Abstract
This essay is a postcolonial reading of the recently republished auto/biography *A Lion Called Christian* (2009; originally published in 1971), written by two Australians, Anthony Bourke and John Rendall. The book narrates the unlikely story of raising a lion in Chelsea and discusses his eventual repatriation and new life in East Africa. The essay argues that the representation of the animal in the metropolitan and African spaces as portrayed in the book can be read critically in the context of the cultural legacy of British colonialism and the role of exotic animals in particular. The essay shows that the function of the animal in the book is to problematize the naturalized division of space into human and animal spaces. As a result, the book deconstructs colonalist and anthropocentric hierarchies in modern society by revealing moments of hybridity when the values of colonial discourse are open to disruption and critique.

Keywords
*A Lion Called Christian*, animal spaces, Anthony Bourke, hybridity, John Rendall, lions, postcolonialism

Introduction
The 1971 bestseller *A Lion Called Christian*, written by two Australians, Anthony “Ace” Bourke and John Rendall, resurfaced interestingly in 2007 when a YouTube user uploaded digitized excerpts of the two writers’ reunion with their lion in Africa in 1972. This incident led to considerable media attention and the subsequent publication of an updated edition of the book. Bourke and Rendall’s *A Lion Called Christian* (2009) appears at first glance a simple auto/biographical narrative telling of a young British-born lion acquired from the Harrods pet department, his childhood and growing up in Chelsea, the heart of swinging London, and his eventual repatriation to natural life in Africa with the help of the famous wildlife specialist George Adamson. In so doing it maps out in detail the development of an affectionate and trusting
relationship between a lion and his caretakers. Yet the book is more than a mere animal fable, as it opens up a series of transcultural and postcolonial issues ranging from the situation of endangered species and human-animal relations to the problems of postcolonial return and globalized animal trade and mobility. In other words, it is at the same time colonial in narrating the subaltern life of an African lion, and postcolonial when repositioned in the context of the increasingly multicultural London of the early 1970s.

It is the aim of this essay to address Bourke and Rendall’s lion narrative in the contexts of postcolonial and human-animal studies. In discussing A Lion Called Christian, I will pay particular attention to its locations and the mobile position of its central character, arguing that its representations of space—metropolitan London on the one hand and exoticized East Africa on the other—are structured by the legacy of (British) colonialism and its critique. As my reading of the book will show, the major function of the animal in this narrative is to deconstruct the naturalized division of space into human and animal spaces with their fixed meanings. In so doing, Christian appropriates and makes hitherto uniformly human spaces his own. As a result, the book problematizes the maintenance of colonialist and anthropocentric hierarchies in modern society by revealing various moments when they are open to disruption and critique.

In this sense, as I will show, the narrative is an example of what postcolonial theorists like Homi K. Bhabha (1994) have referred to as hybridity, a way of thinking about the effects of cultural contact and mixing. Hybrid identities, such as those carved out in German-Turkish cinema or black British literature, are ways of mapping out emerging types of cultural self-definition and national affiliation in new spaces generated by the processes of migration and mobility peculiar to modernity (see Kuortti & Nyman, 2007). As the case of Christian shows, the hybridization of everyday urban space is linked with both the history of colonization, enabling the presence of the lion in the former center of the Empire, and with the transforming relationship between humans and animals in this apparently uniformly human space. In other words, the book narrates encounters at two intertwined levels, one involving the colonial past and its legacy, the other involving humans and animals, and thus is highly relevant for both postcolonial and human-animal studies.

