READING ANIMALS AND THE HUMAN-ANIMAL DIVIDE IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY FICTION

Catherine Helen Parry

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Lincoln for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

March 2016
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My wholehearted thanks to my supervisors Dr Rupert Hildyard and Dr Sian Adiseshiah at the University of Lincoln. They were kind, thoughtful, and always right. I am also deeply grateful to Hilary Savory for friendship beyond the call of duty. Thank you to my daughters for their patience and support, and to Bonnie for her companionship throughout my doctoral studies. Most of all, thank you to Keith for making these writing years possible.
ABSTRACT

The Western conception of the proper human proposes that there is a potent divide between humans and all other animate creatures. Even though the terms of such a divide have been shown to be indecisive, relationships between humans and animals continue to take place across it, and are conditioned by the ways it is imagined. My thesis asks how twenty-first century fiction engages with and practises the textual politics of animal representation, and the forms these representations take when their positions relative to the many and complex compositions of the human-animal divide are taken into account.

My analysis is located in contemporary critical debate about human-animal relationships. Taking the animal work of such thinkers as Jacques Derrida and Cary Wolfe as a conceptual starting point, I make a detailed and precise engagement with the conditions and terms of literary animal representation in order to give forceful shape to awkward and uncomfortable ideas about animals. Derrida contends that there is a “plural and repeatedly folded frontier” between human and nonhuman animals, and my study scrutinises the multiple conditions at play in the conceptual and material composition of this frontier as it is invoked in fictional animal representations. I argue that human relationships with animals are conditioned by our imaginative shapings of them, and that the animals we imagine are, therefore, of enormous significance for real animals. Working in the newly established field of Literary Animal Studies, I read representations of ordinary animals in a selection of twenty-first century novels, including Indra Sinha’s Animal’s People, E. O. Wilson’s Anthill, Carol Hart’s A History of the Novel in Ants, Aryn Kyle’s The God of Animals, Yann Martel’s Beatrice and Virgil, Mark McNay’s Fresh, James Lever’s Me Cheeta, and Karen Joy Fowler’s We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves. I interrogate how fictional animal forms and tropes are responding to, participating in or challenging the ways animals’ lives are lived out in consequence of human imaginings of them.

There are many folds in the frontier between human and nonhuman animals, and my thesis is structured to address how particular forms of discursive boundary-
building are invoked in, shape, or are shaped by, the fictional representations of animals. Each of the four chapters in this study takes up one form of discursive boundary building – respectively, political, metaphorical, material and cognitive – between humans and other animals. Analysis is directed at developing concepts and critical practices which articulate the singular literariness of the human, ant, horse, donkey, chicken and ape representations encountered throughout my study. Understanding the ways we make animals through our imaginative eyes is essential to understanding how we make our ethical relationships with them.

A key task for Literary Animal Studies is to make visible how literary animal representations may either reinforce homogeneous and reductive conceptions of animals, or may participate in a re-making of our imaginings of them. My study contributes to clarifications of the terms of this task by evolving ways to read unusual or unacknowledged manifestations of the human-animal divide, by giving form to previously unarticulated questions and conditions about how animals are imagined, and by evaluating literary re-imaginings of them.
# CONTENTS

**INTRODUCTION:**

Animals and Literary Criticism .................................................. 6

**CHAPTER ONE:**

*Animal’s People: Setting Humans Apart* .......................... 14

**CHAPTER TWO:**

Ants, Multiplicity, Anonymity and Metaphorical Boundaries .................................................. 65

**CHAPTER THREE:**

Fleshy Lives, Stitched Skins and Meaty Bodies ......................... 112

**CHAPTER FOUR:**

The Sameness and Difference of Apes ......................................... 166

**CONCLUSION:**

Knowing More, Feeling More .................................................. 219
ANIMALS AND LITERARY CRITICISM

Human relationships with other animals are many and complex, and this thesis is about one particular and most forceful aspect of these relationships. The Western conception of the proper human proposes that there is a divide between such a human and all other animate creatures; relationships between humans and other animals take place across, and are conditioned by, this divide. The excision from the category of animal that humans give to themselves is taken to confer exceptional status, and leads to the privileging of human interests on the assumption that the animal lacks the qualities of the human. Both “the human” and “the animal” in this equation are imaginary creatures, and this thesis proposes that although we cannot encounter animals themselves through literature or literary criticism, we can find and test the making, re-making and un-making of the imagined animal we make ourselves against, and consider what the consequences of our imaginings may be for real animals. Such a literary critical enterprise would, until very recently, have been thought to serve little purpose beyond illuminating the figural and fabular beast, but literature teems with animal representations which exceed anthropocentric, symbolic interpretations, and this thesis and the field of Literary Animal Studies insists that the creatures of fiction are significant and meaningful in the lives of humans and animals.

Literary Animal Studies was born at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a long overdue, specifically literary critical form of attention to human imaginings of the lives and deaths of animals. A tiny, scattered selection of critical texts about literary animal representations emerged through the 1980s and 1990s, and in the early twenty-first century they have been joined by a rapidly expanding – although still very small – body of work which engages with the complexity of literary animal production and the relationships, imaginative frameworks and ethical concerns encoded in it. In 2014 Robert McKay asked “what kind of literary animal studies do we now want or need?”, for such an infant field is still clarifying its questions and identifying the concepts, methods and language necessary to a forceful and scholarly literary critical practice.¹

¹ Robert McKay, ‘What kind of literary animal studies do we want, or need?’, Modern Fiction Studies, 60.3 (Fall 2014), 636-644, (p.637).
While there are many potential replies to McKay’s question, my study responds by identifying two key tasks for Literary Animal Studies. The first is to make visible how, in the twenty-first century, the location of imaginary literary animals in homogeneous, reductive categories may co-operate with the reinforcing of distinctions between sacred human life and disposable animal bodies. The second is to consider how the making of new, de-anthropocentrising concepts and ways of writing are evolving in animal representations. My study will participate in these tasks through readings of twenty-first century novelistic representations of nonhuman animals and ideas about exceptionalist distinctions between humans and animals, and by evolving new theoretical models and terminology which can help to articulate answers to difficult questions. It will pay attention to, but also maintain a tension with, contemporary scientific and philosophical thought, to develop new lines of enquiry on the textual politics of fictional animals.

Of the very modest body of book-length titles dedicated to Literary Animal Studies, most pay some attention to the human-animal distinction; none of these titles, however, direct all their attention at the human-animal distinction in novelistic representations of ordinary nonhuman animals. This leaves an area that seems central to critical practice in the field of Literary Animal Studies dispersed across a small number of chapters and journal articles, or the parts of wider works.2 Responding conscientiously, as McKay argues Literary Animal Studies should do, to the predicament of animals in human and wild spheres, and against the backdrop of what may be a mass – global – extinction event,3 my study will make a sustained analysis of animals and the human-animal distinction, and consider the entanglements of animals with human technical, material, imaginative, political and discursive practices.4 Evaluating the forms of their literary textualisation, I hope to develop

---


4 McKay, ‘What kind of literary animal studies do we want, or need?’, p.637.
concepts which articulate how twenty-first century novels negotiate what Jacques Derrida calls “the question of the animal”.5

Although the traditional notion of a radical break between humans and other animals has been undergoing a steady fragmenting and dismantling by the empirical sciences since Charles Darwin published his theory of evolution, and although post-structuralist thinking and postmodernist forms have worked in the humanities to negate the idea of a stable, autonomous human identity, this has not translated into a substantial revision of what the homogeneous and reductive category of “the animal” legitimates. My thesis does not intend to argue that humans are not remarkable beings in many ways, but it will insist that human adaptability, creativity, and vigour has evolved into a powerful sense of entitlement to acquire, use and manipulate the matter of the world to human purpose. The historical categorisation of animals as the usable matter of the world, as essentially and definitively the negative to the human positive, has enabled political and cultural structures which persist into the twenty-first century.

Even if, on the one hand, there are scientific and cultural discourses that reject anthropocentric, metaphysical, and destructive distinctions between humans and animals, there is, on the other hand, a seemingly resistless trajectory of industrialisation, technological intervention into animal bodies, and environmental appropriation which reinforces the assumptive separation between sacred human lives and disposable animal lives. However much our appreciation of other animals’ lives, interests and capabilities is increasing, it is also apparent that, for example, the vast, systematic production of factory-farmed animals, and the human-engendered extinction of other species, is not seriously challenged by such appreciation. Thus, although the traditional terms of anthropocentric distinctions between humans and animals are in flux, the existence of powerful forces that privilege particular human interests over those of any other animal are evidence of the insistence of the human-animal divide. The global scale of both industrialised animal breeding and habitat destruction forcefully demonstrates that the question of human exceptionalism has never needed attention more than it does now.

My study asks how the idea that there is a hierarchical distinction between humans and all other animals is invoked in twenty-first century fictional

representations of animals, and reads ten novels to examine the complex significations and fashionings of animals in the human imagination. These readings are concerned with developing a critical practice which makes it possible to formulate the terms of difficult questions, to evolve concepts which give shape to indistinct or fraught conditions, and to consider how the literary textualisation of an animal might enable more just and thoughtful, and less harmful and anthropocentric, ethical approaches to nonhuman animals. Human relationships with other animals can be characterised in many ways, including by violence, commodification, affection, neglect, absence, or manipulation, and these forms of relationship occur across a range of domestic, wild, industrial, social, economic, political, and discursive domains. Each is conditioned by human imaginative shapings of animals which can overwhelm any consideration of the actual lives and interests of animals themselves. The animals we imagine, then, are of enormous significance for real animals. To interrogate the ways the novels in question develop animal representational practices and ideas about a human-animal distinction, the study develops a framework of enquiry which opens up questions of how fictional animal forms, representations and tropes are responding to, participating in, or challenging the ways animals’ lives are lived out in consequence of human imaginings of them.

The primary texts under consideration are English language novels which, with one marginal exception, have been published since 2000; some are well known and have attracted a degree of critical attention, while others have failed, so far, to enjoy either scholarly or popular notice. They include Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*, E. O. Wilson’s *Anthill*, Carol Hart’s *A History of the Novel in Ants*, Aryn Kyle’s *The God of Animals*, Yann Martel’s *Beatrice and Virgil*, Mark McNay’s *Fresh*, James Lever’s *Me Cheeta*, and Karen Joy Fowler’s *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*. These novels address a wide range of thematic and ideological concerns, but all in some way represent important encounters with ethics, animals and Western cultural assumptions that the creature called “human” has interests and privileges which exceed those of any other animal. They are fictions with an interest in how humans and animals are imagined relative to each other, responding to the ways human intervention may overwrite and make absent the lives and experiences of animals. For many of the novels the effects of invisibility, and of a human willingness to cloak what is done to the animals who live among us in exculpatory concepts and discourses – to know and
not know – are central premises. How humans inhabit the lived space of the world, constructing and compartmentalising environments in ways that diminish the lives and experience of other animals, is also a dominant feature. Although many of these fictional animals live unusual lives, all are ordinary, earthbound creatures whose entanglements with humans take place in the ordinary, earthbound messiness and struggle of human social and sexual relating and, most importantly, are engaged in ethical encounters the full meaningfulness of which has yet to be fully debated in early twenty-first century Western culture. In my view, it is the responsibility of literary critical work to open out such debates.

My analysis is located in contemporary critical debate about human-animal relationships, and, starting out from the animal work of such thinkers as Derrida and Cary Wolfe, makes a detailed and precise engagement with the conditions and terms of literary representation in order to give forceful shape to awkward and uncomfortable ideas about animals. Derrida’s work on “the question of the animal” subjects to critique how philosophical views of animals have been marked with essentialism and reduction, and a failure to make an ethical encounter with the other – to meet face to face with a singular animal. For Derrida there is no question that there is “a discontinuity, rupture, or even abyss between those who call themselves men and what so-called men […] call the animal”, and he proposes that rather than attempting to redraw or dissolve a “plural and repeatedly folded frontier” his task is to trace what grows and multiplies at the limit.  

Struck by a recognition of his cat’s not-human perspective, Derrida is inspired to deconstruct western animal representations and their participation in dissimulation about, and concealment of, violence against animals. Donna Haraway complains that Derrida capitulates to the metaphysical tradition by failing to consider “an alternative form of engagement”, or positive forms of knowledge about animals and a “possible invitation, a possible introduction to other-worlding” when caught in the gaze of his cat. For her, he steps back when he should move forwards. Derrida’s project, though, is to articulate the conditions of the human-animal distinction, and his imagining of it as a composition of discursive, political, cultural and material folds provides a conceptual starting point for reading literary animals. This study scrutinises the multiple conditions at play in the composition of

---

conceptual and material divisions between humans and animals, and tracks the layers, thicknesses, blurrings and inconsistencies at stake in twenty-first century fiction representations of animals.

Cary Wolfe has been one of the most consistently thoughtful and challenging voices in the early life of Literary Animal Studies, playing a leading role in developing specifically literary critical forms of conscientious attention to animal representation from the broader field of Animal Studies. His multiple titles evolve new forms of literary critical theory and practice, and develop the potential of posthumanist forms of thought to re-vision human self-imaginings in less anthropocentric ways. To take the literary critical project forwards from Derrida’s ideas, this study responds to Wolfe’s re-thinking of the construction of subjectivity in relation to that of animality, and the substance of law and responsibility, to encounter what Wolfe calls the “vexation and rawness” of any genuinely ethical exposure to the vulnerability of animal bodies. “Rawness” is an experience of the kind expressed by Elizabeth Costello in The Lives of Animals as she reflects upon her inability to make a rational defence of her vegetarianism, and her failure to come to terms with the horrific abuses that otherwise kind and loving humans allow to be inflicted on animals. Aspects of the human-animal relationship are subject to human signifying practices that hinder explication, and my analysis opens out occlusions, impotencies and absences in language about animals. In the light of this analysis I seek, then, to identify not only the twenty-first century literary encounter with the history and constitution of the discourses of distinction and their effects, but also to articulate those affective, de-anthropocentrising or posthumanist impulses which mobilise a conscientious poetics of writings and readings of literary animals.

There are many folds in the rupture between human and nonhuman animals, and my thesis is structured to address the character of particular aspects of the discourses of distinction and division, and how these aspects are invoked in or mediate the fictional representations of animals. Each of the four chapters in this study takes

---

up, respectively, four modes of discursive boundary building – political, metaphorical, material and cognitive – between humans and other animals. Chapter One will address the fundamental ideas which construct the human as a set of positive values against which the inferior category of the animal is made. It will identify the instability of such a category in the global politics which administer the distribution of ethics and justice, and the processes of animalisation which validate the neglect and oppression of disempowered people via analogical identification with the idea of the animal. The grounds of the human-animal distinction set out in this chapter will be thickened, problematised and interrogated through encounters between human and nonhuman literary animals in the following three chapters. Chapter Two will take forward the idea that the human is constructed with and against imagined animals, investigating literary ants as an imaginative form which operates as metaphor and trope for human political and social organisation, and confuses notions of autonomous existence. Chapter Three will argue that human imaginings of animals have material consequences for real animals, and focuses on fleshy bodies in a system of semiotic, carnal and gendered property made possible by discursive and malleable legitimations for the making and killing of animals. If, for humans, the value of animals is located in fleshy bodies, then humans distinguish themselves from animals by opposing brute matter with high intelligence. Chapter Four will investigate this supposedly tidy distinction with readings of fictions “by” and about chimpanzees – beings who forcefully trouble insistence on absolute human difference – and ask how the very human and cognitively complex activity of writing fiction may not close all questions of unassailable human superiority. Articulating the singular literariness of the human, ant, horse, donkey, chicken and ape representations encountered throughout my study will remain central to analysis, for understanding that we see animals through our imaginative eyes is essential to understanding how we make our ethical relationships with them.

All the novels under discussion express, in various ways, pro-animal intentions; that is, their animal representations draw attention to fraught and unjust relationships between humans and other animals. Even when the animals in question are ants whose fictional manifestation is chiefly of an analogical nature, concern with conveying the suffering inflicted by humans on animals remains a significant feature. The textualisation of these animals is a dominant consideration; the novel form,
particularly formal realism and the *Bildungsroman*, is, broadly speaking, founded in human lives and the stories we tell ourselves about what we think we are, but many of the novels in this study attempt to disrupt or break narrative conventions to announce representational inadequacies when recreating animals in human language and textual forms. For these novels, linear and determinate narrative is coterminous with neat and tidy distinctions between humans and animals, and they reject orderly and explicable discourse in order to foreground inconsistencies and absences in the Western ontological model. This study hopes to give critical form to how fiction engages with and practices the textual politics of animal representation, and in so doing to consider the value of literature and literary criticism in articulating new questions and lines of thought about the form and validity of the human-animal distinction.
Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* is a novel of political violence, environmental degradation and extreme poverty. Despite the novel’s title, the exegesis of these situations is invested not in animals but in animalisation, western traditional imaginings of animality and humanity, and the nature of the boundaries between them. The eponymous Animal is a human boy living in Khaufpur, a fictional city with a history similar to that of Bhopal in India. Industrial poisons in the local environment have warped his spine, compelling him to walk as if a four-footed animal. Animal is thus severely deformed and disabled, and his disfigurement functions as the symbol of an exploited body politic, as an interrogation of racist discourses which depend upon the inferiority implied by the term “animal”, and of the notion that there are stable conceptions of humanity and animality with stable relations to material bodies. Indeed, *Animal’s People* can be read as a novel characterised by disfigurement – disfigured bodies, disfigured and disfiguring politics, texts and metaphors, traditional ideas and conventional forms. Animal takes a name which specifies his failure to meet the defining conditions of the “proper” western humanist human and his rejection of such a figure, and his disfigurement analogises the misshapenness of the discourses which legitimate and excuse the abuse, exploitation and neglect he suffers. In *Animal’s People*, however, disfigurement is not wholly a negative transformation; disfigurement can also be thought of as a challenge to the insistence of particular figurations. In this sense *Animal’s People* is a text which questions the traditional figures of the human and the animal, and in so doing it represents an openness to a way of thinking about human-to-human and human-to-animal relationships which are not dependent on divisive, exclusionary and privative discursive conditions.

In *Animal Rites* Cary Wolfe argues that in the discourse of animality both humans and animals can be animalised by the attribution to them of such bestial characteristics as irrationality, savagery and limited intelligence. Animalised beings are thus constructed and imagined in opposition to the equally constructed figure of

---

the rational, civilised being of the human. Jacques Derrida describes the figure of the animal as the animot, mobilising the traditional ontological and ethical distinctions between human and animal under a single concept which acts to obscure the many and complex differences and similarities between humans and other animals. This chapter reads Animal’s People in the light of the concepts of animalisation and the animot, developing articulations of the ways its hero is, as a literary innovation, folded into a complex of political, cultural and philosophical encounters with the idea of the animal. It interrogates the idea of the human and the animal as distinctly different conditions, and considers Animal’s carefully plotted questioning of the discourses which disfigure him. Animal’s People is not, though, a story about a boy seeking his rightful status as a human, it is instead the story of a human animal and his struggle to disentangle himself from the categories and politically driven practices which frame him as an aberrant and worthless less-than-human.

Humans manage and make sense of their encounters with the world by organising them into conceptual categories, and these categories can encode generalising and evaluative beliefs. Although the conditions normalised by such categories as race, disablement or species are subject to ongoing academic interrogation, Animal’s story, and the lives of the people of Bhopal who provoke its writing, indicate that there are social and cultural assumptions about, and legitimations for, the relative positions of humans to other humans, and humans to other animals, that are resistant to new perspectives on the entangling of self and world. This chapter is therefore founded in theoretical discussions of how humans and animals are conceptualised, and the contingent nature of classificatory systems. Coupled to scientific or political structures of understanding are considerations of the animal as philosophical topoi, the face as an ethics contracted to the human person, and the idea that semblance functions as a normative hermeneutic method. The substance of many of these discussions is of a longstanding nature, for the dispositifs of any boundary between humans and other animals has occupied minds across human intellectual history, but Animal’s People tackles the mobile ontologies of human distinction in a unique manner by foregrounding Animal’s resistance to a humanist, neo-liberal model of the human, and expressing an openness to the politics of posthumanism. The concept of “the animal”, too, is of concern, for the generic assumptions that construct animality have been implicit in a broad range of stereotyping practices; Animal’s
critique and simultaneous appropriation of the category of “animal” produced by his poverty, social exclusion, political marginalisation and physical condition asks questions about the relationship of animality to the posthumanist human. This chapter reads Animal’s People as the story of an animal who is human, interrogating the terms and conditions of anthropocentric and humanist distinctions between humans and other animals, and how they are made visible by the novel’s conceptual apparatus and its literary composition.

NAMING ANIMAL

Animal begins life on the margins of human society, born to poverty-stricken parents in the hovels surrounding a pesticide factory in Khaufpur, India. Replicating events in Bhopal, the Indian city overwhelmed by a toxic gas cloud in 1984 following a catastrophic failure of safety systems in a Union Carbide factory, an explosion leads to the immediate and later deaths of thousands of local people and animals. Animal, only a few days old on what the Khaufpuris call “that night”, is found abandoned in a doorway, his parents, presumably, dead.2 Six years later residual chemical poisoning wipes Animal’s memory of his former self, including his name, and causes his spine to twist so that he must walk on all fours. He lives in the poorest zones of Khaufpur, surviving on begged and scavenged scraps of food, despised or ignored by the local authorities, and in conditions of such precarity that he takes the name Animal. If he cannot enjoy the security and recognition that form the normal expectations of humans then he is not, he says, a human, but an animal with no possessions, entitlements or social responsibilities. He nevertheless shares a mutually caring relationship with Ma Franci, an elderly and not entirely sane French nun, and has many friendships among the people in the city of the poor. He meets Nisha and her chaste, saintly lover, Zafar, an activist campaigning for compensation for Khaufpuris suffering the effects of primary and environmental poisoning, and becomes a member of their activist group. Zafar’s efforts centre around attempts to make “the Kampani”(p.14) accept responsibility for the eruption of the toxic gas cloud, and to force them to assist in a clean-up. When Elli Barber, a young and idealistic American doctor, sets up a free clinic for the poor and poisoned she offers Animal the hope that, with money and the right contacts, his back can be straightened and he can become human again. However,

2 Indra Sinha, Animal’s People (London: Pocket Books, 2008 [2007]), p.5. All subsequent references are to this edition, and are incorporated in the text.
there is no such fairy-tale ending for Animal, for although the novel relies on features not characteristic of realism, it is founded in the unending bitter reality of Bhopal’s struggle against corporate power and callous indifference.

*Animal’s People* is Animal’s bildungsroman, an autodiegetic, picaresque tale of animalised delinquency narrated in an idiosyncratic vernacular idiom which is unapologetically crude and scattered with obscenities. His verbal style is a textual resonance of his living conditions – obscenely poor, and crudely deprived of everything most humans would consider essential to everyday life – but it is also the medium that he must use to represent his thesis that he is an animal, an avatar of conditions against which versions of the human are defined. Animal’s rich use of language and complex storytelling indicate that the conventional understanding of what an animal is – a being with no capacity for human speech, rational thought, self-awareness or moral understanding, with limited intelligence, and of a species other than *Homo sapiens* – is not applicable to him, but the question of why Animal insists that he is animal can begin to be answered by asking *how* he is an animal: in what ways does he fulfil the generic requirements which place him in the category of animal, while not meeting the specific attributes of the particular category of human? From Animal’s perspective he is positioned on what appears to be the wrong side of a line which demarcates power and privilege, and his ontological state has its origins in the relationships between his disfiguring political form of life and his disfigured body. Importantly, Animal argues that he is treated like an animal and as a consequence is obliged to live like one, and the generic conception of animality upon which he bases interpretations of his condition is as constructed as the idea of the proper human at which Animal directs such scorn.

Multiple dimensions – political, social, cultural, metaphorical, material, historical, textual, conceptual – converge in Animal as the dispositifs which locate his body and identity in relation to ethical entitlement. Destitute, hungry, physically disabled and disenfranchised, he is invisible to the local, national and global systems which administer the distribution of ethics and justice, and as a nameless undocumented body he is matter that does not matter. As a fiction Animal does not, of course, actually have any matter, but is instead a bundle of words and ideas, a metaphor for a multitude of injustices perpetrated by rich against poor, powerful against weak,
humanity against animality; however, his metaphorical function as an animalised human is inextricably tied to the principle of his material existence. His animalised status is not just metaphorical or symbolic – animal as philosophical topos – but constituted in his living and suffering body. Although genealogically and biologically human, Animal’s compromised body and allegedly animal behaviour question assumptions about the characteristic form and nature of the human species, drawing attention to the many discourses with an interest in creating and reinforcing such assumptions. These discourses depend on historical ideas in natural philosophy and science which have attempted to locate understandings of animals and humans in systems of unstable and politically motivated categories, for the idea of the animal has rather nebulous outlines.

The basic biological construction of a human is the same as that of an animal, that is, all animals are dynamic living organisms characterised by voluntary movement and a capacity to make complex reactions to stimuli. But this lowest common denominator definition is an insufficient explanation for human experience of self and world as, although humans may on one level know themselves to be nothing more than an, at present, particularly successful animal species among many other more or less successful species, on another level they conceive of themselves as distinctively different to other animals. Philosopher Mary Midgley identifies two dominant uses of the word “animal”: the first covers “the immense range of creatures, including ourselves, from blue whales to tiny micro-organisms”; the second, however, is the more common usage in which we “contrast all other organisms with our own species, speaking of animals as distinct from humans”.³ Both of these understandings are used readily in everyday life, but the word “animal” can be used to “draw a hard dramatic black line across this continuum”.⁴ So, although the species Homo sapiens is encircled by the definition ‘animal’, the concept of humanity is not; the human being as an imagined state is thus outside the state of being an animal or the conceptual characteristics of animality. If one believes that humans and other animals share a basic set of conditions for life, but that human engagement with life is qualitatively distinct from that of animals, then there is a tacit agreement that the differences between humans and animals are of more significance than the shared characteristics. If,

⁴ Midgley, The Myths We Live By, p.136.
therefore, Animal declares himself to be a nonhuman animal he must have a set of categorisations which defines what a human is – a list of qualities that he either rejects or cannot find in himself. But if a human being is conceived of as qualitatively distinctive and animal life is by comparison a base state, then what are the characteristics of the base state of being animal which humans both possess and exceed? The answer to this question (and, therefore, the terms by which Animal identifies himself) is framed by the tension between two simultaneously held conceptions of what a human is, and ideas about what an animal is. A human is an animal who differs from other animals only in the way all species are physically and cognitively distinctive from each other; but a human is also distinctively not an animal by virtue of a set of physical and cognitive advantages, ideas about the genesis of which emerge from a tangle of biological, metaphysical and theological conceptualisations of what a human is.

If we want to know what an animal is there are many philosophical and scientific theses to turn to. Thomas Sebeok, for example, describes the biological category of animal as a living system maintained in a system of negative entropy – the concentrating of a stream of order on itself by an organism, thus (temporarily) escaping the atomic chaos sought by entropy, or the decay of systems. Or in other words, an animal is the fleeting (in terms of cosmic time) combination of atoms into a living body, a brief Bergsonian eddy in the current of space and time. This conceptualisation does not, however, explain anything about the nature of life or about a living, breathing, animated body, and an animal, human or otherwise, does not experience itself as a brief coalescing of matter, or as a set of transmutative processes. Certainly, for humans at least, this is an insufficient formulation for it does not attempt to explain how it is even possible for a human to ask what an animal is, and the capacity to ask such a question is, humans believe, what makes us distinctively different. Indeed, Tim Ingold observes that the question of what an animal is tends to be construed as a question about ourselves – in talking of animals we are in fact articulating the ways in which we are distinctively not animal, and imagining ourselves as the positive property in a structure which automatically relegates nonhuman animals (beings we assume are

unable to question what they are) to inferior status.\textsuperscript{6} Thinkers across human intellectual history have wrestled with articulating terms, conditions and categories which will explain the ways in which humans may or may not differ from all other animals. The thinking of Aristotle, Descartes and Linnaeus stakes out an indicative range of the arguments relevant to this discussion.

Aristotle’s treatises in \textit{The Parts of Animals} represent the first systematic, biological classification of animals; organisms are divided into \textit{vegetalia} and \textit{animalia}, with animals further divided into sanguineous and bloodless.\textsuperscript{7} Although Aristotle includes humans in the category of animal, and his detailed genera are apparently based on first-hand observations which sought meaningful biological and behavioural criteria with which to group species, some of his interpretations are distinctly metaphysical. Aristotle describes “man” as a “political animal” and does so as a biologist, defining man as by nature endowed with speech, reason and a sense of morality; with these natural capacities he can articulate the ethical foundations of a just \textit{polis} of those beings with the same natural capacities.\textsuperscript{8} In the just city, however, only men – men like Aristotle – are fully in possession of these natural capacities. Women – for whom, a neat trick this, silence is the character of their particular virtue – children, slaves and nonhuman animals are discursively divested of the rational speech of the political animal.\textsuperscript{9} Rene Descartes also treated speech as central to the identity of the human, for language is tied to the rational, immaterial and transcendent soul possessed only by humans, whereas animals, being speechless, are less intelligent than even the most “dull-witted or stupid” of men.\textsuperscript{10} For Descartes, the reasonable soul stakes out an absolute category of difference for humans from “beasts”.\textsuperscript{11} The effects of both Descartes’ and Aristotle’s thinking have lingered into the twenty-first century.

\textsuperscript{7} Aristotle, ‘Book 1.2’ \textit{The Parts of Animals}, [online] trans. by William Ogle (Internet Classics Archive), (para. 2), \url{http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/parts_animals.mb.txt}, [accessed 18 March 2011].
In the eighteenth century Carolus Linnaeus provided the foundations of modern natural history in *Systema Naturae*, his binomial system of taxonomy which sought to understand the natural world and to describe its laws with a methodical system of naming and classification. Paul Farber suggests Linnaeus acknowledged that “his method did not reflect any ‘real’ order in nature”, but was an artificial system which attempted to articulate God’s plan in it.\(^{12}\) Giorgio Agamben, though, addresses the tension for Linnaeus between what he believed natural science dictated about the correct classification of humans, and theological disapproval of its more appropriate location. Linnaeus explains in *Menniskans Cousiner* (Man’s Cousins), says Agamben, that natural science can see no meaningful difference between anthropoid apes and man, although he acknowledges that there is a clear difference at the moral and theological level.\(^{13}\) Linnaeus places humans in the Family *Hominidae* – the great apes – but, against his better judgement as a naturalist, separates them from other apes into the genus *Homo*, species *sapiens*; he does not, however, leave the matter there. Agamben says that:

Linnaeus’s genius consists not so much in the resoluteness with which he places man among the primates as in the irony with which he does not record – as he does with the other species – any specific identifying characteristic next to the generic name *Homo*, only the old philosophical adage: *nosce te ipsum* (know yourself).\(^{14}\)

Man, says Agamben, is in Linnaeus’s classification absent of any specific identifying characteristic other than self knowledge: “man is the being which recognises itself as such, that *man is the animal that must recognize itself as human to be human*”.\(^{15}\) Taxonomy recognises that the living world is immensely complex, and peppered with ambiguities which impede absolute taxonomic classification. Biologist Richard Whittaker observes that taxonomic classes “are products of human contemplation of the living world, […] and] the various systems may be judged by their relative success in expressing those broad relationships which seem most important”.\(^{16}\) A taxonomy is, thus, a provisional representation of what seems significant to humans at a given time.

---


\(^{14}\) Agamben, *The Open*, p.25.

\(^{15}\) Agamben, *The Open*, p.25.

and the exact location of humans in Family Hominidae remains subject to how humans represent their significance among other apes.

Born to human parents Animal’s People’s Animal must, as Darwin tells us, phylogenetically, be Homo sapiens, a vertebrate, mammalian, primate species in the Kingdom Animalia. He, like all other humans is thus taxonomically an animal and an ape, but located in a separate genus – Homo – from our closest relatives, the chimpanzees (genus Pan). Taxonomists do not, however, agree on the taxonomic correctness of separating humans from other closely related members of the Order Primates. In The Third Chimpanzee Jared Diamond defines taxonomists as either traditional or cladistic: the former group “species into higher categories by making somewhat subjective evaluations of how important the differences between species are […] and] place humans in a separate family because of distinctive functional traits like large brain and bipedal posture”; the latter argue that humans should be in the same genus as chimpanzees and pygmy chimpanzees (bonobos) so that there are three Homo species, with a good argument for including gorillas as a fourth.17 Tom Tyler points out, however, that even if the cladistics view seems less anthropocentrically exclusive, “[r]eclassifying chimpanzees as humans suggests once more that humans are in some sense prior to, or preeminent among, the great apes”.18 He suggests that humans can discover “a new ‘we’” if the chimpanzee genus name Pan, stemming from the Greek meaning “all”, is taken to apply to every one of the species within our chimpanzee genus”, including humans.19 Such fine principles and tinkeringas with words are not part of Animal’s world, for Linnaeus’s dictum to know himself leaves him, paradoxically, unable to recognise himself as a human. Like the traditional taxonomists, and unlike Linneaus, he sees bipedalism as a distinctive feature of being human. His failure to be bipedal signifies his failure to be properly human.20 For him,

19 Tyler, Ciferae, p.252, p.253.
his warped posture is a disfiguration of the natural form of a human, deviating too far from the standard model for easy cognisance or for assimilation into ordinary human life.

Animal’s most distinctive physical characteristic is that he walks, he says, “on four feet” (p.11), although at some unremembered point in the past he “walked on two feet just like a human being” (p.1). He does not, in fact, have four feet, but is instead obliged to employ his hands in the same way as he would feet as a consequence of having a spine “twisted like a hairpin, [so that] the highest part of me was my arse” (p.15). His atypical mode of locomotion impacts significantly on his identity; in the categorical either/or descriptions and the syllogisms which frame human understanding, his failure to conform to the human descriptor “bipedal” causes him to be re-described and re-perceived as quadrupedal – he looks, he says, more like an animal than a human. He avoids mirrors, expresses his “raw disgust” (p.2) at the sight of his own shadow’s shape on the ground, and rages against everything that needs only two points of contact with the ground to function efficiently and normally. His “list of jealousies” (p.2) includes women carrying pots on their heads, children playing hopscotch, performing bears, a one-legged beggar with a crutch, goalposts, possibly a bicycle. These are entities which meet the specification of their particular species or function in order to fit the niche which the human world prescribes for them. For Animal, simple semblance to a standard model is the hermeneutic method by which to identify a human, and he, not resembling standard bipedal human specification, is therefore something else. In his ape-like form and deportment he expresses a semblance which analogises regression to the animal forebears of the modern human, an analogy which categorises him by simple appearance as the uncivilised, the savage and the less-than-human.

Animal observes that “[t]he world of humans is meant to be viewed from eye level” (p.2), the eye level, that is, of a standard human body; his eyes, however, are at crotch level where a “[w]hole nother world it’s” (p.2). Down here, where Animal knows “which one hasn’t washed his balls, I can smell pissy gussets and shitty backsides […], farts smell extra bad” (p.2), it stinks, literally and metaphorically. And it is not just that the air smells less sweet down at the excremental level – human life in general ensures that the engagement with it of a physically disabled person is of a
distinctly inferior nature. Disabled People International (DPI) distinguishes between impairment as a “functional limitation within the individual”, and disability as “the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers”.\(^1\) These terms, says Dan Goodley, medicalise impairment and “politicise disability”.\(^2\) The spinal twist that forces Animal down on all fours limits the functionality of his hands, effectively disbarring him from interacting with humans and the features of the human world in the way they expect. The business of the world effectively goes on above his head, its machinery controls, pedals, door knobs, tables and chairs intended for an upright body with two hands free to press buttons or carry trays. Whereas the medical framing of “impairment” as a biological or other difference locates the fault of the disconnect between an impaired body and “normal” life in that individual, “disability” draws attention to the assumption that the furnishing of the world according to a “normal” human body is natural. Animal’s crotch level eye-line disfigures this normality; for him, damaged by industrial poisons, it is the world that has disabled him and obstructed his access to it, and then, as a final twist, excluded him for his inability to interact with the human world in a human way. In doing so, the world of humans makes no distinction between disabled humans and animals, for they are equally not taken account of in its geography. Conflating animals with human disablement via the body of a boy named Animal who walks as if a four-footed animal does not, though, analogue disablement animals. Rather, it foregrounds that all beings who differ from “normal” humans are equally excluded from sharing any part of the environment which is “natural” to those humans.

As Aristotle’s The Parts of Animals, written in approximately 350 BCE, indicates, the human search for an order in nature has a long history. The method and science of this search accelerated in modernity, made possible by advances in technology and philosophy, but the enlarged understanding of nature these advances provided did not necessarily promote a radical epistemic break from a sense of an underlying, pre-existing natural order. In believing in semblance as a form of supposedly natural ordering – a system of metaphysical prototypes – which expresses

what is either human or animal, Animal could be described as a Platonist who compares himself with a *sui generis* of humanness. He argues that “if I agree to be a human being, I’ll also have to agree that I’m wrong-shaped and abnormal” (p.208), and so articulates his faith in a Platonic idea of the properties to which a human body accords. He describes himself as having an “invisible other self” (p.139) which stands upright, and which emerges from the point where his spine twists; this imaginary perfect form torments him with its impossibility. Two-footedness and an upright body are properties of humanness, properties which Animal’s twisted body does not express. If he does not express the exemplary properties of a human body then he must be expressing those of another kind of body, and in expressing the property of quadrupedalism he has a share of a generic notion of animalness. Animals are not, of course, generically quadrupedal, but what is significant to Animal is four-footedness as a demonstration of general non-exemplification and non-conformance to human being as the pinnacle of evolutionary achievement. Stephen Clark identifies similar processes at work in “folk taxonomy”, which depends on a hermeneutic method of semblance in visible physical forms and functional properties to define things via an *a priori* conception of what is natural and normal, rather than unembodied genealogical descent and impossibly microscopic nuclei structures.²³ This approach is less a method of classification than an argument that scientific order is only an overlay upon a more deep-seated and less conscious hermeneutic method.

Platonic Form and folk taxonomy suggest that humans may categorise and interpret the world and its events and objects using a different set of normative criteria to that proposed by the language of modernity, mathematics and scientific description. Instead, humans inhabit the world through a system of signs and semblances in which experience is constituted in embodiment, as well as in social and more formal classifications. The kind and constitution of a particular entity is established by its physical, behavioural and functional correspondence with habituated understandings and expectations, or, in other words, humans expect other humans to walk upright, have largely hairless bodies and flat faces; they are also expected to communicate through grammatical language, and follow elaborate social rituals, such as those

involved in courtship. By the same token, humans expect apes to have hands which they use to walk on, to be covered in hair, have prominent muzzles, to communicate with inarticulate sounds and body language and have social behaviours compatible with, rather than repressive of, instinctual bodily urges. Humans look and behave like humans, and apes look and behave like apes, and these are the primary normative grounds for recognition, differentiation and interaction, but Animal reveals that the nature of these grounds is, nevertheless, problematic.

The origin of Animal’s construction of himself as a failed human lies in his naming by others. Animal relates that during an orphanage game a boy “kneed me in the face. It hurt. I was so angry I bit him […] The other kids started shouting, Jaanvar, jungli Jaanvar’. Animal, wild Animal” (p.15). On another occasion, after playing in a water-filled clay pit, a little girl leaves the prints of her muddy fingertips on his skin and remarks that he looks like a leopard. “Animal, jungli Animal!” cry the other children, and “[t]he name, like the mud, stuck […] some things have a logic that can’t be denied” (p.16). Animal is subsequently described as “like a monkey” by his friends, who also suggest that he could be mistaken for a “baboon” (p.77). While his friends’ remarks are comparisons rather than absolute namings, and his fellow orphans’ name-calling is childishly reductive rather than malicious, they are, to Animal, cruel barbs which promote his sense of alienation from the ordinary human expectations he might otherwise have enjoyed. Animal’s body and behaviours are sufficiently different from normative human configurations that, through their compromising of absolute definition and containment within a tidy ontological boundary, his naming as something other becomes a legitimate possibility. Western philosophy contended for many centuries that the mind or soul and the body are separate, and while this formulation no longer actively pertains, there remains a residual sense that some aspect of human identity – some notion of what ultimately defines the humanness of the autonomous individual – exceeds the fleshy body. The naming of Animal as an animal would seem to deprive him of the privileged excess that identifies the human, leaving him a life of mere animality, the qualities of which are constructed from generic assumptions of animal subjection to instinctual drives.

Biting, using teeth as a weapon, tends to be considered as an aggression characteristic of animals rather than humans (who have, after all, devoted considerable
effort to developing far more sophisticated and effective tools of maiming and destruction), and is viewed as bestial behaviour. A slip into bestiality is evidence that humanity as a state of being is a fragile condition which is not guaranteed, so when Animal bites another child he is “behaving like an animal”. In permitting instinct and uninhibited reaction to overrule the social strictures and conditions that constitute human civilisation and govern rational response he is bringing the polarities of savagery and humanity into collision. As Mary Midgley suggests, the animal “is a symbol for the forces which we fear in our own nature, and do not regard as a true part of it”. This symbol is a dramatisation of natural forces, of “our ‘animal nature’ [which] exists already as a Trojan horse within the human gates. Only constant vigilance can stop it playing an active part in human life”. Animal’s acquiescence to his “animal passions” marks him as less like a rational human and more like a beast, and this, combined with the quadrupedal animalness of his physical form, downgrades the quality of his humanness.

Animal has other appetites which are constitutive of his demotion from humanity to animality. His extreme poverty places him persistently on the point of starvation, and hunger drives him to scavenge the scrapings of other people’s meals from restaurant bins (which he does with his scavenging colleague, a dog), to eat a vulture’s egg he finds on the city dump – a scavenger eating a scavenger – and even chew lumps of dry, horny skin which he breaks from his own feet. To the majority of humans these menu items are, respectively, dog food, edible but revolting and taboo, inconceivable as a foodstuff. To Animal, waste and conventionally inedible matter are made edible, and even tasty, by necessity. He has not the luxury of discrimination, for his life on the farthest margins of a marginalised people insists that there is no place for civilised delicacy in his diet. Linnaeus, among some other rather dubious subspecific classifications in Homo, provided a taxonomic location, Homo sapiens ferus, to describe wolf-children, and although of the three characteristic features of ferus – tetrapus, mutus and hirsutus – Animal expresses only walking on all fours, ferality describes the nature of his exclusion. Feral children in Linnaeus’s taxonomy are, says Agamben, “the messengers of man’s inhumanity, the witness to his fragile

identity”, and as Animal lurks among the rubbish of human civilisation, the discomfiting sight of his human face upon his animal body with its animal eating habits, dislodges any sense of certainty that human behaviour is absolutely distinct from that attributed to nonhumans. Agamben further draws attention to Pico della Mirandolla’s thesis in *On the Dignity of Man*, that “man was created without a definite model […] and must shape it at his own discretion in either bestial or divine form”. In this formulation Animal is doubly damned, for in gnawing old bones found on the city dump he has either deliberately shaped himself in degenerate, bestial form, or is unable to exercise a discretion which is proper to a human because he is instead already a beast. Animal’s indiscriminate choice of foods and his irrepressible hunger clearly mark him as bestial in habit and inclination; his willingness to consume even his own dead skin to survive indicates the triumph of irrational, fleshly, animal appetites over rational, civilised, dignified, definitively human mind.

