

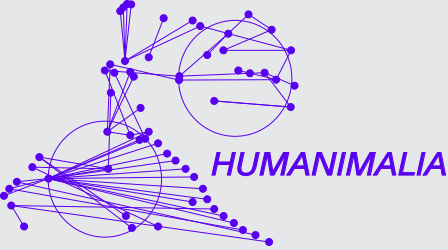
HUMANIMALIA

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Special Issue:
Elephant (Research)
Routes

Guest edited by
Violette Pouillard
and
Marianna Szczygielska





Humanimalia is a biannual journal devoted to the study of human–animal relations. It is interdisciplinary, open-access, and peer-reviewed, publishing original articles from a wide range of cultural, historical, philosophical, political, and aesthetic perspectives.

Humanimalia has three aims: (1) to explore and advance the vast range of scholarship on human–animal relations; (2) to encourage exchange among scholars working from a variety of disciplinary perspectives; and (3) to promote dialogue between the academic community and those working closely with animals in non-academic fields.

We invite innovative works that situate these topics within contemporary culture via a variety of critical approaches. Ideally, we seek papers that combine approaches, or at the very least draw upon research in other disciplines to contextualize their arguments.

We are particularly interested in papers that acknowledge and seek to advance a more-than-human conception of aesthetics, culture, society, and politics.

<https://humanimalia.org>

Cover: Rembrandt van Rijn, *An Asian elephant [Hansken]* (c. 1637)

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There seems to be a general consensus on the internet that the moment in Disney's *Bambi* (1942) when Bambi's mother is shot constitutes a kind of intergenerational wound or shared childhood trauma: "Everyone knows Bambi's mom dies."¹ Many viewers recall it as their first encounter with on-screen death, while others claim to "know" the moment intimately despite never having seen the film at all. The release this year of a new screen adaptation of Felix Salten's novel prompted a new discussion in the media about the lasting impact of the traumatic scene, whose power lies not only in what it shows, but in how it circulates as cultural shorthand, as a meme, as inherited knowledge long after the original viewing experience.²

For me, however, that formative moment did not come from *Bambi*, which I only encountered much later, but from *Babar the Elephant* (1931) by Jean de Brunhoff. At the very beginning of the narrative, an anonymous white hunter, his back turned to the reader, shoots and kills Babar's mother. In that moment, the child reader (or, more likely, the child being read to, perhaps by their own mother) is strongly invited to identify with the baby elephant and to regard the faceless "vilain chasseur" as the embodiment of evil.³ In the wake of this traumatic event, little Babar manages to evade capture and eventually makes his way to the big city, where he is introduced to the wonders of modern civilization, and, under the kind tutelage of a rich old lady, fitted out with elegant clothes and a proper education, and thus inducted into bourgeois respectability. Later, he returns to the jungle to bring the benefits of civilization to his fellow elephants.

Though as a child I was mostly oblivious to the broader historical context, revisiting the story now it is easy to see how *Babar* can be read as an allegory or perhaps even an implicit endorsement of

- 1 Natalie Linn (Rab), "Bambi II: The Purgatory of Grief", The Sin Squad, *YouTube* 20 July 2024, 23:42, <https://youtu.be/LU6zLPrl-bo>.
- 2 See Jaime Lorite Chinchón, "Bambi's Mother Dies Again: Why the Scene Continues to Traumatize the World", *El País* 19 January 2025, <https://english.elpais.com/culture/2025-01-19/bambis-mother-dies-again-why-the-scene-continues-to-traumatize-the-world.html>.
- 3 Jean de Brunhoff, *Histoire de Babar, le petit éléphant* (Paris: Editions du Jardin des Modes, 1931), 6. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k96582907>.

French colonialism and its “civilizing mission”. Indeed, critics have argued that the *Babar* books normalize European cultural imperialism beneath the veneer of charm and whimsy and should be rejected or even “burned”.⁴ Writing in the *New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik offers a contrary view, arguing that the books function instead as a self-conscious comedy about the allure and costs of bourgeois civilization, registering both its attractions and its discontents.⁵ These readings are not mutually exclusive, nor are they without merit. But what strikes me about them is that neither is particularly interested in elephants *as elephants*, nor in the more-than-human dimensions of the histories of violence, labour, and exploitation that also haunt the pages of *Babar*. Following the initial shock of the elephant killing, the narrative quickly abandons any pretence at realism, escaping instead into a world of dapper green suits, civic order, and anthropo-normative education. But the initial trauma—the abrupt intrusion of human violence into an elephant lifeworld—is never quite resolved. It lingers, unexamined, beneath the allegory, shaping the affective economy of the story even as it goes unnamed.

In his reflections on *Babar* on the book’s fiftieth anniversary, Maurice Sendak writes that he never quite got over the death of Babar’s mother: “Babar, cruelly and arbitrarily deprived of his loving mother, runs wildly out of babyhood (the innocent jungle) and into cozy, amnesia-inducing society (Paris, only blocks away from that jungle). It is there that he feverishly embraces adulthood, culture, manners, any surface, to hide the hideous trauma of that useless death.”⁶ The narrative pivot from that cruel reality (“nature”) to the comforting fantasy of bourgeois modernity (“culture”) is also the story of Western civilization itself, i.e. the story it tells about itself, clothing the animal body to hide the savage world beneath. (As if the heartless hunter and the kind old lady were not two sides of the same civilizational

4 See Ariel Dorfman, *The Empire’s Old Clothes: What the Lone Ranger, Babar, and Other Innocent Heroes Do to Our Minds*, new ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), and Herbert Kohl, *Should We Burn Babar? Essays on Children’s Literature and the Power of Stories* (New York: New Press, 1995).