**Locating a Postcolonial Animal Narrative: Harrods, London**

Traditionally the role of the animal in colonialist literature has been to represent nonhuman Otherness because of its association with questions of
brutality and inability to communicate through human language. Animality and animal-like behavior have been linked with non-Western ethnicities, and the evolutionary discourse has been abused to construct various racialized Others (Bernstein, 2001; Youngs, 1996). As I have argued in another context, colonial animal narratives ranging from documentaries and scientific writing to children’s literature and fiction construct the animal by applying various discourses of race, gender, and sexuality, and tend to posit the animal as the opposite of the human (Nyman, 2003). What is important from the perspective of this essay is that these discourses have often constructed big cats—lions, tigers, and panthers—as prime markers of colonial space and potential man killers. This has been noted by several scholars, including Wilbert (2006), who suggests in his analysis of stories of animal attacks that one of the functions of such narratives constructing the animal as a lethal danger is that they support the colonizer’s desire to maintain control and perpetuate conventional hierarchies of spatial ordering. In the view of Schell (2007), who has examined narratives of tiger hunting in colonial India, hunting stories such as George Sanderson’s memoirs, while promoting hunting as a marker of idealized masculinity and gentlemanly behavior, also reveal a transformation in the hunter’s relationship with his prey by indicating signs of the changing status of the tiger. According to Schell (2007), the hunters reveal increased affection for the tiger: as the hunters come to the belief that the big cat follows similar principles as its solitary and sportsmanlike hunter, the bond between the hunter and the hunted is strengthened in an ambiguous manner.

In general, the ideology of European modernity emphasizing human rationality has been particularly effective in promoting its anthropocentric perspective. Recent studies of human-animal relations in postmodern and postcolonial narratives in particular have questioned some of the former understandings of the role of the animal and argue for a need to study animal narratives from a variety of critical perspectives. For example, Armstrong (2008) argues for three focal areas:

The relationship between human-animal narratives and the social practices and conditions from which they emerge; the evidence of exchanges between human and non-human forms of agency; and the documentation of shifts in the emotional and affective engagements between humans and other animals. (p. 2)

For instance, Armstrong (2008) examines the problematics of nonhuman agency in Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and the rhetoric of the hunt in Lawrence and Hemingway, and argues that by the mid-20th century the formerly dominant belief in human mastery over nature “is replaced with ubiquitous images of a diminished and fragile world” where “animal life… is captive and threatened”
In a somewhat similar vein, Huggan and Tiffin (2010), in their appeal for a merging of the concerns of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism, suggest that the study of animal representation in postcolonial texts is to be linked with the general aims of anti-imperialist and environmentalist thinking: “[T]he righting of imperialist wrongs necessarily involves our writing of the wrongs that have been done... to animals” (p. 22). In so doing, Huggan and Tiffin’s zoocriticism seeks to problematize the connections between animal representation, colonialism, Christianity, and sexuality, as well as the general anthropocentric thinking driving such representations. What also characterizes their research agenda is a concern for agency and the problematization of the human-animal boundary. This can be seen in their readings of postcolonial texts that in the manner of Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and Peter Goldsworthy’s *Wish* (1995) reveal the porousness of the borders of human and animal spaces and generate new hybrid identities (see Huggan & Tiffin, 2010).

The popularity of Bourke and Rendall’s narrative in the 1970s was undoubtedly linked with the immense success of other late colonial lion narratives such as Joy Adamson’s *Born Free: A Lioness of Two Worlds* (1960) and its sequels *Living Free* (1961) and *Forever Free* (1962). By providing a personalized account of a woman’s close relationship with a potentially dangerous animal and emphasizing the emergent human-animal bond, Adamson’s bestselling books and their film versions (to which Bourke and Rendall refer in their book), had a significant role in conservationism and changing people’s ideas about wild animals (cf. Nyman, 2003; see Mitman, 1999).

In addition to portraying a strong bond between a lion and her caretaker, Adamson’s narratives of the lioness Elsa share with the story of Christian the idea of the animal’s return to his or her original habitat. Both lions have been raised by humans and need to relearn their behavior and negotiate their relationship with humans. Whereas *Born Free* tells how Elsa leaves the human space of the camp, *A Lion Called Christian* is structured around two contrasting spaces—cosmopolitan London and exoticized Africa, and it reveals a more complex sociocultural setting. The attraction of London as the center of Empire is clearly described in the book, as it promises personal fulfilment for its down-under narrators Ace and John. Recent university graduates, they, like many other Australians in the period, head for the metropolis after “a variety of jobs with no clear career path at that stage” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 8). Like that of his caretakers, Christian’s presence in London is also linked with the imperial experience. An African lion, though he was born in the zoo of Ilfracombe, North Devon, his kin have been brought to Britain to serve as markers of its imperial past, and they and their cubs have been gazed at by various British “holiday crowds” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 7). In Malamud’s
(1998) view, the colonial project is evident in zoos and other similar displays of imperialism in two ways: first, the humans make clear their dominance over other species, and, second, the zoos themselves derive from the colonial project, since, at one level, their captive exhibits ranging from animals to indigenous peoples have been imported to mark the Western ability to bring them “home” to the center. The lion, indeed, has a special role, and Tony and John mention in their narrative of Christian’s background that “No zoo is complete without lions” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 7).