Steve Baker, in *Picturing the Beast*, observes that in language the animal comparison is almost always negative and suggestive of contempt. An exception to this (if a rather superficial one), says Baker, is sexual predation, and Animal – who is the proud bearer of an exaggeratedly large appendage, his famous “lund”(p.46), or penis – illustrates that such a comparison, while apparently producing a paradox in which positive and negative connotations compete, tends to reinforce the belief that animal behaviour is governed and limited by the urge to reproduce. Animal’s friends joke to him, “My god what a lund. Fucker is made like a donkey […]. Jaanvar you are hung like … a jaanvar”(p.46). While being “hung like a jaanvar” earns Animal the admiration of his male companions and, indeed, provides him with some “joy”(p.46) in his otherwise joyless existence, it offers only solitary pleasures. He is often accused of having doggy-fashion sex with his street-dog companions, but, in truth, he is tormented by the resilience of his virginity. Animal is certain that, despite his handsome face and powerful upper torso, no girl could either love or desire his twisted body, and he is unable to alleviate his sexual urges by paying for the temporary affections of a prostitute. Despite maintaining that he is an animal, Animal’s ambitions

---

27 Agamben, *The Open*, p.29.
29 In Hindi and Urdu jaanvar means ‘animal’ or ‘beast’, a word derived from ‘jaan’, meaning ‘life’.
regarding the requiting of his lust are directed entirely at human women, particularly Nisha, who kindly but firmly rejects his devotion in favour of the hero-activist Zafar. Recognising the difference between sex and love, and telling himself that an “[a]nimal mating with human female, it’s unnatural”(p.78), Animal is nevertheless ceaselessly distracted by his lust; he describes his penis as “a relentless monster, no peace does it give me, always it’s demanding, demanding, in my hand it feels hot and stupid”(p.226). Plagued by irrepressible erections at inappropriate times, he also describes it as “beastly”, and a “brute”, and demands to know “who’s in control here?”(p.226). Imagining his penis as a separate entity to his intellect, he sees it as mindless matter warring for control over his thoughts and actions, and, in keeping with a widely held cultural analogy of uncontrolled lust with animality, he believes that his uncontrollable passions represent the victory of animal bodily irrationality over human rational mind.30

Jealous of the time Zafar spends (quite innocently) alone with Nisha, Animal drugs his rival in an attempt to suppress his supposed ardour. He hopes that the drugs he administers to Zafar in his tea will make him too sick to trouble Nisha’s modesty, and at the same time reduce Zafar’s transcendent saintliness by making him as subject to bodily limitations as Animal himself is. This project backfires, first, because the drugs are made of the aphrodisiac Datura, so that Zafar is forced to exercise great, and therefore very saintly restraint; and second, Zafar will later undergo a hunger-strike almost to the point of death, demonstrating that his rational mind has absolute control over the mindless demands of his body. For Animal, the contrast between what is perceived as Zafar’s exemplary humanity and his own ungoverned, or even ungovernable, libido is, again, evidence that his behaviour and refractory body are too bestial to be human.

Animal transgresses a boundary, and although there are two formulations of his transgression – his “animal” shape, and his bestiality – these apparently separate contexts of physical form and behaviour are connected in complex ways to denote him

30 In Hinduism lust is a vice to be avoided (L. Edwards, A Brief Guide to Beliefs: Ideas, Theologies, Mysteries and Movements (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p.138). In Islamism lustfulness leads to immoral conduct (Asfar Bano, Status of Women in Islamic Society (New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 2003), p.136.). Similarly, in Christianity lust and lewdness are viewed as base and sinful (J. Wright Knaus, Abandoned to Lust: Sexual Slander and Ancient Christianity (New York: 2006).) All these perspectives on lust are as subject to re-interpretation and politically motivated manipulation as any other social discourse.
as a creature whose full access to humanity is flawed. As has already been discussed, Animal perceives his warped spine and consequent inability to walk upright as the outward manifestation of his failure to be properly human, but his contorted body and impaired functioning have implications beyond simple physical disability in producing his lack of what is “proper” – in a Heideggerian sense – to the human. Derrida, in ‘Geslecht II: Heidegger’s Hand’, discusses Heidegger’s assertion that apes, for example, have organs that can grasp, but have no hands.31 He interprets Heidegger as seeing the hand not as a metaphor to explain how a human can conceptually “grasp” the world, but as the essential difference from organs that are only prehensile paws, claws or talons, which manifests as an infinite gap of being. “[M]an” says Heidegger, “is not merely part of the world but is also master and servant of the world in the sense of ‘having’ world”, whereas “the animal is poor in world”.32 For Heidegger, says Derrida, the animal can only take hold of, grasp, lay hands on the thing. The organ can only take hold of and manipulate the thing insofar as, in any case, it does not have to deal with the thing as such, does not let the thing be what it is in its essence.33

An animal cannot have the world because it cannot grasp its essence – it knows only things, not objects or their conceptualisation – whereas human understanding of the world is implicit in our engagement with it, placing humans not as a simple part of the world but “over against” it, a “having’ of world”.34 Through the hand, its capacity to use and manipulate tools and the world, and the concept of the “ready-to-hand”, a specifically human relation with the world is established. This is a proposition, says Derrida, which marks the text with a metaphysical humanism inscribing an “absolute oppositional limit” between humans and animals. For Heidegger an animal’s relation to the world is irrevocably of a different quality to that of a human, in a formulation of

---

33 Derrida, ‘Geslecht’, p175.
animalness which encloses animality in its “organic-biologic programs”, separating humans irretrievably from the rest of the world.35

To wilfully misuse Heidegger’s concept of grasping, Animal can, in one sense, grasp the world, and in another cannot. He has human language with which to grasp the world conceptually, and is present to himself as a being; however, the mode of being which enables him to conceive of things as objects is frustrated by his inability to complete the connection between hand, speech and thought. He refers to his hands as feet and paws, and observes that “if you go on all fours you have only one hand plus mouth free to carry things”(p.25), and claims that “[a]n animal must use its mouth, no other tool does it have”(p.26). Thus, although Animal has hands, his flawed capacity to make use of the tools of thought (his hands) means that his capacity to “stand over against” the world is disabled – the world and its “equipment” are for him conceptually waiting to be used, but not actually “ready-to-hand”.36 Animal’s relationship to the world is instead characterised by an unreadiness-to-hand in which, rather than achievement being hindered by the breakage or obstinacy of an object, the unreadiness is located in his own recalcitrant body; his hands are no longer the unnoticed, untheorised manipulators of the world, but are instead the locus of a fracture with ordinary human life. In the disfigurement of Animal’s hands from readiness to unreadiness, a zone of uncertainty is introduced to what Matthew Calarco describes as Heidegger’s uncritical acceptance of “two basic tenets of ontotheological anthropocentrism: that human beings and animals can be clearly and cleanly distinguished in their essence; and that such a distinction between human beings and animals even needs to be drawn”.37 Animal’s hands as the non-expression of a human essence do not figure the idea that simply because he can no longer physically grasp he is therefore not human; his hands are instead a disfiguration – a making incongruous or unseemly – of a fundamental metaphysical figure of human distinction.

In The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics, Heidegger says that a lizard lying upon a rock is in its own relation with that rock in that, if moved from its position,

the lizard will return to it in order to lie in the sun, but will not relate to that rock as rock. He suggests that the word ‘rock’ should be crossed out, but if we cross out the word we do not simply mean to imply that something else is in question here or is taken as something else. Rather we imply that whatever it is is not accessible to it as a being. The blade of grass that the beetle crawls up […] is not a blade of grass for it at all; it is not something possibly destined to become part of the bundle of hay with which the peasant will feed his cow. The blade of grass is simply a beetle-path.38

Lizards and beetles have no awareness of rocks and grass; they cannot ponder upon the abstract potential of the furniture of the world, and cannot therefore encounter the existence of an object or being as such beyond the immediate but un-reflected-upon facility it provides or need it meets. All animals, this formulation says, live in the same limited relation to the world, and this is a reductive animalising which provides all animals with a set of common features which define them over against the human. Animal meets a lizard on a rock in the sun who, upon pleading successfully with the starving, humanity-rejecting Animal not to eat it, tells him that “your nature you can never change. You are human, if you were an animal you would have eaten me”(p.346). Thus, this biological determinist lizard with its own unreflective, speechless and unchangeable animal nature, is also a self-subverting Heideggerian philosophical figure who articulates a philosophy prohibiting the speech it makes.

Heidegger’s motif lizard is just one of a number of Animal’s People’s references to human-animal distinction in the western metaphysical tradition, and to attempts to dismantle it. Agamben’s The Open: Man and Animal falls into the latter category; Agamben’s concept of the “anthropological machine of humanism”, the presupposition of the human produced “through the opposition man/animal, human/inhuman”, seeks to articulate the process of animalisation by which animality is identified, isolated and excluded from humanity.39 Animal’s People performs a similar politics to The Open by rejecting the premises that construct “the human” to reveal the limitations of prevailing legal, political and sovereignty models, and the conceptual apparatus of the novel resonates with that of the philosophical tract. When drug-befuddled Animal asks “am I a man?”, the reply from his delusory world is:

39 Agamben, The Open, p.29, p.37.
“WHAT IS A MAN?” (p.347), a rhetorical question which, as Agamben says, has no answer because the anthropological machine outlines a “perfectly empty” zone containing no traits definitive of the human.  

Animal’s People incorporates specific features of The Open into the thematics of its plot: sanctimonious activist Zafar invents the principle of “the nothing” (p.54) around which to unite the poor and ailing of Khaufpur, echoing Agamben’s critique of Heidegger and boredom; and a musician expounds on frog music (p.48), recalling the frog concertos cited by Agamben. Animal mocks the thoughtless rhetoric of “the power of nothing”; and, bewildered by the too-dignified pathos of the musician, can hear nothing but a frog “happily looking for another frog to fuck” (p.48). Calarco draws attention to the inability of The Open to escape the limitations of anthropocentrism, for Agamben’s writings “focus entirely and exclusively on the effects of the anthropological machine on human beings and never explore the impact the machine has on various forms of animal life”. Animal’s People seems mindful of this, and draws attention to Animal’s construction of himself as the symbolic category of “THE ANIMAL” (p.345), rather than just an animal. Roman Bartosch argues that the novel is “humanist in its ethical impetus”, but that at the same time, Animal “initiates a complex process of what it means to be (post)human”, and Animal’s recognition of the oppositional but hollow categories of the human and the animal validates this. Although, like Agamben, and because Animal is human, Animal’s People is more interested in the effects of animalisation on humans than on animals, it is conscious of the structures of thought and language which make such processes possible.

THE ANIMOT

Animal’s provocative opening gambit – “I used to be human once” (p.1) – is a declaration that being human is neither guaranteed nor a fixed category, but is instead an unstable concept built from a set of rules which, because this set is an empty category outlined in contexts far removed from his life, is difficult to challenge. The

---

40 Agamben, The Open, p.38.
41 Agamben, The Open, pp.63-70, p.9.
42 Calarco, Zooographies, p.102.
text of *Animal’s People*, by granting him an irreverent post-colonial voice, never expresses any doubtfulness about his value as an individual being, and in weaving him into a multi-race, multi-species and environmental community of affect and responsibility generates an aesthetic of posthumanist performance. Animal’s story does, however, propose that the casual, unfriendly, indifferent or presuppositional glance will subject him to a process of interpretation and judgement, and establish a hermeneutically grounded assessment of him based on his physiognomy and proclivities. Possibly he is experienced and interpreted as something uncanny – something odd, and at odds with normative categorisations, and metaphorically other – which must either be fixed into a pre-ordained slot to limit the ontological damage being done, or reconfigured as a human mind trapped in an abnormal materialisation. His material presence emerges as a signifying system with complex and contradictory interpretative possibilities which, in his creation as a literary entity, vary according to the context of encounter. Whether he perceives himself as a sanctified human, a worthless animal, or as something else depends upon the value placed upon his life, and this is structured by wider ethical, cultural, political and critical frameworks.

*Animal’s People* is a fictional engagement with the politics of exclusion and oppression typified by the plight of the Indian city of Bhopal (rather than a fictionalisation of Bhopal itself), where an explosion at a suburban factory manufacturing the pesticide Sevin created the world’s worst industrial accident to date. The Union Carbide Corporation (UCC) factory was operated by its subsidiary, Union Carbide India Limited (UCIL). UCC were asked to build the plant by the Indian government as part of an initiative to encourage foreign investment in local industry, and the Indian government owned 22 per cent of UCIL.\(^{44}\) Owing to falling demand in the 1980s the Bhopal plant was being prepared for sale and closure, operating at a quarter of capacity, and at significantly lower safety standards than its sister factory in West Virginia, USA, although this is contested by UCC. These low safety standards included inadequate and poorly trained staff, the shutting down or re-appropriation of safety equipment, and a failure or inability to enforce or follow safety systems. The result of this was that when, on the night of 2 December 1984, a small leak in a

---

chemical storage tank was detected, the necessary steps to halt and neutralise a build-up of toxic gas were not taken. A massive leak of methyl isocyanate gas (more than 40 tons) erupted from the tank and spread through the air above the sleeping inhabitants of Bhopal. This caused the immediate death of around 3,800 people, mainly from the slums around the factory along with, as Edward Broughton and Upumanyu Pablo Mukherjee report, large numbers of buffaloes, cows, dogs and cats. Another 10,000 humans died over the next few days. Accounts of the number of premature deaths that followed over the next 20 years vary – Broughton suggests 15 to 20,000, while Mukherjee reports up to 60,000 – but no true figure is likely ever to be arrived at as many left Bhopal after the accident and the subsequent health of these people cannot be recorded. The inhabitants of Bhopal suffer long term health problems including chronic eye, respiratory and gastrointestinal conditions, increased chromosomal abnormalities leading to birth defects, and psychological and neurobehavioural problems. Primary gas poisoning continues to be exacerbated for the original victims and their children; the inadequately cleaned plant still contains toxic chemicals and heavy metals which are now contaminating water supplies. While this continues subsequent generations in Bhopal will be unable to escape the effects of foreign risk relocation.

Union Carbide took steps immediately after the disaster to avoid responsibility by blaming UCIL and its local workers for incompetence, and citing wholly unproven sabotage by obscure Sikh extremist groups or employees. UCC has also failed to reveal the constituents of the toxic cloud, hindering initial and later attempts at treatment, although evidence suggests it caused acute cyanide poisoning. UCC has fought a protracted and hugely expensive series of legal manoeuvrings in which they tried to avoid cleaning the ground and watercourses or paying adequate compensation. An apparent difference in perceptions of the value and significance of an Indian life compared to an American one is promoted to a real difference by the compensation paid to the people of Bhopal by UCC. UCC accepted moral responsibility for the disaster and made a full and final settlement of $470 million based on contested figures of 3,000 deaths and 102,000 permanent disabilities. This, Broughton says, amounted

to an average award of $2,200 to families of the dead. Broughton goes on to observe that

[h]ad compensation in Bhopal been paid at the same rate that asbestos victims were being awarded in US courts by defendants including UCC – which mined asbestos from 1963 to 1985 – the liability would have been greater than the $10 billion the company was worth and insured for in 1984.**47**

Clive Ponting relates that, when asked how the compensation offered to the people of Bhopal compared “with a $10 million out-of-court settlement the company had recently made with the family of a brain-injured American child, the official spokesperson for the company replied: $500 is plenty good for an Indian”.**48** While Ponting does not offer a source for this remark it correlates with the evidence, offered by the different sums involved, of corporate contempt for the lives of the poor and disempowered of the world. In legal, political, ethical and economic terms, they do not matter. In 2010 eight individuals, all of whom are Indian, were convicted of “death by neglect” in an Indian court, and they remain the only individuals convicted of responsibility for the disaster. A warrant issued in 2003 for the arrest of Warren Anderson, the former Union Carbide chairman has never been acted upon, and UCC continues to insist that the disaster was caused by local saboteurs. Legal actions by the Bhopal people lack the full support of the Indian government and legal system because UCIL is part owned by that government. When the Bhopal Gas Leak Disaster Act was implemented in 1985 to process claims, the victims became legally represented by the part owners of the company they were fighting.

The story of Khaufpur tracks the twists and turns of the story of Bhopal, with its intransigent and unrepentant Kampani, as Animal calls it, corrupt and/or complacent Indian government officials, violent and corrupt police activity, bureaucratic and unsympathetic legal processes, and beset, sick and ignored people. Animal encounters all these agents and situations, and scrutinises the animalisation, neo-liberal ethical conditions, and facelessness which make his status as a human subject questionable through the figure of his conflicted identity. Derrida’s concept of the *animot* enables the deconstruction of these elements, the part they play in understanding Animal’s embodied identity, and his dis/figural function.

---


Derrida’s passionate but typically playful engagement with “the question of the animal” finds lucid expression in lectures given by him in 1997 at a conference entitled ‘The Autobiographical Animal’. These lectures, simultaneously autobiographical and philosophical in theme, were later published in print form as The Animal That Therefore I Am. Derrida’s purpose in these lectures is to examine and deconstruct “the name of man”, “the abyssal limit of the human”, and the violence perpetrated upon animals by the singular concept of the animal. He addresses the discourse of domination and the “ontology, mastery by means of knowledge”, found in the concept of the animal in Western philosophy. With particular reference to Descartes, Kant, Levinas, Lacan and Heidegger, the history of Western thought and its definition of animals in terms of inferiority to humans is systematically held up to Derrida’s critical gaze.

Derrida’s meditation is inspired, he says, upon finding himself, sans bathrobe in the bathroom one morning, shamed by his nudity in front of his cat. When faced with the cat’s unembarrassed gaze Derrida asks “[h]ow can an animal look you in the face?”; what does it mean to find oneself being seen by an animal?; what does it mean to ask if the animal responds?; can one “know what respond means”. Derrida’s real, living, individual cat, Michael Naas says, “is the animal that is first seen seeing and [Derrida is] the human that is first seen seen”, for philosophy’s gaze has always failed to take account of, or has looked away from, the gaze of animals. That an animal may have an experience of seeing has been disguised, denied – disavowed – and misunderstood, for humanity is “above all anxious about, and jealous of, what is proper to it”. Derrida makes two hypotheses as he embarks on what he describes as a “chimerical discourse” of the shades, hauntings and myths from which humanity builds the right and authority to name “the animal.”

Derrida’s first hypothesis identifies the past two hundred years as a period of “transformation in progress” in the being of what calls itself man or the Dasein with

49 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.8.
51 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.29.
52 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.89.
54 M. Naas, ‘Derrida’s Flair (For the Animals to Follow …)’, Research in Phenomenology, 40.10 (June 2010), 219-42 (p.225).
56 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.23.
what he himself calls, or what we ourselves are calling, what we are still daring, provisionally, to name in general but in the singular, the animal”.

57 The altered relationship of which he speaks is constituted in forms of knowledge and interventions into animals. It is located in the industrialisation of farming, laboratory experimentation, genetic manipulation, and genocidal endangerment and extermination of species on a global scale. Violence to animals and their subjection to human will is of much longer standing, but we are now, he says, “passing through a critical phase”. 58 As Peter Singer does in Animal Liberation, Derrida cites Jeremy Bentham’s footnote question on animals, “Can they suffer?”; but although Derrida’s interests are ethical he does not follow Singer’s focus on the extension of moral consideration to all sentient beings. 59 Calarco argues that Derrida is instead interested in the potential of Bentham’s question to revolutionise the “ontological and proto-ethical dimensions of the question of the animal”, for the capacity to suffer contains “an interruptive encounter”. 60 Derrida argues that

‘can they suffer?’ amounts to asking ‘Can they not be able?’ And what of this inability? What is this nonpower at the heart of power? What is its quality or modality? How should one take it into account? What right should be accorded it? To what extent does it concern us? Being able to suffer is no longer a power; it is a possibility without power, a possibility of the impossible. Mortality resides there, as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life, to the experience of compassion, to the possibility of this impossibility, the anguish of this vulnerability, and the vulnerability of this anguish. 61

It is not a question of merely acknowledging that animals can suffer, but of, as Calarco says, encountering and being moved by “an animal’s inability or incapacity to avoid pain, its fleshy vulnerability and exposure to wounding”. 62 It is a question of compassion and not just argumentation, of acknowledging – unlike Descartes’ refusal to witness – “the undeniability” of animal suffering which precedes, is older than, the question of the animal.

58 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.29.
60 Calarco, Zoographies, p.117.
61 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.28.

62 Calarco, Zoographies, p.118.
Derrida’s second hypothesis is concerned with the “logic of the limit – “limitrophy” – and the “abyssal rupture” that divides the “so-called human” (the human that names himself and others) from “The Animal” – a singular category of “creatures” that are not man. Here Derrida is interested in transforming the limit by “multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding, and dividing the line” rather than effacing it, for not only is there a difference between what man calls himself and “what he calls the animal”, but there are multiple forms of difference and heterogeneity between humans and animals along a many-folded edge. To highlight that a heterogeneous multiplicity of living organisms and relations is being delineated by and reduced to a single word, “animal”, and at the same time reflect the implied symbolism and conceptualising effect of the word, he asks his lecture audience to silently substitute the singular word l’animot whenever he says “the animals” (les animaux – the homophonic connection between –maux and mot (word) makes this neologism more immediately accessible in French). The animot as concept and word acts as a reminder of the noun and the voice that names, of the plural heard in the singular, and of allowing that the absence of the name and the word can be thought of as something other than privation.

The concept of the animot is a compelling one in its encapsulation in a single word of the simple exclusion which divides humans and animals, while also conveying the discursive nature of this exclusion. Calarco finds Derrida’s talk of an “abyssal rupture” not entirely satisfactory. He suggests that Derrida is vague in his conclusions and, despite speaking in terms of a multi-leaved rupture, fails to systematically articulate the elements of this rupture. Calarco says that “[i]n complicating our understanding of the differences between those beings called ‘animal’ and those called ‘human’, Derrida is seeking to do little more than create the conditions of possibility for another way of rethinking the forms of relation that obtain between these singularities”. Although, he says, Derrida works to demonstrate the failure of the philosophical tradition to recognise that the ontological and ethical assumptions upon which they have worked do not stand up to rigorous examination, his focus on the

---

63 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p31.
64 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.29, p.30, p.31.
65 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.47.
rupture seems to operate as a validation of the binaries that he has insisted should be transformed. While Calarco believes that “Derrida’s insistence on maintaining and reworking the human-animal distinction is profoundly mistaken”, and offers Donna Haraway’s option to “simply let the human-animal distinction go” (italics in original), he nevertheless affirms that Derrida provides, not a systematic theorising, but a means by which to think about a previously obscured philosophical orientation.67

Derrida’s hypotheses, the concept of the animot and the undeniability of suffering, underpin his dismantling of four key western philosophical orientations. Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Levinas and Lacan fail, he says, to take account of essential and structural differences between humans and animals, and instead create a privative ontology of mastery by reason, language, consciousness and authenticity, to legitimate practices that are forbidden to be carried out on humans, but are acceptable with regard to animals. Kant is taken to task for establishing humans as rational animals through the use of the autodeictic, auto-referential and self-distancing ‘I’. Kant’s Man is defined by his capacity for self-representation which, in its signifying of a unity of consciousness that remains the same throughout all its modifications, raises him in power above and in opposition to “things” which are incapable of expressing self. According to Kant, in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, says Derrida, what the nonrational animal is deprived of, along with subjecthood, is what Kant calls ‘dignity’, that is to say, an internal and priceless value, the value of an end in itself, or if you prefer, a price above any comparable or negotiable price, above any market price.68

Only the rational human has the privilege of dignity and autonomy, and the animal, according to Kant, has no end in itself, but is only a means to an end for humans. This is a function and continuation of the Cartesian machinic animal.

Rational humanism carries within it a set of historical and anthropocentric, discursively constituted assumptions which reinforce the misunderstandings and violent disavowals against which Derrida is arguing. Levinas, says Derrida, despite his “subversion of the subject” and “submitting of the subject to a radical heteronomy”, continues the Cartesian tradition of making this subject of ethics a face, a face which

---

is “first of all a fraternal and human face”, placing the animal/animot outside ethical consideration. The animal is not even an other. The commandment “thou shalt not kill”, is to Levinas the primary rule in the doctrine of human socialisation, and is translated by him as ‘you shall commit no murder.’ It forbids murder, says Derrida, namely homicide, but doesn’t forbid putting to death in general, no more than it responds to a respect for life, a respect in principle for life in general […]. It is a ‘Thou shalt not kill’ that doesn’t forbid one to kill an animal; it forbids only the murder of the face.

Levinasian animals are not “persons”; they are not a subject of ethics because they are faceless and cannot therefore be murdered, that is, they can be put to death without committing murder, without committing the crime of murder. The inability of animals to say “Here I am”, to make this “autotelic, autodeictic, autobiographical movement, exposing oneself before the law”, because they cannot respond or have ever responded or have the right to nonresponse, removes them from human standards of ethical consideration. Derrida undermines Levinas by arguing that when he is asked what the significance of a face is – what having a face implies – he replies that he “cannot say at what moment you have the right to be called ‘face’. The human face is completely different and only afterwards do we discover the face of an animal. I don’t know if a snake has a face. I can’t answer that question”. When Levinas says that he does not know if a snake has a face, he is saying that he does not know what a face is, what the word means, and what governs its usage. This, Derrida says, renders insufficient, without renouncing, the concept of the subject by calling into question the whole legitimacy of the discourse and ethics of the face.

The face is a figure that describes and augments human distinction, and as such it participates in the “plural and repeatedly folded frontier” between humans and animals. A human face designates a unique individual among other similarly unique humans, over against the homogeneous set of individually indistinct animals,

69 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.106.
70 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.110.
71 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.111, p.112.
73 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.118.
74 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.30.
constituting ethical subjecthood before the law, and confirming an individual’s non-continuity with other auto-deictic, auto-referential, self-defining human subjects in their social and administrative context. A human face is, however, not just meaningful in structures of legal responsibility; it is meaningful within the context of the verbal, visual, conscious and unintentional exchanges which constitute the daily experience of inter-subjective social life. It is a complex assemblage of the physical features, emotional expressions and social interpretations implicated in the many physical and cognitive operations and relationships at play when humans recognise each other through facial distinctiveness. Human faces thus matter to humans prior to the law, but in law the individual distinctiveness of human faces plays an integral part in affirming the responsibilities it treats as entailing from human personhood. The Khaufpuri people of Animal’s People recognise and affirm their unique value to each other, but neither the Kampani nor legal and administrative systems will face them or respond to their call for responsibility. Facelessly submerged into the masses of the poor, their ties to ethical subjecthood are loosened. The shackling of the face to ethical subjecthood as the province of the human forms a privative and exclusionary figure which distinguishes the human from its animal or irrational others. Derrida argues that it is “not sufficient for an ethics to recall the subject to its being-subject, host or hostage, subjected to the other, to the wholly other or to every other. More than that is required to break with the Cartesian tradition of an animal without language and without response.” Animal, of Animal’s People, takes up this Cartesian tradition in his disfigured body to dramatise the discourses of the face and test the conditions of a life lived before a law which does not recognise the ethical subjecthood of an animal human.

MULTIPLYING FACES AND FIGURES

Aristotle’s and Descartes’ insistence on speech and language as the absolute distinction between humans and animals has not lost its power in the twenty-first century, but possession of language itself is not, Animal of Animal’s People says, a guarantee of full humanity, for although he always possesses the capacity for language he does not necessarily have a voice with which to say “Here I am”. Animalisation and poverty precede and talk over anything Animal might have to say until a journalist

75 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.118.
records his story onto tape. The content of Animal’s People is prefaced and framed by an “Editor’s Note”; it claims that what follows is the transcription of a nineteen-year-old boy’s (Animal’s) tape-recorded words, a metafictive framing which draws attention to the giving of a voice to Animal by Western interest. Until he is rendered as Homo fabulans, the story-telling human animal, with all that is entailed by the capacity to self-narrate and demonstrate self-awareness, he lacks “proper” human subjectivity. Like the (possibly fictional) ancient Greek fabulist, Aesop, who was described as “of loathsome aspect, […] potbellied, misshapen of head, snub-nosed, swarthy, dwarfish, bandy-legged, short-armed, squint-eyed, liver-lipped – a portentous monstrosity […], speechless”, and who was not perceived as human until granted the power of speech by the gods, Animal is a misshapen less-than-human creature gifted a human-sounding voice by a journalist.76 The journalist’s tapes are the medium for him to articulate his borderline status, and reveal how he symbolises the processes and effects of animalisation by acting as a representation of the concept of the nonhuman animal. In so doing he interrogates the form and validity of the notion of human subjectivity. Whether having a voice that can be heard entails from having subjectivity, or whether subjectivity entails from being heard is a question that Animal’s People asks of one of the central structures of Western humanism and of the institutions that facilitate it.

The presumably fictional Editor claims that other than being translated from Hindi to English, Animal’s “story is told entirely in the boy’s words as recorded on the tapes […] nothing has been changed”(unpaginated). Apparently also unchanged are French expressions, Hindi idiom, slang and phrases, and an unconventional syntactical style. French usages are glossed in English in the text, and the lavish scattering of Hindi – some of it existing only in this novel – is explained in an eight page glossary. Animal’s syntax is unorthodox, but is not grammatically disorderly in a way that changes practical interpretation of events. Similarly, his frequent malapropisms, such as “Apokalis”, “Amrika”, and “the Kampani”, imply speech cadences and verbal rendition of words which have been encountered aurally not textually, and do not necessarily impede interpretation. Superficially, then, the textual making-explicable of Animal’s foreign world says that there is a stable relationship

between his narrative and its intelligible textual representation for westerners reading in English. The “Editor’s Note”, however, casts doubt on this easy transaction, remarking that Animal’s tapes “contain long sections in which there is no speech, only sounds such as bicycle bells, birds, snatches of music and in one case several minutes of sustained and inexplicable laughter” (unpaginated). These elements, which are not Animal’s “words”, are not transcribed; perhaps the Editor cannot make these non-linguistic sounds into meaningful text, or feels that they will make no sense to readers who require that all should be explicable. The metafictive tactic of announcing the elision of untranslatable and untranscribable non-verbal events points to an instability in what is translated, and suggests that the words on the page have in fact been substantially changed into a hybrid form which draws attention to the chasmic differences between rich and poor, between Western neo-liberal and postcolonial other, and between the human and the animal. This hybridity suggests both a resistance to being read under the terms of “first world” assumptions about “third world” lives, and a desire to be recognised and responded to as a meaningful voice and identity.

Roman Bartosch argues that hybridity and metafiction in Animal’s People function to create complicity, for “there is complicity in telling stories just as there is complicity in neocolonial ecological and economic practices”.77 When Animal struggles to find a way to explain his life to the strangers who will become his readers, the journalist suggests he imagines “thousands of other people are looking through his [the journalist’s] eyes” (p.7), and to tell his story to the journalist’s one pair of eyes as a conduit to the many. Speaking to his implied listener/narratee Animal says, “you are reading my words, you are that person. I’ve no name for you so I will call you Eyes. My job is to talk, yours is to listen” (pp.13-14). You, the reader, he argues, participate in this story, for your desire to know is implicit in the structure of its telling. Animal’s invoking of both eyes and ears as the receivers of his narrative suggests that although he is taking advantage of the power implied by narrative voice to control the telling of a story, he is also aware that Animal’s People will be a written text intended for reception and interpretation by the Eyes – Eyes which will occupy the position of a spectator, a voyeur. The journalist, says Animal, is interested only in making his own reputation: “[f]or his story we are not really people. We don’t have names. We flit in crowds at the corner of his eye. Extras we’re, in his movie” (p.9). As a conspicuous

freak and a victim Animal has told his story to journalists many times before, and is aware that the so-called “human interest” angle does not necessarily provoke compassion in its readers, but rather produces him as a kind of “catastrophe porn”. The being and the individual name of the story’s subject are secondary to a ghoulishly horrified pleasure at his tormented body and subhuman habits. “Well bollocks to that”, Animal says, “[t]ell mister cunt big shot that this is my movie he’s in and in my movie there is only one star and it’s me”(p.9). It is not Animal’s intention to make his life over to the world in terms that explicate it by simplifying it, for the conditions which create and feed it are complex, and although he is fascinatingly Other and exotically distant to his metafictive Eyes, their lives and his cannot be disentangled.

Hybridity indicates a new form made from two separate forms, and Animal’s twisted body is the figuration of a painful collision between the human and the animal. For the Eyes who watch Animal it seems that the appropriate trajectory of the story is towards the curing of his deformity – the re-forming of his twisted spine in the image of the proper, physically upright human to end the pain of non-conformance. American doctor Elli raises American money to pay for corrective surgery that will give him a normal human body with a straight back, and useful productive hands, but Animal rejects the American offer of “normality”. Surgery requires that his back must be broken to be remade, and his potential literal breaking is the figuration for the breaking of his deviant otherness to fit a single neo-liberal model of perfect humanness. Such a Procrustean reshaping would leave Animal on crutches or in a wheelchair, and thus his entry to humanity could be only partial. He refuses to be re-made as an imperfect rendering of the authorised model of the human, and remains “four-foot […] [t]he one and only Animal”(p.366), untidily different and uncategorisable. In doing so Animal’s People articulates a refusal to be confined to traditional western models of the upright and thus moral human, while disfiguring through Animal’s resistant body the traditional animal tropes and metaphors which construct such models.

Animal figurations have always populated philosophy and literature. Rather than utilising only attributes which exist within animals themselves, humans reimagine animal bodies to perform explanatory figurations, or superimpose qualities to exhibit and discuss human behaviour. This renders the original living creature invisible. In either case animals function as a mirror to the human gaze, and as a source of rhetoric.
to describe human culture in which, as Steve Baker says, “[c]ulture shapes our reading of animals just as much as animals shape our reading of culture”, and in which their autonomous existence is subordinate to their reproduction as similes, metaphors and metonyms.78 Greg Garrard establishes a (simplified) typology of animal representation in his second edition of *Ecocriticism* which articulates the means by which “[h]umans can both be, and be compared to, animals”:

**Typology of representations of animals**79

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likeness (metonymy)</th>
<th>Otherness (metaphor)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Animals-to-humans</strong></td>
<td><strong>Denigrating/reductive otherness</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crude anthropomorphism (aka disnification)</td>
<td>Mechanomorphism (aka Cartesianism, anthropodenial)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Anthropomorphism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Critical zoomorphism</strong></td>
<td><strong>Allomorphism</strong> (aka therioprimitivism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crude zoomorphism (aka theriomorphism)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Humans-to-animals</strong></td>
<td><strong>Numinous otherness</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Garrard acknowledges the dangers of such a generalised construction, but reiterates the importance of distinguishing between crude and critical forms of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, and the necessity for a vigorous theoretical confrontation with “the ugly history of zoomorphism”.80 Intensely conscious of the way animal imagery is utilised in human political and ethical discourse, *Animal’s People* interrogates not just this ugly history, but its effects. It employs animal imagery in a reflexive fashion, enacting practices of animal representation to critique their multiple discursive developments.

*Animal’s People*’s Animal is a figuration with a multi-faceted origin and purpose; his body has multiple hermeneutic aspects – his bent spine, “bestial” urges, chemically-induced ailments and ethnicity – and is a vehicle for multiple figurative constructions of disfigurement, animality, pollution and racialisation. The text draws

---

78 Baker, *Picturing the Beast*, p.4.


on and comments upon a range of pre-existing tropes, one of which is the use of anthropomorphic animals to illustrate aspects of the human, a practice which itself tends to invoke a host of other figurative constructions. Animal’s physical deformity is a major constitutive element in his degradation, but it also operates as an annulment of metaphors which relate bodily attributes to character – a tradition established very early in philosophy and literature. Plato’s Socratic dialogue *Phaedrus* discusses rhetoric and pure philosophy using the rhetorical, allegorical illustration of the soul as a winged chariot. Each soul comprises a charioteer and two horses, and these horses are described in binary terms:

The right-hand horse is upright and cleanly made; he has a lofty neck and an aquiline nose; his colour is white, and his eyes dark; he is a lover of honour and modesty and temperance, and the follower of true glory; he needs no touch of the whip, but is guided by word and admonition only. The other is a crooked lumbering animal, put together anyhow; he has a short thick neck; he is flat-faced and of a dark colour, with grey eyes and blood-red complexion; the mate of insolence and pride, shag-eared and deaf, hardly yielding to whip and spur.\(^8^1\)

The soul’s struggle between its good and bad sides employs the figural structures of light and dark, dexter and sinister, beauty and ugliness, uprightness and crookedness to correlate a particular physical appearance with a particular quality of soul. The white and physically glorious horse is noble, agreeable and godly, while the dark, ill-favoured and stunted animal is base, offensive and monstrous. This simple bundling together of traits into horse-shaped icons as the representative shorthand for good and bad, is a form of crude anthropomorphism in which a real horse acts only as the source for a heavily stylised image and a body to carry human characteristics, while also associating good and bad with, respectively, humanity and animality in the guiding of the white horse by word and the compulsion of the dark horse by “whip and spur”. The figural relation between physical deformity and deformed character proposed by the perfect horse and the warped horse is reproduced in Animal. The people of Khaufpur point him out, he claims: “[t]here he is! Look! It’s Animal. Goes on four feet, that one. See, that’s him, bent double by his own bitterness”(p.11). Animal’s deformed body and animalistic identity can be perceived as the traditional metaphorical monster performing the unacceptable and therefore animal aspects of human nature which must be brought into line by the charioteer; however, Animal’s active adoption of animal

\(^8^1\) Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. by Benjamin Jowett [online] (Internet Classics Archive), [http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedrus.html](http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedrus.html) [accessed 31 March 2011].
status figures the crude symbolism of a deformed body as a multi-dimensional and reflexive somatic entity, both as an abject singularity and as the body politic.

Body as figuration is, in Animal, an act of critical anthropomorphism and of critical zoomorphism. The body as metaphor is, say Lakoff and Johnson, a “basic domain of experience” in which bodies act as multidimensional “experiential gestalts”.82 Through image schemas such as containment and orientation, and bodily actions such as breathing, dying and posture, the body becomes a coherent concept built from more than one metaphor to perform a “structured whole”.83 This whole emerges in the conceiving of the body as a bundle of natural experiences produced by physical, mental and emotional faculties, interactions with the physical environment (moving, manipulating objects, and so on), and interactions with other people in our culture. Animal’s body is a bundle of physical experiences such as hunger, illness, pain, suffering, joy, sexual desire and the need to breathe, and his deformity produces cognitive and social experiences of alienation and fractured relations with his environment. As such, Animal’s body is a condensation of all the biological, political, ethical and economic difficulties of the people of Khaufpur, and he is the textual gestalt for the pain and injustices suffered by the multitude. In what Rob Nixon describes as the “symbolic economy of Animal’s body,” crippled by the Kampani’s chemicals, there is “an implicit yet unforgettable image of a body politic literally bent double beneath the weight of Khaufpur’s foreign load”.84 His body is a multi-dimensional metaphorical figure with which to reveal the disfiguring boundaries between rich and poor, human and animal, body and environment. Bundled into his twisted spine are notions of ethical aporia, humanist and environmental purity, and recursive structures of crude zoomorphism and crude anthropomorphism.

“Animalisation” is a term used across multiple disciplines to imply broadly the same action – the process of change of state, physical or otherwise, of something from a previous condition to an animal condition of being. In postcolonial studies this change implies a hierarchical downward transmission of a being from a human to an

83 Lakoff, Johnson, Metaphors We Live By, p.117.
84 Rob Nixon, ‘Neoliberalism, Slow Violence, and the Environmental Picaresque’, Modern Fiction Studies, 55.3 (Fall 2009), 443-67 (p.450).
animal state. This is not a biological metamorphosis but instead may take the form of a discursive interpretation or representation of the physical, behavioural, cultural or political characteristics of a person or group of persons in such a manner as to explain them in terms of generic animal rather than human traits. Garrard describes this as crude zoomorphism, the most vicious kind of which is racist representation (such as describing Jews as rats or black Africans as apes) which depends “upon a prior, crudely anthropomorphic projection of despised human qualities – the ‘Beast Within’ is a precondition for the racialised ‘beast’ without”.\(^{85}\) Animalisation means that, through poverty or some incapacity, a person or group is treated like an animal – that is, they lack recourse to the political, ethical and juridical structures which protect self-ownership (the Kantian “I”) and the subjectivity, agency and consequent voice of the self-determined human, and merge into a silenced, homogeneous, unindividuated mass.

The rationalist ideology which underpins Western definitions of humanity involves a form of anthropocentrism which justifies the colonisation of nonhuman nature. By defining the rational human in opposition to the irrational, uncivilised and savage nonhuman, modern humans naturally prioritised humans and human interests above those of animals. Val Plumwood describes this structure as emerging from the conception of the “hyperseparated self” as sharply separated from the female, racial or animal other, enabling the radical exclusion of this other through instrumentalisation as an object whose interests are secondary.\(^{86}\) The prioritisation of Western interests depended upon the drawing of species-based, malleable ontological distinctions, and was employed to legitimate oppression of the poor, human slavery and colonial appropriation across the world by white Europeans. Through the discursive recreation of indigenous peoples as savage and animalistic, by downgrading their humanity and animalising them, it became possible to treat them as if they were animals – to own them and make their pain, suffering or loss of freedom morally unproblematic. Animalisation ensured that non-European lands were inhabited only by “not-humans” and animals, and were therefore “unused, underused or empty – areas of rational

\(^{85}\) Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p.155.

deficit”, available to the human prior claim. This particular way of thinking permits not just racist oppression and exploitation, but also enables women, homosexuals, the disabled, the elderly, and many others, to be othered and denoted less rational and thus to be treated like animals – as commodities, and of lesser or no value.

The simile “treating a human like an animal” implies that that human is being degraded and treated badly, and that their humanity is being abused. This framework depends upon the ethical acceptability of what Derrida describes as the “non-criminal putting to death” of animals, in which the suffering and death of nonhuman animals – whether sought or not – is acceptable and legitimate, and in which nonhuman animals are downgraded below or are invisible to the human standard of moral concern. This is because, Marjorie Spiegel says, “we have decided that treatment which is wholly unacceptable when received by a human being is in fact the proper manner in which to treat the nonhuman animal”.

Or, in other words, there are protocols involved in the treatment of humans which do not apply to other animals. Morally, it is not permissible to physically or mentally abuse, imprison, impinge upon the free will of, experiment upon or kill humans. Although the welfare of animals is legislated to varying degrees, these frameworks only control the care of animals or the circumstances in which they can be restrained or killed, and are subject to a different set of moral codes and responsibilities. They do not challenge the underlying premise that treatment which is considered reprehensible when applied to a human is unexceptionable in the treatment of animals. Animals are located in a separate category of moral concern because humans are insufficiently attentive to the crudely anthropomorphic criteria which say that animals are, in comparison to humans, generically brute, stupid, lack the finer quality of human emotion, are irrationally subject to their bodily instincts and urges, and are less capable or incapable of those attributes said to define humanity – love, altruism, responsibility, conscience, morality, temperance, joy in life, spirituality and so on. The expression of crudeness taken to

88 Derrida, The Animal that therefore I am, p.111.
characterise animals, and the civilised sensitivity which is the domain of human being, validates – however insubstantial and unproven the criteria may be – a moral hierarchy.

Animal Rights is a term which encompasses a broad range of approaches, including Peter Singer’s preference utilitarianism, Tom Regan’s contractarianism, Martha Nussbaum’s capabilities theory, and Gary Francione’s abolitionism, all proposing that an assortment of rights comparable to those of humans should be extended over a set of qualifying animals. Virtue philosophers such as Peter Carruthers contend that animals should be well cared for but that our duties to them are indirect and are really duties to other humans; for Carruthers, the importance of animals rests in their importance to us and the qualities they invoke in us. Caring for animals before caring for the many starving and abused humans in the world is, Carruthers argues, the easy option.\(^\text{90}\) In *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin challenge this frequently reiterated criticism of suggestions that humans should radically reconsider the foundational principles of our treatment of animals. They set out four difficulties characteristic of such debates: animal metaphor has been and still is used to justify a range of exploitations of human individuals and societies, and if a separate subjectivity is insisted on by such groups this is hardly surprising; pressure on land brings humans and animals into conflict; cultural differences in the treatment of animals can lead to the racialised vilification of one group by another; and, as Carruthers asks, how can animals be prioritised above, say, starving children? Huggan and Tiffin’s response is that “while there is still the ‘ethical acceptability’ of the killing of nonhuman others – that is, anyone represented or designated as nonhuman – such abuses will continue, irrespective of what is conceived as the species boundary at any given time”, and that improvements to the lot of humans, nonhuman animals and the environments they live in are not separate issues, but should “proceed together”.\(^\text{91}\) This summation of the problem does generate some discomforts; the idea that humans could find it ethically unacceptable to kill anything whatsoever seems utopian, and the idea that we would need to find abuse of nonhuman others unethical before we could stop abusing humans is difficult to accommodate. Perhaps these unsatisfying arguments are indicative of the problems that seem to be inherent in articulating how wrong, for


example, industrial meat-rearing feels when prevailing ethical systems require logical, rationally constructed sets of claims.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is founded on a faith that a “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”. Its highest aspirations are freedom of speech and belief, freedom from want, and freedom from fear, and it seeks to establish the right of all humans to “life, liberty and security of person” and “recognition everywhere as a person before the law”. These are high and worthy ideals, and represent a sincere attempt at articulating the mechanism of a just commonweal for humanity, but they rest upon the assumption that the discursive criteria of the “human” are firmly fixed to what we all know to be a human. Thus, says Joseph Slaughter, the administration of human rights rests on a banalised, common sense understanding of what human equality entails which precedes its articulation as rights. Under these circumstances the “Age of Human Rights” is also the “Age of Human Rights Abuse” dispensed by “increasingly systematic, corporate, and institutional” violations. Enshrined in the Declaration is, Zygmunt Bauman says, an incurable aporia constituted in the gap between the proposal of a universal ethical code and the possibility of it; in other words, the Declaration is motivated by a faith in metaphysical absolutes of right and wrong which exceed humans, but which are instead politically contextual and made by humans.