5 Adam Gopnik, “Freeing the Elephants”, *The New Yorker* 22 September 2008, 46–50.

6 Maurice Sendak, “Homage to Babar on His 50th Birthday”, in *Babar’s Anniversary Album: 6 Favorite Stories by Jean and Laurent de Brunhoff* (New York: Random House, 1981), 8.

coin.) But this story is and always has been a more-than-human one. So what would it mean to treat it as such, and not only to acknowledge the elephant in the room, so to speak, but to (re)integrate the elephant into the story?

This, in a way, is the question that animates the special section at the heart of the present issue, “Elephant (Research) Routes: Integrating Elephants into More-than-Human Narratives”, curated by Violette Pouillard and Marianna Szczygielska. Bringing historical and contemporary elephants into focus as actors rather than passive objects, the contributions that make up this collection integrate elephant lifeworlds, sociality, and agency into more-than-human narratives of conservation, captivity, labour, and conflict. Drawing on environmental justice frameworks and a deliberately multidisciplinary methodological repertoire, the five articles recalibrate polarized debates on human–elephant relations by situating them within uneven histories of colonialism, extraction, expertise, and care. The section concludes with an afterword by Nigel Rothfels, which reflects on the broader implications of taking elephants seriously as historical and epistemological agents.

In addition to this themed section, the issue includes four non-themed research articles that extend and complicate several of its central concerns. Two of these continue the focus on animal biography as a critical method. Gabriela Jarzębowska’s “Farm to Fame” reconstructs the life of Geeltje’s Adema, a Frisian breeding bull who became a minor celebrity in postwar Polish agricultural discourse. Situating Adema’s biography within the transition from small-scale farming to industrialized agriculture, the article shows how narratives of individuality can both foreground animal lives and obscure systemic violence, embedding them within anthropocentric regimes of productivity, genetic optimization, and sexualized value. A related set of questions animates Tracy Ying Zhang and Chikako Nagayama’s article, “Go Panda Go! — The Invention of the Panda Circus and Its Exhibition in China–Japan Municipal Diplomacy”, which focuses on the transnational career of Wei Wei, China’s first panda entertainer in Japan. Tracing Wei Wei’s unexpected rebellion against

the demands placed upon him, the authors show how his behaviour unsettled political expectations, media narratives, and diplomatic performances, foregrounding the panda's agency within a tightly choreographed cultural economy.

The remaining contributions broaden the issue's conceptual and geographic scope. In "Applied Dog Genomics: Breed Analysis, Origin Stories, and the Puzzle of Mixedness", Catherine Nash examines how commercial dog DNA tests transform breed mixture into a source of value by borrowing the logics of human ancestry testing, revealing the enduring cultural power of breed as an imaginary through which dogs are known and narrated. Finally, Alethia Alfonso-García's "Beetles and Vessels: Diversity, Eroticism, and Radical Personhood in Hubert Matiúwàa's *Xùkú Xùwàá*" turns to Indigenous Mè'phàà (Tlapanec) cosmology and specifically the figure of the beetle, which is considered a *xùkú xùwàá*—an animal-vessel, a container for flesh and life. This structure extends to human bodies and communal spaces alike, making beetles a central figure in a biocultural taxonomy that unites humans and nonhumans. On this basis, the article proposes Matiúwàa's poetics as a complement to Western posthumanist theories of expanded personhood and interspecies relationality.

Taken together, the contributions to this issue invite readers to attend more carefully to the routes—narrative, material, political, and epistemological—through which animals come to matter. In doing so, they ask what is lost, and what becomes newly thinkable, when we resist the temptation to turn animals too quickly into symbols, and instead allow their lives to unsettle the stories we tell about them and about ourselves.

Rounding out the issue are four book reviews and a review essay. In the latter, Sara van Goozen explores "Human–Animal Relations in a Minefield," reading *Nonhuman Humanitarians: Animal Interventions in Global Politics* (2023) by Benjamin Meiches alongside *How to Love a Rat: Detecting Bombs in Postwar Cambodia* (2024) by Darcie DeAngelo. This is followed by Suzanna Millar's review of *The Bible and Farm Animal Welfare* (2024) by David Grumett; David P. Rando's

review of *Finnegans Wake—Human and Nonhuman Histories* (2024), edited by Richard Barlow and Paul Fagan; Jamie Redgate's review of *Interpreting Meat: Theorizing the Commodification and Consumption of Animals* (2025) by Teddy Duncan, Jr.; and Chloë Taylor's review of *Disabled Ecologies* (2024) by Sunaura Taylor.

This has been another busy year for *Humanimalia*. We are delighted to welcome Shumon T. Hussain as a new associate editor responsible for submissions engaging with multispecies archaeology, palaeoenvironmental humanities, and interdisciplinary explorations of the deep history of our species and its diverse entanglements with the more-than-human world.

Finally, a brief note on open access publishing. *Humanimalia* has been committed to open access since its inception—long before it became a buzzword—and we are delighted to take the next step by joining Open Journals Collective, an innovative, community-led initiative working to build a more equitable and sustainable scholarly publishing ecosystem. We are also grateful for the support we have received from the Utrecht University Humanities Diamond Open Access Fund, which will help ensure the journal's continued operation in the years ahead. Readers who wish to support *Humanimalia*, through a one-time or recurring donation, will soon find further details on our website.

As always, I would like to thank all the authors, peer reviewers, editors, copyeditors, and production assistants whose hard work, care, and dedication made this issue possible. And of course special thanks to Violette Pouillard and Marianna Szczypińska for curating this rich and thought-provoking special issue.

On behalf of the editorial team,

Kárl Driscoll
December 2025