Furthermore, the fact that Christian ends up as an object to be sold at Harrods, the famous London department store, is similarly rooted in the discourses of British imperialism and Britishness. As the book shows, Ace and John visit the store as a tourist site that is to be “done” by any visitor from the margins:

We aren’t exactly conscientious sightseers, but one day in an unusual burst of enthusiasm we visited, amongst other tourist destinations, the Tower of London. A suitable contrast, we decided, would be our first visit to Harrods. We were aware of Harrods’ boast that they could provide anything, at a price of course. A friend had once enquired about a camel and been asked, “Would it be with one hump or two?” But Harrods seemed to have extended themselves beyond our imagination, when on wandering into their zoo on the second floor we discovered two lion cubs in a small cage between the Siamese kittens and the old English sheep dogs. A lion cub with a price tag was not an easy thought to assimilate. (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, pp. 8-9)

This commercialized representation of the animal can be discussed in a larger framework of animal trade and colonialism. Harrods, with its famous slogan “Everything for Everybody Everywhere,” is indeed a part of the Western production of the imperial and the exotic through its participation in the formation of a consumer culture emphasizing the oriental and the exotic. As critics of 19th-century colonial discourse have suggested, it operates to promote the exotic on various levels, ranging from literature and administrative texts to world fairs and fashion: the exotic products were marketed in the newly emergent department stores (Mitchell, 1992, pp. 289, 301). What is particularly interesting from the perspective of this essay is the related commodification of the colonial animal: it is an object to be sold to individual collectors in order to satisfy their curiosity. This has particularly been the case with private menageries, where one of the aims of animal keeping has been to aggrandize the “owner” (Rothfels, 2002). Yet trade in exotic animals is also linked with the history of the zoo, not only with such private collections. As Rothfels (2002) suggests, the development of the zoo since the 19th century appears to be linked with both a willingness to learn and a desire to master and control
nature in a bourgeois urban setting. Colonialism, however, has been an element in arranging zoological gardens in the West that “often act out quite explicitly the political, imperial, or educational claims of the current elites” (Rothfels, 2002, p. 39). As visible markers of the project of colonialism, by the late 19th century exotic animals became objects of organized business, captured and shipped to be displayed at Western zoos by such professional traders as the German Hagenbecks, which shows that the activity is a firm part of the business of colonialism (Rothfels, 2002).

Although the book shows a concern for such practices and also includes its narrators’ reflections on the issue from today’s vantage point, this history remains significant for the story. Similarly, the role of the colonial animal as an object of trade remains evident in Harrods’s self-promotion even today. As mentioned in the history of Harrods available on its website, its operations have been multifaceted, often with a colonial focus. To use the company’s own words, it has more than lived up to its reputation over the years. Noel Coward was bought an alligator for Christmas from the pet shop, while Ronald Reagan was on the receiving end of a baby elephant named Gertie. Author A.A. Milne found the original Winnie-the-Pooh for his son Christopher Robin here, and Alfred Hitchcock had fresh herrings flown to him in Hollywood. In the early 1900s, the store made yachts to order, ran its own funeral service (embalming Sigmund Freud), sold aeroplanes and built houses. (History of Harrods, n.d.)