In Animal’s People Animal’s contorted body and animalised status both inhabit and are a synecdoche of Bauman’s aporia. Mukherjee suggests that when Animal proclaims his identity as no longer human he gives voice to a scandal that lurks beneath the tragedy of Bhopal: if there are those who, by dint of their underprivileged location in the hierarchy of the ‘new world order’, cannot access the minimum of the rights and privileges that are said to define ‘humanity’, what can they be called?

---


95 Mukherjee, *Postcolonial Environments*, p.144.
Animal’s answer to this is unequivocal; the refusal of Union Carbide/the Kampani to acknowledge the claim of the Bhopalis/Khaufpurs to recompense for the harm visited upon them equates to an affirmation that, since they cannot claim the legal and ethical rights which “Amrikans” take for granted as indistinguishable from the state of being human, they cannot claim the state of being human implied by this sovereign epistemological power and are relegated to a much impoverished version of the human. Animal refuses to accept that there are shades and nuances at the boundary between human and nonhuman and takes a polarised stance. If the universal ethical code which administers the proper treatment of humans does not recognise him as a human, regardless of his biological and phylogenetic body, then he must be something else. He opts for the politically symbolic “Animal”, in the absence of some other category. He argues that “you’ll talk of rights, law, justice. Those words sound the same in my mouth as in yours but they don’t mean the same. […] such words are like shadows the moon makes in the Kampani’s factory, always changing shape”(p.3). Rights, law and justice – even if they propose to be the means by which a prior ethical code is facilitated – are, Animal finds, malleable terms, with the power to manipulate them resting beyond his reach.

In *Postmodern Ethics*, Zygmunt Bauman proposes to explore “ethics – human rights, social justice, balance between peaceful co-operation and personal self-assertion, synchronization of individual conduct and collective welfare”.96 He identifies the morality of modernity as a form of distinction between right and wrong which replaces a previous belief that everything was weighted equally and produced by Divine creation and providence. In this context, “[f]ree will, if it existed at all, could mean only […] freedom to choose wrong over right – that is, to breach God’s commandments: to depart from the way of the world as God ordained it”; to be in the right was an avoidance of choice.97 With modernity the sense of the autonomous individual grew, and entailed the fading of God as the direct reference point for right and wrong; making moral choices thus necessitated questions of evaluative criteria, so that the “once unitary and indivisible ‘right way’ begins to split into ‘economically sensible’, ‘aesthetically pleasing’, and ‘morally proper’”.98 Social constraints on

---

97 Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, p.5.
98 Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, p.5.
human behaviour which had once been legislated by belief in an ethics natural to 
humans in their participation in the divine metaphysics of the universe, were replaced 
by a rational, administrative ethical code. Here humans exercised their free will within 
a rational legislative framework which defined right and wrong, and discouraged them 
from using their freedom to do wrong by training individuals to develop a self-interest-
based “better judgement” complementary to these definitions. Ethics in modern 
society is therefore, says Bauman, acknowledged to be a “man-made artifice”, and thus 
is aporetic (irresolvably conflicted) because it is “animated by the belief in the 
possibility of a non-ambivalent, non-aporetic ethical code” of theological origins.99 
Universal morality is thus, he says, mythical and utopian, the proposition of it related 
to a politics of power, and modernity characterised by an insularity which deepens 
differences and renders it unfit for any universalisation.100

Bauman’s sense of the ethical aporia constituted in modernity is satirically 
manifested as negative terms and invisibility throughout Animal’s People. Animal is 
frequently arrested for begging and scamming, and he appears in court as what he calls 
the “mystery defendant”:

— Case against boy known as Animal ...
— Where is the accused?
— Your honour he is here.
— Where? I don’t see him.
— Right here, your honour, in the dock.
— Don’t be silly. I am looking at the dock, there’s no one there.
— Your honour, accused is of unusual stature (p.51).

Animal is literally invisible to justice; he is unseen by a judge who refuses to 
acknowledge his existence. The judge, as an individual and as a representative of the 
law, will neither change his position in order to see Animal, nor remove the barrier 
(the judicial dock) between them. In his role as a representative of the people of 
Khaufpur, Animal illustrates that the capacity for an individual or a group to be 
subjects before the law is not guaranteed by mere physical presence, and so critiques 
both the failure of the Kampani to face the poison victims in court and the Indian legal 
system to facilitate such a case. Although Animal suggests that there is some freedom 
in not following human social rules, in his form as a symbol of animalisation he 
demonstrates that his invisibility before the law pushes him below the juridical and

99 Bauman, Postmodern Ethics, p.8, p.10. 
100 Bauman, Postmodern Ethics, pp.10-15
ethical boundary which entitles humans to respect for their right to live well, and to a responsibility for this from other humans. Those who are unseen by the administrative forces of the law have no more access than an animal to justice and the rights and moral obligations humans enjoy by entitlement, he says. In his physical deformity Animal does not fit into standard frameworks of understanding and expectation and so becomes disempowered and unseen – his body is an aporia that human ethical structures do not recognise, and so his human subjectivity and his visibility to legal moral concern dissolves. By calling himself Animal he clearly signals that his abjected condition is the same as that of any animal, so that while he may be the object of some moral concern, he has no stake in the reciprocal duties and benefits a human with full subject-status lives among.

Animal’s lack of human subjectivity is intimately connected with his physical form, and the living matter of his body is as much constructed by his environment and by political and economic influences on India as it is from flesh and blood. Animal’s six-day-old infant body was penetrated by toxic chemicals during the gas-eruption from the Kampani’s pesticide factory, the effect of which is the later deformation of his spine and consequent displacement from full humanity to unstable borderline status. This blurring of his identity is a product of the incomplete distinction between his body and his environment. His initial dose of poison is supplemented on a daily basis by a dump of chemicals left in the abandoned factory which leach into local water-systems and contaminate the ground and food supplies, so that Animal’s body is literally colonised by the products of imperial and corporate activity.

The vocabulary for articulating Animal’s apparent loss of individual integrity can be found in the evolving posthumanist critical approach expressed by Cary Wolfe. His sense of posthumanism emphasises two points; that “the human” is achieved in the transcendence of the body, biology and animal origins, and that posthumanism exactly opposes this, not in the sense of being posthuman and “after” the transcended human body, but “posthumanist, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment itself”. It therefore comes before and after humanism; “before” is the naming of “the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its

biological but also its technological world, the prosthetic coevolution of the human animal with the technicity of tools and external archival mechanisms (such as language and culture). The “after” of posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore, a historical development that points toward the necessity of new theoretical paradigms […] a new mode of thought that comes after the cultural repressions and fantasies, the philosophical protocols and evasions, of humanism as a historically specific phenomenon.\footnote{Wolfe, \textit{What is Posthumanism?}, p.xv.}

Animal is this decentred posthumanist body, one which exemplifies that “there can be no talk of purity”; his body and identity are in a constant state of exchange with physical and social surroundings through permeable boundaries, and involved in a network of bodies, events and discourses which exceed his specific geographical location.\footnote{C. Wolfe, \textit{What is Posthumanism?}, p.xxv.}

The posthumanist premise deletes the notion that loss of purity automatically equates to purity’s antonyms of contamination, corruption and pollution, but for Animal and the Khaufpuris socio-political and environmental taint is a significant constituent of their flesh. The pesticides made in the Kampani’s factory have become so much part of the bodies of the Khaufpuris and of the land they live on, that it no longer seems possible to imagine it as a pollutant in a previously healthy landscape; it has instead become part of the local ecology, an unwelcome and unhealthy part, but one which at least part of the plant-life of the ecosystem tolerates. However, animals can neither accommodate nor transcend the penetration of toxic chemicals. Animal remarks that sandalwood trees and scented herbs have returned to the derelict Kampani factory site, but it is a quiet place – the animal population consists only of poisonous snakes and rabid dogs; there is “[n]o bird song. No hoppers in the grass. No bee hum. Insects can’t survive here”(p.29). In the factory all animals suffer alike, but their suffering is not constructed just at the local level. The poison in the soil and the air produces the involuntary incorporation of Animal and all other animals (human or otherwise) into global systems of exploitation and oppression, for foreign environmental risk has been outsourced to impoverished Khaufpur, while the capital it generates is concentrated in distant states and corporations. This erodes the taken-
for-grantedness of bodily integrity, and disperses agency and self-ownership across a set of other agencies. Such dispersal causes the Khaufpuris to lose their self-identification as people; instead they are identified as “poison victims”, or terrorists, depending on who is categorising them and for what purpose. The Khaufpuris are obscured and overwritten by the interests of distant economic and administrative organisations who redescribe them in order to achieve their own particular aims.

Bauman argues that social space consists of three interwoven but distinct processes – cognitive, aesthetic and moral ‘spacings’ which are, respectively, construed intellectually by acquisition and distribution of knowledge, plotted affectively through curiosity and the search for experiential intensity, and “constructed” through an uneven distribution of felt and assumed responsibility. These processes stand in a metaphorical relation with physical space (measurable and objective space, and pure/abstract space as the phenomenological reduction of daily experience to pure quantity).104 Social spacings exist in knowledge and understanding of others; we live with other beings like us, that is, we assume that our experience of ourselves and other people constitutes what is normal and natural. Our relations with them are constituted in the zuhanden mode (“ready-to-hand”) and we never reflect on them. Zuhanden becomes vorhanden (“present-at-hand”) when objects (or, in this case, people) produce misunderstandings by behaving outside knowledge and understanding of what is “natural” and “normal”. Social spacings, which are not specifically related to physical proximity or distance, are in this way plotted between poles of what is known and understood (intimacy) and what is not known and understood (anonymity) so that, Bauman says,

[at] the anonymity pole, one cannot really speak of social distance at all. A truly anonymous Other is outside or beyond social space. Such another is not truly an object of knowledge – apart at best, from a subliminal awareness that there is, potentially, a human who could be an object of knowledge. For all practical intents and purposes, she is not human at all, since humans we know are always ‘specific’ humans, classified humans, humans endowed with categorial attributes through which they can be identified.105

Anonymous humans have no personal identities other than that derived from the class or category to which they have been assigned by humans who know of them so that they are understood through typification, and their strangeness and the threat they

104 Bauman, Postmodern Ethics, p.145.
105 Bauman, Postmodern Ethics, p.149.
make to the safe, ordered and classified world of people like us is neutralised by reproducing these others as a homogeneous, de-individuated and dehumanised mass. Bauman concludes that “when the Other dissolves in the Many, the first thing to dissolve is the Face. The Other is now Faceless”.106

Moral spacing does not heed the rules that define social space, but says that being for precedes being with; residents of moral space are objects of moral concern through being concrete others, “out there”. However, this responsibility for the other can only be performed in the social space of “being with”, so that moral concern is subject to the categories and entitlements of social spacing rather than any a priori moral spacing. Those Others who are distant or anonymous in social spacing, who are Faceless, are not objects of moral concern. As previously discussed, Derrida also equates the face with a politics of inclusion and empowerment, and relates it to human subjectivity. To be recognised as human via the human face is to be entitled to the privilege of a particular standard of ethical consideration as an individual, while to be part of an undifferentiated, homogeneous mass is to be foreign to the “ethics of the person as face”.107 At and beyond the margins of recognition, responsibility for the sanctity of the other dissolves. Derrida and Bauman’s separate but related metaphorical uses of facelessness, which refer respectively to the morally inconsiderable amorphous mass of animals (the animot) and the amorphous mass of socially anonymous humans (the dehumanised), can be brought together to suggest that, as well as the losing their personhood and their individual sanctity through their distance from people like us, the Faceless entity is “defaced”.

To “deface” has two different but related meanings here. One involves taking away the face, and the other the consigning of a new face. To deface is to remove the face, a metonymic description of a failure to perceive a moral responsibility to the other owing to their degree of otherness. To deface is also to spoil, mutilate or obliterate, and this usage describes the metaphorical overwriting of an individual’s or a social grouping’s self-naming with an externally imposed category. Defacement can be seen in action in the treatment of the people of Bhopal by Union Carbide. As Mukherjee describes, UCC refused to be brought to court in either the US or India,

106 Bauman, Postmodern Ethics, p.155.
107 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.111.
contending, first, that they were a US company and were not therefore under the jurisdiction of Indian courts, and second, could not be tried in American courts because Americans would not be able to comprehend the daily realities of Indian life. Mukherjee argues that

[t]his legal defence is in effect a philosophical position that assumes an unbridgeable gap between two apparently discontinuous worlds. What is human in one, is not so in the other. What is understood as the environment in one, is incomprehensible in the other.108

UCC, supported by the US legal system, finds the Bhopalis’ lives not to be semblable (as Levinas would say) with American lives, and finds their difference too great to be imaginable in American understandings of what constitutes “normal” human life. The overall thesis to be surmised from this is that UCC’s representation of a vast difference between an American and an Indian life, and their refusal to respond to or take moral responsibility for Bhopali lives, legally enshrines these lives as less than human. It is not, though, that Americans in general consciously think of people in Bhopal as animals, merely that this is what UCC’s legally defensible argument implies.

The people of Khaufpur, in Animal’s People, are sure of their animalisation; an old Khaufpuri woman confronts a Kampani lawyer saying “we lived in the shadow of your factory, you told us you were making medicine for the fields. You were making poisons to kill insects, but you killed us instead. I would like to ask, was there ever much difference to you?”(p.310). To imperialist forces, she argues, she and her community, with their complaints and illnesses, are pests who impede expansion and the increase of capital through absorption and assimilation of new parts of the world. It is not only the Kampani that recreates the people of Khaufpur as of no more value or consequence than animals. They are defaced by authorities and individuals who have close geographical proximity, but distant social spacing. A wealthy local doctor believes that “[t]hose poor people never had a chance. If it had not been the factory it would have been cholera, TB, exhaustion, hunger. They would have died anyway”(p.153), reiterating a framework of understanding that defines the people of Khaufpur as unpreventably always already dying. The group of individuals involved becomes the genus “poor” – a type whose economic poverty is an effect of their supposedly natural inability to thrive – so that subjecthood and a human right to moral

108 Mukherjee, Postcolonial Environments, p.142.
concern is simply graffitied over with a rhetoric which represents them as herd-like masses with inferior, limited, animal expectations being weeded out by natural forces. Here, the loss of the figural face is shown to be a disfigurement – the discourses of the figural face produce the literal disfigurement of poor, poisoned Khaufpuri bodies, and in the same move disable the freedoms and ethical entitlements attached to the figure of the face by assuming its absence. The figure of the face, taken to signify human sanctity, is itself shown to be a deforming practice which, in the hands of corporate and administrative power, specifies a single but malleable model of humanity, deviations from which are refigured as something other than human.

Ma Franci, the slightly mad French nun who cares for (and is cared for by) Animal, seemed to suffer neurological damage in the Apokalis, and from being able to communicate freely with the Khaufpuris in their own languages became unable to understand any speech but *la langue humaine* (French), insisting that the Khaufpuris talk “gibbering nonsense”(p.40). “The Apokalis took away their speech”(p.100), she says. Ma Franci’s simultaneous compassion for, but inability to talk with, those for whom she feels compassion, is representative of the transformation that the Apokalis wrought upon the Khaufpuris. The crippling abjection brought about by the toxic gases, and the subsequent defacing subjection to the motives of external agencies has redefined the relationship between the Khaufpuris and the rest of the world. Ma Franci’s perception of them as having lost their capacity for language analogises their descent into animality in their inability to be acknowledged as responding, even to kindly meant Western charitable ministrations. Such crude and unintentional zoomorphism is highlighted through a refracted framework of critical zoomorphism in which the analogy of poverty with animal being is revealed to be a metonymic construction which misrepresents both parties.

By constructing himself as an animal, Animal clearly expresses the animalised status of his fellow Khaufpuris and at the same time enacts the concept of the *animot*. During a riot Animal is flogged by police, and thinks despairingly that “neither man am I nor beast. I don’t know what is being beaten here. If they kill me what will die?”(p.313). There are many ways of describing killing – slaughtering, culling, exterminating, euthanasia, collateral damage – and these terms tend to have highly contextual applications. A rat, for example, is exterminated as a pest, so to speak of
the extermination of humans carries connotations of the cleansing of the pestilential in the way that Nazis wished to expunge the contamination of Jews, gipsies and the disabled from German blood. The Nazis are condemned for invoking the paradigm of extermination and for analogising human death with that of rats. Alternatively, when cattle are slaughtered this describes a food production process, but to talk of the slaughter of humans invokes images of “bloodbaths”, the rending of flesh, and horrific death. Talk of animal killing by humans is therefore produced in a distinctly anthropocentric framework in which the taking of an animal life tends to inspire real revulsion and a sense of violence and evil only when used to describe the taking of a human life. This discursive distinction is highlighted by Derrida as he points out that animals and humans alike can be killed, slaughtered, and so on, but only humans can be murdered and meet their death in a framework of good, evil, responsiveness, blame and responsibility to sanctity. “There is no murder other than of the face,” Derrida says, “that is to say, of the face of the other, my neighbour, my brother, the human, or another human. Putting to death or sacrificing the animal, exploiting it to death – none of those, within this logic, in fact, constitutes murder”. Lack of a human face means that an animal is incapable of responding, of ever having been able to respond or of being the victim of murder, for it lacks the individual subjecthood of the face, submerged as it is into the amorphous body of the animot. For Animal, this distinction is brought sharply into focus as he lies on the ground in expectation of his imminent (unrealised) death. A human identity enjoys the privilege of a sanctity of self, and to destroy this sanctity by beating him to death is to murder. Murder of a human is interdicted by ethical code – it is an immoral and evil act. An animal that is beaten to death suffers only a ceasing to live; only a body dies as there is no autotelic, autobiographic, autodeictic ‘I’ that has lived knowing it will die. Autotelically encountering his potential death, Animal does not know if he can be murdered. Will his death be ethically acceptable? Will his broken body be shovelled to one side with tomorrow’s rubbish, in the way that politicians gave instructions for dead Khlaufpuri humans and animals alike to be thrown into the river the day after the Apokalis? Will any possible sanctity invested in their dead bodies be disregarded, their lives lacking a subjecthood, a Kantian “I”, and the entitlement to dignity which this entails?

Doubts about the criminality or otherwise of Animal’s potential violent death brings evaluation of his condition of being to a decisive point. Is Animal primarily a human whose chief concern is to satirise the crude zoomorphism which cripples him and his contemporaries, and in so doing to critique the crude anthropomorphism which makes such racism possible? Is he primarily an animal who wishes to question the coherence of humans’ visions of themselves? Is the biological and phylogenetic definition of *Homo sapiens* to have the final word and pronounce Animal as irrevocably human? Whether Animal is human or animal, the ghost of other possibilities of his being always haunts him, and this spectre hovers over any insistence upon certainty about what he is. Animal thus inhabits a zone of uncertainty; if he is to be an animal, that is, a non-specific creature inhabiting the amorphous designation of nonhuman animal by dint of being deprived of the additional characteristics that identify the humanist human, he must be a non-political animal driven by instinct and with a Heidegger’s-lizard-like being of body only, with no capacity to doubt his existence or to reflect upon his death. Clearly, this is not the case as Animal is a self-conscious self-narrator meditating upon what will follow his death, and the inverse should therefore apply. However, the politics of animalisation and of the humanist notion of the proper human upon which animalisation depends both exist in, and are subverted by, Animal. The Kampani lawyers, who leave Animal “contemplating how it is that in the same world there are people like the lawyers and creatures like me”(p.263), are the means by which the traditional definition of “human” becomes questionable. If to be human is to be unthinkingly cruel, or dully indifferent to the suffering of Others then Animal does not want to be human, but Heidegger’s lizard makes plain to him that he also fails to qualify for the traditional definition of animal as limited by instinct, and defined by “tooth and claw”. The question of what Animal is, then, cannot be framed on the oppositional basis of humanity and animality, and the absolutes of modernity and the bounded human individual dissolve into uncertainties.

The impossibility of dividing Animal’s biological condition from his political form of life is revealed and figured forth in the industrialised deforming of his spine. Animal describes his spine as “melted” in a “furnace”, and re-shaped by “the hammer-blows that beat his humanity out of him”(p.219), and so frames his affliction in the metaphor of the smelting-works and the changes wrought upon organic and elemental matter by the tools of human industry. The mutation of his body by the pesticides
which are intended to adapt and integrate India’s agrarian base into Western agribusiness incorporates his body and material existence into global and corporate structures, and diffuses his identity across multiple agencies. Animal makes clear that the penetration of industrialisation by imperial forces into his body and that of the unwilling indigenous population is at the root of his suffering as a living being, and that the physical binding of his material existence with his political context is irrevocable, and existed prior to his birth.

Neil Badmington suggests that posthumanism enables an approach which accepts that all the signifying strands will not necessarily be tied off, and in which it is not possible to arrive at a moment of certainty, mastery, satisfaction. Meaning keeps on moving, and cultural criticism must learn to hear the ‘yes’ with the ‘no’, to read the disfunctioning alongside the functioning, to announce how every ‘supposed system’ is at once a deposed system. Humanism is there and not quite there. It comes and goes, it flickers, it drifts. For Animal, humanism does indeed “flicker” and “drift”; sometimes he qualifies as human, sometimes he does not, and so performs the inadequacy of modernity’s distinction between human and animal. Having spent the text searching for a category to define himself by, Animal closes his narrative by resolving to remain an animal of no fixed species and to be “the one and only Animal”(p.366), rather than the privileged, bounded and impenetrable human individual that Western modernity proposes is the solution to his problems. He hopes, as Matthew Calarco and Donna Haraway hope, to let the human-animal distinction go.

The concept of “the animal” infiltrates all aspects of the idea of “the human”, and Animal’s People stages the complexity of human political, cultural, legal and social encounters and entanglements with animality. The novel proposes that crude anthropomorphism and crude zoomorphism are disfigured and disfiguring discourses, and reveals the frameworks of thought and practice which animalise humans. The suffering of humans as a result of the hypocrisies and legitimations of animalisation is very clearly set out, but Animal’s People is not always as self-conscious in its disfiguring of animality as it is of humanity. Animal’s lizard does nothing to interrogate its supposition that animals are by definition wholly subject to instinct.

110 Neil Badmington. ‘Pod almighty!; or, humanism, posthumanism, and the strange case of Invasion of the Body Snatchers’, Textual Practice, 15.1 (Spring 2001), 5-22 (p.12).
Animal himself views animal life as wild and free, and while this may be relevant to a human subversion of the restrictions imposed by notions of the proper human, the text does not reflect upon the conflation of wildness and freedom as part of the apparatus of animality. While, therefore, the text disfigures the idea of the human, and addresses some of the disfigurations created from the generality of the animot, some of the many folds at the edge between humans and animals remain resiliently unexamined. But Animal is a human animal; maybe readings of other animal representations can unfold them.
Charles Baudelaire’s poetry collection *Les Fleurs du Mal* has been translated into English many times, with each translation demonstrating different nuances of meaning. Such interpretative vagaries and semantic shadings can be seen in the following translations of the first words of ‘Les Sept Vieillards’ (‘The Seven Old Men’): “Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves”.\(^1\) Edna St Vincent Millay translates the line as “City swarming with people, how full you are of dreams!”,\(^2\) Robert Scholten as “Teeming city”,\(^3\) and Richard Howard as “Swarming city”.\(^4\) Roy Campbell and William H. Crosby take a different approach with, respectively, “Ant-seething city”;\(^5\) and “A swarming anthill city”.\(^6\) James McGowan comments that, as well as the difficulties for Baudelaire’s many translators of rendering a poem written in French rhythms, images and language into a (good) poetic work in English, “each translator necessarily brings himself into the occasion”.\(^7\) As can be seen from the five different translations of *fourmillante cité* above, each translator has sought to convey their own reading of the concept Baudelaire encoded in the line, but polysemic potential arises not only from the literal translation of *fourmillante* but also from the long and rich (human) cultural history of a very tiny creature.

Millay addresses a personified city which she imagines to be swarming with people, while for Scholten and Howard it is the city itself which teems or swarms – a place in which life seems to surge and throb as a mass. This replacement of people

---


with indeterminate flows and pulses steps away from Millay’s comforting sense that the poetic speaker, despite the later uncanny horror evoked by an old man’s repeating “sinister form” (Baudelaire/Millay, l.40), passes through the city in the company of humans. *Fourmillante* derives from *fourni*, the French for “ant”, and its dictionary translation into English is “swarming”, entangling the verb “to swarm” with ants so that the image of unindividuated ant massing is implicit in swarming. Scholten and Howard’s translations erase human presence, while for Campbell and Crosby, ants replace the human metropolis entirely. Here ants and anthills analogue a sense of fear at the loss of the autonomous modern human subject in the crowded, seething city, suggesting a loss of solidity and meaning in images of aimlessly scurrying streams of ants. Humans cease to be individuals, with all the worth, private motivations and interior life implied by the individual human being dissolving into faceless, dehumanised masses; in the deindividuated mass human intelligence and personhood degenerate into mindless cell movements in the oppressive social organism. The poetic speaker is alone in a hostile, psychotic landscape devoid of the consolations of human contact, characterised by unthinking, unfeeling, inhuman, *inhumane* swarming.

Jonathan Culler draws attention to Baudelaire’s preoccupation with the diabolical, and this is more clearly framed in translations which perceive the ant in *fourmillante*. Culler suggests, when discussing the archaic trope of manifested evil employed by an apparently modern poet, that if:

> the Devil is the name of a force that works on us against our will […] isn’t he just a personification of aspects of what Freud called the Unconscious or the Id, forces that make us do what our conscious selves might reject? To make Baudelaire modern can’t we just cross out Devil and write in *Unconscious* or, better, *Death Drive*, or *Repetition Compulsion*?8

In the anthill city the Devil is figured forth in ants as the actualisation of repressed, mindless, automated beastliness, opposing the idealising concepts of humanity and the individual and stripping away the mantle of the civilised self to reveal the seething, unconscious inner ant(s) of modern urban life. The swarms of Baudelaire’s city are representative of a distinctly modern and modernist trope in which ants seem to be both the anthropomorphic and the zoomorphic antithesis of Enlightenment Man and his vision of autonomy and conscious, purposeful, individual personhood. Ants are

---

perceived as characterising a life in which the individual organism is undifferentiated and unexceptional, and is meaningless in anything other than the context of massing society.

This particular figuration of ants plays its part in a significant discourse of modern Europe and shines a rather distorting light on actual ants, but symbolic ants are not always a figure of threat as their perceived thrift, altruism and organised social life have also often been a model for the harmonious society. Animals, as Claude Levi-Strauss remarked, are “good to think”, and ants have provided the material for humans’ stories of themselves across recorded time and across almost all cultures. This chapter will explore the Western human concepts, ideas and fears which seem to be enabled and enacted by ants, and consider the nature of transactions between humans and ants in their shared occupation of the Earth. Ideas about what humans think they are or are not can be drawn on discursive lines constructed out of figurations of sociality and autonomy, and ants, as social insects, figure ideas about humans in their social context. Literary works teem with ants, and ant- and anthill-shaped imaginative forms operate as a trope which figures human political and social organisation, and which often appropriates ants into discourses of the ideal, of psychosis, or of the inconsiderable. Ant and anthill figures crystallise ideas of human exceptionalism built from notions of autonomous identity and elevation above instinctual limitations, and literature uses these figures to analogise questions about how humans live as social creatures, for the fabular ant is not just good to think, and not just a trope, but a method for constituting and defining what it means to be human.

This chapter addresses a range of literary texts, first, to outline the various trajectories ant-shaped cultural mythologies have taken, and second, to consider twenty-first century novels in which ant figurations and analogies are in some way constitutive of the text’s forms and concerns. These texts vary in genre, but despite their differences they are unified by one distinctive property: while retaining the trope of ant representations as figurations of humans’ explications of themselves, the novels also depend heavily on a detailed knowledge of the behaviour and biology of ants for their creative impulse. Recent advances in myrmecology – the study of ants – have not necessarily produced the conditions for plausible fictive ants that are also interesting.

---

for the entirety of a full-length novel, and only one text of those under consideration, Carol Hart’s *A History of the Novel in Ants*, even attempts to elevate ants to the status of fully-realised literary characters. Like the other primary texts, though, even this text makes an analogy between humans and ants its central conceptual premise.

The lives of animals are often imagined to be spontaneous, automatic, chaotic, deterministic and limited, and these attributes tend to be conceived of as antithetical – the necessary binary opposite – to civilised progress, humanistic free will, culture and elevation above base behaviour. If the origins, form and narrative strategies of the modern novel are inextricably linked with a particular conception of the modern human, the novel may be anthropocentric by nature and non-anthropocentric animal protagonists inaccessible; however, it may be that the novel is only incapable of stepping outside its preoccupations with human concerns while perceived fundamental differences between the experiential worlds of human and nonhuman animal continue to be stated in destructive anthropocentric terms. While anthropomorphism may produce only humans wearing a superficial coat of animal fur or a chitinous shell, it is possible that its careful untangling from the precepts of exceptionalist anthropocentrism and more thoughtful use of its imaginative possibilities may offer a valid alternative to attempting “authentic” renditions of nonhuman sensory worlds at present inexpressible in human language. The ability of the texts under discussion to question and reflect upon aspects of anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism or to consider whether it is possible to translate animal experience not from one human language to another, but from one sensory semiotics to another, is a key component of this chapter. Animals’ lives are largely unknown or unimaginable to humans, but that other animals’ worlds as they are felt, touched, smelt, seen, heard, tasted, breathed and known (or indeed experienced in ways not thought of by humans) may be unknowable is a necessary admission if humans are to find ways to consider the nature and extent of their relationships with, and responsibilities to, the nonhuman occupants of planet earth.

Although literature may wish to imagine otherwise, ants are probably motivated entirely by instinctual, fixed reactions to their environment, but their complex social lives provide fictional works with concepts to consider how humans imagine themselves to be distinct from other animals through transcendence of
biological limitations. Fabular ants dramatise human fears that we may have escaped nature’s prescriptions only in order to enter a social organism in which autonomy and self-conscious intelligence are the illusory effects of living in an invisible, dominating, blindly co-ordinating and unhuman structure. The social ant, thickly involved in the continuation of the colony and unable to survive outside it, could be said to live its life as an individual organism and as a component of a multiple existence – a life and world which is always both One and Many. Where self-definition and individuality have been imagined as constitutive factors of the humanistic human, maybe multiplicity is the primary condition of ant existence. The ant, as a creature which can live only in a social medium, has functioned as a vehicle for describing forms of human sociality, and retains its analogical power as a method for critiquing humanistic individualism.

Ants are inarguably physically dissimilar to humans; ants have six legs, an exoskeleton, a segmented body, are oviparous, live in a haptic and olfactory world, and are really very tiny in comparison to humans. There is no problematic boundary between humans and ants as physical organisms; it is instead interpretations of their social organisation and behaviour that sketch a curious set of figurative divisions and intersections. The analogy of the swarm is engendered by the only partially understood mechanics of the ant colony and by the teeming numbers of ants in them, and although ants are not the only creatures to mass and swarm they have become the metaphor of choice for imagining the movements of multitudes. This is possibly partly owing to their near omnipresence on the Earth’s land surfaces – they are easily observable and thus readily available to those seeking a metaphor – but also because, myrmecologists claim, ants lead the most complex lives of all insects, and so seem to parallel the creatures that, so humans say, lead the most complex lives of all mammals – humans.

The traditional analogical ant is an entity composed from complex linguistic entanglements among human social, academic, cultural and political contexts that are often only tangentially related to actual ants. It can be difficult, under these circumstances, to be sure of what one sees when one looks at an ant; are descriptions such as “harmonious”, “hard-working”, “altruistic”, “civilisation”, anthropocentric terms which obscure, or are they anthropomorphic terms which make the apparently unfathomable other intelligible when a scientific researcher finds him or herself at a
loss for an objective description? It may be that, as Ezra Pound writes, “The ant's a centaur in his dragon world”, and “it is not man / Made courage, or made order, or made grace”; in Pound’s cosmos these human concepts are not inventions, but are generated from our contemplation of creatures such as ants and “The green casque” in our efforts to make sense of ourselves.\textsuperscript{10} In consequence, this chapter may in some ways not be about ants, but about the ways in which ants are the necessary means for talking about particular aspects of human life and meaning-making.

**ANTS IN FACT**

Ants are astonishing and fascinating creatures; they are an ancient order of insects, evolving from primitive wasps in the late Jurassic or early Cretaceous period, approximately 120 million years ago. There are approximately eleven thousand known ant species, and they are the most successful insects on the planet, occupying almost all terrestrial spaces on Earth. Biologist and myrmecologist E. O. Wilson crudely estimates the number of ants living today to be “at the nearest power of 10, $10^{16}$, ten thousand trillion”, with a biomass roughly equivalent to that of humans.\textsuperscript{11} All ants are social and live in colonies, displaying an astonishing sophistication and range of abilities in their social organisation, and to the twenty-first century scientist these activities are explicable as evolutionary adaptations and random automatic behaviour. To lay observers and natural historians across the centuries there has, however, always seemed to be the potential for more exciting or mysterious explanations for ants’ innovation, organised co-operative behaviour, and sheer achievement in tasks such as nest-building and garnering of food supplies.

Scientists are not immune to the fascinations of ants, and myrmecology is a branch of biology marked by ideological accounts of behaviour; the historical description of the reproducing member of a colony as a queen, for example, implies a hierarchical organisational structure with a powerful leader, while subsequent explanations of the way ant colonies function focus on ideas of collective decision-making. Similarly, describing ant task management in terms of division of labour in a caste-based society, which posits that the tasks an ant can carry out are genetically


fixed and limited by biological caste, frames ants in terminology which carries more than a whiff of biological determinism across to human sociological discourses. Biologist Deborah Gordon argues that “the history of our understanding of ant behavior is the history of our changing views of how organisations work”, and thus that there are powerful connections between how humans view their social structures and how what ants do is interpreted. There are, then, some aspects of understandings of ants which are subject to debate about the significance of what is being described, the concepts used in that description, and the effects of a given conceptualisation on what conclusions are drawn. Nevertheless, there are descriptions of ants which can, by dint of scientific consensus, be treated as factual, and which can underpin literary critical approaches to readings of ants in novels.

Ants eat a wide variety of foodstuffs, including honeydew secreted by insects such as aphids. Some species of ants and aphids have evolved a symbiotic relationship known as trophobiosis in which aphids excrete honeydew on demand for ants. Some species of ants even farm aphids by caring for aphids and their young. Most food, honeydew or otherwise, is acquired by foraging ants and shared with others in a system called trophollaxis. Ants store food in a social stomach and regurgitate it on demand to ants carrying out tasks other than food-gathering in the nest, and this social, co-operative behaviour allows ants to work collectively to raise new generations of ants. There are two broad categories of ants in any colony: reproductive alates (winged female queens and male drones), and non-reproductive (female workers). Female workers constitute the vast majority of the colony’s population, and they carry out all the tasks of nestbuilding, colony maintenance and food gathering. Queens, after their nuptial flight, found a colony and thereafter their only activity is to lay eggs. The life of a male drone is short, and its only task is to mate, or attempt to mate, with a queen, after which it will die. Communication seems to be a significant part of the successful functioning of a colony; ants interact with each other and their environment by touch and smell, incorporating a pheromonal sign system. Combinations of chemicals exuded from glands distributed across ants’ bodies communicate messages such as raising alarms, laying trails and recruiting ants for defence, food gathering or nest maintenance tasks. Ants are also united around a colony odour generated by the queen.

and carried around the nest during communicative or trophollaxis interactions. The haptic and olfactory world of the ant is the medium for a system of communication which can both transfer information in rapidly expanding logarithmic fashion to all members of the colony, and maintain multiple information streams simultaneously, and the pheromonal context of existence seems to be the primary factor in enabling ants to manifest what is generally interpreted as collective organised behaviour. There is, however, very little really known about ants; as biologist Deborah Gordon says, “there are many different kinds of ants, it’s hard to figure out what an ant is doing, and not many people have looked”.

Much of what ants do, then, is in the domain of hypothesis and uncertainty, and understanding how a colony functions often depends on conceptualisation rather than provable data.

The term ‘superorganism’ is often used to describe ant sociality, and provides shorthand access to an easily graspable visualisation in a way that diverts attention from its metaphorical and conceptual, and therefore imaginative rather than baldly factual, nature. Victorian polymath Herbert Spencer coined the term “super-organic” to describe the meshed constitution of social living, and myrmecologist William Morton Wheeler converted “super-organic” to “superorganism” to conceptualise the functioning of an ant colony and the means by which it appears to contain multiple individual organisms engaged in fulfilling a single purpose. As Gordon says, the superorganism compared

the ant colony not to a kingdom but to a single organism, with the queen and workers all acting as cells that contribute to the life of one reproducing body. Because ants do not make more ants, but instead colonies reproduce to make more colonies, a colony is in fact an individual organism in the ecological sense.

“Superorganism” – which has generated more complex models variously known as “emergence”, “self-organisation”, “swarm” or “hive intelligence”, or “collective decision-making” – describes a structure of ant behaviour which is not observable or objective, but is instead a model of explication – it is analogical rather than factual. This is not necessarily problematic if it is acknowledged that this is a way of talking about something – a means of thinking about and understanding what is not known by reference to the known. As Joke Mekeus says, models of analogical reasoning can

---


form part of a problem-solving process in which, if a solution concerning a target domain (an object, a class of objects, a system) is not derivable by pure deductive means, “one looks for a source domain – a domain for which a similar problem can be posed”. Analogy offers a way of making connections and sequences, of working through a problem and seeking a resolution by telling a story. Ants, and particularly the notion of colonies as organisms, have provided a fertile analogical source for humans to tell explanatory narratives about themselves, and the long and multi-stranded history of ant analogy is described by Charlotte Sleigh as a form of myth-making. She clarifies this, saying that “I do not mean to suggest that one should consider them fiction. There is, however, no single correct way of studying ants; like everything else in our universe, they can be described on multiple levels”.

ANTS IN WRITING

Humans perceive lessons and explicable stories in many nonhuman animals, but ants have been the inspiration for a particularly rich range of models and metaphors for humans to judge their own behaviour and condition by. In Western culture one of the earliest references to ants as moral models is attributed, circa 900 BCE, to King Solomon in Proverbs 6:6. Solomon advises one to “look to the ant thou sluggard – consider her ways and be wise. Without chief, overseer or ruler, she gathers the harvest in summer to eat in the winter”. This is, of course, a translation framed by the circumstances of its possibly multiple translations and is to a certain extent conditioned by the political and religious contexts pertaining at the time the King James version of the Bible was written, but its simple message, based on the apparently relentless scurrying and food-gathering of ants, is that self-motivated thrift and hard work is the morally upright mode of a godly life.

Solomon uses ants as a lesson of exemplary behaviour from nature, but Aesop’s ‘The Ants and the Grasshopper’ (circa 600 BC) uses anthropomorphic insects

---

17 The contents of The Bible’s Proverbs may be a collation of wisdoms in a Solomonic tradition rather than words spoken by Solomon himself. See Riad Assis Kaziz, The Book of Proverbs and Arabic Proverbal Works (Leiden, NV: Koninklijke Brill, 1999), p.40.
which may or may not validate a similar model of appropriate behaviour. George Fyler Townsend’s 1887 version has a motto which appears to close meaning, but it is open to more than one interpretation:

The ants were spending a fine winter’s day in drying grain collected in the summertime. A Grasshopper, perishing with famine, passed by and earnestly begged for a little food. The Ants inquired of him, “Why did you not treasure up food during the summer?” He replied, “I had not leisure enough. I passed the days in singing.” They then said in derision: “If you were foolish enough to sing all the summer, you must dance supperless to bed in the winter.”

‘Idleness brings want’.19

Aesop’s/Townsend’s ants labour unceasingly, and the fruits of their labours are good health and security – they earn their freedom from suffering and hunger with diligence and good husbandry. Their rather puritan certainty that ceaseless industry is the good, proper, common sense way to live is clear as they admonish the feckless grasshopper and insist that he should have the life (or death) that he has earned. This moral rectitude is, however, somewhat contradicted by the ants’ distinct lack of charity or compassion for the suffering of the grasshopper, whose artistic endeavours are worthless to them. The grasshopper suffers not only for his art but for being alone, while the pluralistic ants, speaking univocally (either they speak in unison or what one ant says is what all ants say), benefit by committing their multiple bodies to a unified aim. The altruistic unanimity of the ants, simultaneous with what is, anthropomorphically construed, an inhumane disregard by the univocal mass for the grasshopper’s plight reflects the two more or less opposing imaginings of antness – altruism and not-human swarming mindlessness – which have been of most interest to those in search of an analogy to describe human massing.

It is highly unlikely that ants are capable of compassion, or that a grasshopper views his stridulations as musical art, but such conceptual, emotional and ethical quibbles are ignored in the suspension of disbelief that writing and reading humans so easily learn to assume in fiction, and which has made the anthropomorphic animal such a productive symbol of human behaviour in narrative. Lorraine Daston and Greg Mitman describe the humanised animal in fables as a caricature, and argue that

[w]hereas the same stories told about humans might lose the moral in a clutter of individuating detail of the sort we are usually keen to know about other people, substituting animals as actors strips the characterization down to prototypes. Animals simplify the narrative to a point that would be found flat or at least allegorical if the same tales were recounted about humans.20

Imagined constructions of ants and grasshoppers enact human concerns by replacing the original creatures with tracings of their habits and outlines of their forms, and such imaginary insects have taken on a life and an evolutionary dynamic distinct from that of the real insects upon which they are suppositionally based. As is demonstrated by the many revisions, reworkings and subversions of ‘The Ants and the Grasshopper’ and a multitude of other ant images, and analogies in literature, film, rhetoric, and social and scientific discourses, the fabular ant has emerged as not just “good to think” and not just a trope, but as a method for constituting and defining what it means to be human.

Aesop and Solomon were early voices in a discourse that spoke to the moral education of the individual, and by the late Middle Ages this discourse was developing contiguously with that of a discourse which sought a unified purpose for humans. This strand of ant narratives was interested in the idea of the anthill society, and had positive and negative constructions which impacted on humans’ conceptions of themselves and of ants. The anthill metaphor proposes a society of diminished autonomy, individual identity, boundaries and motivations, and emphasises socially beneficial altruistic behaviour. Johannes Nider, a fifteenth century Dominican friar, viewed ants’ social behaviour as the model for an orderly, pious and Christian society, but such utopian thinking is, to later eyes, severely flawed by its location in Formicarium, a manual for identifying and destroying witches.21 Subsequent writers also employed ants as the validating force for their particular ideological projects. Russian anarcho-communist Peter Kropotkin’s 1902 work, Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution, is described by Simon King as overturning the Hobbesian war in the body politic. Kropotkin, says King, sees ants as living in a co-ordinated state of anarchy in which trophallaxis is the operation of social openness, and takes place “within a moral economy of duties and

responsibilities”.

Swiss psychologist Auguste Forel also believed ants to be “anarchists and communists at the same time”. Describing Forel’s deep fascination with the social behaviour of ants, Charlotte Sleigh argues that “[w]henever Forel watched ants, he saw potential lessons for humanity”, and believed that as ants could be taught to overcome colony and species differences so could humans. However, says Sleigh, his work was pervaded with issues specific to Swiss society and to the politics of the Swiss canton structure – religious tension, political relations of the part to the whole, and the promotion of eugenics, abstinence, suffrage, socialism, moral action and Esperanto.

Kropotkin and Forel saw ants as offering positive, utopian models for humans, but others, although they saw the same features encoded in ant metaphors and analogies, interpreted them as negative attributes. The anthill metaphor appears in a fable entitled ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ in Book V of Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov. Satirising modern theology, ‘The Grand Inquisitor’ tells the story of Christ’s return to Earth during the Spanish Inquisition. He is arrested as a heretic, and told by the Grand Inquisitor that the Catholic Church is a corrective of Christ’s mistake in giving humans the gift of freedom:

Thou couldst accept the glaive of Caesar Thyself; why didst Thou reject the offer? By accepting from the powerful spirit his third offer Thou would have realized every aspiration man seeketh for himself on earth; man would have found constant object for worship; one to deliver his conscience up to, and one that should unite all together into one common and harmonious ant-hill; for an innate necessity for universal union constitutes the third and final affliction of mankind. Humanity as a whole has ever aspired to unite itself universally.

