Postcolonial studies, writes critic Philip Armstrong, “has shown little interest in the fate of the nonhuman animal” – possibly, he goes on, because “pursuing an interest in the postcolonial animal risks trivializing the suffering of human beings under colonialism” (2002: 3). But how stable is the dichotomy on which such a differentiation is based? And how could postcolonial ecocriticism, in destabilising it, help to advance the scope of its ethical critique in general and the debate about world-literature in particular? The task would be bringing together two fields of scholarship that might look worlds apart at first sight. On the one hand, there is what can only be called an anthropocentric project of outlining “world-literature” in an economic, aesthetic and purely cultural sense; on the other hand, studies in human-animal relations demand what has been called an ecocentric perspective focussing the wild, the natural and the other-than-human world.

However, we will see that both fields work with comparable strategies that depend on traces, literal and figurative ones, and that they link ethics and aesthetics. Both Moretti’s and Casanova’s recent reformulations of Goethe and Marx’ “world literature”-idea grapple with issues that human-animal studies and postcolonial ecocriticism know only too well: “distant reading” as a concept of hermeneutic engagement with textuality, for instance, and the ethical discussion of commodification, reification and alterity in general.

We will begin by looking at the history of postcolonial ecocriticism, on the one hand, and the literary representation of animals, on the other, and try to connect our findings with a postcolonial critique of eurocentrism. Are postcolonial animals victims of othering and rendered subaltern by colonial discourse, or are they, qua being nonhuman and outside of culture, free from these processes? Do animals, often used metaphorically in cultural contexts, “[explicate] the plight of the oppressed, a fact that supports a reading of the animal body as the locus of oppositional thinking, the foundational example of all subsequent forms of human othering”, as Laura Wright claims (2010: 15)?

In order to answer our central question: where is the place of animals in world-literature?, we will discuss the problem of reading animals metaphorically or allegorically and relate this discussion to postcolonial politics, ecological crises such as the sixth mass extinction that is under way currently, and the economic dimension that world-literature, and reading as a global practice with enormous hermeneutic challenges, encompass.