In other words, the colonial animal—be it an alligator, an elephant, or a lion—plays a particular role in the Western imagination by reminding us of both the dangers lurking in their natural place in the colonial world and our ability to conquer them. In the metropolitan center, the correct place for the colonial animal is allegedly the zoo. To quote geographers Philo and Wilbert (2000), its aim has been “to translate wild animals from ‘wilderness’ to the special, enclosed and policed enclaves nearer to our human homes in ‘the city’” (p. 13). In a similar vein, filmic representations of natural life, as Mitman (1999) has suggested, have similarly transformed wilderness into a spectacle to be consumed by the audience. Writing of Disney’s True-Life Adventures in particular, Mitman (1999) points out that films such as Seal Island are not authentic documents but are ideologically manipulated. Seal Island, for instance, anthropomorphizes animal life by using the trope of the family: in so doing, animal documentaries “purify . . . nature” by carving out sentimental representations of “animals in the wild that sanctify[...][y] the universal ‘natural’ film as a cornerstone of the American way of life” (Mitman, 1999, p. 111).
As I will argue, the sections in *A Lion Called Christian* narrating his life in London are ways of countering and transgressing the naturalized colonialist hierarchy between the center and the margin, us and them, humans and animals, and their naturalized places. The presence of an animal belonging to wilderness amidst civilization problematizes naturalized hierarchies and may lead to violence and other problems. The narrators recognize the issue in their ironic naming of the lion. While the Harrods staff have chosen the name Marcus, Ace calls the lion cub Christian upon seeing him for the first time: “Christian seemed to suit him, and we liked the irony of Christians being fed to the lions in Roman times, which was also a reminder of the danger to which we would be exposing ourselves, and the people around us” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 10).

The possibility of discovering and creating animal places in modern London shows that the city is not a uniform and stable place as argued in monological and exclusionary discourses emphasizing tradition but, following McLeod (2004), it can be defined as a “heterogeneous, diverse and polycultural” space (p. 7). Since such polyculturality in this text extends to different species and is not limited to the various ethnicities and subcultures inhabiting the metropolis, the particular role of the lion as a colonial animal calls for a postcolonial reading where the intertwined aspects of resistance and hybridization can be evoked. The narrative links the construction of a new kind of human-animal relationship with a generational and cultural rebellion against the conventional discourses of previous generations. In so doing, it argues that such new bonds and opportunities for new social relationships are part of the Zeitgeist:

What finally united us was the staunch opposition from most people we knew to the idea of buying Christian. Unwittingly they intensified our determination to accept a challenge we might otherwise have resisted. Our parents were no doubt horrified, but only cautioned us against a decision “you might regret” and that “it will be difficult giving Christian up.” It was a step into the unknown. We were young, we were looking for fun and adventure, and we had left Australia, our parents and some of our inhibitions behind. It was the tail-end of the historic 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, a time of great social change, optimism and opportunities. (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 19)

**The King of the King’s Road**

By inserting Christian in Chelsea’s King’s Road, the text constructs a hybrid space by allowing an animal to transform and hybridize a formerly predominantly human space. Following the idea that postcolonial literature is an act of writing back to the colonizer with a difference, of appropriating and
hybridizing its discourse (see Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989), Christian’s story can be seen as constructing a hybrid postcolonial space that stands in opposition to conventional imaginings of urban space.

It should also be noticed that Christian’s new home is located in a particular part of Chelsea, known, interestingly, as the World’s End, a name with a colonial twist appropriate for a place where lions and other curiosities may roam. Unsurprisingly, the text mentions that in addition to the popular cultural celebrities and fashion designers of the era, the “glamorous mix” includes various “exotic animals”: “in addition to Margot the puma we knew of a serval cat that lived nearby, while the casino owner John Aspinall kept tigers and gorillas” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 22). These changes in the neighborhood generated by the various and increasingly trendy incomers, not only by wild animals such as Christian, are not welcomed by the local residents. The narrative suggests that they do not appreciate the new and fashionable character of their “village”:

[T]he locals resented the growing intrusion of a few smart antique and clothes shops, which included Nigel Weymouth’s “Granny Takes a Trip” and Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren’s boutique, then called “Seditionaries,” later “Sex,” and now “World’s End.” Punk music and clothes would soon emerge from our grungier end of the King’s Road. (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 23)

In other words, in Chelsea, at the heart of swinging London, the transformation of space means a replacement of the old world and its values with more polycultural ones. While the animal presence can be seen as a marginal factor in this process, the change is linked with the wider migration from the former Commonwealth to the center, as testified by the two young Australian lion “owners” and also with the emergence of a new lifestyle centering upon fashion, commerce, and celebrity culture. Similarly, the relationship of Christian and his two caretakers can also be contextualized in the period’s debates on sexuality and read as a queer performance of a family, consisting in this narrative of two Australian men who daily take their lion-child for a walk in a nearby park, disrupting the expectations and models set up by dominant discourses. In this sense the increasingly open character of the metropolis, with the openness to alternative experiences and lifestyles that was emerging in the period, plays a significant role in carving out a narrative calling for tolerance and diversity.