Through the medium of this Satanic speech Dostoevsky suggests that faith in the existence and positive value of human conscious free will (even if it may also be an affliction, and the rejection of its obverse – the submission to either a higher or a biological imperative), is closely tied to ideas about the fundamental nature of the

---

22 Simon King, Insect Nations: Visions of the Ant World from Kropotkin to Bergson (Ashby-de-la-Zouch: InkerMen Press, 2006), p.34. With thanks to Simon King and Jonathan Taylor for generously making this out-of-print text available to me.
24 Charlotte Sleigh, Six Legs Better, p.27.
human condition. Achieving a peaceful and stable society through the loss of autonomous self-determination and identification, in the manner of the dissolution of an ant’s individual identity into the greater good of the colony, is perceived as dystopian and violently oppressive.

After the horror of the First World War, ants became entrenched as a literary and political model for dystopian forms of society. Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* describes an implicitly ant-like caste-based population in which humans are biologically and psychologically conditioned to fit a particular social function, and free will is ideologically recreated as counter to normal, healthy society. In T. H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, King Arthur, while a young boy known as Wart, is turned into an ant in a colony of particularly belligerent ants by Merlyn for educational purposes. Wart is sickened by his forced participation in social feeding, for “[e]ven his stomach was not his own”, and by the ants’ sinister edict “EVERYTHING NOT FORBIDDEN IS COMPULSORY”, a binary epistemology which reduces all being, existence and understanding into right and wrong, and in which all happiness, sanity, criminality or any other conceptualisation can be rendered only as “Done or Not Done”. Wart’s aversion to the absence of any possibility for freedom of thought or self-determination emerges from *The Once and Future King*’s historical moment of production, and the limited conditions of the ants Wart lives among seem to exemplify everything that the “free West” rejected during the middle decades of the twentieth century.

The full cultural entrenchment of the anthill metaphor as politically antithetical to the values of Western capitalism is visible in a stump speech by Ronald Reagan in 1964:

> You and I are told we must choose between a left or right, but I suggest there is no such thing as a left or right. There is only an up or down. Up to man's age-old dream – the maximum of individual freedom consistent with order – or down to the ant heap of totalitarianism.

Reagan’s Cold War ideological framework regards with horror any challenge to the supreme achievement of an individual human’s personal autonomy. The rhetoric of the anthill invokes the image of millions of swarming, faceless, unindividuated and

26 T.H. White, *The Once and Future King* (Fontana Books, 1962 [1939]), p.125, p.120, p.122.

dehumanised humans controlled by an external imperative – mindless cells in the social organism. The communist ant heap is an abuse of proper human destiny, subordinating freedom and self-definition to the will of an unreasoning and homogenising organism interested only in the perpetuation of the system.

In an alternative trajectory of ant figuration, Italo Calvino’s tale of ‘The Argentine Ant’ describes the misfortunes of an unhappy young family, helplessly driven from their home and garden by relentless, unconquerable inundations of ants. ‘The Argentine Ant’ suggests that life is futile but also precious, although the overall interpretatively ambiguous nature of the text leaves the matter of whether this applies just to humans or includes the ants in all their oppressive, meaningless over-abundance remains indeterminable.\textsuperscript{28} The existential perspective on a search for meaningfulness is echoed in J. M. Coetzee’s \textit{Foe} as Susan Barton wonders if the life she lived on the island with Cruso had any more value than that of scurrying ants, asking “[a]re we insects, Cruso, in the greater view? Are we no better than the ants?”\textsuperscript{29} Here ants represent the minimal case for meaningful life as they oscillate on a rhetorical, ontological boundary between intentional, worthwhile animate life and mindless, aimless mere existence.

Such animal figurations are a means of speaking of humans, and rely on a superficial account of the creatures they employ. This form of representation encodes a subtext which suggests that although humans and ants appear to occupy commensurable social structures and display what can seem to be comparable accomplishments, the condition of an ant’s life is qualitatively so vastly different from that of a human that the analogy reifies rather than diminishes the transcendence of one form of life from base existence, and the utter submission to it of the other. We say how we are like ants in order to emphasise how we are not and should not be like ants, or, possibly, we fear that we are like ants (leading scurrying, deterministic, unindividuated and limited lives) and are therefore caught in a recursive analogical structure in which the things we fear in ourselves and see in ants are what we insist make humans and ants different. Ant analogy addresses a sinister side of human self-conception, encompassing not only the rejection of the animal side of human nature,

but also the struggle between the sense of, and faith in, meaningful individuality and the mass movements, blurred boundaries and indistinctiveness of social life. Ant-like humans are nonhumans and embody our deepest fears about the modern human social condition, a way of thinking which reached its literary apotheosis in the poetry and fiction of modernists such as T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence and W. B. Yeats. As John Carey says, from the modernists’ horror of popular culture emerged the linguistic device of the mass, which recreated all those outside the English literary intelligentsia as less than real people, less than “fully alive”. Ants, in their favouring of dull, conforming multiplicity and uniformity over individuality, are the massing antithesis of the ideal of humanity.

The effect of recreating ants as a representational shortcut to the inverse of human transcendence and natural superiority is to diminish or render invisible the original creature, and make risible the possibility of considering ants as inhabiting their own lives in some meaningful way. Scientific research into ants has burgeoned over the past thirty years, and a consequently much enhanced understanding of what ants do and how they do it has provided fiction writers with access to much more of this reduced animal than was previously possible. As a result, there have recently been a small number of novels which show a detailed interest in the complexities of ants’ lifeworlds, and a smaller number which express an openness to exploring encounters with a creature which may or may not be irretrievably and intractably Other. The scientific developments upon which recent myrmecology-based novels depend would seem to suggest that such fiction is interested in achieving authentic, mimetic representations of ants, but the essentially humanistic and world-building habits of the novel form make this potentially a problematic project. Not all aspects of the world are representable in words, and a novelistic aspect on the world is fundamentally limited by this condition of representation, with further restrictions imposed by the novel’s formal reliance on individual viewpoints and subject positioning. This study, then, recognises the limits of the novel in order to deconstruct unreflectingly mimetic animal representations, and explores the potential of texts to engage creatively and imaginatively with the limits of representation and the inexpressible world beyond this point.

ANTHILL: ANTS IN CONFLICT

E. O. Wilson is a prominent voice in ant research; he is also a controversial figure, innovating the theory of consilience, which sought to unify forms of knowledge by subsuming them under biology, and the theory of sociobiology, which took a biological approach to studying social behaviour. Sociobiology has been heavily criticised for its resemblance to aspects of social Darwinism, but Wilson remains committed to the significance of biology in explaining human behaviour, and particularly to the explicatory value of comparing complex forms of social living across different species. Humans, ants, bees, wasps and termites are, he says, the “social conquerors of Earth”, and his 2010 novel Anthill is underpinned by the assumption that advanced sociality indicates productive correlations between ants and humans.31 Its opening contention is that “ants are a metaphor for us, and we for them”, and that there is a genetic, that is, fundamental and material reason for this.32 The comparison between ants and humans thus functions as a validation of sociobiological theory, but the primary concern of the novel is environmental conservation, and ant colonies provide models of destructive overconsumption and ecological moderation for the instruction of humans.

The hero of Anthill, Raff Semmes Cody, grows up in rural Alabama, and studies biology and then law at university in an effort to save an ancient, pristine Alabama woodland, the Nokobee Tract, from development. This human plot frames a popularised version of Raff’s undergraduate dissertation ‘The Anthill Chronicles’, a simplified, fictionalised natural history of ants told through the life-cycles of four ant colonies on the Nokobee lake-shore. Unlike the dull and sometimes silly human story, ‘The Anthill Chronicles’ is rich and knowledgeable, but there are conflicts between the demands of writing engaging fictional ants and maintaining scientifically convincing descriptions of them, and between simple informative writing about ants and didactic ant metaphor.Encoded in these conflicts are a set of moral judgements which arise out of ideological assumptions about good and bad political and social organisation, and which replicate traditional ant analogies. In short, and curiously,

32 Edward O. Wilson, Anthill: A Novel (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), p.15. All subsequent references are to this edition, and are incorporated in the text.
since the author is an evolutionary biologist for whom such judgements seem inappropriate, there are “good” ant societies and “bad” ant societies.

‘The Ant Chronicles’ describes the rise and fall of Supercolony, a giant ant empire which almost eradicates the smaller ant colonies on the lake shore at Nokobee. A small genetic mutation in the hereditary code of the first generation of Supercolony ants reduces their sensitivity to the queen and colony odours around which colony identity coheres. The mutated ants begin to tolerate multiple queens in the nest, and instead of flying away to mate and start new colonies with fiercely defended autonomous territories, in Supercolony the queens mate – possibly incestuously – in their birth nest, lay all their eggs there and cease to create separate, rival colonies. Populations become much more dense, and with the erasure of contested boundaries are able to spread without previous genetically imposed restraints on colony growth into a vast conglomeration of anthills. Supercolony is not a group of individual ants, but a single entity operating as a blind, mindless, intemperately expanding organism, and its textual function is to illustrate the effects of the unpredictable but apparently ineluctable behaviour set in motion by a minor genetic modification.

Unlike ants, says Wilson in The Social Conquest of Earth, humans are not wholly subject to their genetic programming; human behaviour is instead produced by what he calls gene-culture coevolution. This is, he says,

the inherited regularities of mental development common to our species. They are the ‘epigenetic rules’, which evolved by the interaction of genetic and cultural evolution that occurred over a long period in deep prehistory. These rules are the genetic biases in the way our senses perceive the world, the symbolic coding by which we represent the world, the options we automatically open to ourselves, and the responses we find easiest and most rewarding to make.\(^\text{33}\)

Epigenetic rules are hardwired, although the behaviours they create are not. Behaviours are learned, but this learning is made possible by innate predispositions which prepare us to reinforce one choice over another, or counter-prepare us to make alternative choices or avoidances. Approximately three million years ago, the learning capacity of the human brain evolved the ability to build scenarios and store long-term memories, and from this consciousness, storytelling, self-narration and the elaboration of culture emerged. By the summoning of dreams and memories of a lifetime of

experiences, says Wilson, we “live in our conscious mind with the consequence of our actions, whether real or imagined. […] our inner stories allow us to override immediate desires in favour of delayed pleasure. By long-range planning we defeat […] the urging of our emotions”. According to Wilson, the capacity for language and narrative is mutually involved in gene-culture coevolution, and is what makes humans unique and precious in a way not currently achieved by any other creatures. Humans are not limited by nature; instead, they move, Terry Eagleton says,

at the conjunction of the concrete and the universal, body and symbolic medium […] and because they move within a symbolic medium, and because they are of a certain material kind, [their] own bodies have the capacity to extend themselves far beyond their sensuous limits, in what we know as culture, society or technology.

In short, human gene-culture coevolution has produced creatures with the ability to imagine and take account of conditions far removed from the here and now of an individual or discrete group.

Supercolony is wholly subject to the genetic programming prescribed by evolution, and this programming sets limits, so that “neither the instincts nor the genes” of the ants “had any way to plan for the future” (p.228). It cannot extrapolate the consequences of its actions into the future through imaginative scenarios, or learn from its experiences. Previous ant colonies were naturally limited in geographical spread and population growth by ceaseless wars at contested boundaries, but Supercolony, with all such strife genetically mutated out of existence, is set on a course of unrestricted expansion, dominion and destruction. The result is an ecological catastrophe at Nokobee, for in one summer Supercolony had

mastered the environment, subdued its rivals and enemies, increased its space, drawn down new sources of energy, and raised the production of ant flesh to record levels […] but by trading sustainability of the home for wider dominance, its genes had made a terrible mistake. A price had to be paid, first by the ecosystem and then, with its support systems declining, by Supercolony itself. […] It owed to nature a debt of energy and materials incurred by overconsumption (pp.227-8).

Supercolony, genetically incapable of moderating its ambitions to fit the current and future ability of the ecosystem to support it, has destroyed its natural environment and will thus destroy itself.

In contrast, the ants in the small Trailhead, Streamsider and Woodland colonies have no mutated genes and their populations remain restricted by territorial boundaries. They are mutually involved in their surroundings rather than overrunning them; in consequence, they do not exceed their ecological niche, and the environment around them flourishes in the normal and natural way. These ants are “far more than just automated specks” (p. 194), and even though they are described in terms of programming, causes, responses, and “the instinct machine” (p. 191), the learning and analytical capacities of their tiny brains are detailed and admired. Their ability to navigate, and their complex communication and information-processing abilities are reiterated, although only partially explained. These ants are represented in terms of individuated behaviour: the narrative follows individual ants on scouting and hunting expeditions; there are elites who “worked harder and more persistently” (p. 195) than other ants and gain their status by merit; and at the other end of the scale there are “slackers” (p. 244). This is a meritocracy, but a benevolent one, for even the layabouts will be carried by their more diligent nestmates.

There is, then, a sharp representational distinction between Supercolony and the small colonies, in which one group’s failures are indistinguishable from its massification, and the success of the other shares its identity with the individual distinctiveness of its members, which exceeds and contradicts the text’s clearly stated project to convey an authentic sense of ant worlds. Incestuous, intemperate, destructive Supercolony, with its seething, facelessly indistinguishable, genetically determined masses, evokes Ronald Reagan’s socialist totalitarian ant-heap. It has escaped from its “proper” place and offended the natural order, and despite the text’s insistence on the naturalness of the mutation, Supercolony’s ants emerge as the mutant robots of a dystopian, industrially self-perpetuating monster. These are unnatural Bad ants. The small colonies, populated by individuated ants with distinguishing characteristics, live within the limits prescribed by their environment, sharing a rich ecology with other organisms. They are the model for social individuals to live a sustainable way of life. These are Good ants. Since Anthill is written by a scientist about a scientist, and ‘The Ant Chronicles’ purports to originate in a scientific dissertation which “presents the story as near as possible to the way ants see such events themselves” (p. 170), the novel seems to wish its ants to be perceived as real rather than fanciful. Its proposition that there is a mutual metaphorical relation between humans and ants focuses on objective
similarities in sociality, but the representational distinction between Supercolony and the small colonies points to a transformation wrought by narrativisation. The powerful ideological and qualitative lines drawn between Supercolony’s destructive dystopia and the small, sustainable ant cities diminishes the proposition of an interest in actual ants. There is no suggestion that the individual tendencies observed in the small colonies either do not exist or have not been observed in Supercolony, it is rather that such individuals are not germane to the story, and so do not appear in the text. These ideologically inflected Good and Bad ant societies thus perform traditional ant tropes, so that it seems Anthill is more interested in fabular ants than ants themselves. This impacts on the wider human story.

Raff’s wealthy uncle, Cyrus Semmes, has significant property investments in Alabama and Florida and an interest in growth through urban expansion, which will engulf the primordial forest at Nokobee that Raff wishes to protect. Cyrus proudly informs the despondent Raff that “[i]n fifty years Mobile and Pensacola will be one single urban area surrounded by well-to-do suburbs. I like to think we’ll be a metropolis”(p.258). Later, watching two squirrels engage in a territorial dispute, Raff muses upon

[t]he ownership of land, and the power and security it provided: that was what drove the battles of squirrels. And the cycles of ant colonies. And that was what Cyrus Semmes was trying to tell him too, in a tragic sense, about what runs the world (p.261).

‘The Ant Chronicles’ compares Supercolony to an “overpopulated human city”(p.227), and its similarity to Cyrus’s conurbation suggests that the behaviours of ants and humans are dominated by the same survival imperatives and that using either one as the metaphor for the other will illuminate the causes and possible outcomes of actions. However, the text’s intention, even while it proposes the mutual metaphoricity of ants and humans, is to emphasise the human potential eternally unattainable for ants. Eagleton describes humans as “self-cultivators”: “[w]e resemble nature in that we, like it, are to be cuffed into shape, but we differ from it in that we can do this to ourselves, thus introducing into the world a degree of self-reflexivity to which the rest of nature cannot aspire”.36 Raff exercises his human ability of rational self-reflection by arguing for, and achieving, a compromise arrangement which satisfies the pockets of property

developers and saves the majority of the Nokobee from further development; here, gene-culture coevolution has given humans the intelligence to exceed their immediate desires and exercise the free will and reason to choose not to be like Supercolony. Sociobiology argues that ants and humans may be alike in having genetically programmed tendencies to destructive, dominating behaviour and to group altruistic behaviour, but only humans are equipped to imagine their current condition as the cause of a potential but not necessarily inevitable future. The Mobile-Pensacola metropolis has yet to happen, and thus Supercolony is Anthill's imaginative projection of what lies ahead for an unthinking, greedy society. Anthill is, in this sense, a fable – a moral tale intended for the instruction of humans. As the source domain for an analogical argument, the significance of the ants as living creatures that are themselves of independent interest is diminished – their primary function is, instead, an analogical illustration of the mechanics of an unsustainable society. They are didactic devices supplementing the unravelling of the human story, not actants actively participating in their own story.

Anthill is clear on the nature of the distinctions between ants and humans; both are interesting and complex life-forms, but where humans are rational, intelligent, self-aware and creative, ants are instinctual and inhibited by physical form from exceeding the limits of their genetic programming. Anthill views these evolutionary, physical and intellectual conditions as shortcomings which serve as a lesson from nature for humans; but while it is, of course, entirely true that ants lack those attributes humans recognise as important in themselves, and thus that their genetically imposed constraints absolve them of responsibility for their behaviour or its effects, Anthill's analogy is qualitative rather than a case of intersecting but different modes of being which exist independently of any heuristic potential. Fables utilise anthropocentric tendencies to view nonhuman animals in qualitative and comparative terms; the traditional Aesopian fable will anthropomorphically transform creatures by employing some aspect of their natural features, and by indirection enact a scenario which casts light on or solves a problem which may or may not be of a morally inductive nature. Although there may be some recognition of comparable features between humans and animals, as is the case in Anthill, it is these particular features that are the primary interest for a fabular narrative, not the autonomous existence of the creature bearing them. For a fable, then, animal parts are the creative method by which a human matter
is analysed. *Anthill*’s ants purport to be transparently real and therefore of independent
significance, but their distinctive form of life is diminished by their metaphorical
function to a matter of rhetorical method, and *Supercolony*’s deterministic,
inescapable failure to live well is the imaginative scenario for educating humans.

As a literary work, *Anthill* is of minor value, but E. O. Wilson is a conspicuous
figure, both as an empire-builder in the scientific world and an important voice in
debates about environmental problems. His novel is, therefore, culturally significant
for it draws mainstream attention to questions about population and the politics of
capital. It is not, however, attentive to matters of medium; Wilson’s fictional treatment
of his ongoing project to compare ants and humans produces a confusion of science
and ideology, and the unreflective analogisation in *Anthill* forecloses further questions
about ants, and their metaphorical function negates the otherness of creatures so
distinctively different to humans. *A History of the Novel in Ants*, by Carol Hart, is,
however, a literary text which is aware of its means of production and opens the literary
representation of insects’ other-worlds to question and experiment.

**NOVEL ANTS**

*A History of the Novel in Ants* creates a fictional space located entirely in the world of
ants, with the exception of the first half of chapter IX, ‘Postmodern* Postcolonial Ant’,
of which the contents page, injecting the reader into the production of the novel, says:
“*Postmodernists are welcome to read this section first, as a prologue to the book*.37
One may either frame one’s readings of the ants with the postmodernist musings of a
human, self-reflexive, authorial, metafictive narrative voice about the difficulties of
imagining the apparently inaccessible world of ants, or reject the contrivance of overt
human mediation and begin at the beginning, accepting the novel’s premise that genres
of fiction make worlds, characters or plots that are as coherent if told with ants as if
with humans. The novel tells the life story of an ant colony in ten chapters, each written
in the style of a particular genre of the novel, starting with early forms such as
‘Picaresque Ant’ and ‘Epistolary Ant’, and ending with ‘Magical Realism Ant’. The
title suggests that ants are the conceit by which to illustrate stages in the history of the
novel form, but the structure of the text also brings together the science of

---

subsequent references are to this edition, and are incorporated in the text.
myrmecology and the literary mythology of ants, and its discursive strategy draws attention to the function of narrative in analogies of humans and ants. The mapping together of human and ant social movements raises questions about the part played by imagination and conceptualisation in human understanding, and about the values implicit in them: do ants explain something about humans, or vice versa? Do ant metaphors and analogies create a fallacious connection between irreconcilably different species? Does the link created by narrative anthropomorphism between humans and ants demonstrate the potential and the limitations of fiction? The anthropomorphism upon which A History of the Novel in Ants depends is fanciful, and sometimes absurd, but it can also be disruptive of anthropocentric horizons in the novel form, rendering, compellingly, a narrative in which what is most significant is the ants themselves. By following two strands of argument – the formal aspects of the text and the ideas contained in its fictional fancy – this section considers how fiction can imagine worlds and experiences inaccessible to humans in ways that do not subordinate that otherness to entirely anthropocentric devices.

A novel is a text which is, broadly speaking, founded in human lives in the ordinary world – a pretence of reality which participates in constructing the story of what humans think they are. In Modernism, Narrative and Humanism, Paul Sheehan argues that

[n]arrative […] is human-shaped. It is a uniquely human way of making order and meaning out of the raw material of existence. It is also, more importantly, a way of carving necessity from the uncertainty and potential chaos of personal experience […] we tell stories about ourselves to give our lives meaning and purpose, and about our kind to maintain the crucial human/inhuman distinction.38

Narrative is thus a supporting aspect of being human, as it both provides the means for defining the human and enables the terms of that definition – we have the ability to tell stories about ourselves, but we are also able to decide, within limits, what stories to tell and how to tell them. The novel, particularly formal realism and the Bildungsroman, enables the story of the humanist human to be refined; its encompassing of the dimensions of time and space promotes narratives of the growth of a self-defining, individual subject. The novel has its origins in the Enlightenment

movement, forming part of a cultural trend towards human individualism, and away from the strictures and teleology of dogmatic religion and the heroic fables of romance. The potentially limitless pages and linear structure of the novel offered a writer the capacity to create the full breadth and length of a fictional human life as it travelled through time and space, while at the same time exploring how the internal world of a character’s self-awareness and identity is constructed. With no requirement to conform to the physical laws which govern material, external existence, this internal world had the facility to be almost infinite. The narrative of a novel is, nevertheless, limited to the conditions and concepts available to human language, and constructed to achieve narrative and literary satisfaction rather than replicate untidy reality.

Animals live in a vast range of experiential worlds and non-verbal semiotics that are not amenable to a simple translation into human words and stories, making an animal’s perspective difficult to imagine or evoke in text. Animal representations tend, therefore, to be characters whose furred or feathered exteriors clothe the concerns, beliefs and interests of humans. The internal worlds of literary nonhuman animal characters such as the elephants of Barbara Gowdy’s *The White Bone* and the horse narrative voice of *Black Beauty* have thus tended to be human-shaped. This does not, however, mean that they are *simply* humans who have adopted fur, extra legs or burrows as a storytelling conceit; *Black Beauty*, for example, provokes an encounter with at least aspects of bodies, perspectives and conditions that are assuredly not human. In such stories, says Allan Burns, the subjective writing and reading human can attempt to see “a direction – or imagine a reality – that is difficult to reach directly”, and so make sympathetic identifications with real animals through fictional animals.39 One must, however, remain cognisant, as Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert say, of “the practices that are folded in the making of representations”.40

There are constraints on what it is possible for a human to imagine about the interior life of a nonhuman animal, and the resulting empty space in a fictional creation may be filled with anthropomorphic imaginings or a construct containing only those features pertinent to the fictional text in question. However, an anthropomorphic

animal is not necessarily wholly transformed into human ideas, for although we may
not be able to imagine the subjective life of a horse, we can describe the objective
pattern of its activity, and remain aware that the objective reality of a horse’s fleshy
existence precedes textual representation. In the negotiation between text and reader,
the prior, other animal itself retains some presence in its anthropomorphised textual
condition, enabling empathy with the life experiences or being of horses and elephants.
Hanno Würbel argues that humans have a biologically-based tendency to empathise
with animals in proportion to their similarity to us of look and behaviour – they have
recognisable physical correlates to human bodies (faces, fleshy bodies, readable
emotions), intelligence (of a kind explicable to and recognisable by humans), and have
individual physical and behavioural characteristics. For this reason, he says, we feel
the strongest compassion for primates, followed by other mammals, much less for
birds, reptiles or fish, and none for a lettuce.\footnote{41} The evolutionary reasons for this are a
matter of debate, and there is, says Würbel,

no evidence that empathy \textit{with animals} has any adaptive significance. Empathy
with animals most likely is a psychological side-effect of empathy with humans
[...] Presumably, it is triggered by animal signals that sufficiently closely
resemble those human signals that trigger adaptive empathy among humans.\footnote{42}

According to Würbel, then, this biological predisposition to empathise with humans
inspires a secondary capacity in humans of empathy with animals, but with the
correlate that any animal understood in this way will have its wellbeing or suffering
judged according to biologically engendered values of likeness and difference. In other
words, humans anthropomorphise animals, and scale their anthropomorphising,
naturally. In a literary work, therefore, it is natural for a human to construct an
individual identity for Black Beauty in the same way as for other humans, and at least
attempt to imagine the being of a horse based on perceptible but relative similarities
between horse and human, and in which horse and human inhabit a viewpoint informed
by degrees of biological similarity. In the biological tendency thesis this is achieved
through a degree of haunting of the animal by the human which may scale from a
minimal reflection to full-bodied anthropomorphic possession.

\footnotetext[41]{Hanno Würbel, ‘Ethology applied to animal ethics’, \textit{Applied Animal Behaviour Science: Special
Issue: Animal Suffering and Welfare}, 118.3-4 (May 2009), 118-127 (p.120).}

\footnotetext[42]{Würbel, ‘Ethology applied to animal ethics’, p.121.}
Anthropomorphism as an empathising practice in the representation of animals remains the subject of fractious debate, because naïve writing or reading of anthropomorphic animals occludes or sentimentalises the real creature behind the fiction. Any animal, even an ant, can be anthropomorphised to produce a fictional entity with a characterful identity and capable of enacting a complex plot; however, according to Würbel’s biological tendency thesis, there is little capacity for a human to empathise with a real ant, or with an ant representation traced with only a minimal human haunting. The result of this is that literary ants tend either to be highly anthropomorphic and metaphorical, or entirely symbolic of the uncomfortably and irretrievably other. In the popular imagination, says Eric Brown, “insects preponderate as vectors for disease and psychosis”. In bestowing the name “insect” Aristotle chose insects’ sectional bodily existence as their primary identifier, closely followed by the capacity for bisected body parts to crawl away from each other, thus articulating the idea of insects as the model of fragmentation and as Other to the singular unity of the human body. But even while a social insect is individually multi-sectional it is part of an apparently unified social organism, and it is this relationship between individual and social body that Brown feels makes insects seem unsettlingly unstable to humans as forms of life. Their multiple forms of radical difference escape us, and it is their unknowableness which disturbs.

The structure of *A History of the Novel in Ants* rests on the presumption that the relationship between individual body and society is of equal importance for humans and ants. For humans, this relationship is enormously complex and subject to multiple scientific, political and anthropological explanations, and the miniature, anarchistic orderliness of social insects’ lives provides a mechanism for making the structures, mass movements and relations between human bodies intelligible. Cristopher Hollingsworth describes the metaphor of the Hive as “a building block of the imagination […] signify[ing] a mental structure informing any representation that, implicitly or explicitly, defines the individual and the social order in relation to each


39 Brown, ‘Reading the Insect’, p.xi.
other”. It proposes a view (usually urban) from above and at a distance, in which people are difficult to individualise, and appear united by common industry; it translates physical distance into emotional and cultural distance. This view is “both fashion and fashioning”; the Hive is a “visual machine” which informs actual and imaginative vision, so that how we see actual insects and the stories we tell with them are closely connected. The anthill as a cognitive model performs the same function as the Hive, fashioning alienated, amorphous and massified swarms of movement, but with a unified purposefulness entirely other to human faith in individual sovereignty.

A History of the Novel in Ants takes the visual machine of the anthill and its various fashions and fashionings in different genres of the English novel as the method with which to examine, playfully, the development of the novel and the lives of ants. The imaginative facility of the anthill is underpinned by scientific understandings of ants; that is, although individual ants have conversations that are anthropomorphic and impossible, they are never removed from their native nest or diverted from the natural pathways that real ants follow. The development of the ant colonies in the novel, the hazards they face, and the activities of the individual ants are plotted according to what is known about real ants. By prefacing each chapter with four or more epigraphs, at least one of which is on each occasion drawn from published scientific research and observations, the text asserts that the plot premises of that particular chapter are not the product of the author’s fancy, but created from scientific language, events and descriptions. The chapter ‘Magical Realism Ant’, for example, describes the spiteful manoeuvrings of ants seeking their own advantage, and these events are framed by an epigraph from the scientific journal Trends in Ecology and Evolution about the evolution of spite among ant workers. The scientific epigraphs introduce a fundamental credibility to some of what ants do in the text, but although science offers explanations for a proportion of how ants live their lives, it cannot exhaust the myriad ways and motivations of such a diverse and disobligingly inaccessible group of species.

---

The language of instinct, programming, and empirical observation leaves a vacancy in understandings of why ants do what they do and how they experience it, and the nameless, disembodied human narrative voice of the ‘Postmodern Ant’ chapter muses upon how much remains inexplicable: “the perpetual waving and tapping and slapping of their feelers at or upon one another”, she says, “must serve some aim, must mean something” (p.241). In the empty space left by a lack of empirical, scientific explanations of the why and the how, the novel places anthropomorphic, fictional ants and fanciful plots which are pinned onto the observed behaviours of ants, for, the narrative voice says, “I am no scientist and have no scruples to inhibit me from inventing answers to unanswerable questions” (p.254). Whatever nuance of meaning (if any) is conveyed by the minute flick of the antenna on a real ant, such a flick in the novel becomes the equivalent of dense and complex human social significations such as the raised eyebrows or scathing put-downs characteristic of the motives, elisions, language and conditions of a novel of manners. The chapter ‘Manners Ant’ is preceded by literary and critical epigraphs from, among others, *Pride and Prejudice*, and Harold Bloom on Jane Austen, pointing to the ideological assumptions of the genre in which the chapter is written, its characteristic style, and its thematic preoccupations. In the narrative world of the ‘Manners’ ant the normal business of the colony is freighted with Regency ambitions and restrictions: the “winged virgins” (p.90) (young fertile female alates) of the colony excitedly await their “grand coming out ball” (p.87) (the nuptial flight) at which they will meet eligible suitors (drones) and contract suitable alliances (mate). The currency of human gossip emerges in chemical communication as ants consume the “subtle fragrances” of their hundreds of sister ants, and “[w]ith feelers and with scent glands, every nuance of situation – obsequious deference, temporizing acquiescence, jealous resentment, offended consequence, triumphant superiority – ” (p.85) is experienced and expressed. The narrative constructs characters with the preoccupations of, for example, privileged, conceited early nineteenth century young women who are limited by convention to the brief excitement of finding a husband followed by life as a wife, but who are, simultaneously, elite two-week old ants limited by instinct to the brief excitement of a nuptial flight followed by a lifetime of laying eggs. Undeniably shaped as humans by the genre in which they are narrated, these ants are also undeniably still ants, blurring any certainty about whether characters are humans in ant armour, or ants clothed in human language.
*A History of the Novel in Ants* amusingly dramatises scientific ideas about ants through a pastiche of romanticisations of how humans imagine ants to be like and also not like us. The structural strategy of mapping anthropomorphic ants framed by human social and literary conventions onto a scientific discourse of ants is mobilised by the premise that literary metaphor, scientific analogy and language make them comparable. Although the differences between ants and humans as physical beings are of a marked nature, figurative comparisons can be plotted between them through the assumption that they are at least partly constructed by the social mediums they inhabit, and humans take these figurative comparisons to be either illustrative or revealing of some aspect of human life. *A History of the Novel in Ants* draws attention to the ant analogies and metaphors which form such common currency in philosophy, science and literature, and plays upon the idea that humans, like ants, may be merely swarming creatures who do not experience the world in a unique and individual way or wield the agential power to make decisions. What if our decisions are made according to social conditions or genetic programming? What if our choices are not choices but conditioned responses dedicated only to the perpetuation of the colony? Hölldobler and Wilson describe the ant colony as “the unit of meaning in the lives of ants”, elevating the significance of collective identity above the individual ant bodies that populate it; however, *A History* is a novel with named ant characters and individual identities, and one of its interests is addressing the philosophical, ideological and scientific tendency to view ants as indistinguishable multiple expressions of the same body and the same programmed reactive behaviours.49

Anonymous sameness as a defining aspect of ant experience and being is debated in various ways throughout *A History of the Novel in Ants*. The ‘Picaresque’ chapter describes a young alate who, rejected as a runt in a society characterised by “jostling and posturing”(p.9) for rank, is obliged to live on her wits. Her method of survival depends on theft and social presumptuousness, and she becomes known as Thrip – the name given to a small and useless insect. The picaresque storyteller observes that “[i]t is not usual nor is it proper for an ant to have a name. Social harmony […] depend[s] upon sameness and anonymity”. Any ant with a name “is an ant with a

defect”(p.9). When Thrip fondly names her larvae for their perceived individual characteristics, her mother, Regina, instructs her that

> the disturbing notion that your larvae are individuals can only be a morbid fantasy brought on by your loneliness and hunger. Your large, demanding larvae are alphas and betas; the feebler ones are gammas and deltas. These are not individuals but recurrent aspects of the social order […]. What you call individuals I call mistakes. Whenever an ant perceives herself as me rather than we, as a singularity rather than a part, she is a threat to social harmony. […] once an ant perceives herself as different, whether that difference renders her superior or inferior to her sisters, she may well formulate goals contrary to those of the society (p.43).

Although Regina concedes that a queen is permitted to be selfish, and is individuated both by this selfishness and the unique position of being the only member of the colony fully capable of reproduction, she is, she says, as limited by her social function as any other member of the colony, and is, in Butleresque fashion, “in the end, little more than an egg’s way of making more eggs – many, many more eggs”(p.39). Individual behaviours in ants are trivial but potentially dangerous tendencies which partially obscure the imperative under which all ants labour – ensuring the survival of the colony. In *The Social Conquest of Earth*, E. O. Wilson argues that ant workers are “extensions of the queen’s phenotype, in other words alternative expressions of her personal genes and those of the male with whom she mated. In effect, the workers are robots she has created in her own image”.50 This rhetoric of robots that are merely ambulatory and dispersed parts of a larger genetic mass partakes of the Cartesian tradition of the machine, and reduces the ants to the fact of their bodies and activities. Regina’s workers are robots and, contradictorily, also self-determining individuals, simultaneously genetically determined functionaries and possibly ant-bodied human individuals in a totalitarian society. The ironic narrative relation she sketches between scientific discourses which purport to explain the relation of ant to colony, and political discourses which map the principle of totalitarian society onto ants and humans, produces a slippage in the cultural mythology of ants and scientific language about them that politicises all such representations. Here it is difficult to know what is anthropomorphic and what is not. If anthropomorphism is a cognising activity which exists prior to the discursive, our imagining and conceptualising may not begin and end in scientific and literary discourses. This would inhibit the drawing of neat distinctions between anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic relations with and

representations of animals, creating ragged and unpredictable boundaries with tendrils extending heterogeneously from one domain to the other.

Regina’s colony ethos of self-abnegation is incompatible with a spirit of selfhood or individual preferences, and depends on the eternal reproduction of the same in which the aggregate effect of each rank of ants and the tasks they perform must always achieve the same average. Such a system tolerates a degree of variance to achieve the necessary average, but whether these variables are deviants or potential heroes of social revolution depends very much on the manner and genre in which they are narrated and whether it is ants or humans in question. Regina describes her colony in terms of human collectivism, and the language of this politics fairly effectively maps onto ideas of the ant colony as a superorganism, but while conceiving of bodies as the deindividuated, biologically limited functions of the colony is acceptable when applied to ants, such an organising principle is imagined as an ideological and political challenge to dominant Western understandings of what it means to be human. The western novel, predicated on arranging the experiences of individuals into meaningful explanations of chaotic existence, struggles to imagine a form of experience which does not emerge from individual consciousness. Thus, the elaboration of Regina’s collectivist politics is articulated in dialogue between two individual, fictional, named characters, rather than through the experience of nameless, anonymous, bundles of genetic programming. The ‘Picaresque’ chapter asks you to “Imagine, Reader”(p.7), that you are an ant, but as the narrative voice of the ‘Postmodernist’ chapter admits, ants are “fundamentally incomprehensible, something utterly not me”(p.255), and she cannot imagine anything other than herself in an “ant suit”(p.255), failing, in the manner of Thomas Nagel, to conceive of “the subjective experience of an ant being an ant among other ants”(p.245). The lives of real ants are, she concludes, unimaginable, and we can encounter them only through a composite of fragmentary scientific hypotheses and ideologically inflected anthropomorphic conceptions of the individual in society. For the reader this raises provocative questions about how humans conceive of themselves as individuals who evolved as social beings.

Insect-inspired literary theory makes a very small field; unlike philosophy, fiction or poetry there are very few references to insects in literary theory, and the richness and frequency of insect tropes in philosophical and literary texts indicates that
this theoretical absence is a deficiency. Work which pays any attention to the terms of
the distinction between humans and insects in literature is even more limited, probably
because distinctions of kind and value between them seem thoroughly distinct and
without need of qualification. In keeping with any philosophical or anthropological
insect-related preoccupations, the small body of literary thought operates on a specific
range of concepts. Apropos of autobiography, subject matter he seems to consider
counter to ant conceptualisation, Derrida remarks that the ‘themness’ of ants consists
in “the figure of the very small, the scale of the miniscule (small as an ant) and the
microscopic figure of innumerable multiplicity, of the incalculable of what teems and
swarms without counting, without letting itself be counted, without letting itself be
taken in”. 51 The character of the ant from the human perspective is, according to
Derrida, of a smallness that precludes the possibility of individual distinctiveness
among uncountably high numbers of other similarly small bodies. An ant can have no
individually distinguishable traits because it lives in a state of aggregation and
combination with its colony, and its condition is multiple: to frame an encounter with
a single ant as an encounter with an individual identity is meaningless. To be face to
face with one ant is to be face to face with the totality of the colony, and to imagine
ant autobiography thus seems impossible. Whether multiplicity and superorganism, in
which a single ant is conceived of as no more than a merely ambulatory function of a
larger body, actually describes an individual ant’s condition, or whether it is a
metaphor mapped onto the colony which is now treated as objective truth and which
does not, in fact, reflect an ant’s connection with the colony and experience of the
world is at present unknowable. It is clear, however, that ants offer a trope in which
humans can consider the perplexing idea that individual lives are inseparable from
multiple lives,

If an ant’s proposed subsuming of individual identity to altruistic colony
identity is perceived as either a totalitarian dystopian or a utopian model for human
social organisation according to the various novelists, poets, philosophers, politicians
and rhetoricians who make use of ant figurations, then what is highlighted is one of
the key distinctions that modern humans have made between themselves and other

Sexuelle’, in Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing, Hélène Cixous and Mireille Calle-Gruber, trans.
animals of whatsoever kind. Human ethical systems recognise and respect, in principle, the significant uniqueness, value and sovereign autonomous right to life of all human individuals. While particular animals, such as pets, may acquire unique identities and be valued for their individual characteristics, single animals tend to be identified as non-specific examples of a given species and are, therefore, not significant as unique and irreplaceable beings – they are interchangeable with any other animal of the same species in a way that humans believe themselves not to be. The teeming, multiple sameness of ants exemplifies this non-uniqueness and locates them at the apogee of the animal Other; in Zygmunt Bauman’s terms ants represent the absolute dissolving of the Face as the metonym of the unique, meaningful human agent and ethical subject into the Many of indistinct, unconscious mere life. An ant is the antithesis of the human face; its hard exoskeleton says it has nothing waiting to be called face. Its encounters take place not between individual interior consciousness and external entities and environment, but through multiple and distributed but unified bodies, and are of a nature entirely alien to the metonymy of the face which identifies the modern human individual.

Western modernity and its intensification in the Enlightenment proposes that humans are autonomous free agents whose thoughts and behaviour are directed by an internal, sovereign consciousness. Paul Du Gay argues that this unified self is taken to be the essence of what it means to be a human person and is, in this sense, fictional because “the individual’s identities, interests and objectivities – everything that might stabilize their description and their being – are variable, contingent outcomes that fluctuate with the form and dynamics of the relationship between […] individuals”.52 Du Gay’s analysis, counter to the Enlightenment view, says that humans do not have established identities prior to relationships with other humans or divorced from their empirical settings, reducing their likeness to the figure of “the human” and increasing their likeness to the figure of “the ants”. Pierre Bourdieu argues that “[t]o produce a life history or to consider life as a history, that is, as a coherent narrative of a significant and directed sequence of events is perhaps to conform to a rhetorical illusion”.53

authored life history of a subject in the social world produces a sense of a constant, responsible and predictable identity through various institutions, one of which is the proper name. Through nomination “a constant and durable social identity is instituted which guarantees the identity of the biological individual in all possible fields where he appears as agent, that is in all his possible life histories”.54 Political, legal, social and educational contexts require and assume a unified self across time, and in this sense identity as life history is not an illusion, but is nevertheless historically variable and contingent rather than natural or essential. Bourdieu’s “rhetorical illusion” is the mode of storytelling as a technique for organising experience and forming a narrative self, and is, in the novel form, “the common representation of existence that a whole literary tradition has always and still continues to reinforce”.55

Paul Ricoeur describes narrative selfhood as emerging at the intersection of ipse (identity – that which is not reducible to substance) and idem (sameness – the notion of a relational invariant). At this intersection the questions of “who? what? why? how? where? when?” are answered by the autobiographical or biographical recognisable and reidentifiable self.56 While humans conceive their behaviour to be at least in part distinct from deterministic biology, animals as a general category – Derrida’s animot – are determined by their biology, genes and instinct, locating identity in species or function rather than individual existence. In short, we, as humans, distinguish between who we are, what we are, and what we do. We do not make the same distinction for animals, who are only the what of category, and thus can only be pack, herd, swarm, species, multiple, and do not achieve the positive attribute of being individual. In this sense, science, narrative and human habits of thought produce only humans as reidentifiable individuals, unless particular animals are given human-shaped nominations and identities.

For Cary Wolfe ipseity and the question of sovereignty describes “the subject’s proper relation to its own singularity and uniqueness”, and thus

ipseity and sovereignty are taken to be in stark opposition to the ‘animal’, and to the animality of the human when the human becomes something

anonymous, either through massification […] or by being reduced to an equally anonymous condition of ‘bare life’.\textsuperscript{57}

Iipseity is a frame which defines the proper human and is part of the apparatus which draws a line between human and animal. In this way it is an apparatus which, says Wolfe, is “a discursive resource, not a zoological designation”.\textsuperscript{58} Language as the enabling mechanism of thought is the key element of this apparatus, producing Cartesian dogmatic adherence to the brain as the locus of ipse, and thus locating the “who” of the conscious, sovereign human in neurology, and the “what” of animality and unconscious, massified animals in biology and matter. The separation of the thinking and therefore responding “I” of “man” from the biological body supposes that all that remains outside the frame of thinking consciousness is merely reactive, rejecting the idea that “the capacity to ‘respond’ is the product of a complex, dynamic, mutually imbricated relationship between the ‘who’ and the ‘what’”.\textsuperscript{59} This “‘dynamic dance’ between organism and environment, physiological wetware and semiotic machinery, the individual and the ongoing storehouse of social knowledge held by a particular group of animals”, applies to animals, including humans, as they act upon their desires within a certain view on how the world is organised, dismantling the possibility of a simple division between a responding sovereign “who” and a reacting animal “what”.\textsuperscript{60}

Such a view does not imply equivalence among all animal life-forms. There is a correspondence between neuro-physiological plasticity and individual variation in ontogeny which, if highly developed, permits more complex interactions and hence co-ontogenies of behaviour.\textsuperscript{61} For social insects, says Wolfe, the restrictions placed on development of neurocephalic tissue and thus plasticity by their exoskeletons produces “individual ontogenies [which] are quite rigid and subject to a very limited set of variations. Thus, their individual ontogenies are of little importance in explaining their behaviour”.\textsuperscript{62} A stigmergic, reactive, non-individual has a diminished boundary between single bodies and the mass of bodies, distinguishing it from those organisms

\textsuperscript{58} Wolfe, \textit{Before the Law}, p.10.
\textsuperscript{59} Wolfe, \textit{Before the Law}, p.67.
\textsuperscript{60} Wolfe, \textit{Before the Law}, p.69.
\textsuperscript{61} Ontogeny refers to the sequence of events involved in the development of an individual organism.
\textsuperscript{62} Wolfe, \textit{Before the Law}, p.70.
which do have meaningful individual ontogenies. Wolfe addresses the knotty problem of human responsibility to life-forms such as viruses and bacteria by concluding that mere life cannot be considered a qualification for equivalence. Responsibility, he says, without “discrimination, [...] selection and a perspective would be, paradoxically, unethical”, so even though the privilege of human sovereign ipseity has been withdrawn, Wolfe’s specific location of social insects close to the boundary between individual ontogenetic flexibility and multiplicitous rigidity means that they continue to mark the limits to what humans see as meaningful animate life.