Christian’s contribution to the transformation of the urban space is rather modest and focuses upon the aptly-named furniture shop Sophistocat, where the trio lives and works. While Christian’s lodgings in the basement of the shop, with a heater, blankets, and “an improvised lion-sized kitty litter tray”
(Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 25), are supposed to be his primary space of play and rest, the presence of the lion cub in the shop itself transforms it into an animal enclave. Sophistocat is described as “a jungle of furniture” suitable for various stalking games involving surprising leaps and jumps (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 27). Games are also mentioned as a potential site of danger. The narrators explicitly mention having to refrain from “too boisterous” activities and rough wrestling: “We never let him realize that after a certain point he had become physically stronger than us, and could harm us” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 28; see also p. 46). Furthermore, the shop also becomes a contact zone where humans meet the animal. The cleaner Kay Dew is a steady object of Christian’s entertainment: “He chased her brooms, rode on the vacuum cleaner, and stole or ate her dusters” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 28). More importantly, however, it is the casual shoppers who are affected by the presence of a lion in the formerly exclusively human space of the shop:

When Christian first came to the King’s Road, he was small enough to run around the shop with our customers. They rarely took seriously our initial warning, “Do you have any objection to lions?” One disbelieving woman, on seeing one of Christian’s bones, said, “That bone is at least lion-sized.” “That’s what we tried to tell you. Look behind you.” She watched incredulously as Christian ambled past to claim his bone. Usually it was good for business, and the owners of Sophistocat were incredibly tolerant. Even the English had to react to a lion cub stretched out on the antique pine table they were contemplating buying. (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, pp. 28-29)

The insertion of an animal in this formerly ordered space generates elements of surprise and carnivalizes its interaction through moments of havoc and chaos involving breaking glass, a great many shattered household objects, surprised customers, and a James Bond actor too frightened to enter the shop. That the animal literally takes over this space is evident in the description (and the photographic images included in the book) of Christian’s favorite place at the top of the stairs: “[H]e enjoyed surveying his domain from a height, and would often sit on tables and chests of drawers. Fortunately, he preferred the stairs, which gave him greater height, and would sit with a paw dangling elegantly over the side” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 42). In the case of a lion, as the text has made clear, the space is not entirely safe, although Christian’s exceptional character is frequently emphasized. This can be seen in such statements as “Christian was particularly unaggressive and unpossessive about his food, which indicated that in some respects he was an exceptional lion” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 40) and “For a lion he was very obedient, and he usually co-operated with us” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 46).
In addition to the events taking place in the shop, Christian’s performance also has a public side. Malamud (1998) argues that the zoo audience is immersed in passive spectatorship, and animals are mere objects eliciting little response and reflection. In the case of Christian, the situation is reversed, which shows how he actively transforms the human space through his actions performed with a difference. While at one level an object drawing a general populace to follow him, he is also shown to leave the shop windows as he pleases and, in turn, to gaze at the action on the street. As a result, the animal changes from a silent and passive object of the gaze into an active and even regal gazer looking down on his admiring audience:

Late in the afternoon Christian would sit regally on the furniture in the shop window, in the spotlight, watching the activities of the World’s End. He was the area’s star attraction, and the locals, particularly the children, loved him and were very proud of him. He seemed to belong to all of them. In the window he drew appreciative crowds of regular admirers or astonished newcomers. These were happy hours. If there were too many people and his view was obscured, he simply changed windows. Several motorists, seeing Christian unsheatheously displaying himself. bumped into the cars in front. And a conversation was overheard between a child and his mother on a passing bus: “Mummy, there was a lion in that shop window!” “Don’t be ridiculous. If you don’t stop this lying, I’ll get your father to thrash you!” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, pp. 32-33)

What is at stake in these representations of hybridized space populated by a nonnative lion is a transformation of space and identity. Hybridity, indeed, can be defined as a site “where fixed identities based on essentialisms are called into question” (Kuortti & Nyman, 2007, p. 3). As the lion makes his home where he does not conventionally belong, he challenges the existing power hierarchies and the primacy of the human in metropolitan space. Philo and Wilbert (2000) describe such processes in the following manner:

[The key lesson is that in such cases, as in many more mundane ones, it is animals themselves who inject what might be termed their own agency into the scene, therefore transgressing, perhaps even resisting, the human placements of them. It might be said that in so doing the animals begin to forge their own “other spaces,” countering the proper places stipulated for them by humans, thus creating their own “beastly places” reflective of their own “beastly” ways, ends, doings, joys and sufferings. (p. 14)]

From this point of view, the text lends itself to both an animal-centered understanding and a postcolonial reading. Christian’s “beastly space” is at the same time the hybridized space of the postcolonial that allows for a rethinking of
the center-periphery relationship. The reading of Christian as postcolonial is further supported by the description of his favorite space, where he routinely spends his afternoons—the nearby garden that becomes his very own space of pleasure:

There was a large area of grass for Christian to play on, and trees and hedges to hide behind. Interestingly, it took several weeks for him to adjust to all the space, and initially he would not go out into the centre of the garden, away from the protection of the hedges. But then the garden became his established territory, and he adored it. . . . He would run after the ball, pounce on it, and dramatically roll over and over with it. The few times there was snow, he loved skidding through it, and was not worried by the cold. (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, pp. 31-32)

What is important in the description of the space is that this secluded garden “surrounded by a high brick wall” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 31) is already a hybridized migrant space bringing together various histories. Resting on the site of “the foundations of Sir Thomas More’s stables” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 31), it is now a home to a chapel (and a graveyard) built by 18th-century Moravian settlers in London, originally Protestant refugees. In other words, Christian’s entry to this historically multilayered space testifies to the transformation of the space and its appropriation by various human and non-human groups.

Christian’s postcolonial identity is supported by inserting him in further historical and cultural narratives. The figure of the lion has been appropriated by European (and other) nations, as can be seen in its popularity as a heraldic symbol of bravery and courage (as the Royal Standard of England and the national herald of Finland, for instance). Christian, however, as a flesh-and-blood colonial animal is beyond such symbolic representations and needs to learn about them and his special species status. This happens in the third chapter of the book, “Noblesse Oblige,” where Ace and John drive Christian to Trafalgar Square—a part of London narrating various memories of empire and recently described by Bill Schwarz (2005) as the site of “history in monumental mode” (p. 216)—so that the lion could watch the four famous lions that are part of Nelson’s Column and learn from the experience: “He was delighted to be such an obvious symbol of nobility” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 35). The episode is narrated with a humorous tone, as the narrators emphasize that prior to the event Christian did not identify himself as a lion, but they decided to reveal the truth to the lion to prevent him from “ask[ing] awkward questions” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 35). But the incident has darker and more political undercurrents. What emerges as its important effect is the
reconstruction of Christian’s identity. He is now represented as a postcolonial visitor to the metropolitan center whose identity has been appropriated by the colonial power and cast in bronze in praise of its military-imperialistic achievement, the same achievement that has deprived the colonies of their history. In this respect Christian resembles the famous late-Victorian elephant Jumbo in “represent[ing] both the reach of Britain’s Empire and its submission to the imperial centre: he was the colonial exotic and, at the same time, the representative of Britain and her ‘greatness’” (Huggan & Tiffin, 2010, p. 153).

In other words, what is at stake in this episode is that the colonial and imperial past, represented through Landseer’s monumental lions, is juxtaposed with a postcolonial present, represented through the transgressive lion entering the symbolic site of Trafalgar Square. In so doing Christian takes on the role of cultural theorist Bhabha’s (1994) colonial mimic: “a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite” (p. 86). Rather than learning imperial mastery and stability as a result of this meeting of the imperial lions and a postcolonial one, Christian learns, as the ironic tone of the narrative suggests, what is an effect of ambivalence and what can be seen as the basis for his transgressive agency: it is possible to mock the allegedly naturalized, official, and monumental narratives of history and nation (cf. Bhabha, 1994).