Philosophy and critical theory, therefore, assume that for an ant there can be no question of “who”; an ant is not a “who” because it fails to emerge from the massifying ant swarm as a distinctive, reidentifiable individual across time. On the part of science, biologist David McFarland observes that “it is difficult for us to be certain that [ants] are simply automata, but the research [...] strongly suggests this”. A History of the Novel in Ants contests the dissolving of meaningfulness in the individual ant into the swarm by the discourse of the automaton. Automatons, says the human narrative voice of ‘Postmodernist Ant’, are “mindless”(p.247), and once conceived of as mindless an ant is deprived of interests and experiences. Such language, she says, does not encourage scientists to ask more interesting questions about how ants experience the world. Taking ants in and out of laboratory mazes brings many interesting conclusions about their learning capacities, but “leaves unanswered essential questions of character, discourse and motivation”(p.250), and cannot approach the unwatched, unexperimental real lives of ants in their nests. “I find fictional ants easy to apprehend. It’s the real ones [...] that are quite, quite inconceivable”(p.245), says the narrative voice, but even if our only access to the

63 Stigmergy is a function of automatic behaviour; it is “the production of behaviour that is a consequence of the effects produced in the local environment by previous behaviour”. Stigmergic behaviour appears purposive but emerges from random automatic behaviour which encourages further automatic responses in a sense-act cycle. In contrast, intelligent behaviour, which involves responses to the world partly determined by internal state, is a sense-think-act cycle, or cognition. Termite mound-building is stigmergic; termites roll balls of mud and place them by or upon mud-balls placed by other termites by automatic response. The nest thus emerges from programmed termite reactions to specific environmental factors. To a non-scientist this seems an insufficient explanation for the complexity of a termite mound, but the alternative is that termites are purposive builders, and this also seems unsatisfactory. David McFarland, Animal Behaviour: Psychology, Ethology and Evolution, 3rd edn, (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 1999 [1985]), pp.454-8.
64 Wolfe, Before the Law, p.86.
inconceivable is through the imagination, what matters is that such an attempt is made. McFarland would agree that the methods humans use to assess animal intelligence, or the validity of terms such as consciousness to explain animal experience and cognition, have been fraught with difficulties of ideology and intention, and even once the habit of concentrating on abilities that are thought to indicate intelligence in humans is discarded, it remains difficult to construct and analyse experiments which can confirm or deny particular construals of intelligence.66 Ants may live complex lives and have fascinating behaviours, but this does not answer the question, argues the postmodernist narrative voice, of whether stepping on ants matters, which she begs us not to do. Metafictively, she places the feet of her readers among her novelistic ants, obliging one to consider if such ants matter. Is a single ant invested with something which makes its individual life significant to it, or to us in some way? How can our methods of valuing animal life decide this? These are difficult questions, but what is important is that A History of the Novel in Ants creates the conditions to ask them.

The only humans admitted to A History of the Novel in Ants are the authorial narrative voice and her metafictive reader, excluded from the plot of the ants’ lives, but implicated in their fictive construction. In the simultaneously scientific, fictional and anthropomorphic structure of A History the discourses that produce the culturally cognisable ant for author and reader cannot be easily pulled apart from each other. It is not so much that their edges blur as that each is mutually constituted in the politics, language and narrative forms of the others. These ants – these fascinating, analogous, human-like ants – are both meaningful and produce meaning. If Regina represses individuality, the mechanism of a particular politics is given a name; if Thrip seeks to preserve her life, we empathise with her struggles because she has the characteristics of a purposeful consciousness. There can be no question of treading on Thrip, but real ants, says the postmodernist narrative voice, remain “tiny, insignificant, squashable”(p.241). They are alien and inaccessible; can you, Dear Reader, compose a conscientious response to creatures across that divide?

THE STRANGERS AMONG US

This chapter has considered ideas about how real ants behave, and how the multiple discursive constructions of ants emerge in literature. The differences between human and ant physical form, cognitive capacities and lived experience are vast, and this means it is easy to feel that there are no difficult epistemological, scientific or ontological boundaries between real humans and insects. Instead, much of the thinking on correspondences between humans and ants is predicated on models of similarity in sociality and the metaphorical possibilities they present, transactions for which take place across a boundary of an ideological and linguistic nature. Ants are also the poster-girls for another conceptual boundary; occupying an undecided margin between life that matters and life that does not, ants earn their place in a discussion of the human-animal divide by marking the edges of human conceptions of meaningfulness. Metaphorical ants describe, variously, our anxieties about human insignificance, indeterminacy or lack of autonomy, versus the comforts of social living and sum-is-greater-than-the-parts achievements. In this way concepts generated by ideas about ants create an aesthetic boundary for defining the proper human. Two final texts, A. S. Byatt’s novella, ‘Morpho Eugenia’, from Angels and Insects, and Jonathan Taylor’s Entertaining Strangers, clarify how these concepts resolve in recent English literature.

‘Morpho Eugenia’ analogises ants and humans by enclosing an assortment of texts about insects, including ants, in a human story. William Adamson, a post-Darwin Victorian naturalist recently returned from the Amazon, is employed by wealthy landowner Harald Alabaster, to catalogue his chaotic collection of plant and animal specimens from around the world. William courts and marries the eldest daughter of the house, the fecund Eugenia, who rapidly produces five babies moulded in her own image. Through mysterious and undisclosed machinations William stumbles on the discovery that his wife and her half-brother have been and continue to engage in an incestuous relationship. With his paternity of Eugenia’s children in doubt and, subsequently, only a social rather than a genetic sense of responsibility for them, he returns to the Amazon accompanied by Matty Crompton, one of the Alabaster household’s maiden aunts. Before this disaster befalls him William and Matty study a nest of local wood ants whose inhabitants, structures and conflicts analogue those of the Alabaster family and their servants. Lady Alabaster is a corpulent, immobile woman whose boudoir is the centre of organisation at Bredely Park in a manner reminiscent of a queen ant; her many white-haired children are larvae-like; Harald
Alabaster, having fathered these children, is exiled to the outer edges of the house, as redundant as a male drone ant; and seemingly countless black-clad women servants / worker ants swarm silently and busily around the house / colony attending to the every need of its elite occupants.

William writes a natural history of the wood ants called (á la Baudelaire) ‘The Swarming City’ in loquacious Victorian style, lengthy extracts from which appear in ‘Morpho Eugenia’. Matty Crompton remarks of one such passage that William’s rhetoric has perhaps been somewhat anthropomorphic in his observation that male ants “poignantly exemplify the remorseless random purposefulness of Dame Nature”. Biology and evolution have made them victims of their genetically and socially determined function; they are helpless and do nothing towards the running of the colony as:

[their whole existence is directed only to the nuptial dance and the fertilisation of the Queens. Their eyes are huge and keen. Their sexual organs, as the fatal day approaches, occupy almost the whole of their body. They are flying amorous projectiles, truly no more than the burning arrows of the winged and blindfold god of Love. And after their day of glory, they are unnecessary and unwanted (p.103).]

Although William cannot fly and his body is only chemically rather than physically occupied by his sexual organs, once the ornate prose is stripped away what remains is William’s droneness as he reflects, rather bitterly, that in the Alabaster household he is nothing more than a lust-driven procreative tool for the perpetuation of the family, and a hanger-on husband who, having provided sperm, is useless and burdensome (and even this function becomes doubtful). Although he tells Matty that “men are not ants”, and that “analogy is a slippery tool”, he is afraid that “he was a creature as driven, as determined, as constricted, as any flying or creeping thing”(p.116), curiously emasculated by his biologically-engendered male desire. If such behaviour is explained by E. O Wilson’s rules of epigenetic predisposition, William’s lustful, biological response to Eugenia’s plump blonde charms is a genetic urge to reproduce, and he eschews the more intellectual activities that he sees as his characteristic self to follow his epigenetic predisposition – the lusty stranger within him – by choosing her bed. When he discovers Eugenia’s incest, William is repulsed and cured of his lust for

---

her, suggesting that human morality and rational response finally conquers instinct, but the novella is in the end ambiguous on this point. Matty may seem to be the intellectual choice of an intelligent man, but William’s fascination with her originates, ant-like, in her odour – an apparently pheromonal combination of faint, acrid underarm smell and lemons.

‘Morpho Eugenia’ may be a text that is as much about analogy as about ants and humans, as it reflects on the analogical ways that knowledge is produced and the power of words to construct the disposition of our thoughts. If we seek to understand the new by reference to the already understood, then it is hard to know whether it is ants or humans that are the source domain in ‘Morpho Eugenia’ – are we being told about ants in order to learn about humans, or vice versa? Or are we to reflect on the more general apparatus of animate life and its ambiguities, paradoxes and exigencies? Although the concept of the superorganism when applied to ants is a compelling (if disputed) one, when applied analogically to humans it is the antithesis of the individual, autonomous humanist identity; however, ‘Morpho Eugenia’ points to a more complex and posthumanist understanding of the many ways that forms of life connect and diverge. Men are clearly not ants – human capacities vastly exceed those of ants in many ways – but the analogy between them indicates points of similarity and departure between humans and insects that reflect upon the nature and kind of difference. This difference is not one of absolute schism or one of degree, but one of heterogeneous, irregular and unpredictable concurrences across different systems of meaning.

Such concurrences appear in Entertaining Strangers, a curious, tragi-comic tale of the enigmatic and gender-reticent autodiegetic narrative voice, Jules, depressive-philosophe Edwin, his traumatised family and socially impaired friends, the cruel and pointless destruction of a girl in a vanished city, and an ant farm. The novel explores multiple philosophical, literary and cultural conjunctions between ants and humans, but ultimately ant representations and figurations are refined to a single point which unifies ideas about singularity, swarming and mattering, and which

---

68 With thanks to Dr Amy Culley for bringing this novel to my attention.
highlights the vulnerability of living bodies of every kind before human framings of sovereignty.

*Entertaining Strangers* is more a novel of stasis than of plot, as the inability of Edwin Prince and his brother to escape from the overwhelming effects of their grandfather’s unspeakable crime resolves in their cycles of depression, psychosis and destruction. Temporally bewildered Jules is the inadvertent catalyst for clarifying and beginning to close the fractures in the minds of the brothers, and in their human relating with a number of other lives. Jules, who topples through Edwin’s front door one lost and rainy night in 1997, is haunted by the sounds and smells of fire and disorientated by intimations of an unseen city in an unknown time. He or she, let us say she in the absence of certainty, may be an itinerant suffering traumatic episodes, a hapless and unaware guardian angel or deus ex machina, the reincarnation of a girl murdered in Smyrna in 1922, or the trauma of the Prince family made corporeal. Her reality as character and text appears to exist only in the presence of Edwin and his concerns, and she neither narrates nor appears to have any awareness of other times and spaces, although her narrative is told from an obscure, “much later” point.69

Edwin’s first words to Jules when she arrives in his squalid sitting room are “Ants. They’re everywhere, you know” (p.9). This is certainly the case in *Entertaining Strangers*; the text is filled with ants in philosophy, politics, art, television, *Tom and Jerry* and literature, there are ants in epigrams, ant natural history, ant facts, structural ant analogies, metaphorical and metonymic ants, ants on the ground and in the air. There are even ants in the Afterword as the author once shared a house with and was inspired by Simon King, previously mentioned in this chapter, when he was writing the Ph.D out of which *Insect Nations* emerged. In short, *Entertaining Strangers* is a pastiche of ants as first and second order cultural artefacts, with its real ants displaying resisting obduracy to the reconstructive onslaught. Much of this pastiche is channelled through Edwin’s fascination with ants, and supplements and enriches the novel’s strange and elliptical tale of human kindness, cruelty and eccentricity. Ultimately, the text allegorises how human conceptualising, abstraction and political form of life determines our ability to connect and empathise with other living and suffering minds.

---

There are multiple avenues of ant-based analysis to follow in *Entertaining Strangers*, but just four of these will be highlighted in order to summarise and bring to a conclusion the findings of this chapter.

Music has a powerful presence in *Entertaining Strangers*, and plays a part in establishing how cultural difference is constructed, but it is also part of a textual experiment in difference. Owing to the grandfather’s obsessive terror of “Armenians”, Edwin’s brother has dedicated himself to purging “dangerous”, “discordant” Armenian harmonies from Western music. In Kachaturian’s music, he says, “Armenians hear normal, tonic chords as dissonances. What we hear as consonance, *they* hear as discord. Our beauty is their ugliness, our nature is their unnature” (p.105).

To him, music as a cultural form articulates a fundamental epistemological and natural ethnic opposition between Armenians and Europeans – to each the meaningfulness of the other’s world’s concepts *sound* antagonistically wrong. Edwin likes to play apocalyptic music very loudly, particularly Penderecki’s *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*. *Hiroshima*’s evocative, agonised, shrieking violins elicit an extratextual, aural level in the text’s structure and metaphorical connections, and the suggestion of sounds in written narrative is probably interpretatively assimilated by a reader in the same way as visual imagery. However, Edwin points out that ants have a sensory array of a nature alien to humans, who prioritise their conscious seeing and hearing. Ants’ eyes and ears may be of more supplementary than primary use to them, and what we hear with our ears they may feel as vibrations in their bodies. The exquisitely bone-sawing, nerve-lacerating violins of *Hiroshima* may be felt in the body rather than just heard in the ears and interpreted in the mind, and this experience of bone and flesh-deep vibration exemplifies a form of experiential encounter with the world – passive feeling, not active touching, bodily sensation not rational listening – to which humans are sensitive in the flesh but do not include in their five key senses.70 Thus the text finds a way to imagine an alien sensory experience of the world. Through music *Entertaining Strangers* evokes a little-considered sensory experience and an intimation of other modes of the world’s interpretation, and disrupts human emphasis on visual and aural formants.

---

70 To elaborate on this point, I cannot find a satisfactory adjective of a similar nature to ‘visual’, ‘oral’, ‘aural’, ‘olfactory’, ‘haptic’, to describe the sensory experience of vibration felt in the body.
Edwin concentrates much of his energy on his ant farm, a contrivance consisting of two connected tanks, some worker ants (Lasius niger) dug up in a field, and a queen who enters the nest of her own volition at a later point. Exploring the many ways in which humans have used ants as social, political and organisational model and metaphor, Edwin talks of ants in *King Lear*, Hobbes, Kropotkin, Nietzsche and Escher, and conducts experiments on musical appreciation in ants, arguing that ants can feel musical vibration through their feet. When the ants do not respond to Mosolov’s ‘The Iron Foundry’ he concludes that ants are not soulless automata, Social Realist or Russian Futurist; lack of response to Elgar’s *Pomp and Circumstance* reveals that “militaristic metaphors for ants are reductive”(p.81); indifference to Göttterdammerung is taken to mean that ants are not Darwinians. Ralph Vaughan-Williams’ *Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis* does, however, produce a response which Edwin interprets as sentimental and nostalgic reverie. Wilfully ignoring evidence to the contrary, Edwin searches for order and meaning in the political and metaphorical moulds which human conceptualising has made for ants, investing them with the “harmony, balance, beauty, brotherhood, heroism”(p.180), that he fails to find in humans. Ultimately, Edwin’s ants fail to prove the possibility of any kind of utopia, and when it seems that the worker ants have murdered the queen he is so distressed and disappointed by their all-too-human casual and banal brutality that he kills them, and unsuccessfully attempts his own suicide with the same poison. In consciously highlighting the many different ways in which humans have attempted to explain or remake their social behaviour through ant models and metaphors, *Entertaining Strangers* both charts a history of ideas about sociality and proposes that any supposed ant origins in these ideas derive from human motives and desires. Actual ants are obscured by the discursive transformation of metaphor into metonym.

While playing 3D Ant Attack, a (real) computer game in which the stick figure playing-piece must rescue his or her love interest from swarms of aggressive ants in a ruined city, Jules recognises “a time and place I can’t quite recall, a past city from which only my memory escaped, a burning city where my stick self is still wandering, forever trapped with a marauding army, never finding the way out, never reaching a successful ‘Game Over’…”(p.61). This burning city foreshadows an ‘Entr’acte’ revelation of the grandfather’s crime, his own inescapable horror at which mutilates the future lives of his grandsons. As a nineteen-year-old sailor in the British Navy,
terrified and attempting to follow the politically motivated orders of his superiors to remain neutral, the grandfather pours boiling water (the traditional method of destroying ants’ nests) onto the face of a girl, Juliette, as she begs him for help. She drowns in Smyrna’s harbour while attempting to escape “a chaos of half-a-million people, trampled animals and lost possessions”(p.269). They, a cosmopolitan people and their unfortunate animals, are caught between an occupying Greek army and a returning Turkish Nationalist force, and trapped on a quay to which they have been driven by the flames of the deliberately fired city (possibly a strategic action by Atatürk as he forged a new Turkey in the real world outside Entertaining Strangers). The particular visual and psychological nature of this mass movement is captured in an epigraph drawn from Marjorie Housepian Dobkin’s account of the event, Smyrna 1922, in which, “[l]ike ants, the people kept swarming toward the sea”(p.261). Ants as a trope enable Housepian Dobkin to make the streams of thousands of dispersed living bodies converging on one point in the city visually and conceptually intelligible, encoding the perspective of a removed observer, heaving, indivisible crowds of massified bodies, and an instinctive flight from threat, in a single metaphor. Ants are dehumanisation and animalisation in extremis, and in the loss of the individual human face into a dark and unmeaningful swarm the British, American, Japanese and Italian ships can stand off in Smyrna’s harbour and not see the suffering on the seafront. The people of Smyrna die political deaths, and thus their lives are valued as political loss or gain and not as uniquely valuable loving or suffering beings. When Juliette’s single, drowning human face emerges from the swarm the grandfather’s alienated and emotionally distanced perspective is shattered, and from her terrible, individual death his psychological trauma is born.

Drawing together the metaphorical correlations made between humans and ants, the alienating effect of difference that ants symbolise, and the capacity of the distancing swarm to massify, dehumanise and antify, it becomes clear that the killability and mattering of living bodies is decided by human motives, desires and discursively justified political expediency. The murders of the people of Smyrna, Juliette and the queen ant seem motivated by the same pressure for territory, and they are unconsciously devalued and made killable by metaphor. When humans become ants they cross the conceptual boundary between life that matters in its individual dynamic uniqueness, and life that does not, and between the known and the remote;
however, Edwin is distraught at the death of the queen, the responsibility for which he ascribes to himself, to the ants, to all those who should have cared for him, and to contaminating and self-serving humankind in general. For Edwin, Juliette and the ant queen are killed by the same human failings – neglect of loved ones and strangers alike, the failure of imagination, and the pursuit and maintenance of power – and the life of one ant, whose death is “equally your fault, whoever you are, and the fault of someone thousands of miles away” (p. 252), matters so much to him that life among the uncaring and unseeing beings of both species becomes intolerable.

Humans may not be ants, but it is not clear whether ants are ants. Ants are culturally reconstructed as aspects of how humans explain themselves; historical perceptions of how ant societies cohere and function offer a conceptual framework for imagining perfect and imperfect forms of human society, and imagining how the individual body relates to the body politic. Here, anthropomorphism seems, inescapably, to play a role in the construction of knowledge, and draws attention to the blurry and inconsistent boundaries we make between real and imaginary animals, and to the difficulties involved in extricating actual animals from our ideas about them. This chapter has explored the aesthetic of this heterogeneously dissolving and resolving division to consider the significance of ants in humans’ constitution of themselves as sovereign beings. It has also considered how scientific theorising about ants is part of a recursive system of mythmaking that nourishes how humans understand themselves. The scientific and cultural processes of mythmaking are not always innocent, and programme ideas about the nature of being human or being ant.

Ants are a key part of most ecologies, so the significance of ants plural and multiple in the physical world is certain. The analogical and metaphorical ants of literature, culture and philosophy depict multiplicity, amorphousness and anonymity, and make unimaginably complex systems intelligible in overview if not in detail. But if large numbers of ants are imaginatively significant, the single ant tends, in contrast, to be the metaphor for inconsequence and insignificance. Translated to the real world, an ant is fundamentally inconsequential and may be stepped upon without the least moral or ecological qualm: one ant does not matter as there are many, many more ants. Since humans first began to incorporate ants into language as a figurative tool, we have dissolved the extreme physical differences between humans and ants and reconstituted
them into linguistic and conceptual similarities and differences. Literary ants emerge in various negative or positive guises according to the way they are narrated, to create a poetics of similarity and distinction between humans and ants which reflects on the condition of the individual in society. In terms of a discursive distinction between humans and animals, humans may be no different to ants, or could not be more different, and sameness or absolute difference does not consistently correlate with structures of goodness or badness. But if a literary ant may or may not be unproblematically stepped upon, or if philosophy’s lifeboat is highly likely to leave an ant to drown in a sea of logical inferences, this does not tell us if real ants matter. If there is either a very fine line or a vast chasm between humans and literary metaphorical ants, then the same distinctions pertain between humans and scientific analogical ants, but the question of whether or not a single, real ant matters or feels anything at all – pain, fear, regret, release from its antish life of unremitting toil – if stepped upon, remains unanswerable.
CHAPTER THREE

FLESHY LIVES, STITCHED SKINS AND MEATY BODIES

For humans, bodies, whether human or animal, have value. Such value may be metaphysical, or economic, positive or negative, or calculated according to a host of other parsings which participate in the qualification of relationships among humans, animals and objects, and the distinctions created by such evaluative systems are uneven. Human bodies as labour and sexual currency acquire value in inequitable class, race and gender structures, and animal bodies have similarly served as the machines of trade and industry. Flesh can be traded and commodified, objectified into literal and metaphorical consumable body fragments, but even if the language of objectification is the same for humans and animals, its effects materialise and dematerialise at different boundaries in ways that prevent violence or oppression suffered on account of gender, race or species from any easy alignment or equalisation. Hierarchical and messy distinctions between human, dehumanised and nonhuman bodies along Derrida’s “plural and repeatedly folded frontier” mean that sexualised or racialised humans whose proper humanity is diminished, may be portioned up and consumed – as hands, breasts, feet – in a figurative construction which depends on the guaranteed literal consumption of animals for its conceptual power.¹ Those whose human status is marginal in the twenty-first century may have literally commodified flesh in the global trade in organs for transplant, or in genetic material, or slavery, but nonhuman animals are, as a generic category, always tradeable meat in what Nicole Shukin describes as a global system of carnality. Animal life, she says, is “culturally and carnally rendered as capital”: the bodies, skin, feathers and flesh of billions of mammals, birds and fish, and the semiotic currency of animal signs are “animal capital”.² Animal capital’s life-based products circulate in a vast cultural traffic of animal signs and flesh, and in a structure of biopower legitimated and perpetuated by convention, self-interest and indifference. This chapter explores literary representations of the circulations of animals and their flesh, skin and meat among humans.

Animals live in human culture as pets, pests, entertainment, sport, food, clothing, wildlife, for medical research (and so on), their habits, desires and bodies displaced and re-shaped to feed those of humans. In this cultural and semiotic economy, Randy Malamud conceives of humans as habituated to over-writing authentic, natural animals with a script that amuses or benefits or otherwise satisfies our cultural cravings. An animal’s existence today – its appearances, its life, its relation to people – is heavily attenuated by the frames imposed upon it and the tableaux arranged inside these frames.  

Developed from Judith Butler’s theorising of framing and the construction, apprehension or recognition of moral others, these frames organise what is seen and how it is seen, privileging what is captured inside and defining human expectations of animal existence. Frames put an animal in its proper place by editing and de/recontextualising so that packaged chicken breasts in a supermarket, for example, are made visible as hygienic, inanimate products to which consumers are expected to (and indeed do) respond according to price and their dinner plans, rather than as part of a once whole living bird. Edited out of this particular frame is another frame which sees a chicken body as a feed conversion rate in the operation of industrial meat processing and global distribution systems. The chicken itself is discursively framed as meat product and property, and the living creature with its own interests and concerns is elided from discursive sight, a disappearance augmented by its actual concealment behind broilerhouse and processing plant walls. The general human failure to pay attention to the practical realities of industrialised animal life is condemned by Derrida as a disavowal or dissimulation of cruelty by humans on a global scale. It is in the interests of, for example, big meat producing and trading organisations to promote the ethical acceptability of particular uses of animals, and for consumers to sign up willingly to the belief that industrially farmed animals are well-treated so that animal products can be used without troubling the conscience or challenging historical norms. Sustaining practices which create animals as lucrative manufactured products therefore depends on maintaining frames that ensure consumers are not confronted with views which disturb what seems normal, natural or morally legitimate. This apparent taboo on the visibility of animal death, say The

---

Animal Studies Group in their introduction to *Killing Animals*, both conceals purposeful animal killing and demonstrates “an unease and a potential of public disgust that threatens the whole edifice of killing”⁶ In short, a significant mode of human engagement (or refusal of engagement) with animals, particularly in industrialised societies, is characterised by sublimated shame, by a refusal to know about the animal practices in which all consumers are implicated.

This chapter reads three recent novels and their particular perspectives on the concepts and constructions which make it possible for living animal bodies to become the fragmented, alienated and mediated products of human activity – items of use and exchange. It also considers the emotional complexity of human encounters with other vulnerable bodies when framed by human social and psychological desires and economic necessity, and the discourses which console through concealment of what may disturb. The chapter asks how the novels conceive of material animal bodies (including human bodies) as textual productions, to examine what emerge as narrative enquiries of the terms and conditions which structure the incorporation of animal flesh, skin and meat into twenty-first century Western society. Methodologically, flesh, skin and meat are considered separately: flesh as material body living, breathing, wounding and dying in the world; skin as separable from underlying tissue and bones, the locus of identity and an organ of interface between body and world; and meat as flayed flesh which is defined by its eatability. Aryn Kyle’s novel, *The God of Animals*, treats class and poverty as activating components in the nature of Western human relationships with animals, and discussion of flesh focuses on the exposure of the text’s living bodies to the psychodynamics of humans as they are subjected to social and economic pressures. A critical response to skin as biological organ and symbolic surface is evolved in a reading of Yann Martel’s *Beatrice and Virgil*; the novel’s use of taxidermy animals confronts contentious analogies between Jews under the Nazi regime and animals, while at a textual level it plays with animal representation in a discomfiting way. Mark McNay’s *Fresh* follows the path of chickens through a Scottish chicken processing plant, locating humans and meat in an environment of suffering and exploitation. Each novel demonstrates an interest in the potentiality of

---

meat, skin as surface and flesh as vulnerability, so the relating of each methodological category to one text only involves an artificial framing, but one which reflects an aspect of the ways humans encounter animals in human society – as fleshy bodies which can be cut up into something else.

**FLESH**

From Descartes onwards the notion of the Subject-Object divide has been a principle of modern Western philosophy, participating in a transformation of the view of the universe and nature from an animistic to a mechanistic condition. To Descartes, all living bodies, human and animal, are fashioned by God, with their internal workings set in motion by the arrangement of their parts in the manner of “a clock from the power, situation, and shape of its counterweights and wheels”.7 Beasts, lacking human language, and therefore reason and “rational soul”, are mindless bodies that are analogous with machines; their actions are the product of “nature which acts in them according to the disposition of their organs”, that is, their behaviour and reactions are ordained by their bodies, not their minds, so that their condition of life is invested in their flesh.8 In contrast, the rational soul of a human “cannot be derived in any way from the potentiality of matter”, that is, the human soul does not emerge from the material body and, being immortal, is essentially distinct from it; thus, that which makes us human is invested in a metaphysically delineated substance that is not brute matter.9 Flesh, for Descartes, is only the means by which the disembodied mind/reason/soul receives experiences and sensations and is carried about, and his thesis, dualism, locates the capacities and potential of humans in a mind or soul which, because it is immaterial, inhabits, in principle, an entirely different realm of existence to fleshy matter. Condemning lack of reason in animals as a void, in contrast to the human as ontologically full, Descartes renders them as *only* flesh with no means of meditating on their experiences and sensations. The animal, through the mystification of reason and the soul, has continued to live on the other side of an essential difference between humans and animals, its unresponsive body incapable of the speech, reason

and experience characteristic of the human. Although Descartes is in no way individually culpable for the instigation and continuing power of exceptionalist thinking and qualitative difference, an intractable Cartesian heritage continues to shape Western human encounters with animals.

Scornful that “all philosophers” – even if they disagree on a definition of the limit – presume that humans in general are separated from animals in general, Derrida argues that the apparent “theoretical and philosophical right, to distinguish and mark as opposite, namely, the set of the Animal in general, the Animal spoken of in the general singular”, presents philosophical right as common sense.¹⁰ “This agreement”, he says, “concerning philosophical sense and common sense that allows one to speak blithely of the Animal in the general singular is perhaps one of the greatest and most symptomatic asinanities of those who call themselves humans”.¹¹ As Derrida attacks assumptions of difference in kind made in philosophical language, he also contests unthinking continuism. To ignore the rupture between “‘we men,’ I, a human’”, and “what he calls the animal or animals”,

would mean first of all blinding oneself to so much contrary evidence: and, as far as my own modest case is concerned, it would mean forgetting all the signs that I have managed to give, tirelessly, of my attention to difference, to differences, to heterogeneities and abyssal ruptures as against the homogeneous and the continuous. I have thus never believed in some homogeneous continuity between what calls itself man and what he calls the animal.¹²

While the quality of the relationship between humans and animals continues to be thought in terms of the animot, an ethics based on anything other than dualist similarities of soul and its more recent inflections, or on continuist similarities of flesh, remains unthinkable. As Cary Wolfe asks, citing the mechanistic “wheels and springs” brought so forcefully to the fore in science fictions such as Blade Runner, why do androids not beg the question “about why there should be any necessary relation between the phenomenological and ethical issues that attend what we usually denote by the term ‘human’ and the particular physical mechanism of its realization”.¹³ If differences between humans and animals are a matter of degree – degrees of similarity

to “our flesh” – then, as Wolfe asks, “[h]ow much ‘of our flesh’ is flesh enough?”. The human remains the final measure of value in a calculation of qualities and biology which a nonhuman animal cannot equal simply because it is not human. In possession of human language, humans retain a “Cartesian hubris”, says Wolfe, in the linguistic distinctions which master descriptions of the world, and which allow billions of wild and domesticated animals to be defined as tradeable flesh.

**Horse Trading**

Human investments in animal flesh are many and complex, addressing a wide range of practical, economic, spiritual and emotional needs. Aryn Kyle’s 2007 novel *The God of Animals* stages, in austere prose, the entwinings and collisions of humans with other humans, humans with horses, and living beings with environment. A realist text, and the coming-of-age of a young girl and a young horse, it exposes the ways in which financial and symbolic economies structure the dynamic of a particular group of humans, implicit in which is the impact that money, shame and frustration have on the horses they keep. These horses are variously bought, sold, valuable, beaten, loved, intransigent, pets, equipment, wombs, advertising, barely seen, and broken, but never permitted to exist as independent beings. As the conflicts and preoccupations of humans are played out in the flesh of horses, the novel develops a structure of entanglements between control of horses and women, and of normalised cruelty in ordinary life.

The events of *The God of Animals* take place during the 1980s or 1990s in Desert Valley, Colorado (probably a fictional version of Grand Junction, Colorado), a town set in a landscape of scrubby desert and mountains. The inhabitants of the older side of town define themselves and their history in weather; the vernacular for their way of life is heat-waves, droughts, storms and plagues of mayflies. On the newer, wealthier side of town, where lawns are watered and air efficiently conditioned, the tenor of human experience is not shaped by weather and desert. Alice Winston, the specular autodiegetic narrative voice of her twelve-year-old self, occupies Desert Springs’ elemental, fly-blown demographic, the younger daughter of struggling horse-breeder Joe Winston. At the start of Alice’s story her older sister, Nona, has run away

---

with a rodeo cowboy, and her mother Marian, who went upstairs when Alice was a baby, has not since come down again. Living at their horse-yard and working in its barns and paddocks, Joe and Alice tend the brood-mares, foals and riding horses that constitute the family business. Joe advertises himself as a horse-breeder and gives riding lessons, but the yard’s stallion has died, and the beginning of the novel sees the arrival of only one client – Sheila Altman, a girl the same age as Alice but from the side of town where the grass is greener. Where shabby Alice is reserved, defensive, and tells lies, Sheila is appealing, clear-sighted and unstintingly kind and honest. Struggling to pay the bills, Joe boards the horses of wealthy women, bringing Patty Jo, her friends, and their pampered equine toys to the yard. Joe buys an eye-catching and expensive young mare named Darling Peaches N’ Cream in an attempt to attract new clients, but Darling refuses to live up to her name and the decline of Joe’s business is paralleled by his failure to control her.

Darling is an active and fully-fleshed character, but there are many other horses occupying the background of the human lives in the novel. Some are named and individualised, but, textually, most of the horses are passive plot-elements, ciphers populating scenarios which function to develop the text’s ethical and social concerns. In their story-world they are part of a system of production, the reactive recipients of an order imposed on them by their human owners – commercial horseflesh and fetishised objects of consumer desire. The conditions of their various kinds of lives are key to Alice’s awakening to the vulnerability of animals in a network of human social inequities, emotional conflicts, ideological commitments, and financial necessities. The suffering of the horses educates Alice by defamiliarising the normalised masculine violence characterising life in this version of the American West, and she realises the more empathetic possibilities this culture represses.

Winston Stables has many boundaries and limits to keep its horses in their proper place, all of which, as Alice’s story opens, are accepted as necessary, normal, ordinary, or are simply invisible to the habituated eye. Paddock fences, pens and walls clearly mark who may go where, and frame the functions of those inside them, or excluded from them. Ordinary, useful fences keep the stallion from the mares, ensure horses stay where they are put, keep them from straying onto dangerous roads. They operate as manifestations of human power, bring liminal zones into existence, describe
class pressures, announce in the outline of healthy flesh what is commercially viable, and hide what is not. The maintenance of these boundaries and frames, and the social and economic systems they are entangled in, depend on the terms of the human-animal divide while also making these terms highly visible; while the limits the humans in the story struggle with are metaphorical, social and psychological, and thus constituted in conceptual and non-concrete forms, the fences confining the horses are physical and designed to be insurmountable. In short, while humans may not live in the world of potentially unlimited choices they have been promised, they still have choices which they can expect other humans to respect; the horses do not.

In *Creaturely Poetics* Anat Pick makes two premises: (i) “the human-animal distinction is a site of contestation, anxiety, and ritual […], an area of sharp separation, a zone in which the upkeep of human integrity, as it were, exacts a devastatingly violent price on animals,” and (ii) “the human-animal distinction constitutes an arena in which relations of power operate in their exemplary purity (that is, operate with the fewest moral or material obstacles)”.16 She proposes to examine the ordinary relationships of humans and animals by paying “attention […] to the bodily and the embodied”, to the “material, temporal, and vulnerable” living body, whether human or animal.17 This can be achieved by “dehumanization”, a process conceptually similar to Shklovsky’s defamiliarisation – art’s making the common uncommon by way of an estranged eye – in which ideas about human subjects and animal objects are reshaped.18 It is the means of challenging “consolatory thinking”.19 Consolatory thinking provides an explanation (intellectual, psychological, philosophical or religious) that confirms the propriety of human treatment of animals, so that God, reason, language or superior intelligence as validating stamp become an obscuring discursive layer between humans and the realities of, and reasons for, their use of animals. It deflects any feelings of shame arising from awareness of the effects of what Derrida terms carnophallogocentric Western culture on the vulnerable flesh of animals. The effects of fences on the horses at Winston Stables can be charted in their

17 Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.5.
18 Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.6, p.195, n.3.
19 Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.11.
vulnerable flesh, as Alice learns that saying “it’s just business,” is an insufficiently consoling explanation for the violence that fences seem to endorse.\textsuperscript{20}

The concept of property, whether private, corporate or state, is powerfully encoded in Western thinking, politics and legislature. The limits of land property are marked by fences, signifying the entitlement of a human to confine animal property to it. Philosopher Christine Korsgaard summarises Kant’s thesis of a human sense of the right to claim parts of the world as an assumption of common possession which emerges from the “right to be where you are” – a right to control your own body and not to be killed or forced to move on, and a right to use the resources of where you are to support yourself. In other words, “we are thrown into the world, and having no choice but to live here, and to use the land and its resources in order to support and maintain ourselves, we claim that we have the right to do all of these things”.\textsuperscript{21} The claiming of things thus seems an unavoidable demand of bodily existence and need. But for Kant, continues Korsgaard, the claim of possession, the right to act on the right to be where you are, can be made only by a rational being in a moral and normative conceptualisation which excludes all beings considered non-rational from self possession and common possession. Contra Kant, Korsgaard observes that we are not the only beings thrown in to the world in this way, and maybe “the other animals should share our standing as among the rightful possessors of the earth”.\textsuperscript{22} In \textit{The God of Animals}, during the sale of a horse, Yellow Cap, Alice observes that “Mrs Altman handed my father a check and he handed her the registration papers. The horse never even left his pen”(p.20). This exchange of ownership is a transfer in the entitlement to use him and make decisions about where he lives, what he eats, what medical treatment he receives, who can ride him, who is responsible for any damage he may do, whether or not he may reproduce (although in Yellow Cap’s case this particular stable door is already irretrievably shut), make a profit on his onward sale or use by others, make legal claims against his loss or damage. Yellow Cap’s body is worth owning because it offers a leisure facility, and because the attractions of its form, colour and movement have both emotional and resale value. He is a transferable resource, a common

\textsuperscript{20} Aryn Kyle, \textit{The God of Animals}, (New York: Scribner, 2007), p.32. All subsequent references are to this edition, and will be incorporated in the text.


\textsuperscript{22} Korsgaard, ‘Kantian Ethics, Animals, and the Law’, p.647.
possession, which stands on and as someone else’s claim to a part of the world (that is, within the fences that make his pen). The possibility for Yellow Cap to have a prior claim to himself, his body and the land he stands upon – a seeming right for humans – is not conceived of. Yellow Cap’s feelings on the matter, while they may have been considered, make no difference to the principle that he is always already available to be sold, and the consequences for him of his tradeability may be minimal, or they may be enormous.

In principle, laws provide that an animal may be owned and killed while a human may not, and the non-criminal enslavement of, for example, Africans by Europeans and Americans, was validated by the animalisation of those slaves, but objecting to the treatment of animals by making equations between human slaves and animal property is a fraught business. Reading representations of the Holocaust, Anat Pick, echoing Elizabeth Costello’s Jewish critic, Abraham Stern, in J. M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals*,

encounters similar problems in ideas about humanity and inhumanity: the view is, “if the Jews died like cattle, cattle do not die like Jews. Comparing the fate of animals to that of Jews is considered ethically repugnant”. Cultural insecurity surrounding the comparison of humans to animals in slavery and the Holocaust thus generates a discussion about the unethical nature of making a comparison, rather than revealing a “drama of unequal power”; “A drama of force”, says Pick, “becomes a story about poorly understood concepts”. Jean Allain and Robin Hickey point out that human slavery still exists in the twenty-first century, as although “private law ownership of human beings is today a ‘legal impossibility’ […] it remains possible for the same kinds of control to pertain in respect of persons in ways which continue to be objectionable”. Here the normative category “person” equates to the “natural” category “human”, and awards to humans a libertarian ethic of self-ownership, instituting a property boundary over the extent of an individual’s own human body, a boundary which it is morally and legally wrong to breach with

---

23 Abraham writes a note to Elizabeth Costello objecting to an aspect of a lecture she has given, saying, “You took over for your own purposes the familiar comparison between the murdered Jews of Europe and slaughtered cattle. The Jews died like cattle, therefore cattle die like Jews, you say. That is a trick with words which I will not accept.” J. M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), p.49.
25 Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.43.
force. The objectionability of withdrawal by force of any consideration of consent or refusal about what happens to a human’s own body by slavers or Nazis within their respective frameworks of justice, and the legal non-objectability of the force applied to animal bodies to own and kill them demonstrates that humans in principle imagine and enshrine a legal property boundary over their own individual bodies and that of animals, while animals have no legal property in their own individual bodies or the body of anyone else. Property, then, as concept and practice, is a key animating principle in relationships and distinctions between humans and animals, and objectionability a quality of that principle.

Gary Francione argues that the USA’s current property laws, which couple the person and individual bodily property, should no longer pertain to animals. These laws assume that humans are capable of having rights, while animals have only a diminished moral consensus right not to be subjected to “unnecessary” pain, or “unjustified” killing. In a preferential system which validates animals as property for humans to control, the inhuman treatment of animal property is not necessarily the greater evil than, for example, depriving someone of animal property held as a right by theft of it.\(^\text{27}\) It is a framework of necessity and justifiability which circumscribes animal welfare and reduces animals to the status of property – objects in the same subject-object relations with humans, says Francione, as a chair. Laws and the relationships they inscribe are developed in language, argument and precedent, so when Allain and Hickey assert that ownership is concerned with control and objects of control, and define the ordinary objects of property rights as “bikes, cars, horses, coats”, Francione seems entirely justified in accusing the law and tandem cultural assumptions of linguistically constructing horses as having the same object-status as commodities and machines – bikes, cars and coats.\(^\text{28}\) Jerrold Tannenbaum, however, argues that the law pertaining to animals, in the USA at least, is conceptually “not hopelessly manipulative and heartless”, but “sensible and serviceable”.\(^\text{29}\) Activists such as Francione, he says, take the popular view of legal property as “something that belongs to one, something the use or destiny of which one has the sole right to determine”, a framework derived


\(^{28}\) Allain and Hickey, ‘Property and the Definition of Slavery’, p.929.

from John Locke’s theory of property, and William Blackstone’s list in *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765) of “movable chattels” (which included animals) over which owners have “despotic dominion”. Using this concept Francione et al can then choose to interpret property as referring to inanimate objects, and thus argue that the law should no longer class animate animals as property because it problematically divests them of individual interests.

Tannenbaum disputes that Blackstonian “despotic dominion” underpins common law, or that defining an animal as property means it is therefore inanimate. Modern Anglo-American property law, he says, instead derives from post-Conquest English laws relating to litigation over rights to possess cattle (a term which included oxen, cows, sheep, goats, horses and chickens); cattle were essential to human survival and therefore considered as “a seminal kind of personal property”. Constraints applied by governments ensure that no individual has sole dominion to possess, use or transfer any property, and the concept of property rather confers “priority of certain kinds of rights of possession or use”, so that “the legal concept of property signifies relationships not just between an owner and his or her property but between an owner and other people”. Thus, one can be prosecuted for cruelty to one’s own animals – those that one supposedly has absolute dominion over. Overall, says Tannenbaum, animals should remain property because that is the most appropriate way to protect them; it is people who are at fault if they are cruel to animals, not property law, and cruelty is “what society in general would consider unnecessary or unjustifiable infliction of pain on animals”.

Cary Wolfe might throw up his hands in frustration at a thesis that proposes all the nonhuman stuff of the world as within the protection of human property law, and then washes its hands of the practical results of its view by claiming responsibility only for the principle. He criticises animal trainer Vicki Hearne’s conclusion that the only way to protect the rights of her dog, who cannot speak to or of the state so that the state cannot be his state, is through an appeal to property rights in him. Surely, he says, this is simply a wish that all owners will be good owners, and

---

If they are not – if an owner decides to set his dog on fire, instead of a chair or table, its equivalent under the law (as property) – doesn’t this beg the question that the whole point of granting rights to the animal would be to directly recognize and protect it […] against such an owner who decides to forget or abrogate, for whatever reason, what ‘ownership’ means?34

As Tannenbaum has pointed out, Wolfe is wrong that a chair is equivalent to a dog in law since there is a considerable body of legislation which recognises that animals are living beings and regulates their treatment with concern for their welfare, while there is no such concern for the welfare of a chair. They are both property, but property which requires substantially different responsibilities from their owners. In this sense there is some inclusion of animals in human “moral community”, albeit as moral patients rather than persons. However, although Tannenbaum argues that education and tighter regulation of property laws are the best ways to ensure animals are treated fairly, this does not address Wolfe’s most telling point – that there still remains a broad range of property rights in which human interests can always be made to drop the balance against those of animals. They are always actual or potential possessions living at the dispensation of individual, corporation or state. The fundamental difficulty to be wrestled with is that the legal ownership of dogs, horses or herds of cows is but the manifestation of a wider sense of entitlement for humans to breed industrial meat, kill pests, or destroy habitats as wished, as the fulfilment of immediate need for earlier human societies has grown into the technologically facilitated power for humans to intervene into the lives of domestic and wild animals in, as Derrida says, transformative ways and in a subjection of “unprecedented proportions”.35

One’s wish, of course, will be that Yellow Cap has a good owner, and that, although he will be sat upon, he will be treated with more concern for his welfare than that accorded to the foregoing insensate chair, which endures no suffering on its own account if set on fire. Luckily for him he is Sheila Altman’s dream horse; his golden coat, refined bone structure and graceful gait have been carefully selected for by humans across the centuries so that he now has a hair-tossing glamour which appeals to girls brought up on My Friend Flicka, Black Beauty, The Silver Brumby, the Jill series, and a vast range of other “girls”’ books which idealise horses as (sanitised)

34 Wolfe, Animal Rites, p.49-50.
35 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.25.
objects of adoration. Winston Stables as a business depends on idealised horses to attract clients seeking the experiences enjoyed by their fictional idols, but in The God of Animals the realities of horse breeding and training, and the lives of horses in the human world in general, are very different to the ideal. Joe Winston could be considered the eponymous God of animals, exercising a degree of control over his horses which his inexperienced clients find exceptional enough to make him metaphorically and hyperbolically “a bona fide fucking god!” (p.109); but his relationships with his horses are complex and uneven, characterised by contradictory acts of brutality and compassion which emerge from a conflicted internal life of shame, ego and frustration in constant exchange with his external world of ecological, financial, social and sexual pressures. Maybe in these terms all humans are Kantian gods – and not necessarily kind ones – holding animals in common possession and thus implicated in what Joe does.

Horseflesh

Alice’s undecorated and unromantic narrative style reflects the hard necessities and unvarnished realities of her life. What changes for her is the justification for that reality and the names it can be given. Horse-breeding is, apparently, a tough business for humans and horses, requiring an unsentimental perspective, although not necessarily one lacking in compassion. The stallion, Bart, when alive, “had been little more than a piece of equipment” (p.30), a body carrying a “money-organ” (p.140) and its capital stream of sperm. His body and its valuable breeding lineage served to advertise the quality of the horseflesh he could reproduce, and he as a living animal was subordinate to his semiology and the real substance of exchange, his semen. The broodmares are, likewise, “functional, they had a purpose, a job that they performed year after year” (pp.33-4), as horseflesh reproduction mechanisms with little individual materialisation. For Joe, sentimentalising his breeding stock would limit his ability to make money from them, and his ability to make money is closely tied to his reputation among his male peers.

36 It is notable that many of these fictions do insist on the cruelty and hard facts of horses’ lives, whether in the wild or at the hands of humans, and lumping them together in a list is not an assumption that they are equally either thoughtful or unthinking, mawkish or pragmatic, or ideologically limited with regard to gender, class or race. They all, nevertheless, emphasise equine physical beauty as part of character, plot and aesthetic construction, and romanticise the nature of the relationships possible between humans and horses by valuing horse compliance while masking it in a proposal of independent ‘spirit’.
Driven by business imperatives and masculine attitudes to horse-rearing inherited from the old American West, Joe weans his foals from their mothers by abruptly and permanently separating them. Traumatised, the foals ram “their chests into the fence […] crying out in thin, anguished whinnies, slicing the air with their pain”(p.146), while the mares, their “udder swelled under the weight of their unnursed milk, cracking and bleeding […] surrendered to the pain, lying down on the dried grass, giving themselves over to agony and grief”(p.146). According to Joe’s father Jack, this is the only way to wean the foals – to attempt to ameliorate their suffering is only to prolong it – “It’s kindest just to let them suffer”(p.147) – and because they cannot be trained while with their mother, commercial good sense dictates the termination of their tranquil infancy. Feminist critic Greta Gaard says that “we understand the frenzy of a human mother separated from her new infant, yet our understanding and empathy seems to halt at the species boundary”, and although the women and children at the yard are distressed by the horses’ suffering, they acquiesce to Joe and Jack’s superior knowledge of horse management and the implicit assertion that any comparisons between human and horse maternity is sentimental and anthropomorphic.37 Nevertheless, there is a lingering sense that, while the men’s arguments of justifiable necessity seem rational and female concerns thus irrational, Jack’s definition of “kindest” actually means “most expedient” in its prioritisation of utility for humans over the powerfully felt preferences of the horses.

Simple, inanimate fences, ordinary features of the landscape, emerge as instruments of ordinary, unexceptionable animal suffering, and as wasted milk trickles from the mares’ bodies their leaky, hysterical and acceding flesh juxtaposed with the solid integrity of the fences is reminiscent of Hélène Cixous’ summary list of dual, hierarchical oppositions in ‘Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays’.38 The oppositions of Culture/Nature, Head/Heart, Father/Mother, Master/Slave describe a phallogocentric rendering of the female human as the weaker, non-autonomous, irrational, more animal side of a formulation that insists on being binary. Women are “open”, and “for men this permeability, this nonexclusion is a threat”, indicating a

---

37 Greta Gaard, ‘Reproductive Technology, or Reproductive Justice: an Ecofeminist, Environmental Justice Perspective on the Rhetoric of Choice’, Ethics & The Environment, 15.2 (Fall, 2010), 103-129, (p.121).

being possessed, a dispossessing of the self, a passivity.\textsuperscript{39} In Cixous’ terms the fences of \textit{The God of Animals} manifest masculinity, a “plus-value of virility, authority, power, money, or pleasure”, by decreeing feminised animal bodies to be un-self-possessed and thus legitimating their external possession and control,\textsuperscript{40} but also condemning the male builder of the fence to “proving something” to others in a culture of “phallocentric narcissism”.\textsuperscript{41} In other words, once Joe Winston has staked out his territory in posts and rails he has also staked out his reputation as a horseman among other horsemen, a reputation measured in compliant horses and a thriving business, and one damaged by defiant mares and errant daughters.

Before Nona’s elopement her filmstar looks, easy manner, and impeccable horsewomanship were part of Joe’s advertising strategy. At horse shows she would let little girls from the stands sit on her horse. While she showed them how to hold the reins […] she would aim her voice at their parents and say, ‘You’re a natural!’ Then she would flash her smile at the mother and say, ‘My daddy gives lessons. You all should come out sometime’ (p.5).

Unlike introverted Alice, Nona was “good for business”(p.5), but her sudden and inexplicable departure with her cowboy marks Joe as having “done something wrong”(p.69) in his raising of her, and his inability to control his teenage daughter draws local comment. Maybe his failure to control his daughter’s weak accession to her sexuality, allowing her to pass into the control of another male, casts doubt on his natural male authority. “‘Think about the mother,’ they whispered”(p.69), alluding to Marian Winston’s permanent retreat to her bedroom: maybe such wilful behaviour is indicative of something awry in the breeding. Implicit in such mutterings is a conflation of horses and women, that, when convenient for it to be so, there are essential features common to females that cross species lines.

The permeable bodies of the mares, bodies opened by a human requirement for absolute access to fertility control and which “write” of reproductive oppression in trickles of “white ink”, are not human, and the inclusion of animals in feminist work appears not to be a consensus field.\textsuperscript{42} In Stacy Alaimo’s opinion in \textit{Bodily Natures},

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Cixous, ‘Sorties’, p.105.
  \item It should be noted that stallions are also owned, confined and controlled, but the commercial and symbolic reasons are of a different tenor. These are discussed later.
  \item Cixous, ‘Sorties’, p.107.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
“most feminist theory has worked to disentangle woman from nature” – to disentangle human discursive gender structures from animal biological sex.43 Cixous’ formula speaks of women, not mares, and to apply to horses a challenge to the animalisation of women might be considered an objectionable comparison of the same nature as that between slaves or Jews and animals, in its suggestion that there are similarities of condition and experience. If such similarities are perceived then perhaps they will undo feminist objections to essentialist evolutionary or sociobiological explanations for sexual inequality, and risk a heteronormative cross-species feminist community based on reproduction. Carrie Rohman comments that Susan Gubar has objected strongly to the inclusion of animals in a feminist framework of “victimisation”, surmising that perhaps Gubar perceived it as a “threat […] to the political position she felt she had staked out for women, for a particular set of feminist claims”, or associated it with a poststructuralist “boys’ club” of high theory in work on animals by thinkers such as Derrida, Wolfe and Agamben.44 Nevertheless, Cixous’ project to dismantle ontological dualism underpins critique by feminist theorists such as Lori Gruen, who sees a conceptual link between the ‘logic of domination’ that operates to reinforce sexism, racism, and heterosexism and the logic that supports the oppression of nonhuman animals and the more than human world more generally, a link that translates into individual and institutional practices that are harmful to women, people of color, nonnormative humans, as well as other animals and the planet.45

The “logic of domination” and a culture of “phallocentric narcissism” inscribe not just the relations between men, and men and women, in The God of Animals but between man and horse, and woman and horse. Joe Winston’s breaking of Darling and his parenting of Alice – a patchwork of love and confused anger – signifies his hybridising attitude to the proper place of females in general – horse or human – and its social origins, and makes his social emasculation possible.

In the world of equitation “breaking” describes the process of training a horse to wear saddle and bridle (or other harnesses) and follow the instructions of a human

rider or driver, and as “breaking” and “training” are thus synonymous the latter more modern term somewhat obfuscates the connotations of the former more traditional description. Darling, bought as an unbroken young animal and chosen for the attractions of a beautiful body and spirited disposition, quickly proves that “spirit”, when challenged, can look more like wilfulness and intractability. “Exhaustion”, says Alice, “was the key ingredient to breaking young horses, driving them into the ground until they were drenched with sweat and so bone-tired that they wouldn’t even notice the additional weight of a saddle on their backs, the additional weight of a person”(p.83). Exhaustion, however, does not break Darling’s resistance to human control, and she refuses to consent to either a saddle or a rider on her back. Joe attempts ‘Plan B’:

During the hottest part of the day, he would lead her into the empty arena and hold her tight as he cinched the saddle around her. Then he tied one rein to the side of the saddle so that her head wrenched sideways and her body curved into a C. At this angle, she couldn’t buck, couldn’t roll, couldn’t take a step forward. She was frozen in the center of the ring, stationary, powerless […]. Even from a distance, it was clear that she was not submitting to the heat. She was merely enduring it (p.94).

The daily repetition of Joe’s efforts to bend his large financial investment to his will, which he consolingly frames as a necessary process in making a large, dangerous animal safe, is better named as cruelty. Alice allows herself to be consoled by the normality of this treatment until Joe decides to shut Darling in a field day after day with the broodmares. Her daily removal and reintroduction arouses their natural hostility to a stranger and they kick and bite her mercilessly. Joe legitimates his deliberate setting of horse against horse by calling it “just nature”(p.172), but Alice experiences a defamiliarising shift of perspective on the normality she previously understood as circumstantially acceptable when Sheila condemns Joe’s actions as “sinful”(p.174). She is no longer consoled by or reconciled to normal practices of horse management, for normality has been reframed as objectionable.

In his continuing attempts to quell Darling’s resistance Joe decides to put her in foal; he hopes that, physically weighed down with a burden of flesh in the shape of a foal and awash with maternal feelings, she will become more feminine and biddable. Mindful of Darling’s general spirit of noncompliance Joe ties her hind feet together to prevent her kicking the stallion to whom she is taken, but, watched by Joe, the stallion’s owner, Bud Pope, and an assortment of other interested parties, she breaks
the hobble and cripples her equine lover/assailant. Darling’s successful rebellion aside, owners watching their horses copulate is an everyday scenario, and preventing “receptive” but “coy” mares from damaging valuable stallions is a standard practice. The ordinariness and normalness of subduing a horse in the pursuit of human interests seems to place objections to such standard animal breeding practices on the lunatic fringe, but replace “coy” with “unwilling” or “non-consenting” and a mare becomes imaginable as more than a breeding body: she becomes visible as an individual with interests she is prepared to defend. Alice insists that Darling “never would have kicked if they hadn’t tied her legs” (p. 144), and it is implicit that if Darling’s consent is not sought then, finding such a failure to consider her wishes objectionable, she withdraws her willingness to consent. Latent in this event is that the men who tie her feet and gather to watch her forced copulation seem to be colluding in her rape.

Anthrozoologist Samantha Hurn, referring to a case study at a stud in Wales, has no doubt that a Welsh Cob brood mare who is habitually sedated and twitched at matings because “she objects so strongly to the process”, is subjected to rape at the behest of her owner. Hurn observes that although the owner attributes some degree of sentience and agency to his mare by describing her as a bitch, this is only “relative to his ability to control the situation and, in particular to control her fertility for his own ends – a culturally accepted human privilege”. Rape is an emotive word, and its use to describe anything other than a forceful penetrative sexual act by a man on a non-consenting woman or man might be considered objectionable, especially if applied to nonhuman animals. Cultural anthropologist Craig Palmer agrees (or maybe concedes) that rape in nonhumans might have unacceptable implications for human rape by opening the door to “naturalising” evolutionary or sociobiological

---

46 Attributing the term “coy” to a horse may or may not be anthropomorphic, but it at least implies a “no means yes” assumption about the behaviour of mares which further implies that in horsebreeding the discourses of human females and horse females are coupled in a Derridean phallogocentric language.

47 Twitching refers to the practice of twisting the lip of a horse either with rope, hands or wood and metal twitches in order to control it. The initial force is undoubtedly painful and holds a horse still; the pain, so the argument goes, then triggers the release of endorphins which tranquilise the horse.

48 Hurn, ‘What’s love got to do with it? The interplay of sex and gender in the commercial breeding of Welsh Cobs’, Society and Animals, 16.1 (March 2008), 23-44 (p. 29).

49 Hurn, ‘What’s love got to do with it?’, p. 29.

50 Craig Palmer and his regular co-author Randy Thornhill created a stir in academic and particularly feminist circles with their 2001 book A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion. They were criticised for attributing rape to evolutionary biological causes, for misreading Susan Brownmiller’s influential Against Our Will, and for bad science.
explanations and justifications. But he also argues that rape defined as “copulation involving […] the individual’s resistance to the best of his/her ability”, can encompass many examples of non-consent among nonhuman animals, including “passive nonconsent”, and takes account of how females of many species actively choose a mate while deliberately withdrawing consent to the attentions of others. Describing a nonhuman animal act as rape, then, seems possible, as does a sexual act by a human on a nonhuman animal, but the idea of consent remains complex and difficult to qualify with any certainty. Catherine MacKinnon, speaking of human rape, argues that focusing on nonconsent may produce unsatisfactory definitions. She debates legal definitions of rape, saying that they commonly emphasize either compulsion or lack of agreement […]. Yet conceptually speaking, emphasis on nonconsent as definitive of rape sees the crime fundamentally as a deprivation of sexual freedom, a denial of individual self-acting. Emphasis on coercion as definitive, on the other hand, sees rape fundamentally as a crime of inequality”.

Definitions of rape among humans are in constant legal and social flux and, in MacKinnon’s terms, demonstrate a tendency to conceptualise in a polarising manner, but debates surrounding sexual abuse of animals occupy very different spaces; if sexual abuse is directly perpetrated by humans on animals it is policed by bestiality taboos (as disgusting rather than traumatising and violent), and if by animals on other animals is the object of scientific study (or human prurience). That either Darling or Hurn’s Welsh Cob may have been deprived of their sexual freedom is difficult to argue for, for the idea that a nonhuman animal could enjoy sexual freedom might invoke social conditions that pertain only to humans. There is considerably more force to describing them as coerced under conditions of inequality; however, introducing inequality as a contributing factor is to invoke an obvious assumption of hierarchy which is so ubiquitous in human-animal relations that it illuminates little with which to pin down the specifics of Darling’s situation. It seems that drawing parallels between human and various kinds of nonhuman forced copulation by subsuming them under a single term is to obliterate the many different contexts and qualities conditioning any violent sexual and/or reproductive activity, whether against

52 Palmer, ‘Rape in Nonhuman Animal Species’, p.358.
individuals or encompassing entire categories of animate beings. Language begins to
struggle when asked to carry the burden of such reconceptualisations of normalised
and ordinary human activity, and as Pick says, becomes an argument about words,
instead of the act itself.

In Against Our Will, Susan Brownmiller argues that “[a]ll rape is an exercise
in power,” and “a hostile, degrading act of violence” – genitals as “man’s basic weapon
of force against woman”.54 This does not, in literal terms, describe either Darling’s
situation or that of Hurn’s unwilling Welsh Cob mare. Although the exercise of power
enables the assault on Darling, and the hobbles which limit her self-defence are a
repressive violence, had the stallion successfully completed his task he would not have
been her rapist, never having been more than the hapless and ignorant instrument of
others, the vehicle for a displaced violence. His reproductive lust is employed by others
to perform an economic and ideological function far beyond his understanding and
influence, rather than the political and sociological act of hostility which Brownmiller
describes. There is, however, a powerful symbolic imperative conditioning the relative
standings of the horses and the men, for when the stallion receives the physical wound
from Darling’s kick in his “money-organ”(p.140), Joe and Bud Pope receive a
symbolic wound in their metaphorical money-organs. Joe and Bud are pragmatic men
who settle the incapacitating injury to the stallion and the ensuing weeks of lost stud
fees via financial recompense, a transaction which compensates the possessors of
property rather than the wounded property himself, and one which only papers over
the cracks of the wounds inflicted on their masculinities. In Bodies that Matter Judith
Butler describes mater and matrix (womb) as etymologically associating the feminine
with matter and its generation, so that “women are said to contribute the matter; men,
the form” to the potentiality of matter.55 This is certainly part of the traditional
structure of horsebreeding, which is allied to the folkloric idea that confirmation
(desired breed characteristics of body and abilities) and individual characteristics are

54 Susan Brownmiller, Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books
which women moved freely without fear of men. That some men rape provides a sufficient threat to
keep all women in a constant state of intimidation, forever conscious of the knowledge that the
biological tool must be held in awe for it may turn to weapon with sudden swiftness borne of harmful
intent […]. Rather than society’s aberrants or ‘spoilers of purity,’ men who commit rape have served
in effect as front-line masculine shock troops, terrorist guerrillas in the longest sustained battle the
world has ever known.”(p.209)

passed down the male line. A stallion thus has considerably more symbolic and economic value than a mare, for she seems to provide only the rude matter for him to refine. Bud Pope’s reputation as a horsebreeder benefits from his association with the potency of his horse and his ownership of its fertility and patrilineal descent, while Joe, who derives a reputational halo of impotence from his dead stallion, has only a mare who thwarts his masculine human privilege to control her fertility and who would, in any case, do little to enhance his standing relative to a patrilineal system. His inability to impose his male will through second-order violence on what refuses to be compliant female flesh is an emasculating humiliation of far greater extent than the temporary threat to Bud’s horse’s male potency (and consequently Bud’s masculine reputation) and the injury to his wallet.

If Darling’s failed mating is to be thought of as a failed rape then it is a failed analogical rape – analogy rather than actuality, for human language seems to lack a conceptual vocabulary for the nuanced complexity of such species interaction and difference. If such an event is to be spoken of outside its conventional definition of ordinary and normal expediency, language users find themselves resorting to identifying points of similarity that, while drawing attention to the inherent violence, obscure important differences and invite criticisms of invidious comparison. Concepts and practices overlap without coinciding across all terms, and terminological parity would, in any case, be difficult to achieve when rape perpetrated by humans on other humans has no stable definition. Darling’s case, although a fairly common one, cannot be instituted as indicative of a generality in domesticated animal matings; however, the prevalence of, for example, artificial insemination when humans breed animals for economic purposes, demonstrates how little thought is given to the willingness of any of the animals involved. Normalised human practices with regard to industrialised and commodified animal breeding are not properly described as rape, for this requires a balancing of one form of violence against another. This particular form of large-scale, industrialised violence is horrific on its own terms, but because of its “disavowal” and dissimulation is apparently explicable only through analogical not-quite-explicating reference to human experiences of suffering.56

---

In *The God of Animals* Joe’s treatment of Darling is considered to be just about acceptable by his peers, if indicative of his desperation, but men such as Bud Pope mock him for the “Kill” horses he keeps in a back paddock. The Kills are mutilated and ailing horses who are “damaged beyond repair”, and destined to be auctioned by the pound as “good for nothing but rendering plants and schoolroom glue” (p.34). Joe buys them to heal their traumatised minds and bodies and give them a good life, apparently hoping to atone for the crimes of others:

Chief had been dragged behind a moving truck until his hooves were ground to stubs and had to be bandaged, cared for, regrown like endangered plants. Charlie had been starved to the point of madness, then left in the desert to die alone. Old Ace had been beaten with a hammer, his skull misshaped, his hindquarters stooped (p.35).

Alice believes all these cruelties to have been perpetrated by strangers, anonymous bad people, but Nona reveals that Ace was beaten in a momentary loss of temper by her “good” (p.255) grandfather: “Jack, his square, freckled hands. A hammer, smooth and heavy. Ace, young and still perfect, cowering beneath the blows, hooves scraping concrete, blood and hair, the deep, wet noises of flesh giving itself over. Bones breaking” (p.253). There are not good or bad people, Nona tells Alice, there are “regular people. Just like you and me and everyone else” (p.255). Cruelty is not elsewhere, it is ordinary and quotidian and omnipresent, and even while Joe attempts to ameliorate his shame by atoning for his father’s crime, he is still surrounded by and participates in an environment of mundane cruelty, its callousness concealed by its frame of normality – a discourse of necessary masculinity in a tough environment.

Alice is not alone in finding the claim to the necessity for masculine toughness in American West-style horsebreeding unacceptable. Alice’s mother Marian retreated to her bedroom twelve years previously, apparently exhausted by the effort required to accept the dominant consolations for the annual round of equine pregnancies, weanings, geldings, confinements and breaking. The toll exacted from the propertied flesh of horses by their human owners inflicts on her a sense of responsibility for their everyday suffering which she finds unbearable. That her husband “truly loved” (p.305) his horses and also consents to crushing their vitality, wounding them and beating them, is a version of normality so unacceptable that she abdicates from it, removing her conflicted psyche to the safety of spectator, a “tissue paper” (p.121) woman at the bedroom window. Alice’s rendering of her own world, initially a facsimile of her
father’s story of it on which she spectates unquestioningly through a metaphorical window of childhood innocence, becomes increasingly less spectatorial as she reaches early pubescence. She steps from childhood into an adult world of responsibilities, limits and compromise when, angrily frustrated with his daughter during an argument, her father accidentally hits a colt. The colt, caught in the crossfire of human conflicts, falls, breaks a leg, and is immediately shot. Alice, in hindsight, concludes that “[m]y father struck the blow. Jerry fired the gun. But I alone killed him. And a life, whole and perfect, ended before my eyes” (p. 297). The colt is not the only victim of Alice’s petulant teenage defiance for Darling, shut in a paddock with the colt’s dead body, is finally broken:

She had spent the night breathing the scents of his blood and fear, the sticky-sweet panic rising like steam in the cold air as he tried to lift himself. She had heard bone snap and flesh tear, the frantic tinny screams that wrenched from his wide-open mouth. And she had seen us walk away, leaving his broken body to the night, the cold, the deep, unknowable silence of the earth disappearing beneath the snow. By the time I went for her, her eyes were empty, her breath slow. I reached for the reins and she turned to follow me, passive, obedient, a perfect pet (pp. 298-99).

Acknowledging the inability of regret to restore what has been destroyed, Alice nevertheless bitterly regrets that where “Darling had once loved to run, that she had once been unbreakable” (p. 298), she is now broken by the power of her human possessors to do as they wish, to kill and abandon the vulnerable flesh of their possessions, and deny an interest for a nonhuman animal in the self-possession of its own body and intentions.

The scenarios assembled by The God of Animals pay attention to the damage humans inflict on each other in a social structure secured by the control and circulation of fleshy bodies, and although humans, particularly women, suffer in this system, it is overwhelmingly on the horses that the violence falls. The Cartesian distinction between human mind and animal flesh and the different attitudes, and outcomes it engenders for either side, is realised at the end of The God of Animals as Alice leaves Desert Springs for the freedoms of intellectual life at college, and Darling’s now safely domesticated, pliable and spiritless body is sold to a young family. Darling, when compared to Alice’s ordinary teenage character flaws, looks like a feminist hero as she boldly refuses to surrender her body to masculine human control, but she does not
receive the fair rewards of a hero; in such a relentlessly unromantic novel her final subjugation replicates the lot of horses in the real world. She is always already a fleshy body in common possession, available to be transferred, manipulated or used to produce more animal commodity. The forceful neutralisation of her insistence on her own interests produces her as a marketable object displaying no independence of mind or identity; humans have sought to remake her in the form of a Cartesian animal – spiritless flesh – and succeeded. Darling, like all other domesticated animals, must express the attributes suitable to the position decided for her in advance by humans, in an epistemology which encodes an a fortiori assumption of human natural possession of animal bodies and the ground upon which they stand. Relationships between humans and animals are produced and constrained by perceptual frameworks around property, gender and cruelty, shaping the names by which animal bodies and their uses are known and the normality of their treatment.

SKIN

Animal bodies materialise in human culture in curious forms, and in ways that evade ethical closure. The animals of Yann Martel’s 2010 novel *Beatrice and Virgil* express the conditions of just such an evasion, the stories of their taxidermy bodies representing aesthetically intriguing manifestations of life that are also disturbingly dead. At the same time, the novel’s animal characters, a donkey called Beatrice, and Virgil, a howler monkey, confront the terms of the human-animal divide in the most painful and provocative ways by dramatising discursive conjunctions between the industrialised mass killing of Jews by the Nazis and the industrialised mass killing of animals. *Beatrice and Virgil* is not about the Holocaust itself, instead addressing how stories are made possible or excluded by representational forms, but any writing that invokes the Holocaust, explicitly or otherwise, inhabits a fraught domain of representational propriety. Adorno’s observation that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”, often treated as an aphorism containing an implicit assertion that art and pain occupy entirely different realms, has come to be a precept for writing about the Holocaust. 57 *Beatrice and Virgil* rejects the boundaries imposed on representation by

interpretations of Adorno’s phrase, and conducts a critical enquiry into the aesthetic form and concerns of what can be described as an art of pain.

**Holocaust Narrative**

Fiction about the Holocaust tends to generate debate, and *Beatrice and Virgil* is no exception; indeed, it has been the target of particular animus for installing stuffed animals in the place of Jews. Beatrice and Virgil’s eviscerated bodies and re-formed skins engender a complex and discomfiting symbology which is at odds with more conventional expectations of appropriately respectful Holocaust representation. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel argues that “between our memory and its reflection there stands a wall that cannot be pierced”.58 “Others will never know” what Auschwitz was, he says.59 Of Wiesel, Primo Levi, Charlotte Delbo and Jorge Semprun – all Holocaust survivors – Robert Eaglestone says, “[t]hese writers and survivors, and many others, believe that it is not possible for those who did not survive to understand, in a truthful way, the events of the Holocaust. Language is not enough”, for words are only a description of pain, not the experience of it.60 For many, because the Holocaust caused suffering unimaginable to anyone who has not been a survivor of genocide, only survivors can identity appropriate Holocaust words, and survivor testimony is the only appropriate medium for these words. This view excludes fictional representations, but few Holocaust survivors have written of their experiences, and according to writers such as Martel there is more to say, think and feel; however extraordinary the Holocaust was, it cannot be extracted from the historical entanglements from which the rest of the human world emerges. Reviewers saw *Beatrice and Virgil* as disrespectful of human suffering, and it further failed to engage by being unlikeable, for the novel does not set out to entertain with “idle chatter”, but to pay serious attention to the language and memory of suffering by refusing to make the pleasure of a reader the object of a Holocaust representation.61 The novel uses taxidermy animals to analogise and critique what it treats as the limitations of a Holocaust discourse constructed only from historical narratives and survivor

61 Adorno, *Prisms*, p.34.
testimonies, but the multiple fictional expressions of these animals – material, imaginative, allegorical, symbolic – produce them as far more than a conceit with which to theorise formal narrative method.

Any juxtaposition of Jews and animals raises the spectre of the final journeys of the Jews in cattle trucks, their treatment in Nazi concentration camps, and their efficient despatch in death camps. Primo Levi, author of the canonical Holocaust narrative, *If This is a Man*, writes of the way he and Jewish prisoners in general in Auschwitz were perceived by non-Jewish “civilian” prisoners:

> they see us reduced to ignoble slavery, without hair, without honour and without names, beaten every day, more abject every day […]. They know us as thieves and untrustworthy, muddy, ragged and starving, and mistaking the effect for the cause, they judge us worthy of our abasement.  

Each of the Jewish prisoners, Levi says, was engaged in an “individual struggle against death”, lacking what are thought of as the distinctly human, civilised qualities of self-sacrifice, dignity, heroism or hope, and abandoned to normal standards of acceptable behaviour, for “in the face of driving necessity and physical disabilities many social habits and instincts are reduced to silence”. By depriving the Jews of citizenship, culture, and the ability to maintain ordinary dispositions to cleanliness or compassion, and by keeping them always exhausted, cold and desperately hungry, the Nazi administration dehumanised them. By insisting on conditions of animality in the camps the Nazis made the Jews into “filthy” and “bestial” creatures. In 2004 PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), taking up the transportation of Jews in cattle trucks to their industrialised slaughter as analogous to the transport and slaughter of cattle, opened a controversial exhibition, ‘The Holocaust on Your Plate’, featuring photographs of humans in Nazi concentration camps and animals in factory farms. The exhibition was inspired, said PETA, by a passage from ‘The Letter-Writer’, a short story by Jewish Nobel prize-winner Isaac Bashevis Singer in which he described life for animals as “an eternal Treblinka”. Although the exhibition was designed and supported by Jews, the initial and continuing response of many to it is that it is objectionable in its equation by juxtaposition of the pain and experiences of Jews in the Holocaust with those of industrially farmed animals. Such a comparison of the

---

63 Levi, *If this is a man*, p.116, p.93.
64 Amanda Schinke, ‘PETA Germany’s display banned’, *PETA*, [online] (March 27 2009)  
suffering of animals with that of Jews is treated as monumentally offensive because of its implicit equation of animality, which thus seems to endorse the Nazis’ treatment of the Jews as subhuman.65

David Sztybel details thirty nine points which prove that such a comparison can be made; although this does not imply that it is legitimate to equate, he says, it is valid to compare. There are important differences, and there are “prominent similarities”.66 The thread that joins Sztybel’s points of comparison together is articulated by Cary Wolfe as the way locations on a discursive “species grid” define animality and “noncriminal” killing. Species significations and the ideological fictions which legitimate them are arranged by the law of culture as follows: the category of animalised animals contains objectified and sacrificial nonhuman others, the wearing, eating and otherwise using of which is institutionalised and taken for granted; humanised animals such as pets are endowed with human characteristics which exempt them from sacrifice; animalised humans are those racialised or similarly brutalised others excluded from sanctified humanity by cultural prescription; and humanised humans, occupy a “wishful category […], sovereign and untroubled”, as pure and proper humans.67 In the discourse of animality – the attribution of bestial characteristics such as irrationality, savagery, non-sentience – noncriminal killing, says Wolfe, is legitimated by animalisation, and as humans are animalised so also are animals, with the assumption of the latter producing the terms of the former. On Wolfe’s grid, the animality of animalised animals such as cattle, and animalised humans such as Jews, is constructed by the same ideologies and motivations, and legitimates similar attitudes and abuses, regardless of species.

A typology is by its nature reductive, a structure of words which cannot itself take account of unstable and blurry edges. It creates neat blocks between which to

65 See Judith Butler, ‘No, it’s not anti-semitic’: she argues that one of the legacies of the horror of the Holocaust is a discourse which argues that any criticism or unflattering representations of Jews and Israel is anti-semitic. This “exclusion and censorship” dilutes challenges to genuine anti-semitism, and makes thoughtful and properly evaluative responses to PETA’s exhibition or similar comparative framings difficult by diverting discussion into unproductive channels. She further notes that it also reproduces the idea of Jewish exceptionalism that the Nazis used to justify genocide. Judith Butler, ‘No, it’s not anti-semitic’, The London Review of Books, 25.16 (21 August 2003), 19-21. http://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n16/judith-butler/no-its-not-anti-semitic [accessed 12 September 2014].

66 David Sztybel, ‘Can the treatment of animals be compared to the Holocaust?’ Ethics and the Environment, 11.1 (Spring 2006), 97-132 (p.98), (p.99), (p.125).

make distinctions, or within which to contain comparisons, and in doing so may elide some important moral and emotional distinctions. However successfully the Nazis may have made the Jews and the other groups they persecuted into animalised humans (and assertions of their success are countered by evidence such as the invention of the gas chambers to, at least in part, reduce the debilitating stress on soldiers ordered to shoot large groups of people, including children), there are different inhibitions – whether natural or cultural – to overcome when killing another human than when killing a nonhuman animal. Eaglestone argues that the Nazis “saw their victims as both human and not human at the same time […], not human on the ‘ontological plane’, their faces lost in Nazi narration of and propaganda about the ‘Jews’, but clearly human on the ‘ethical’ plane”. The Nazis knew that they were not killing the Jewish lice they had created in their propaganda; they “knew that they were committing a most terrible crime, and yet the structure of subjectivity allowed them to do so,” for the Nazis were, according to Stanley Cohen, in a paradoxical state of “knowing and not-knowing”.

The structure of “knowing and not-knowing” about the methods by which Jews or any similarly abused group become animalised humans and thus killable, and any parallels which can be made with human treatment of nonhuman animals, is a key concept with which literary animal studies must grapple, for it brings to the fore the differences between discrimination by race and discrimination by species. There is a danger of conflating racist and species-based discriminations in ways which ignore substantial differences between the ways humans relate to other humans through the entirely cultural structure of race, and to other animals whose species adds a meaningful difference to cultural constructions of them. Susan McHugh argues that “meat animals have become a locus of metaphor perceived in crisis” and, similarly, that the Holocaust has become a reference point to describe extremes of horror. Thus, two real and distinct sets of circumstances have become first, the source data for identifying the violent character of something else, and then connected with each other as mutually interrogative. For McHugh, such structures of comparison produce

68 Eaglestone, The Holocaust and the Postmodern, p.312.
inadequate representational forms which participate in a “widespread failure of metaphor to regulate aesthetic along with political forms of agency”.\(^{71}\) For *Beatrice and Virgil* this is precisely the point; that such a linkage exists, and that it functions to produce contested representations fuels a narrative which confronts the terms of a conjunction between the ordinary mass killing of animals and the extraordinary mass killing of Jews. Narrative realism, the novel says, is a process of taxidermy – the drawing of a skin over voids, dissimulations, and edges – and taking taxidermy as structuring narrative conceit and as human practice, the text foregrounds the formation and reading of narrative as consolation and concealment and the abstraction of the real horror of pain.

**Narrative Taxidermy**

*Beatrice and Virgil* is a narrative made from multiple fragments and frames, in a metafictive manifesto of postmodernist camouflage and exposure, and things left unsaid. Mark Currie calls such writing “theoretical fiction”, a way of exploring “the logic and the philosophy of narrative without recourse to metalanguage”, fiction with a critical function.\(^{72}\) The novel tells the story of Henry, a successful ex-novelist, and his attempt to help a sinister taxidermist finish a play in which Beatrice and Virgil search for words to describe “the Horrors” they have endured.\(^{73}\) The dramatic fictional animals are inspired by a taxidermy donkey and monkey in the taxidermist’s shop, the unsettling artistic symbols of human acquisitive destructiveness. *Beatrice and Virgil* emerges from previous literary projects of Martel’s; an abandoned critical essay and novel, and an unfinished play are reworked into a novel which merges some of Henry’s experiences with Martel’s, and contains a patchwork insertion of the play which in its fictional expression remains incomplete owing to the taxidermist’s writer’s block. Further, intertextuality motivates structure, discourse and plot. There are sections of a short story by Flaubert, and references to other writers and fictions. Multiple different forms of representation, including lists, letters, games, verbalised essays, posters and a picture, also supplement and fragment the text. All these fictional strategies, texts and intertexts propose that they are “representing the Holocaust differently”\(^{p.174}\).

\(^{71}\) McHugh, *Animal Stories*, p.176.
\(^{73}\) Yann Martel, *Beatrice and Virgil* (London: Canongate Books, 2011 [2010]), p.136. All subsequent references are to this edition and are incorporated in the text.
They facilitate a discussion of historiographic narrative in a dialogue between different modes of representation, debating the ways a narrative engages in the interpretation and reconstruction of the past, and foregrounding the conditions of commemoration in the present. Animals play a key part in this complex, indeterminate and ambiguous textuality, and are incorporated into the text’s reflexive genre and representative modes through the strategy of narrative taxidermy.

The dramatic versions of Beatrice and Virgil are characters in the taxidermist’s Beckettian play, ‘A Twentieth Century Shirt’ – so named because it is set in a landscape made of a striped shirt – in which Virgil recalls the “divine”(p.51) taste of a pear to Beatrice in ultra-realist-style narrative. When she presses him to explain what a pear actually tastes like, he flounders, unable to “put it into words. A pear tastes like itself”(p.51). Words later fail Beatrice as she speaks of her torture by indifferent men: her head is repeatedly held under water, her hoof is nailed to the floor and torn off, she is kicked, boiling water is poured in her ear and an iron bar is forced into her rectum. Words, although adequate to relate events, fail, she finds, to convey her experience of all this pain: “It’s so hard to talk about it [she says]. It hurt, it was painful – that’s all there is to say about it, really. But to feel it!”(p.178). Echoing Adorno, Virgil articulates the central question of the novel: “How can there be anything beautiful after what we’ve lived through? It’s incomprehensible. It’s an insult […] Oh, Beatrice, how are we going to talk about what happened to us one day when it’s over?”(p.112). The animals search for a language which will be “knowing of”(p.147) “the Horrors […], the unthinkable and the unimaginable, the catastrophic and the searing, the terror and the tohu-bohu”(p.136). They compile an imaginary sewing kit – a list of items to enable them “[t]o talk-about so that we might live-with […] [t]o remember and yet to go on living”(p.137), to be always “knowing of”(p.147) the Horrors. It contains, for example, a “howl […], a hand gesture […], 68 Nowolipki Street, games for Gustav, a tattoo, […] aukitz”(p.143). In the way a taxidermist stitches together an animal’s skin, Beatrice and Virgil’s sewing kit provides the materials for making a narrative. Their heterogeneous patchwork of things, concepts, moments and actions are either thickly meaningful in themselves, or make a symbolic place for intense experiences for which there are no words. The formally non-contiguous, non-corresponding motley of objects and symbols drift free of structural connections with each other, motes of acknowledgement and recognition amongst the vast unspeakableness of “the Horrors”. 
The sewing kit, as a collection of items from which to build a representation, mirrors the formal representative strategy of the play’s framing text as a collection of textual fragments, forms and images opened to a particular set of interpretations by their relationships inside the narrative that brings them together.

Henry interprets Beatrice’s institutional torture, items in the sewing kit list, the reference to the Hebrew phrase “tohu-bohu”, and the striped shirt motif as evidence that the play is about the Holocaust. In their relationships with these dramatic entities, and framed by a fictional play, Beatrice and Virgil are signalled as having a symbolic function; they are not representations of actual animals, or telling their own stories, but allegorical and fairly conventional animal figurations created to signify Nazi stereotyping of the Jews and the ideological spaces allocated to them. Virgil’s howler monkey body recollects the simianising of the Jews, and Beatrice, as a donkey, is the traditional figure of the beaten, locating the Jews she represents in an abused body. Apulieus’ ass, Balaam’s donkey, and the ass who blocks Tristram Shandy’s path precede Beatrice as symbols of the floggable and the pathetically abjected. The taxidermist rejects any association with the Holocaust, claiming that his play is about animals; he insists that “[i]n quantity and in variety, put together, two thirds of all animals have been exterminated, wiped out forever. My play is about this … this irreparable abomination”(pp.134-5). He became a taxidermist “to bear witness”(p.98), he says, to all the animals killed by human indifference or hatred. For him, Beatrice and Virgil are not allegorical figures for the suffering of humans. They are anthropomorphic representations of a real donkey and monkey who tell the story of their suffering at the hands of humans in verbal testimonies only coincidentally reminiscent of the agonised narratives of human Holocaust survivors. Henry and the taxidermist’s disagreement generates an interpretative and ultimately undecidable doubleness in the novel; it may be about animals or it may be about the Holocaust, but neither writer can accept the perspective of the other, preferring to suppress any

---

74 Donkeys, like dogs, have travelled alongside much of human history. In consequence they have multiple culturally endued characteristics, including stupidity, stubbornness, servility, ugliness, patience and humility. Such descriptions, whether or not they are founded in ‘fact’ (and they are usually not founded in ‘fact’, since they are motivated by anthropomorphic perspectives and anthropocentric intentions), create the conditions for the treatment of donkeys; that is, human assumptions about donkey characteristics are distinct from and precede donkeys themselves. They are a patchwork of ideas which generalise and obscure the animals they purport to describe.
narrative not in accord with their own engagement with the play’s symbolic framework.

The textualisation of ‘A Twentieth Century Shirt’ foregrounds the figurativeness of its fictive allegorical animals, while refusing to allow the figurations to oust the animals themselves, and Beatrice and Virgil as *dramatis personae* are phenomenologically thickened by narrative doubles located in the text framing the play. A donkey and monkey, another Beatrice and Virgil, in the taxidermist’s shop precede and inspire the dramatic Beatrice and Virgil, taxidermy animals who are the real counterpart to imaginary animals. Or rather, they are the real skins of real animals tracing life and flesh that once was. The indistinct nonhumanness of allegorical animals and consequent diminished sense of creaturely life in the play is compensated by the intense and curious animal realism of Beatrice and Virgil’s stuffed and mounted skins. Their silent and lifeless bodies express a human wish to preserve the appearance and meaningfulness of animal life in a way that conceals the artifice of their representation, but, simultaneously, this makes present the death of that animal.

There is a strange quality to taxidermy, for it pushes against the ability of modern Western humans to engage in culture-mediated “consolatory thinking” in their encounters with animals and animal products. Skin is a real and metaphorical machine of “consolatory thinking”, concealing the animal meatiness of human bodies and thus powerfully implicated in the construction of a qualitative human-animal distinction.\(^75\) Human skin is a literal, figurative and discursive boundary upon which human identity and a social, political, gender, race and species politics is inscribed, and is a complex imaginative schema of autonomy, appearance, separation and protection. Animal skin is not, however, the site for inscription of any individual distinctiveness or the boundary marker of a sanctified body. It is instead the surface upon which human motivations, desires and ideologies are reflected, and is always a potential fragment in human culture, for at the most fundamental level of distinction any animal may be skinned, dismantled, stuffed and displayed. As Cary Wolfe’s “species grid” indicates, though, such distinctions are not in a determinate relationship with species; “humanised human” bodies, and sometimes “humanised animal” bodies, retain their sanctity after death and are the subject of funeral and death rites, with the final resting

---

\(^75\) Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, p.11.
place of fleshy remains treated as commemorative of a person. The bodies of “animalised animals” and “animalised humans” lack such sanctity, and indeed, in the case of meat animals, a life has only been the means to achieve dead flesh for commercial utilisation. Taxidermy commemorates a life, but it also commemorates a death, and this implicit presentiment of suffering disrupts complacent acceptance of the ethical distinctions which make the dismantling of animal bodies acceptable.