An African Future

Owing to the lion’s practical inability to live in urban London, the authors seek to find a solution for his future and demonstrate his inability to fit in, as emphasized in the photographs in the book. Rather than seeing Christian becoming a performer in a traveling circus or a stressed inhabitant in a “restricting and insensitive” zoo (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 67), a chance encounter with the actor Bill Travers and his wife Virginia McKenna, known to the world for their parts in the film adaptation of Joy Adamson’s Born Free (1966), opens up a new phase and begins the negotiations concerning Christian’s return to Africa with the wildlife expert George Adamson. The second part of the book concentrates on the narrative of return, including a transitory period in the British countryside, followed with the actual flight and its necessary preparations, and Christian’s entry into Africa and the world of lions. Rather than defining the return as a narrative of expulsion and forced migration to colonial East Africa, this story may be read in the framework of a postcolonial return. This journey is, indeed, represented as liberation from a future of incarceration in Britain: “Inevitably we compared Christian’s future with the life of his parents. Freedom, instead of cement, bars, and boredom”
The description of Christian’s parents at the Ilfracombe zoo underlines the point: “They were an affectionate couple but incessantly paced the cement floor of their small cage” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 96).

Similarly, the commentary describing Christian’s arrival at the Nairobi airport emphasizes the promise of the homecoming: “Christian was safely in Kenya, and had escaped the fate of a life of captivity in the United Kingdom” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 107). To fund the return, however, the film rights, as well as Christian himself, were assigned to a production company (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 82).

As Christian leaves the urban spaces of metropolitan Europe, his identity is to be reconstructed in the exotic space of the African wilderness with its promise of liberty. It is noteworthy that the description of Kora, the chosen rehabilitation setting operated by the famous lion expert George Adamson, emphasizes its being void of humans, owing to its desolate and arid character:

Kora had been offered because no one else wanted it. George described it as a desolate, unattractive part of Kenya, where few Africans lived; there were disease-carrying tsetse flies, and in the wet season it could be inaccessible. The game, while not abundant, would be adequate for Christian and the other lions in the pride that George intended to form. For the exclusive use of this unwanted land the film company had to pay £750 a year. (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 109)

Only in a space not desired by humans is it possible for Christian to attempt to return to his alleged home and nature; the homes of the lions, the British and African ones, are indeed linked in the narrative, as each of them is described as “World’s End” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 124). In the case of a lion raised by humans, such a return is by definition an ironic one. This is evident in the description of Christian’s first night in Africa at the end of a long drive of 200 miles, which shows his distance from nature: “Christian was exhausted and we led him into a small compound that had been built for him. We decided to put our beds in with him, and he promptly climbed on to one of them and fell asleep. His first night in the African bush!” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 111).

The unlearning of human and European habits and customs is gradual and is represented through Christian’s entry into Adamson’s lion pride waiting to be rehabilitated. This consists of Katania, a foundling cub, and Boy, a former army mascot. The first day reveals a symbolic act of undressing: “We symbolically took off his collar, now to be permanently discarded” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 113). Not only does it signify Christian’s transition from
culture to nature but the passage continues to represent Africa as the lion’s natural space:

It was extremely hot, and he just walked quietly, absorbing everything. Instinctively he knew how to remove thorns from his tender paws with his teeth, and we saw that the colour of his coat was a natural camouflage. He was obviously in his rightful environment. (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, pp. 113-114)

In addition to learning rapidly to respond correctly in this space, Christian also gradually learns how to behave in the company of other lions. As a younger lion, he needs to gain the acceptance of Boy through submission; Boy also plays an important role in teaching Christian the proper behavior of a male lion necessary for his entry into the natural:

Christian concentrated adoringly on Boy, and even imitated his movements; he followed him around, sat down when he sat down, and lay in the same position. We often saw him lying just round a corner from Boy, a clever trick to get closer to him than would normally be allowed. He sometimes played with Katania, but she was a poor second to Boy. Christian was still affectionate towards us, but he was definitely a lion’s lion. (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 130)

The representation of gender, however, is not entirely unproblematic, as the relationship between Boy and Christian is described almost in the manner of a romantic relationship, and such a queer reading may be supported by the fact that Christian prefers the company of males to that of Katania. Read from a slightly different perspective, however, it can be suggested that the passage emphasizes the importance of homosocial relations and male role models in constructing a “proper” masculine identity capable of functioning as a site of power. Upon Boy’s death Christian indeed “relish[es] his position as head of the pride” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 163). Christian, however, is only initially successful in acquiring the identity of a wild lion. While he manages to form a pride of his own, in 1973 he faces serious territorial problems and disappears into the wilderness, never to be seen again.