Taxidermy raises questions of what Carol J. Adams in *The Pornography of Meat* calls the “absent referent” – the invisibility of the animals in animal products which functions to save us from “uncomfortable feelings about violence, butchering, suffering, and fear”. It separates us from the idea that our meat or our leather was a “someone (a cow, a lamb), a once-alive being, a subject”. The absence of a troubling referent is a consolation enabled by complicity with concealment. Taxidermy seeks the consolation of the absent referent by asking the viewer of it to look past the necessities of its processes to its union of art and nature, and to appreciate the representation of life. In doing so it both dissimulates and simulates; as Jean Baudrillard says,

[t]o dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn’t have […]. Pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false’, the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’.77

Taxidermy is a dissimulation of the animal death necessary to the display of a preserved and mounted animal skin, but is also a simulation of the liveliness of the animal, not in a claim of present life but in the claim that this is a representation of a living body, not a dead one. Steve Baker describes taxidermy as primarily an experience of looking at killing; a taxidermy animal has an “intense reality”, and induces a sense in the looking human that the animal is looking back, reminding of its necessary death, and indicating a failure in taxidermy to erase all the stages which intervened between the original living animal and its displayed, preserved remains.78

---

This is because, Rachel Poliquin says in *The Breathless Zoo*, taxidermied animals are not ideas or images but potent *things* in which the actual animal skin creates the verisimilitude of the art that represents it. Taxidermy is a deadly realism, Poliquin says, eerie and uncanny in its efforts to capture the liveliness of an animal in a “blatant presentation of death”. 79

In *Beatrice and Virgil*, Henry first encounters taxidermy animals with a self-satisfied air of intellectual openness to new experiences. He is aware of but unmoved by the animal death implicit in an animal skin, and is instead enchanted and fascinated by the art and craft which creates a perfect artifice of life in a mounted okapi. Henry pronounces it to be “a superlative job”, for when he searches for some trace of stitching he finds

[t]here was nothing, only smooth hide flowing over muscles, with here and there ripples of veins. He looked at the eyes; they appeared moist and black. The ears were erect, listening intently. The nose seemed about to tremble. The legs looked ready to bolt (p.57).

Henry is delighted that there is nothing “to shatter the make-believe”(p.59) in the physical rendition of the okapi; without visible evidence of the literal dismantling and reconstruction of an animal carcase he is relieved of any obligation to reflect on the aesthetics of realism and how it may refract the reality of death. He is captivated by the “lifeliness”(p.59) of the okapi and the many animals and animal parts crammed into the interior of the shop, knowing and not-knowing that he has accepted the simulation of life and the dissimulation of death, that he has elected not to see further. Although the animals’ immobility insists on their lifelessness, Henry subdues his response to death in preference to anthropocentric, authorial excitement at finding “a stage full of stories”(p.61). If taxidermy gratifies a human desire to look at animals, Henry desires to look at what an aesthetic surfacing of an animal offers him as a creator, and, despite being accompanied by his adored (living) dog, fails to make a cognitive association between the pelt of his pet and the destruction implicit in the animal hides surrounding him. He sees that the skins are representations of animals, and that they are simulations of life, but deletes the human appropriativeness fundamental to their making and reception from his consciousness.

The taxidermist rejects allegations that his occupation is barbarous; casting himself as a historian, he records the fact of an animal’s past existence by “extracting and refining memory from death” (p.96). He preserves what once was, for were it not for taxidermy specimens, animals such as the now-extinct quagga would be “only a word” (p.92). Donna Haraway describes taxidermy as “the servant of the ‘real’”; its apparent purpose is to reconstruct an animal exactly as it appeared when alive, record its dimensions and external features, and make it an effortlessly realised object of looking, “spontaneously found, discovered, simply there if one will only look”. Taxidermy is dedicated to concealing its artifice and essential gruesomeness, and is realist in its practical efforts even if the final achieved object has an unsettlingly indeterminate ontology. Realist literature also seeks to appear “spontaneously found”; it asks the reader to accept a textual world as a faithful replication of the real world, to look past the artifice of the text to enter an imagined world in which the suspension of disbelief allows invented characters and events to exist as if alive. As the skin of a taxidermic animal simulates naturalness by hiding internal wood or resin forms, and conceals the stitching together of bisected parts with invisible seams, so a realist novel builds a world from narrative forms and conventions, and pieces together a story from selected bits of time, space and perspectives in a way that minimises its underlying assumptions, necessary elisions and things left unsaid. *Beatrice and Virgil*, as a theoretical fiction, uses narrative form to argue that a dependence on only testimony to tell the story of the Holocaust creates a realist narrative which excludes some stories and creates other new ones. In *Beatrice and Virgil* an animal is a literally deconstructible body whose parts can be sewn back together to tell the story its maker wishes it to, but the stories it tells also exceed and escape the intentions of the stitcher. The making and form of the novel’s taxidermy animals is the metaphorical literary conceit for the making and form of the narrative, so that content and structure are mutually interrogative.

The relationship between content and structure in *Beatrice and Virgil* proposes that its seams and parts do not tell the whole story. The Beatrice and Virgil of ‘A Twentieth Century Shirt’ offer traumatised and moving testimonies of their experiences in “the Horrors”, but their stories are frustratingly partial for not only are

---

time and space fractured, disordered and evacuated into symbols such as the shirt motif and the non-contiguous items on the sewing kit list which cannot be sewn into a whole piece/narrative, other stories of ‘the Horrors’ are absent. While the testimonies convey Beatrice and Virgil’s disorientating and alienating shock in “the Horrors”, the structure of the play allocates no space for context, history or explanation, and admits no other voices. Perpetrators of “the Horrors” participate in the play, but the crimes they commit are viewed through the uncomprehending eyes of Beatrice and Virgil – they are simply violent events without explanatory commentary or chronology, bewildering, frightening and meaningless. According to the taxidermist his play “doesn’t work”(p.100), and the conceptual failure of the drama represents the novel’s analogising of what it treats as the inability of Holocaust testimony to provide sufficient stories or historiography of an event which involved far more people than a small number of survivors, including the unwelcome stories of perpetrators, bystanders, and of those who did not survive – as Beatrice and Virgil do not – for their experiences have no testimonial record. The structure of the novel outside the play develops this theme by deliberately exposing its different parts, making the metaphorical stitching between them visible and the joins crude.

Flaubert’s short story ‘The Legend of St Julian Hospitator’, is given to Henry by the taxidermist with all passages relating to cruelty to animals highlighted in yellow. It is read in full by Henry, but the novel’s reader is granted access only to short extracts, or to skimming rendition or summaries of other parts, and to Henry’s analysis of the story.81 Henry finds the story of St Julian troubling, for despite St Julian’s continuing love of hunting of the most bloodthirsty and gratuitous kind, the crimes he commits in his youth are redeemed by noble and saintly deeds in later life, and his abundant and appalling cruelty to animals is not taken into account in the final moral judgement of his life. Henry finds the story “baffling and unsatisfying”(p.43), and for his readers, having seen only a discursively motley selection of its parts, the inadequacy of the story’s insertion into the text is much intensified. Similarly, narrative interruptions such as the sewing kit list are vaguely allusive but exasperatingly indeterminate in meaning, and Henry’s frustrations at the taxidermist’s refusal to explicate his ideas are amplified for the reader of Beatrice and Virgil. Henry concludes that the taxidermist was “a stinking old Nazi collaborator, now casting himself as the great defender of the

81 Although the interested reader can, of course, find the full text of Flaubert’s story elsewhere.
innocent. Take the dead and make them look good. How was that for murderous irrationalism neatly packaged and hidden?” (p. 190) The taxidermist’s interest only in cruelty to animals in ‘St Julian’ indicates a man seeking “redemption without remorse” (p. 189). Evidence for this judgement is, however, highly circumstantial and ultimately not at all certain. The incompleteness of the novel, its final undecidability, its hotch-potch of texts from inside and outside itself, draws attention to the limits of representation which realism attempts to conceal. It is a botched taxidermy, a construction of awkwardly stitched bits, symbols and gaping seams, a self-consciously and horribly distorted narrative which insists on the representational failure of realism.

**An Art of Pain**

Henry is, initially, intrigued by the artistry and creative possibilities of taxidermic animals, and resists seeing Poliquin’s deadly realism in the bodies and body parts in the taxidermist’s shop. Animals provide him with an “artful metaphor” (p. 10) in which to speak shamanic truths, but he has “no outstanding interest in animals” and uses them “for reasons of craft rather than sentiment” (p. 29). He has a simple (and smug) example to explain his narrative choices:

> if I tell a story about a dentist from Bavaria or Saskatchewan, I have to deal with readers’ notions about dentists and people from Bavaria or Saskatchewan, those preconceptions and stereotypes that lock people and stories into small boxes. But if it’s a rhinoceros from Bavaria or Saskatchewan who is the dentist, then it’s an entirely different matter. The reader pays closer attention, because he or she has no preconceptions about rhinoceros dentists (p. 30).

Henry’s fabular animal dentist is a cipher only, a more or less empty skin necessary to the acting of, or the acting upon, of events; it displays only characteristics pertinent to the plot or the “truth” of the story without the complications attendant on a full-fleshed and complex human. Henry’s view of the Beatrice and Virgil in ‘A Twentieth Century Shirt’ would seem to accord with his view of his own literary fabular animals; to him, their imaginary lives function as abstractions of millions of historically real, dead people. Their tame, substitutable and generic animal bodies provide a means of articulating the unspeakable, for the unimaginable and unbearable horrors perpetrated upon humans become speakable when the load is figuratively and allegorically transferred to those beings who are, relatively speaking, the more acceptable vessels for abuse. Yann Martel’s crafting of literary animals, if interpreted via Henry’s

---

82 See Daston and Mitman’s analysis of the function of animals in fable in Chapter Two of this study.
rhinoceros dentist and applied across the entire text of the novel, situates the taxidermic Beatrice and Virgil in the figurative mode. Their material skins are simply another construction of the same metaphor, and all the animals in *Beatrice and Virgil* thus speak only of humans in the Holocaust and make no equation between human and animal suffering, for there is no animal suffering here.

However, the novel’s taxidermic animals materialise in ways that transform them from textual objects to textual entities with disquieting agency. The unsightly practical processes of preparing an animal’s body are gradually revealed to Henry, and he becomes less able to avoid being caught in the gaze of the creatures undergoing their deathly re-presentation as eviscerated traces of life. An incomplete deer head mount has a mouth that is “a tongueless, toothless gaping hole revealing the yellow fibreglass jaw of the mannequin. The eyes had that same yellow glow. It looked grotesquely unnatural, a cervine version of Frankenstein” (pp.72-73). Initially, Henry responds to the macabre scene dispassionately and via the abstraction of a fictional creation whose pain lives only in the realm of the imagined – thought in words, but not felt in the flesh. Much later, as events near their climax, Henry watches the taxidermist pull the skin from a freshly dead red fox “like a pullover” (p.155), cutting it away from the flesh at gums and nose, removing the head skin from the rest of the pelt and turning it inside out. Henry stares at the peeled head, pink and raw, of a formerly sentient being. The ears, despite being the largest features, were inexpressive. But the eyes, the eyelids rather, were closed while the mouth was open, as if in a scream. He looked at the neck cut again, at the red fur emerging from within. A soul on fire, he thought. The head suddenly became that of a being caught in its moment of greatest agony, shuddering uncontrollably, beyond reason and beyond help. A feeling of horror overcame Henry (p.156).

The unemotional and prosaic exposure of the fox’s internal surfaces by the taxidermist, and a sudden sense of the flaying of skin as a violent and intense torment, precipitates Henry’s apprehension of a horrifying pain which reduces any sensate body to totalised pain, and replaces his previous distant and over-ridden cognisance of it. The animals in the taxidermist’s workshop cease to be the source of wonderful stories, and become beings who once had all the capacity for joy and pain, vitality, and striving to escape

---

83 I assume that this is a mistake on the part of Martel or his editors, and should actually refer to Frankenstein’s monster; the taxidermist could be compared to Frankenstein, but his animals cannot.
death that characterises sentient life. Taxidermy is not an art of animal preservation, but an art of pain.

*Beatrice and Virgil* is an allegory of human genocidal brutality told with animals, but it is also of human genocidal brutality to animals, for even if its taxidermy animals are dead and therefore beyond harm, their simple usability and disposability bespeaks the fundamental distinction humans, confident of their humanness, make between their own bodies and those of other animals. The project of the novel is to make absences in acts of narrative vividly present, highlighting that there are worrying voids in the Holocaust story, and also that there is a vast narrative of animals which is unspoken and excluded, for animals do not have words with which to speak of their pain. The text’s unsatisfying aporia and gaping, abrading seams are formal literary devices; they represent the impossibility of the many possible different discourses and significations with which any particular event can be retold to fit seamlessly together into a complete and meaningful story. Stories cannot be universally complementing, supplementing or contiguous with and of each other, and there will thus always be some stories that are inexplicable because there are not words for them, or unacceptable because they do not accord with what is treated as the right kind of story.

As a work of theoretical fiction *Beatrice and Virgil* is thoughtful and innovative, and its foregrounded indeterminacy and refusal to be an enjoyably entertaining fiction claims a seriousness intended to turn aside the accusations of tastelessness sometimes attached to the inventing of Holocaust stories. This is all very “clever”, but the novel engages little readerly sympathy. The taxidermist’s cold intransigence is repellent, and smug, vain Henry is, frankly, impossible to like, so one must wonder why Martel would write a story with something to say that is populated by such off-puttingly unlikeable people; but, if *Beatrice and Virgil*’s humans are intolerable in their various ways, the novel does offer a character with whom a reader can develop that strange attachment humans feel for entirely imaginary entities in books.

Beatrice is not a living character, she exists in the novel as an eviscerated and remodelled donkey skin, and a dramatic abstraction of an idea of a donkey focused on that real but dead body. But despite her body being dead and her living personality only a figment of the imagination of a fictional person, she nevertheless inspires
affection and compassion. Whether or not Beatrice as a dramatic character is only an allegorical figuration of human concerns, her description of her torture is genuinely affecting, and this may be because it is a donkey that suffers such terrible cruelty. Even if perceptions of donkeys as patient and long-suffering are anthropomorphic and sentimentalising, her gentle donkey appeal is redolent with the pathos of a real history as a much-abused beast of burden. The real Beatrice, the taxidermied body, once lived in a petting zoo where she was run over by a delivery truck, her death not an act of wilful cruelty but the unfortunate accidental side-effect of ordinary human life. Henry becomes fond of both Beatrice and Virgil, but when the taxidermist burns down his own shop and their bodies are destroyed, he “missed them with an ache that made itself felt even years later […] a physical hunger for presence.” (p.194) He knows, as we the readers know, that “they didn’t exist, not really” (p.194), but we also realise that even if the animals are fictional, even if our attachment amounts to a projected skin over real animals, our emotional investment in them is significant and meaningful. Beatrice dies three times, the helpless victim of mundane carelessness, of appalling violence, and of human self-obsession, and her many deaths at the hands of humans are unavoidably shameful. Her last death, when her crushed, flayed and burned body is finally beyond all harm because it has been reduced to nothing, creates an absence which must be read as a rebuke.

The many parts and pieces of animals which are absorbed by human activity cause the originating animal itself to disappear into its edible or manufacturable remains, no longer animal corpses, flesh or skin, but commodified matter and commercial products. The Nazis did not kill the Jews, the Romas, the disabled and many others to profit from their bodies – gold from teeth, redistributed possessions, or the alleged lampshades made of skin were just efficiently managed collateral benefits – and their destruction is not comparable to that of animals in this way. What is comparable in the industrial killing of animals and the genocidal killing of humans is the discursive and psychological structures that permit them: Derrida’s disavowal and dissimulation, Anat Pick’s “consolatory thinking”, Stanley Cohen’s “knowing and not-knowing”, doublethink, the king’s new suit of clothes. The animalising of animals and the animalising of humans is an active structure of distinction-driven oppression from which “knowing and not-knowing” is distinguished by its passivity; it does not create conditions, it merely prefers not to see what may discomfit, for to do otherwise insists
on action. Henry, no longer able to ignore the horror, shudders at the exposed raw edges of skin on the fox head as the taxidermist prepares it for mounting, and the incompletely closed joins and unexplained stories of Beatrice and Virgil are similarly ugly and worrying. Beatrice and Virgil’s art of pain, awkward and disturbing, does not provide answers, but it insists on a response.

**MEAT**

This section is marked by reluctance; breaking, for a moment, the “fourth wall” of my impersonal exegesis, I draw my personal vegetarian voice into the argument to acknowledge how reluctant I have been to engage with the research material necessary to an analysis of industrial meat production in fiction. It is miserable work; I am unwilling to confront data describing cows who are flayed and dismembered while still alive and conscious in abattoirs, chickens boiled alive, turkeys so distorted by technological intervention that their legs cannot support the weight of their own over-developed breast flesh, the ordinary processes of industrial-scale slaughter. One does not, however, need to be vegetarian to find the suffering authoritative sources say is being inflicted on large numbers of animals every day in badly managed slaughterhouses, or even those slaughterhouses committed to good animal welfare, too horrifying to look at. The vast majority of human engagements with the industrially grown, processed and packaged meat bought and eaten in the western world are characterised by a reluctance to look at and to know how a pork chop or chicken breast lived and died. Thus, we prefer factory farming and industrialised animal slaughter to be concealed from us because we find it too unpleasant to look, but it continues because by looking away we consent to it. We consent to it because as Jonathan Safran Foer says, “we want to and can”; we quell any uneasiness we may feel about our implication in the lives and deaths of billions of animals by consenting to the

---


invisibility of the practices of mass meat production conducted on our behalf, practices we might not be able to consent to if we looked at them.86 We engage in consolatory thinking, knowing and not-knowing, about how animals are made into meat, and we do this because we like to eat meat. This liking is not merely a matter of tastiness or nutrition for, Nick Fiddes says, “meat is more than just a meal; it also represents a way of life”.87 Perhaps it is the high regard for meat in western culture, and the direct and personal implication of the meat-eating majority, that accounts for what seems a reluctance on the part of fiction writers to address the experiences of animals in meat production directly, for there are few novels that do so.

**Meat Mythology**

In his essay ‘Eating Well’ Derrida evolves the theory of carno-phallogocentrism, which is to say, his theory of the western world. For Derrida, the western subject is predicated on a conceptual machinery of “presence to self – which implies therefore a certain interpretation of temporality; identity to self, positionality, property, personality, ego, consciousness, will, intentionality, freedom, humanity etc”.88 These predicates reveal an onto-phenomenological structure of “difference, trace, iterability, ex-appropriation”, in humans, a Heideggerian having of world which is lacking in stones or animals, so that their not having of the world locates them in a sacrificial structure – a place maintained and left open “for a noncriminal putting to death.” Through the “executions of ingestion, incorporation, or introjection of the corpse”, the Judaeo-Christian adult male seeks not just to master and possess nature but to accept its sacrifice and eat its flesh.89 Such a structure has a deep history of internalised mythologies, ideologies and power structures. Human food – its making and eating – is deeply embedded in societies and cultures, and the success of humans as a species has depended on the organised garnering, management and consumption of food resources. Food historian Maguellone Touissaint-Samat places food at the centre of all human endeavour:

---

89 Derrida, ‘Eating Well’, p.112.
From time immemorial, the human race has explored the world in search of food. Hunger has been the force behind its onward march. Hunger is still the source of mankind’s energies, good or bad, the reason for its advance, the origin of its conflicts, the justification, and the currency of its labours.\footnote{Maguellone Touissant-Samat, \textit{A History of Food}, 2nd edn, trans. by Anthea Bell, (Chichester: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2009 [1987]), p.xv.}

Food is a constitutive factor in human sociality, for food-related activities have always dominated the work and interactions of human individuals and groups. Early humans worked co-operatively to hunt or gather food, and then later to husband crops and domesticated animals, gathering together around fires to prepare and eat their meals. Modern social organisation and cultural formations emerged from these primitive activities and diets. Touissant-Samat describes diet as “a social signal […] identification magic. The food of the strongest – like his religion, his spiritual food – is always regarded as the best. The strongest person is he who imposes his diet on others”.\footnote{Touissant-Samat, \textit{A History of Food}, p.3} And meat, particularly red meat, is the mythological diet of the strong in the Western world.

Intensive farming has its origins in the Middle East, where the first humans to domesticate dogs, pigs, sheep, goats and cows built fences around them, changing human-animal relationships to possessor and possessed, and the relationships of animals with their food, their environment, with each other, and with their own bodies. Animals were and continue to be selectively bred for certain bodily and dispositional features and facilities, their own tendencies and preferences subordinated to a range of practical and symbolic human interests. In \textit{The Heretic’s Feast}, Colin Spencer argues that:

Domestication was a logical extension of the dominance of humans. To keep other creatures in captivity and to govern their lives from birth through breeding and feeding to slaughter bestows a sense of power upon the owner. It is not difficult to see how the man who collected the largest herds would become the most influential and most powerful in the community.\footnote{Colin Spencer, \textit{The Heretic’s Feast: A History of Vegetarianism} (London: Fourth Estate Limited, 1993), p.29.}

The coupling of meat and power in this way located the production and eating of meat at the heart of hegemonic social structures, and thus, says Spencer, to view meat as non-essential “would be not simply a criticism of meat eating but a criticism of
This is a view which persists into the twenty-first century, for factory farming and the industrial production of millions of tonnes per year of mostly beef, pork, lamb, chicken and fish products, are now global corporate concerns which depend on a continuing demand for cheap meat, and the sense and habit of the centrality of meat in a proper diet. Objections to the volume of meat consumption in the Western world, or to the principle of eating meat, remain marginal, as any mainstream restaurant menu will very ably demonstrate.

Meat is animal flesh which has become food, and is distinct from human flesh which, although it is, as biological tissue, little different to that of any other mammal, is never meat. The question of meat thus traces a clear discursive line between humans and animals, an absolute distinction which rests not on the edibility or otherwise of any particular kind of flesh, but on the (in principle) inviolable sanctity of the human body and the usability of the animal body. Recent fiction has tended to interrogate the nature and terms of the ontology which separates sovereign eater from bestial eaten by transforming or mutilating human bodies, discursively denying or ignoring human status, or emphasising how the possession or absence of language defines meatiness. David Mitchell’s Cloud Atlas describes the ontological ambiguity of a genetically engineered people who, though possessed of every attribute taken to define the proper human but natural parentage, are slaughtered and their bodies rendered for meat and further clone reproduction. Adam Roberts’ Bête opens with a cow pleading in English with a butcher to spare its life, for a proportion of animals are fitted with chips which install human cognitive powers working in parallel with animal consciousness. These novels draw attention to the essential meatiness of all vertebrate bodies, and expose the prevarications, hypocrisies and justifications used to smother discomforts about eating animals. Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake trilogy asks questions about the creation of edible animal tissue that does not suffer or need to be killed since it is not living animal in the accepted sense. Atwood’s genuinely revolting “chickie-nobs”, echoing attempts in the real world to grow cultured in-vitro meat, point to problems in human relationships with food, as does Deborah Levy’s Diary of a Steak. All of these

---

93 Spencer, The Heretic’s Feast, p.31.
novels, however, are science fiction, alternative world, or speculative in some way, which discuss meat via analogy or extrapolation, and none travel with ordinary animals into conventional, present-day slaughterhouses.

Upton Sinclair’s 1906 socialist (and racist) novel The Jungle is one of a very small number of fictions which take such a step. The Jungle describes the lives of immigrant workers in Chicago’s meatpacking plants, and the brief narrative of conditions inside the slaughterhouses – extending to only a few pages of the novel – focused on the blurring of lines between human labouring bodies and animal meat bodies, and the horrifying experiences of all concerned. Its depiction of the exploitation and brutalising of the industry’s human workers as they laboured in slaughterhouse stockyards and killing floors was a public sensation, but one that led to demands for new hygiene and food preparation laws rather than better conditions for workers or animals. Ruth Ozeki’s My Year of Meat, published in 1998, revisits the US meat industry, linking meat, Western patriarchal dispositions and US farming and slaughtering practices in a pattern of brutalising oppression. My Year of Meat and The Jungle have clear if diverse activist intentions, but Mark McNay’s novel Fresh, 2007 winner of both the Arts Foundation New Fiction Award and the Saltire First Book of the Year, is more subtle in its representational strategies.

**Chicken Portions**

Fresh is a realist novel, and describes one day in the life of Sean O’Grady, a very ordinary young man working in a chicken processing factory near Glasgow. The first half of the novel follows his working day in the factory where he lifts chicken carcasses from a conveyor belt and hangs them on hooks all day. While at work Sean also has time to go to the bank, to the pub, to the factory office twice, go to a card game, buy alcohol and cigarettes from another worker, and clean up at the end of the day by sweeping the conveyor belt with a floor brush; with such indifferent management and hygiene standards it is possible to infer that other factory protocols, including ensuring humane slaughter, are similarly slack. In the second half of the novel Sean returns after work to his home in Royston, Glasgow, has brief and untitillating sex with his wife, Maggie, collects his daughter from school, meets his violent Begbiesque elder brother Archie who has been released from prison that day, and reluctantly agrees to help him with a drugs deal as compensation for borrowing his brother’s money. Sean then shops
Archie to the police, Archie escapes and Sean is obliged to stab him to death to stop him murdering Maggie. Although taking a nasty turn before bedtime, the story remains one of ordinary frustrations, poverty and low expectations, social marginalisation, and flawed narratives of masculinity. Both in the factory and at home in Royston, Sean is shunted around by his circumstances, apparently exerting little mastery over the path his own life follows, and is ironically funny because he is so banally ordinary. He is, the novel wishes readers to perceive, in an anological relationship with the chickens he spends all day transferring from conveyor belt to hook.

If meat is a sovereign food, then for Western cultures beef represents its most superior form. Beef is masculine, the food of heroes, conquerors and red-blooded males. Sean, however, works in a chicken factory, emasculated by his association with small, weak birds, their pallid flesh, squawking and flapping trivially and misogynistically associated with women. “Chicken” is the synonym for coward and to be “bird-brained” is to be stupid, and these insults mark the scale of the industrialised devaluation of *Gallus gallus domesticus*, the domestic chicken. According to Annie Potts, hens were domesticated 8,000 to 10,000 years ago in South-East Asia, and until the early twentieth century were central to many spiritual and folkloric symbologies of destruction and creation, while in domestic settings cockerels were noted for their bravery and hens for their devotion to their broods.⁹⁵ For most of the shared history of humans and chickens, the birds have lived with, and been appreciated and valued by those who owned and ate them; however, in 1923 in the eastern USA, chickens became, as Donna Haraway puts it, the “first farm animals to be permanently confined indoors and made to labour in automated systems based on Technoscience’s finest genetic technologies, feed-conversion efficiency research, and miracle drugs (not pain-killers, but antibiotics and hormones)”⁹⁶ A Mrs Steele took delivery of five hundred chicks instead of the fifty she ordered, and decided to raise them indoors through the winter as meat birds. She was so successful that by 1928 the region was raising seven million commercial broiler chickens each year. More than fifty billion chickens are now killed for meat in the world each year, plus many more “end-of-lay” birds from

---

the egg industry. Western industrial farming has transformed them, says Potts, into “the least respected and most manipulated beings on the planet”.

When Sean, in Fresh, hangs his chickens on hooks he is moving them onto the next stage of a pre-ordained journey through an industrial production system that is followed by almost all twenty-first century chickens. Born in mechanical incubators, intensively farmed chickens then live for six weeks in poorly lit broiler sheds, standing on an A4 sheet of paper sized space of their own excrement, before, as Sean says, being “driven to the factory in shoebox-sized containers”. When the chickens arrive strong forearms reach into the shoeboxes and drag their prey into the artificial light and hang them by their ankles on a hook [...], the hooks drag them into a tank of water where an electric current stops their hearts moments before rubber wheels grind the feathers from their skin. By the time they reach Sean they’ve been eviscerated and beheaded (pp.9-10).

Graded according to weight, the chickens emerge at the other end of the factory as whole fresh or frozen oven-ready birds or as meat portions, the literally faceless flesh of always already dead meat in a system that is, says Henry Buller, “not a biopolitics so much as a thanatopolitics”. Intelligent, sociable, responsive birds are made into meat and egg-making machines in an eternal reproduction of dead bodies, and living in conditions that re-present them as if they are “bird-brained”. Intensively farmed chickens are, says Potts, “de-natured, de-personalized and even de-animalized”, their natural tendencies, abilities and preferences over-ridden by the drive for maximum efficiency at minimum cost, and their sensitive individual bodies lost in a machine designed to grow meat, not living beings.

Sean’s section of the factory has the dimensions of an aircraft hangar in which “[l]ines of chickens looped and crossed below the roof”, and there “were five conveyor belts arranged on the floor where the lines dropped chickens” (p.8). The speed the chickens are carried through the factory by the machinery of the hanging-lines and conveyor belts dictates the intensity of the work carried out by human workers who must keep pace with the chicken bodies that appear on rails and belts to be hung alive.

---

97 Potts, Chicken, p.139.
98 Potts, Chicken, p.139.
99 Mark McNay, Fresh (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2008 [2007]), p.9. All subsequent references are to this edition, and are incorporated in the text.
100 Henry Buller, ‘Individuation, the Mass and Farm Animals’, Theory, Culture and Society, 30.7/8 (December 2013), 155-175 (p.163).
101 Potts, Chicken, p.139.
hung dead, gutted, trussed or packaged, before disappearing into the next part of the factory. The pressure of chicken bodies on human bodies is generated by the volume of live chickens delivered to the factory, each new body subject to strict constraints of time spent in holding areas, time hanging upside down while alive, time between stunning and beheading, time in chilling tanks, time between chilling and packaging, with each time constraint subject to maximum space capacity constraints. The machine of maximum profit through maximum production at minimum cost that the factory manifests, depends on human machinery to function – human hands and porterage to lift, gut or truss chicken bodies. If lines and belts drag the passive bodies of chickens through the factory, human bodies are passive parts of the machine which processes them. For Sean, when “the chickens came down faster and faster […] The pile threatened to bury him”(p.16), and as the “machine clicked and hissed faster and faster […] he felt like an old man. He could see what was in store for him. An eternity of this fucking shite”(p.74) of inescapable chickens. His subjection to the ceaseless, sightless, uncaring, inhuman factory machine and its unending waves of dead bodies, recreates him as a mechanical part of that factory, a dehumanised and de-lived merely reactive function of a chicken commodity production system. Sean and the chickens are mutually involved in a social and ideological commodification of the body concerned only with generating capital.

As a function rather than an agent in a carno-phallogocentric system which reduces chickens to commoditised units of meat and humans to fleshy machine parts, Sean is interchangeable with any other fleshy part of the cheap chicken-meat making system – indistinct, faceless and shackled to the factory machine – and he is, therefore, analogically like a chicken. But only like a chicken, and only when the analogy is plotted along a limited range of points of comparison for narrative purposes. Although leading a limited, impoverished life, Sean is, of course, nothing like a chicken. His lifespan has not been reduced from fifteen years to six weeks, he has not been deliberately bred to be eaten, he will not be hung upside down on a hook, stunned (providing this procedure works), plucked and beheaded. Although Sean’s body provides cheap labour to facilitate the generation of capital, it has not been technologically designed to put on 2.7 kilograms of flesh in six weeks, leaving him unable to stand. Although Sean imagines the children coming out of his daughter’s school are like chickens because they have been conditioned to expect nothing better
than work in a chicken processing factory, and although, like chickens driven to fight
with their fellows by overcrowding and frustration, he lives in an environment where
disaffection leads to a culture of male violence and blame, he is not completely
deprived of power. Sean is figuratively like the stereotype of a chicken because he is
passive, makes stupid and irrational choices, allows his bodily desires to over-rule his
intellect, and is non-violent in a way that can be interpreted as “chicken”, but he bears
no resemblance to a real chicken. In truth, most twenty-first century chickens bear no
resemblance to the bright, lively creatures they ought to be.

Kate Soper draws attention to the many ways in which animals can be
registered or represented in literary texts, and highlights the “less anthropomorphic
register” of “the naturalistic”, defining it as “that mode of writing in which animals are
described in a fairly straightforward way and figure as part of the narrative situation
and environmental context”.102 “Naturalism” in this context captures, she says, “a
distinctive mode of representation” in which the animal signifier resists appropriative
symbolism to a certain degree.103 Fresh makes symbolic connections between Sean
and the chickens as an ideological claim, but the chickens, when mediated through
Sean’s eyes, emerge in a naturalistic register. The chickens of Fresh are alive for only
three sentences, echoing the proportions of lively to deathly existence in the factory
where they survive their entry for as long as it takes them to reach the stunning tank.
On this last living journey, hanging on their hooks, they “fly along, upside down,
flapping their wings, trying to escape, shitting down their own chests, squawking and
pecking at their mates”(p.9). Although a brief episode, it clearly conveys the thwarted
agency of the chickens as they are unable to escape, and the many verbs indicate,
pathetically, both the full aliveness that is shortly to be terminated and the irrevocable
manner in which they are being swept to that termination. That the chickens soil their
own chests draws attention to their distress, and to the unnaturalness and vulnerability
of hanging upside-down. Sean seems resigned to the normalised acceptability of the
chickens’ fate, but the spare and unsentimental textualisation of his perspective

102 Kate Soper, ‘The Beast in Literature: Some Initial Thoughts’, Comparative Critical Studies, 2.3
(October 2005), 303-309 (p.303).
bespeaks his dislike of their usage and invokes what Soper calls a “compassionate” register, in which fiction asks us to meditate upon acts of cruelty or ill-treatment.\textsuperscript{104}

Once the chickens are dead Sean’s empathy abates, and in both the textual narrative and Sean’s narrative of himself they are restored to the reassuring condition of plot elements; they are comedic props for a daydream about boxing in which chicken flesh feels satisfactorily although disturbingly like a human cheek when Sean punches it, or opponents in the struggle to keep up with his workload. Chickens are merely background things, part of the process of his daily labour, until he learns, mid-morning, that his psychopathic brother is out of prison and wants his money back. Once assured of Archie’s return, Sean, afraid for the safety of his wife and daughter and certain that penalties will be exacted in violence upon his own body, reimagines the chickens as emblems of the pain he is soon to suffer:

Sean’s station dropped chickens so he picked them up and hung them. They were only little but they felt heavy. They dropped with their wings tucked into their sides, like welchers protecting their kidneys against violent debt collectors. Sean winced as they bounced on the conveyor belt with a sweaty slap. He picked them up with as much tenderness as he could and placed them on hooks that took them out of sight. But they kept falling. There was never a moment free from the wounded chickens […] clutching sides with wings, and sometimes rolling back and forward in agony (pp.125-6).

In his internal world Sean initially re-imagines his daily experiences in masculine scenarios and heroic roles, but now his financial chickens are coming home to roost, he recasts himself as a helpless chicken victim. The ceaselessly falling bodies, impotent, injured and exploited, foretell the blows to be inflicted on Sean’s flinching body, and mark, in a shift of power, his transition from puncher to punchbag. Sean and the chickens are meatbags to be pummelled and abused, reduced to the fact of pain.

As a fully-fleshed narrative entity Sean is individualised and distinctive; one is invited to judge his failings, examine his motives, and feel compassion for the restricted life his violent environment and deprived circumstances have produced. The chickens remain a numberless mass of bodies; they are unindividuated and indistinguishable, deliberately represented in the narrative as they are manifested in reality – a supply of de-animalised edible matter. The narrative, however, makes one significant individual engagement with, not a chicken, but a piece of a chicken. In free

\textsuperscript{104} Soper, ‘The Beast in Literature’, p.303, p.308.
indirect discourse which may invoke either an idiomatic conative “you”, or “you” the reader, the narrative muses that

[f]resh chickens you assume have been killed recently. You picture a redbrick farmyard with purple foxgloves growing in a corner […] the farmer’s wife comes out of the door, pulls a chicken from the ground it was idly pecking, and twists its neck”(p.9).

This bucolic dream of healthy, happy hens obfuscates the realities of the lives and deaths of chickens in Sean’s factory, as the need for a “Portions” worksection confirms. Portions processes that significant number of factory farmed chickens who, having spent the last days of their truncated lives lying in their own excrement because they cannot stand, “come down with ulcers, abscesses, gangrene”(p.63). In Portions these pustular birds are dismembered, for “[n]obody would buy a chicken that had a fucking great abscess on one breast but they would buy its legs, wings, and its other breast”(p.63). During a brief stint in Portions, Sean is repulsed by bins of amputated flesh and the smell of rotten flesh, and is “off his chicken for six months”(p.64) after cutting away “a particularly gruesome cyst”, sickened by the “pus from a volcanic mound with a deep hole in the centre”(p.64). Sean conquers his horror of Portions by avoiding it, and his return to eating “his chicken” – his normal, natural food – exemplifies the doublethink that characterises conventional attitudes to chicken meat. Reluctant to give up eating creatures he knows to have miserable lives, horrible deaths and cankerous bodies, Sean reconciles himself by not looking at the evidence. As his commiserations and congratulations to a Portions long-term stalwart reveal, he is simultaneously aware of his weakness and thankful that his reluctance to look relieves him of a sense of responsibility to act upon what is before him.

The infections cut from chickens in Portions are not, unfortunately, fictional. The apparently acceptable mortality rate for broiler chickens in Britain is 5.1 per cent (that is, of the 900 million broiler chicks bred in Britain each year, 45 million will die before slaughter) with birds dying of infections, heart failure and multiple other conditions. Those who survive suffer a range of blisters and ulcerations from constant contact with their excreta, conditions such as ascites and femoral head necrosis, and behavioural disorders from overcrowding and being unable to cope with their distorted
bodies.\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Fresh}, its title revealed to be ironic, is spare with the facts about chicken processing; the object of the novel is to build a picture of Sean’s relationship with his brother, and reveal the environment of low expectations that fits the former for unskilled labour and pushes the latter into criminality and violence. Pustular chicken bodies in \textit{Fresh} are the metaphor for a poisonous and corrupting environment, and the mass movements of their dead bodies through the factory analogue the limited lives of underpaid, undereducated humans, but the chickens are not just the shorthand imagery of an underclass. Sean and the chickens are locked into the same exploitative system, with each mutually involved in the suffering of the other and none entirely reducible to the textualised figure of pain of any other.

\section*{CONCLUDING REMARKS}

Each of the three novels, \textit{The God of Animals, Beatrice and Virgil} and \textit{Fresh}, raises questions about the usability of animals, and the complex human emotional entanglements with not only living animals but with their dead bodies. Animals are the usable stuff of the world; their labour, the symbolic value of their bodies, and their body parts circulate as social, cultural, political and economic capital. The fundamental distinction between humans and animals here rests on the concept of property; while humans believe in and practise a right to self-ownership over their own bodies, no such assumption is made about the relationship of animals with their bodies. Indeed, the Cartesian assumption is that no such relationship is possible for an animal, and the effects of a belief in an animal’s inability to own itself are enshrined in law; animals are not entitled to ownership of anything – even their own bodies – while humans assume that anything not human is automatically available for possession in some way. Property, as a key animating principle of the human-animal divide becomes, however, a fraught business when humans are able to divest other humans of self-ownership of their bodies through force, to use their labour, control their fertility, remove their right to “be where they are”, limit their freedom or non-criminally put them to death. Explicating and critiquing the experiences and abuses of animal property with reference to the terminology of human-to-human violence or animalisation directs attention away from any abuses at issue and towards the language used to describe

them. Each of the novels draws attention to the obfuscations and prevarications which
attend encounters with animal bodies and parts, although, in the case of rape in *The
God of Animals*, not necessarily self-consciously. Of all the animals under discussion
only the horse, Darling, is represented as possessed of any agency or self-ownership;
the remainder – brood mares, stallions, a donkey and a monkey, chicken bodies – are
represented as framed, shaped and engaged with by humans according to the function
their bodies fulfil. That a repression of animals’ tendencies and preferences takes place
on a vast global scale because animals cannot demonstrate in language such
anthropocentric concepts as self-ownership, is the subject of this study’s final chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCE OF APES

Justifications for an absolute distinction between humans and all other animals become most difficult to articulate in questions of the similarities and differences of great apes, for although great apes are our closest relatives, we conceive of them as less than human, as deficient. The great apes, or Hominidae, are a group which includes humans, gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos, and orang-utans. The nonhuman members of this group represent what humans think we are and are not as we simultaneously include ourselves in, and exclude ourselves from, the category of the ape.¹ Our evolutionary history is written in the faces and bodies of other apes, and they seem to us to manifest diminished versions of our social forms, behaviours and cognitive capacities. Anthropologist Phyllis Dolhinow argues that most human behaviour “has no analog in the behaviour of nonhumans”, and that we should not view our companion members of the Order Primates as “quirky copies of ourselves”; despite this, other apes seem to have a unique fascination for humans, for we see them as mirrors of our primitive selves and as failed humans, what we might have been if we had never attained full consciousness.²

Our fascination with our not-quite-human animal other emerges in the novel in English in multiple titles which dissect and problematise the nature of the distinction between humans and apes, for apes are, we imagine, closest to the boundary between us and all other animals, and thus the epistemologies and ethical justifications which arise at the supposed divide are often debated in literary ape bodies and minds. Language and speech are a distinctive concern in ape stories, for one of the great apes’ most significant perceived deficiencies is the failure to have symbolic and grammatically structured language. This chapter examines, in two novels, the literary representation of chimpanzees with rich experiential worlds but no human speech. The

¹ Although regrettable, given the context of this discussion, from this point onwards and unless stated otherwise, references to “apes” or “great apes” should be understood to encompass apes other than humans to avoid the clumsiness of repeatedly making distinctions between discussions of apes which include humans, and those referring only to nonhuman apes.
first, James Lever’s *Me Cheeta* (2008), features an exceedingly loquacious chimpanzee who can talk to his readers but not to the occupants of his autobiography, while the chimpanzee in *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* (2013) by Karen Joy Fowler can “talk” to other characters but makes no communication with the novel’s readers. Both novels actively problematise anthropocentric insistence on, for example, language, tool use and cultural transmission as markers of human distinctiveness, drawing attention to our fascination with ourselves. They set out representations of animal abuses which they perceive as emerging from this fascination, and the ignoring or repression of evidence for animal intelligence or experiential complexity. They question the ethics of the situations in which their animal characters find themselves, for if language, and the quality of cognition and distinctively rich mode of engagement with the world it implies, is the traditional way of defining ethical obligations to animals, the two chimpanzees, Cheeta and Fern, reveal the flawed presuppositions, injustices and cruelties of such a stance. Cheeta’s and Fern’s lives are the means of meditating on matters of sameness and the significance of difference between apes and humans, and as such the two chimpanzees participate in a mythology of great apes focused on a notion of their failed or not-quite-humanness which stretches back across recorded human history.

**LITERARY APES**

The history of Western engagement with great apes is shaped by geographical distribution; written European experiences of smaller apes began in antiquity, but awareness of great apes was restricted to rumour and misapprehension. While populations of chimpanzees, bonobos and gorillas must have been known to the peoples of central Africa, and orang-utans to peoples of Sumatra and Borneo, European encounters with great apes seemed to consist of vague sightings or second-hand accounts which interpreted them as monkey-men, wild men of the woods or mythical creatures such as lusty satyrs. Hanno, a BC fifth-century Carthaginian sailor is, according to John Miller, thought to have recorded the first reference to a giant hairy man-monkey from the African interior. Some two hundred years later Aristotle’s *The History of Animals* describes the generality of apes as quadrupedal,

---

3 With thanks to Michelle Poland for bringing *Me Cheeta* to my attention.

thickly coated in coarse hair, and with a face which “resembles that of man in many respects”. Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* contains what Kenneth Gouwens calls “an intriguing grab-bag of ape lore”, including a monkey known to play at draughts, and located in a general interest in the ability of apes to make inferior, entertaining, but maybe also offensive human imitations. In the Middle Ages the word *simian* (from *similitudo*) was adopted to acknowledge the strong likeness of apes and monkeys to humans. Simians appeared in many bestiaries, folk tales, encyclopaedias, marginal illustrations and sculpture, but with the proviso that they were always “inferior to humans not only in appearance and abilities, but also in dignity”. By the thirteenth century Europeans such as Marco Polo were more regularly encountering descriptions of Great Apes on their voyages of discovery, and although already acquainted with old world simians, these explorers tended, says Laura Brown, to imagine newly discovered apes as species of semihuman *monstra*. They were ambiguous monsters whose features are condensed into the later figure of Caliban, “a thing most brutish” in whom, says Raymond Corbey, can be found “a quintessential bestial European Other”.

For Early Modern Europeans, humans, created in the image and likeness of God and elevated far above the animals by speech, were distinct from apes, but Erica Fudge draws attention to the “dangerously ambivalent nature” perceived in the creatures by Edward Topsell. He observes that

Apes do outwardly resemble men very much, and *Vesalius* sheweth, that their proportion differeth from mans in moe things then *Galen* observeth, as in the muscles of the breast, & those that moue the armes, the elbow and the Ham [...] yet in their face, nostrils, eares, eye-lids, breasts, armes, thumbes, fingers & nails, they agree very much.