**Homecomings**

While the first part of the book constructs the lion as a postcolonial migrant mapping and transforming other spaces, the section describing his return is both a more conservative narrative of the “natural” place of the animal, which
justifies the return as being right both in terms of morality and animal welfare, and a postcolonial narrative of return. In Elleke Boehmer’s (1995) view, the representation of homecoming is a recurring trope in postcolonial writing and has been approached from perspectives ranging from “celebration to disillusionment” (p. 201). Since the return to Africa has often been a way of countering the legacy and wrongs of colonialism, it has played an important role in the literature of the black diaspora in particular: “[D]reamlike and mythic images of African homecoming often figure a desire to reconnect with the past after a long history of dispossession” (Boehmer, 1995, p. 201). The story of Christian’s return can be located in a similar frame: the dispossession caused by European colonization and animal trade is disowned through the lion’s entry into Africa and the undoing of his former location. Nevertheless, the presence of poachers and other obstacles does not make life in Africa easy for the returning migrant.

The ecological discourse promoting the lion’s return and his successful negotiation of a pure and uncontaminated animal identity is undermined in the narrative by showing the affective power of trans-species relationships. The case in point concerns the return of Ace and John to Africa in 1971 when their reunion with Christian (and his three lionesses) is filmed:

He stared hard at us for a few seconds, and then slowly moved closer for a good look. He stared intently. He looked marvellous, and up on the rocks, he didn’t appear much bigger. We couldn’t wait any longer and called him. He immediately started to run down towards us. Grunting with excitement, this ENORMOUS lion jumped all over us, but he was very gentle…. Christian showed his affection in exactly the same way, had all his old tricks & some new ones. (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 161)

This unexceptional incident revealing the powerful emotional link between man and beast is the basis of the renewed interest in the story. As the introduction to the new edition of the book mentions, a clip from the film showing the 1971 reunion is now available on YouTube and circulates in cyberspace as a “‘send this on to someone you love’ email… complete with Whitney Houston’s version of the highly emotive ‘I Will Always Love You’ as the backing track” (Bourke & Rendall, 2009, p. 3). Appropriated for the different purposes of people who often have no idea of the clip’s origins, the joy portrayed in it has satisfied their emotional needs. While such emphasized affectivity is typical of late-modern culture where human-animal relations are increasingly individualized and often highly emotional, the reunion also contributes to the need to rethink the alleged separateness of humans and animals. In other words, it reveals how their shared actions may construct hybrid spaces allowing for the formation of similarly hybridized identities.
Conclusion

This essay has examined the relationship between human and nonhuman animals in modern urban space by presenting a postcolonial reading of animal representation in the 1971 bestseller *A Lion Called Christian* with particular reference to the space of the animal. This representation reveals the extent to which the presence of an animal apparently alien to his surroundings is able to transform hitherto unquestionable hierarchies. By transgressing against the colonial and human order, the actions of the postcolonial animal like Christian contribute to a reimagining and transformation of urban space and show the possibility of generating hybrid enclaves in formerly homogeneous spaces. Similarly, the book is a critique of the practices of animal trade constructing animals as mere objects. Yet the narrative’s solution to the dilemma of the trespassing lion, Christian’s repatriation to Africa, remains somewhat ambiguous. While on the one hand it reintroduces him in his apparently natural habitat, on the other hand it is also a way of making the animal transgressor safe by means of deportation to his allegedly true home. Although, unquestionably, lions are lethal threats to humans because of their unpredictable behavior, and thus Christian cannot continue to live in the heart of Chelsea, the return to Africa, as it is also a part of commercialized film-making, has another function. It voices what anthropologist Rosaldo (1989) has described as the discourse of imperialist nostalgia where the West “mourn[s] the passing of what [it itself] has transformed” (p. 69). As the life of Christian shows, the disruption of colonial hierarchies and the construction of hybrid spaces where humans and animals are in contact with each other are merely temporary and restricted by various discourses. In this sense they remain utopian but are able to offer glimpses of a different world where transpecies interaction may be possible, an idea that may explain a part of the contemporary popularity of the YouTube clip showing a meeting of friends representing different species.

References