---

The sense of recognition, of similarity, is clear, says Fudge; for Topsell “[t]he ape is both like and not like the human, but ultimately it is anthropoid; its face is like a human face”. In 1658 Dutch physician Jakob de Bondt (Jacob Bontius) is also both unsettled and enthralled by similarities between apes and humans; in his Historiae naturalis et medicae Indiæ orientalis (1658) he records an encounter with a Bornean orang-utan, describing it as

… this wonderful monster
With a human face, so like human-kind not only
In groaning, but also in wetting the face with weeping.

It is with Bondt’s scrutiny of the face of an orang-utan that Great Apes began their transition from creatures of myth and misconception to subjects of scientific and philosophical investigation. The trajectory that led to the field of primatology did not, however, dismantle what Donna Haraway, in Primate Visions, calls a narrative about “primal stories, the origin and nature of ‘man’, and about reformation stories, the reform and reconstruction of human nature”.

In 1697 Edward Tyson imported what is thought to be the first living chimpanzee to be seen in Britain. Described by him in Ourang-Outang sive Homo Sylvestris (1699) as a pygmie, it lived only a few months. The first gorillas to be seen in London were presented by French adventurer-cum-naturalist Paul Du Chaillu in 1861, and were stuffed rather than alive. Du Chaillu’s “thrilling anecdotes” of imperialist confrontations with ferocious gorillas contributed to the excitement and turmoil which followed the publication of Darwin’s On the Origin of Species in 1859, and (despite the later, and in some respects unjust, discrediting of Du Chaillu’s work as “fantasy”) to the beginning of serious scientific interest in the natural behaviour of primates. Robert Sussman pinpoints this inauguration at the 1860 annual meeting of

13 Jakob de Bondt, quoted in Laura Brown, Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes, p.27.
15 Edward Tyson, Ourang-Outang sive Homo Sylvestris: or, the Anatomy of a Pygmie compared with that of a Monkey, an Ape, and a Man. To which is added a philological essay concerning the pygmies, the cynocephali, the satyrs, and sphinges of the ancients. Wherein it will appear that they are all either Apes, or Monkeys, and not Men, as formerly pretended, [online] (British Heritage Library) (London: printed for T. Bennett and D. Brown, 1699), p.2, http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/ia/orangoutangsvh00tyso#page/9/mode/1up [accessed 12 February 2015].
16 Miller, Empire and the Animal Body, p.100, p.125.
the British Association for the Advancement of Science. According to the now famous account by Charles Lyell, Bishop Wilberforce asked Thomas Henry Huxley, “Was it through his grandfather or his grandmother that he claimed descent from a monkey?” Huxley replied:

If the question is put to me would I rather have a miserable ape for a grandfather or a man highly endowed by nature and possessing great means and influence for the mere purpose of introducing ridicule into a grave scientific discussion – I unhesitatingly affirm my preference for the ape.\(^\text{17}\)

This clash represented both an opposition to the new location of man as an animal in the Order Primates, and a refusal to relinquish man’s sanctified and privileged status above animals. In 1871 Darwin published *The Descent of Man*, firmly concluding that “man is descended from a hairy, tailed quadruped”, and dismissing the notion that there is any meaningful distinction between humans and apes.\(^\text{18}\) Darwin’s conviction did not end scientific, political and ideological haggling over the troubling proximity of apes and humans, and the great apes retained their symbolic and mythical doubleness as both similar and not similar to humans, the primitive mirror to the cultured and rational human, and the occupants of a lower rung on the evolutionary ladder.

A significant paucity of real scientific knowledge about great apes did not inhibit their creative representation in literature during the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Inspired by Paul Du Chaillu’s apparently fantastical tales, says John Miller, R. M. Ballantyne’s *The Gorilla Hunters* (1861) exemplified colonialist adventure stories for boys in racist blurrings of ape and native, and in representations of the gorilla as a “nightmarish and […] devilish” beast.\(^\text{19}\) Du Chaillu himself, says Miller, turned to writing children’s stories following his disgraced exit from serious science, creating “exaggeratedly monstrous” gorillas with menacing teeth and improbable physical strength.\(^\text{20}\) In 1912 Edgar Rice Burroughs published *Tarzan of the Apes*, the story of a human baby raised by apes to become lord of the jungle. Tarzan is both the epitome of the noble savage and of human superiority


\(^{19}\) Miller, *Empire and the Animal Body*, p.130.

as an apparently innate white Western male heritage of gentlemanlike manner, linguistic rationality and natural dominion emerges from his primitive childhood. Tarzan’s ape upbringing, although revealing many recognisably human traits among his ape family and displaying him as humanity in rude form, serves only to reinforce the naturalness of his difference from them.

Franz Kafka’s 1917 short story ‘A Report to an Academy’ travels with similar themes of boundary crossings, but from a very different perspective. The eponymous Report is given by Red Peter, who has been invited to describe his previous life as an ape. Having acquired human language and habits to escape a tiny cage and a future in a zoo, Red Peter claims for himself “the cultural level of an average European”, and lives in “the way of humanity,” while retaining the body and gait of an ape.21 Often read as a fable and an allegory of the oppression of European Jews, Red Peter is, in this context, an animal only insofar as he is an icon for a set of conventional symbols about the nature of power and the relationship between language and how the world is understood. However, to read Red Peter as if his animal body is no more than the merest sketch which can gain colour, texture and depth only when interpreted as expressing a human characteristic or ritual, is to ignore the ways in which those symbols were formed in the first place. Historical anxieties about human sanctity induced by the discovery of great apes can be located in Red Peter’s body as a fear of the other – an other who seems both to be a dark, hairy, speechless and therefore debased version of the modern European, and a version who is similar enough to make his otherness unsettling in its blurring of boundaries.

Red Peter’s “aping” of human behaviour and speech is successful enough to earn him celebrity and a degree of human-like freedom, but his audience at the academy is apparently not interested in the accomplishments necessary for transforming an ape in a cage into an ape who attends banquets and scientific receptions. It is his former ape life which intrigues, but he tells the assembled members of the Academy that he cannot fully comply with their desire to find out what it is like to be an ape. “Your life as apes,” he tells them, “insofar as something of that kind lies behind you, cannot be further removed from you than mine is from me”(p.195), for

Red Peter has mastery of human speech, but he lacks a language capable of translating ape experience into human words. In the eyes of the Academy it is his failure which is foregrounded, not his success. In Red Peter’s movement from ape to human world he would seem to have crossed the exclusionary boundary of language, but his safe passage is problematised by the eyes of the “bewildered half-broken” (p. 204) female chimpanzee in whose body he takes comfort at the end of the day. His transition from unthinking animal to syntactically adept humanity is partial in that he must take his pleasure “as apes do” (p. 204) rather than as humans do, but complete in that as a moral being he finds his abuse of a helpless animal unbearable and accepts that he will bear it by refusing to look at her suffering.

A number of notable fictional works follow Kafka’s, all of them provoking questions about humans via apes. John Collier’s *His Monkey Wife* (1930) satirises human weakness, and its chimpanzee hero Emily seems to epitomise a particular idea of womanhood by being compassionate, intelligent, enterprising, and also speechless. Although Emily eventually subverts her voicelessness by learning to type, it is hard not to interpret her silence as part of the construction of an ideal good woman – her species making a biological scold’s bridle. Four years later, the second Tarzan film to feature Johnny Weissmuller as Tarzan (*Tarzan and his Mate*, 1934) was also the first to feature the chimpanzee Cheetah and the animal actor who played him (or her). Cheetah is here an anthropomorphic character capable of thinking and acting as a human would (unlike the “natives” who also appear in the Tarzan films, for they are consistently portrayed as too stupid or primitive to think or act “as a human would”), but his small, dark, hairy body also functions as a foil for Tarzan who, though uncivilised, is very thoroughly and magnificently white, Western and human. The 1933 film *King Kong* also highlights a contrast between the highly evolved human body and dark, primitive otherness by juxtaposing the frail blonde beauty of Ann Darrow and the vast brutishness of the giant ape King Kong. Vercors’s 1952 novel *You Shall Know Them* struggled with matters of race and species distinctions; Douglas Templemore, a young journalist, tests the boundaries of humanity by killing an infant he has fathered through artificial insemination of a female creature who is either an ape-like human or human-like ape. Templemore’s trial for this killing must establish whether the infant was human and thus murdered, or not human, in which case no
crime has been committed; the verdict depends on a definition of the human species, a definition which scientific experts are unable to provide.

An acceleration of primatological research in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries inspired fictional representations of apes that were far more densely informed by ethology, biology and primatology than their literary forebears. Nevertheless, many of the ideological and philosophical debates and problems continue to follow older, if sometimes more sophisticated, trajectories in terms of science and thinking about how or if humans should share the world with other humans and nonhuman others. Will Self’s *Great Apes* (1997), Liz Jensen’s *Ark Baby* (1997), Sara Gruen’s *Ape House* (2010), Benjamin Hale’s *The Evolution of Bruno Littlemore* (2011), and the recent *Planet of the Apes* film prequels all feature apes that have acquired human speech, often by being “lifted” closer to human-like capacities, usually by bestowing speech and high intelligence on ape characters. *Me Cheeta* and *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* are, however, both concerned with evoking a sense of apes’ lives as they are played out among the lives and preoccupations of humans, and their chimpanzees – Cheeta and Fern – have not been “lifted” by experimentation or some kind of epiphany. They are ordinary apes in extraordinary circumstances and they cannot, in their storyworlds, use human speech. They can, though, talk.

**ME CHEETA: STAR OF CAGE AND SCREEN**

*Me Cheeta* proposes that it is the autobiography of Cheeta, a real chimpanzee who appeared as Cheetah with Johnny Weissmuller in Tarzan films made in the 1930s and 1940s. The potential for a chimpanzee to tell its own life to humans is extremely limited, but while there are several arguments militating against the veracity of Cheeta’s memoir, and although much of *Me Cheeta* is an anthropomorphic fiction, it is not a trivial act of animal ventriloquism. *Me Cheeta* instead performs a forceful articulation of an animal whose life is designed and identified via a stereotype of comedic and debased human imitation. Cheeta’s autobiography raises important questions about talking animals: if nonhuman animals could talk to us in a language we understand (that is, in a human way) what would they say to us? And would we

---

22 For clarity, I refer to the chimpanzee character in the Tarzan films using the spelling ‘Cheetah’, while the living chimpanzee at C.H.E.E.T.A. and the narrative voice who tells his story is spelled ‘Cheeta’.
like what they say? As Erica Fudge says, “a speaking animal can upset all kinds of assumptions by saying something we don’t want to hear”.23 Me Cheeta’s story of a comedy chimpanzee, and the comic style in which it is written, also raise questions about how an animal may be overwritten or transformed by comedic representation. Me Cheeta, featuring Cheeta the chimpanzee, celebrity memoirist, retired actor, and real living animal, initially seems to be a spoof of the traditional Hollywood memoir, but is instead a satire of the hedonistic world of Hollywood and of wider human self-obsession. Among all the scurrilous tales of film star depravity and inadequacy, Cheeta’s story is littered with the corpses of animals, animals who are beaten, shot, electrocuted, poisoned, neglected, run over, experimented on, sent into space and otherwise killed by humans – or “the omnicidal”, as Cheeta calls them.24 It seems that Cheeta has much to say that we, the omnicidal, would prefer not to hear about ourselves.

Ape Autobiography

The real, original Cheeta did not write his own memoir, for he neither speaks a human language nor thinks and writes in one. The account provided by the textual Cheeta does not make a conventional claim for authorship, instead invoking the legendary monkeys who through merely adventitious typing generate the complete works of Shakespeare: his work, he says, is “not Shakespeare, sure, but I’m totally amazed at how well it’s turned out, given that I’ve just been randomly prodding at the keyboard. The spelling!”(p.298) The use of a computer keyboard offers a way out of the problem of Cheeta’s lack of human-like speech, but this is a faked self-reflexivity which draws humorous attention to what seems an insuperable difficulty. Cheeta has a life which is worth writing, but as the subject of that life, the being who might be best qualified to provide authoritative material and perspectives on himself, he is not able to record it. As will become clear, access to authority generates significant questions about the principle and practices of animal life-writing and their impact on the representation of that animal, but let us, for the moment, allow the autobiographical Cheeta the parity he claims with the real chimpanzee, and consider what constructs the willing suspension of disbelief in the voice of an animal’s autobiography.

Paul de Man argues that autobiography, in common to some degree with all other texts, is “a figure of reading” which rhetorically posits “voice or face by means of language” in a manner privative of the “shape and sense” of the world.\(^\text{25}\) No autobiography, then, can fully render life experiences, and the experiences an animal has are further removed from their original “shape and sense” than those of a human, for even if the interior world of an animal were knowable it would be transformed by the rendition from the semiotics of its own *umwelt* into human language. Fictional or mythical talking animals have featured in stories throughout the history of storytelling, and since the flourishing of life-writing in the Enlightenment these animal fictions have been joined by animal narratives styled as autobiographies. These are stories which claim some connection with a real animal, told through the assumption by a human writer of a voice purporting to be that of the animal in question. Since this animal cannot speak or grasp a pen, a human adopts the propositional role of an interpretative amanuensis, a narrative premise say Cynthia Huff and Joel Haefner, that works only because it “allows animals to be constructed as rhetorical artifacts”, whose fragile authenticity rests “not in the connection between author and subject but in what the reader is willing to believe”.\(^\text{26}\) In this sense, however real the animal and the events described, any attempt to write the interior world of an animal, even if based on scientific research, is never more factual than a thoughtful and educated guess.

In a preface, Cheeta remarks that “[w]ithout you I’d literally be nothing”(p.xiv), self-consciously acknowledging that *Me Cheeta* creates a rhetorical construction of a chimpanzee’s voice that exists as such only by contract with the reader, and ironically drawing attention to important distinctions between anthropomorphic voice and animal reality. When author James Lever put this prefatory comment in Cheeta’s mouth it is, however, unlikely he was aware quite how pronounced the distances between the real, the literary and the apparently mythical Cheetas might be. Lever was commissioned by Pearson, the publishing house, to write a spoof autobiography about Cheeta’s life as an animal actor using, says Simon Edge, “the known facts from Cheeta’s life but also taking advantage of his unique position

as a unique witness to imagined trysts and clashes between some of the biggest names of Hollywood’s Golden era stars”. Lever, in his Man Booker Prize long-listed novel, does indeed fill the gaps between the “known facts” of Cheeta’s life with invented stories about real people, but the distinctions between these real people and what their fictional avatars do are very blurry, and the real Cheeta’s relationships with these people, and the likelihood of his participation in Hollywood events, are similarly undecidable. *Me Cheeta* is, though, predicated on the assumption that there is a real animal known as Cheeta, and while the textualised voice is fictional, the tales tall, and the spoofing satirical, it is this living body that has, supposedly, left its marks on the history of Hollywood.

*Me Cheeta* is the story of a celebrity chimpanzee’s life in Hollywood, captivity, and retirement. Speaking from the early twenty-first century and his home at the C.H.E.E.T.A. primate sanctuary, Cheeta describes his infancy, circa 1933, in the tropical forests of Africa, the death of his mother, his capture, and his transportation to the USA by animal trainer Tony Gentry. When installed at the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio zoo in Hollywood as a performing animal, he lives what seems to be an exciting life as a star at *Tarzan* film shoots, glamorous parties, and in drunken pranks with the beautiful people of 1930s Hollywood. At the end of his film career Cheeta tours the USA with Gentry as part of a performing animal act until his retirement from public life. Gentry bequeaths Cheeta to his nephew Don who, encouraged by primatologist Jane Goodall, starts up C.H.E.E.T.A., where the now elderly and diabetic Cheeta spends his time painting, visiting hospital patients, and trying to purloin cigarettes. Although many of Cheeta’s stories about film stars and his own roguish adventures are invented, the book includes historical documentation such as photographs, a filmography and picture credits, which locate a chimpanzee at some of the events he describes. When *Me Cheeta* was published in 2008, the real Cheeta had recently been verified by the Guinness Book of Records as, at the age of 76, the oldest chimpanzee in captivity. With this quality of accreditation there seemed little doubt that all *Me Cheeta*’s tall tales hang on a factual framework – that the real chimpanzee known as Cheeta really appeared with Weissmuller in *Tarzan and His Mate*. *Me Cheeta* is not, however, the first storyteller to monkey about with Cheeta.

---

27 Simon Edge, ‘Is cheeta just a cheater?’ *Express*, [online] (Thursday 30 July 2009)  
[www.express.co.uk/expressyourself/117233/is-cheeta-just-a-cheater](http://www.express.co.uk/expressyourself/117233/is-cheeta-just-a-cheater) [accessed 2 December 2014]
Author Richard Rosen, commissioned to write an authorised biography about Cheeta after the publication of the unauthorised *Me Cheeta*, was disappointed to discover that this particular Cheeta may never have played Cheetah with Johnny Weissmuller. The bare bones of *Me Cheeta* originated in stories told by Tony Gentry and were widely treated as factual, but Rosen’s research led him to believe that Gentry may have lavishly embroidered Cheeta’s past. According to Rosen, the Cheeta upon whom *Me Cheeta* is based, the chimpanzee now living at the C.H.E.E.T.A. sanctuary, was probably born in the 1960s, and thus is not the oldest chimpanzee in captivity, and could not have appeared as Cheetah the chimpanzee in 1933. Moreover, since chimpanzees become too strong and unpredictable to use on film sets beyond the age of five, the role of Tarzan/Weissmuller’s Cheetah was probably filled by a succession of infant animals rather than a single continuing animal actor. A book which could have been classified as Cheeta’s biography told through the conceit of autobiography – that is, a ghostwritten autodiegetic voicing of an anthropomorphic satire, located in the plotted points of a real chimpanzee’s life – appears to lose much of its already modest factual veracity, and bears a closer resemblance to a fairly outrageous historical novel inspired by a tangled myth.

Does this matter? It mattered to Cheeta’s owner, Dan Westfall, that Cheeta did not live the mythology attributed to him by Gentry and popular history, and his carefully worded website indicates his struggle to accept Rosen’s findings. It also matters because a *Washington Post* article about Cheeta by Rosen introduces a complexity to the politics of animal life-writing. Cheeta’s voice in *Me Cheeta* is funny and witty, while being scathingly critical of human treatment of animals in the entertainment industry, sport, as pets, as spectacles and in the wild. The force of his satire derives from his assumption of the urbane persona of an affable and elderly actor, mediated through a chimpanzee perspective which comments quite tellingly on the symbols and thoughtless utility humans seek in animals. When the factual basis of

---


29 C.H.E.E.T.A. Primate Sanctuary Inc., ‘Welcome to Fun Photos’, [cheetathechimp.org/bio.htm](http://cheetathechimp.org/bio.htm) [accessed 12 September 2015]. The website also features photographs of Westfall and Cheeta posing with a copy of *Me Cheeta*, suggesting Westfall’s continuing approval of the novel, and photographs documenting visits from members of the now-deceased Johnny Weissmuller’s family which indicate a wider reluctance to let a good story go – especially one that helps fund a venture as expensive as a primate sanctuary.
much of *Me Cheeta* is undermined by the revelation of Gentry’s tall stories, Cheeta’s objective course through history vanishes from the record as the trajectory of one life and the connected trail of marks left on the world by its activities. Cheeta’s newly fictional past diminishes the power of *Me Cheeta* as a critique of the ways humans treat other animals, for its catalogue of abuses becomes less forceful when it loses the authority of historical connection.

Cheeta’s exemplary literary function in *Me Cheeta* is to defamiliarise the treatment of apes in human society, and thus to re-identify his captivity and handling as abusive, but perhaps the loss of a real history and of a real chimpanzee who lived and suffered this life reduces the textual Cheeta to a clever and marketable, anthropomorphising fiction. Previously divided from a real chimpanzee only by textualisation and an elaborate voice, *Me Cheeta* might now be a significant misrepresentation of the real lives of those apes compelled to live among humans. Rosen visits the elderly Cheeta at his home in Westfall’s primate sanctuary, and finds him to be “sinewy, solemn”, “grizzled and a bit threadbare”, with “disturbingly indifferent eyes”, and difficult to reconcile with “the lovable scamp who made a career out of getting Tarzan out of serious trouble”.30 Rosen is nervous about the genuine threat an adult chimpanzee represents to his comparatively puny human body, but intrigued by Cheeta’s careful and idiosyncratically human eating habits and touched by the sincere affection evident between Westfall and Cheeta. This Cheeta excludes Rosen’s human curiosity, his aging body disappointingly failing to enact the traditional chimpanzee role of human imitator and cuddly source of amusement. Rosen’s account of him as both like and convincingly other from humans is a more realistic narrative of an encounter between two individual beings than any of those described in *Me Cheeta*. This version of Cheeta, though, however importantly and meaningfully real he is, does not have the anthropomorphic charm that seems necessary to sustain public attention; that is, he does not talk in a language we understand. It is his mythology that appeals – the story of the animal who anthropomorphically enacts a failed attempt to be human.

Unlike Rosen, *Me Cheeta* does not offer representations that attempt to evoke the realness and otherness of an ape in Hollywood, but its photographs and

---

filmography demonstrate the presence of real chimpanzees, and Cheeta’s ironic commentaries on them point to an acute awareness of what the insertion of these chimpanzees into human environments in twentieth century America entailed. A publicity still for Tarzan’s Secret Treasure (1941) depicts Cheeta sitting on a branch with Boy, Tarzan and Jane; Cheeta remarks that “[d]espite the smiles, I think the tension in the air is palpable”, drawing attention to his own face, which is contorted into a snarl.31 Another photograph shows a chimpanzee making a telephone call while wearing a chain around its neck, and a still from Fox’s Doctor Dolittle shows a very young and anxious-looking chimpanzee in a chariot. There are photographs of a chimpanzee on a unicycle, and the famous image of the chimpanzee Ham’s fear grimace – interpreted at the time as a smile – before his Apollo test flight in 1961. These images represent a historical record which captures the fear, suffering and undignified diminishing of complex, intelligent beings, and thus, although they do not tell the story of a particular, singular life they do create a narrative which charts a general historical set of conditions. The real Cheeta, and the fictional entity who inhabits his mythology, are figureheads for these conditions – visible emblems, the story of an idea in which can be read the lives of other chimpanzees as an inferior species in the human Western world. That there is little documentary evidence interested in distinguishing between one chimpanzee and another serves to expose the marginality of the animals, and their appropriated and intermittent visibility as entities of interest in human cultural milieus.

Me Cheeta is an autobiographical spoof which has in its turn apparently been spoofed by history – an especially ironic twist given the emphatic identificatory claim in the Me of Me Cheeta – but if Cheeta’s claim to history as Johnny Weissmuller’s documented sidekick has disintegrated, the space the text creates for a commentary on what humans seek in apes and on the lives of apes in captivity does not collapse with it. Karla Armbruster argues that although a human fondness for speaking for animals can be destructively anthropocentric if it seeks only to see animals as poor copies of humans:

is it not possible that, running through every poem, novel, film, and silly news segment featuring talking animals, there is at least a trace of a desire to know and better understand the real otherness of animals, to uncenter from

31 ‘The Tarzan cast sitting in a tree’, (Getty Images, 1939), in Me Cheeta, plate section two, p.3.
our human perspective and – in whatever limited way we can – open ourselves to the nonhuman?³²

If the potential exists in literature to acknowledge the existence of meaningful nonhuman experiences and to at least attempt to imagine them, then the task for literary animal studies, says Armbruster, is to “explore what constitutes a responsible approach to the talking animal”.³³ Responsibility does not have to inhere in accuracy in the literary creation, but it must “somehow remind the reader of the real animals that hover outside the human-created text,” while also being aware that because non-linguistic experience must be rendered in human language it always carries an element of the authoritarian.³⁴ Despite his scandalising, flippancy and unreliability, Cheeta remains aware throughout of the unstable textuality of his memoir, of the real animal lives beyond the pages he inhabits, of the ethical and political discourses which shape those lives, and of the verbal mediation necessary to making an animal talk in language humans can understand.

**Comic Apes**

Literary apes have often functioned as devices to illustrate the baser side of human nature; brutality, stupidity and crudeness emerge in racialized, ferocious and bestial ape representations, or in the ape comedy sidekick. Cheetah, in the Johnny Weissmuller *Tarzan* films, has a comedic role, and the literary construction of Cheeta’s voice in *Me Cheeta* continues this theme, deploying witty language and bawdy scenarios while also pursuing the racialising images implicit in the *Tarzan* series. Andrew Stott argues that, “[l]ike water in rocks, comedy has a particular talent for finding the cracks in the world and amplifying them to the point of absurdity”, and Cheeta deploys absurdity as a defamiliarising strategy, his wit cracking open the normalised rocks of animal incarceration, human cruelty and thoughtlessness.³⁵ He reveals the animal suffering woven into everyday life in the Western world with jokes, comic adventures, vicious satire and wry shrugs, and although he makes himself the most conspicuous butt of his wit, the real targets are the assumptions of human

---

³³ Armbruster, ‘What do we want from talking animals?’, p.23.
³⁴ Armbruster, ‘What do we want from talking animals?’, p.24, p.25.
superiority that cast him as an ugly imposter and treat him accordingly. Nevertheless, there are questions to be asked about how Cheeta’s comic satirical commentary on his role as a comedy animal impacts on his own representation as an animal.

Randy Malamud argues that famous animals such as the film star performing dog Rin Tin Tin, are inscribed in “bizarrely unnatural narratives” in which cultural “visual presence overwrites the animal’s actual nature”, erases their actual being, and supplants any public inclination to consider the animal more critically and honestly.36 A chimpanzee comic identity such as Cheeta’s, rests easily and believably on a chimpanzee body owing to the persistence of historical stereotyping which views apes as similar to humans but always inferior in appearance, abilities and dignity – as parodies of humans. The role of the comic chimpanzee is to ape humans, and Cheeta has been trained to sit on chairs, wear clothes, drink from cups, fetch cigarettes and lighters, appear to play cards, applaud, laugh and perform his trademark double-lip-flip to represent approval or amusement. He has also acquired some distinctly human bad habits; he is a heavy smoker, and an immoderate and riotous drinker, having been plied with alcohol from an early age by humans keen to enjoy the antics of a drunken monkey. All these activities attribute to a chimpanzee only the single characteristic of ape as aspirational but failed human, and exclude the habits, preferences and interests of the real animal. Like chimpanzees at a tea party Cheeta’s hairy body, clowning, overly-insouciant smoking and drinking, and the risk that he will break the china, enact a hyperbolised and therefore amusingly inept imitation of proper humans. He cannot be trusted to behave in a civilised manner, and his debased features, lurching gait and inarticulate hooting chime with a longstanding popular image of apes as a bastardisation of the refined, lucid human. The entertainment industry can thus easily frame Cheeta’s body as a figure of farce, slapstick and pantomime – a burlesque transfiguration from a complex, intelligent being to a rudimentary symbol which emphasises human difference and superiority.

Me Cheeta is conscious of the cultural processes that re-inscribe an animal with a character not at all its own, and the text reveals its consciousness through a narrative voice that is at once cynical and naïve, coarse and debonair, and both plausibly chimp-

like and linguistically too sophisticated and savagely critical to be anything but human. On these shifting grounds Cheeta’s narrative voice emerges as unreliable, aware that much of his treatment by humans is species-based abuse, but ironically revealed as unaware that his perception of himself and his human audience’s interpretation of him are markedly different. Cheeta views his drinking and smoking as sophisticated accomplishments, claiming that he has frequently “charmed a reaction out of an indifferent or unwelcoming human by plucking a cigarette from between their fingers and taking a good toke” (p.63), but what he interprets as an air of suave bonhomie and the skilled reading of a human social situation instead amuses his audience for its incongruousness. Cheeta also represents himself not as a performing animal but as a comedy actor – a skilled artiste whose knife-sharp cinematic satire enables him to exact fictional/real revenge on the hated and conflated Jane/Maureen O’Sullivan in *Tarzan’s New York Adventure*. In Cheeta’s eyes he “subtly deconstructed” Jane on screen in “as grotesque a satire on ‘refinement’ and ‘poise’ and all her fake values as I could manage”, by exposing the contents of the carefully packed suitcase of a supposedly distraught woman. As Cheeta reveals that this involves “prancing in front of the mirror with her stockings on my talcum-dusted head” (p.220), it is clear that what he sees as deconstruction, his audience will find funny because he is a naughty monkey out of his proper place and making a mess in a hotel bedroom. Cheeta has been trained to fit the role not of clever ape who has transgressed the species boundary by performing his own anthropomorphosis, but of inadequate and therefore comic imitator, and his ironic narrative undermining of himself foregrounds that what he enacts is the denaturing and mocking of a chimpanzee.

Stott describes the comic body as “exaggeratedly physical, a distorted, disproportionate, profane, ill-disciplined, insatiate, and perverse organism”, and Cheeta’s body performs these notions of the comically uncivilised in public. Cheeta recounts biting a number of leading ladies, accidentally ejaculating over Jayne Mansfield, making aggressive displays at Marlene Dietrich, defecating in public, and copulating with every female member of Charlie Chaplin’s collection of bonobos during an intellectual soiree. Written ironically, Cheeta is represented as not fully aware that the claim to civilisation made by his witty and urbane narrative voice is undermined by his base, unrestrained animal body. What seems a claim to a troubling

---

37 Stott, *Comedy*, p.83.
of the species boundary in the performance of humanness, is simultaneously a reinforcement of human superiority and chimpanzee inferiority because the performance is perceived as parodically debased. Cheeta’s perverse behaviour – his drunkenness, biting and sexual intemperance – embody the socially unacceptable side of human bodily existence. He is a visible and unrestrained enactor of human desires, a failed “as if” human who reinforces human distinction rather than troubling it.

*Me Cheeta* continually reflects on the invitation to inclusion human society seems to extend to Cheeta, while simultaneously using the terms of that invitation to exclude him. Cheeta performs this dualled and blurred identity in a narrative doubling of his and Johnny Weissmuller’s relationship with the fictional coupling of Cheetah and Tarzan, a set of relationships that the narrative deliberately confuses by conflating in Cheeta’s mind the fictional world of Tarzan’s escarpment with its framing reality. As Cheetah/Cheeta adores Tarzan for being “the paragon of animals, the ultimate alpha”(p.112), so Cheeta adores Johnny; Johnny is kind to animals, has uncomplicated and childlike desires, exists in a bodily rather than cerebral way, and speaks more with his body than with words. Johnny, according to Cheeta, is as simple, physical and animal-like as Tarzan, and thus exhibits closer kinship with animals. Tarzan/Weissmuller and Cheetah/Cheeta are a “double-act”(p.28), companions on screen and off, but as cinematic entities, and despite the boundary-blurring of Tarzan’s animalised and Cheetah’s humanised identities, they embody oppositional visual, symbolic and dramatic roles.

Highlighted by the scantiness of his dark loincloth, Tarzan’s body is magnificently muscled, “ideally hairless”(p.102) under the lights, and “silvery-white”(p.112) on screen. In comparison, upon seeing himself on film for the first time, Cheeta discovers that he is a “scratty little slip of a chimp”(p.111); his underdeveloped, dark, hairy body and simian features are the antithesis of Tarzan’s perfect, gleaming physique. Together they enact a “Beauty and the Beast” scenario reminiscent of Plato’s horses in *Phaedrus*, affirming a mythological framework which unites whiteness and beauty with truth and superiority in one, and darkness and misshapenness with debased inferiority in the other. Cheeta is the little dark shadow of Tarzan’s filmic luminosity – secondary, other, and capable only of a mediocre aping of the godlike human. Tarzan’s muscular physical control of himself and his environment – swimming,
swinging through the trees, wrestling crocodiles, tossing Jane effortlessly into rivers, defeating bad white men and the always dangerously stupid, primitive natives – augments his dramatic role as the hero of a story of adventure and of love.\textsuperscript{38} His bodily power and control over chaos and irrational primitive or instinctive desire is cognate with symmetry, order and the definite, and thus inseparable from truth. The equilibrium he brings to the jungle weaves him into conventional structures of prejudice which even though he seems a savage, confirm the naturalness of white Western rational dominance. In contrast, Cheetah is the comic bringer of disorder, the breaker of Jane’s dishes and stealer of her clothes; his role is to jump up and down, “gibbering”\textsuperscript{(p.103)} to reinforce that he is the irrational, agitated, impotent and therefore funny foil for Tarzan’s calm power. Stott describes the body in comedy as “the medium through which humanity’s fascination with its animal instincts and animal nature is explored”, and Cheetah, by occupying the role of comedic body, ensures that those aspects of jungle-dwelling, inarticulate, uncivilised Tarzan which could be interpreted as animal are diverted to an ape by the highly visible contrast between their two bodies.\textsuperscript{39}

Cheeta embraces Cheetah’s role of the comic, muted, diminished, anthropomorphic idea of a wild chimpanzee for reasons of self-preservation. Comedy chimpanzees trained to mimic human behaviour are popular in entertainment and advertising – they sell tickets and improve product and brand likeability – but the use of chimpanzees and other apes in popular media encourages a set of public misconceptions.\textsuperscript{40} Frequency of ape imagery gives the impression that ape populations are stable, while, particularly in the case of great apes, the reverse is true, with all species either threatened, endangered or critically endangered. Further, apes wearing human clothes and trained to behave amusingly suggests that they make good domestic pets, and, again, this is not at all the case. Cultural representations also obscure the brutality of some training methods; John Sorenson points out that ape trainers have used, and continue to use, abusive training methods in which apes are beaten with

\textsuperscript{38} Tarzan and His Mate, Dir. by Cedric Gibbons (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1934).
\textsuperscript{39} Stott, Comedy, p.83.
“fists, baseball bats, clubs, hammers and shovels to keep them afraid, and, thus, compliant. Apes have their teeth removed and jaws wired shut when performing and wear powerful remote-controlled electric shockers”. Me Cheeta seems well acquainted with such practices, and Cheeta draws attention to them in a plot motivated by attempts to avoid beatings with “the ugly-stick”(p.77) by being funny. Cheeta uses comedy to keep his public profile high; he says, “[o]utside of a cage, that was where you were safest, among the humans. The more they looked and laughed at you the better your chances”(p.107), and if the public lose interest in an animal, that animal becomes disposable.

Cheeta is further motivated by fear of deportation to “the lab”. Before his arrival at MGM Studios he is transferred in error to a medical research laboratory where

Pretty much every chimp or macaque I could see was in drastically bad shape. Right across from me, on the highest level of the shelters, was an old female unlike any I’d ever seen. Her chest and belly were so hugely swollen that it would have been impossible for her to stand up. She was breathing in rapid little pants, as if she couldn’t get the air to stay down. Below her was a chimp covered in a pale liquid, which I supposed it had just thrown up. It wasn’t moving. There were macaques with peculiar white-dusted eyes, macaques with open red wounds on their chests (p.81).

The horrors Cheeta witnesses are not necessarily factual in detail, but his description of the suffering of these apes is indicative of a general truth. Thousands of chimpanzees have been experimented on and killed in various ways in medical and military research in the USA since the first research laboratory, the Yale Laboratories for Primate Biology, was established in 1930 by Robert Yerkes, so there is substance to Cheeta’s fears of a prolonged and/or unpleasant death of the kind he witnesses if he fails to keep humans laughing. Perhaps some of the unknown chimpanzees who might have played Cheetah over the years ended their lives in a laboratory. Comedy for a chimpanzee, Me Cheeta makes plain, is no laughing matter, it is a matter of survival.

Ape Sanctuary

Both the textual Cheeta and the real Cheeta spend their retirement in a primate sanctuary, quietly living out their old age nurtured by devoted human attention,

---

environmental enrichment and medical care. As their sanctuary denotes a place of safety so it implies a surrounding environment of danger, and Cheeta frequently articulates the threats humans represent to animals: humans are emptying the seas of fish (p.224), they electrocute elephants or force dogs to tear each other to pieces for entertainment (p.202), send dogs and chimpanzees into space (p.274), slaughter cows to tow alongside yachts as sport-fish bait (p.170), gas moles (p.216), smear snakes onto roads with cars (p.157), kill copious numbers of horses with trip wires while filming The Charge of the Light Brigade (p.202). Taking seriously the responsibility Armbruster hopes for in the literary creation of a talking animal, Me Cheeta draws attention to the “sideshow” (p.106) of animal death that underpins the main feature of human obsession with themselves; “you’re terrible killers” (p.303), Cheeta says. Thus, the creation of separate zones for the safe inhabitation of apes seems necessary, but sanctuaries raise issues about how animals are accommodated – in the broadest sense of the word – in human social spaces and milieus. The boundary between humans and animals is a spatial matter, for relationships between species have a spatial dimension and conceptual spaces have material expressions. Me Cheeta’s concern with safety, sanctuary and threatening places reveals a pattern of human-animal spatial relations which prioritise human activity, and maintain an anthropocentric narrative of the “proper” place of animals.

Perhaps one of the most visible and lucid demonstrations of the distinction humans make between themselves and other animals is the bars of a cage. Bars divide spaces of animal incarceration from spaces of human freedom, and participate in a normalised discourse of the human right to displace, control and contain animals in order to look, or not look at them, as we wish. Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert theorise the nature of such spatial occupations in Animal Spaces, Beastly Places, focusing on the multiple conceptualisations and physical formations which produce “the complex entanglings of human-animal relations with space, place, location, environment and landscape”, using a geographical conception of animals and place which has two distinct but closely related senses. Animals are put in their “proper” place by human classifications, fixed in a series of abstract spaces as they are “neatly identified,
delimited and positioned in the relevant conceptual space so as to be separate from, and not overlapping with other things there identified, delimited and positioned”.

These abstract spaces are separate from but inextricably linked with the concrete places where animals as material bodies live out their lives, whether these places are largely independent of direct human intervention or are designed by humans for the “proper” location of animal stock, pets, zoo animals, and so on. An animal surrounded by the bars of a cage in a zoo is designated as a wild animal, its wildness and any danger it may represent to humans safely neutralised and its body showcased for public visual consumption. Chimpanzees are wild animals, but occupy the human imagination as like and not like us, and this method of conceptualising the relationship between the two species suggests a tension between identities of primate kinship and wild animal otherness. The questions raised by this tension, though, seem answered by the forceful intervention of the cage bars captive chimpanzees live behind, the concrete spaces of their cages insisting that the abstract space of animal otherness – their not-likeness – over-rides ethical concerns about permanently incarcerating beings also identified by their likeness.

_Me Cheeta_ responds to fraught questions about how animals are incorporated into human spaces, drawing attention to the differences between the quality of freedom and that of captivity through narrative durations and representations of temporal density. Much of Cheeta’s narrative of his life as an actor in Hollywood’s Golden Age, along with his meditations on film studios and their stars, is densely populated with lively tales, anecdotes and satirical commentaries about motoring with David Niven and a lion, lunch with Douglas Fairbanks, ecstatic afternoons filming with Johnny/Tarzan, parties, boat trips. These stories of freedom are long, but the time spent living them was short, for the vast majority of Cheeta’s time is spent, he says, in a cage, and a cage, even if well appointed, generates only one story. This story is called “behaviour”. Captive chimpanzees, along with many other species, exhibit “abnormal behaviour patterns”, including, say Lucy Birkett and Nicholas Newton-Fisher, eating faeces, plucking hair, rocking, banging against surfaces, and pacing. Cheeta says “[w]elcome to the world of caged behaviour patterns”, and “[g]et used to the old

---

44 Lucy P. Birkett, Nicholas E. Newton-Fisher, ‘How Abnormal is the Behaviour of Captive, Zoo-Living Chimpanzees?’ _PLoS ONE_, 6.6 (June 2011), 1-7 (p.1), (p.5). They note that “Abnormal behaviours among captive animals are those that are atypical of wild-living individuals”, p.2.
pacing back and forth, get used to those eternal figures of eight”(p.149). Get used to compulsive head-bashing (p.55), enervating boredom, enforced mental and physical stupor. Cheeta survives his incarceration, unlike Stroheim, a chimpanzee in a roadside zoo, where “[i]n the sweat-darkened stripe across his concrete floor you could see the map of his insanity: his insane tos and fros”(p.279). Birkett and Newton-Fisher argue that such behaviours can be interpreted as “symptoms of compromised mental health”, and would be described as “mental illness” if observed in human primates”. Me Cheeta tells the same story of captivity as Birkett and Newton-Fisher’s careful graphs, tables and formulae: “abnormal behaviour” is, in various degree, the story of all captive chimpanzees, and as Cheeta makes clear, is the repetitive consumption of time by the repetitive consumption of a single space. Captivity would seem to be as iniquitous to chimpanzees as it is to humans.

The C.H.E.E.T.A. Primate Sanctuary, both real and novelistic, is a fixed physical location dedicated to providing Cheeta with an environment appropriate to his species. The Sanctuary seems a suitable solution to the problem of how to accommodate in human society a large, potentially dangerous animal, but although Cheeta is occupied and well cared for, his place of safety retains aspects of the cage. The Biblical form of sanctuary is a place “of refuge, to which a person who has killed someone may flee”, ensuring that they are not themselves killed by their accusers before facing trial. Later Christian versions imagined sanctuary as a place for the guilty to claim asylum, and where an intercessory cleric was required to mediate between the guilty person and their accusers. Sanctuary was first used to describe a place of safety for wild plants and animals by A. P. Vivian in Wanderings in the Western Land in 1879, but even in this context it is not clear who is being protected from who. Michel de Certeau points out that “space is a practiced place. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers”. Although walkers need not be human, the streets upon which they walk are designed by humans, and the functions of those streets are the effects of human practices, dimensions, capabilities and expectations; in the same way, an animal

---
sanctuary, in principle, produces a space dedicated to the inscription by animals of their own daily practices in safety. In practice, however, sanctuary makes a space ordered and delineated by multiple competing inter-species conditions, socio-politics, and physical necessities, and which requires the circumscription of nonhuman animals’ daily habits in order to be able to exist inside the space of human practices which surround it.

In *Animals and Why They Matter*, Mary Midgley pointedly says of comparisons between racism and speciesism that “[o]verlooking somebody’s race is entirely sensible. Overlooking their species is a supercilious insult”; racism, she says, implies a trivial distinction, however terrible the practical consequences, but for species “[t]he distinction drawn is not trivial; it is real and crucial”. Cheeta agrees, describing an incident involving Weissmuller’s third wife, Lupe Velez: “it wouldn’t have been difficult for me to rip her limb from adorable limb. I was young then, but a near-adult chimp can put a human in Cedars-Sinai before you can blink. That’s the prevailing physical reality between us, dearest humans”(p.156). The average adult male chimpanzee is five or six times stronger than the average adult human, and this physical power is a far from negligible distinction if humans and chimpanzees live in close proximity. Julietta Hua and Neel Ahuja, researching links between gender and transspecies carework, visited a number of chimpanzee sanctuaries which care for “surplus” or “retired” biomedical or military research animals in the USA. Such sanctuaries deliver a “pragmatic yet constrained solution” to administering the care of captive chimpanzees, dependent as they are on cheap feminised labour. Different sanctuaries have varied approaches to care, ethics and purpose – some focus on conservation, and others on returning chimpanzees to the wild, while a particular sanctuary visited by Hua and Ahuja is most interested in providing the best possible conditions for captive chimpanzees. Here, human caregivers negotiate and develop close relationships with their wards. Finding them to be very like humans in some ways, but aware that there are still important differences, they avoid collapsing intimacy produced by similarity into anthropomorphism. A caregiver says that:

these [chimpanzee wards] are really great friends of mine, but I would never feel safe to be right next to them because they might bite. It doesn’t mean

---


49 Julietta Hua, Neel Ahuja, ‘Chimpanzee Sanctuary: “Surplus” Life and the Politics of Transspecies Care’, *American Quarterly*, 65.3 (September 2013) 619-637 (p.619).
they’re any less of a good friend. They bite each other but they can handle it. We’re built differently, and I think that’s the thing. We have two separate worlds. As the difference between a bitten chimpanzee and a bitten human demonstrates, say Hua and Ahuja, there are “limits to transspecies cohabitation […] chimpanzees are at once our kin even as they entrench the boundaries of difference separating species”.51

The effect of such difference is that humans and chimpanzees cannot safely occupy the same social spaces, and in those places organised to accommodate human daily activity, the social and biological “separate world” inhabited by “retired” chimpanzees is treated as a threat which requires concrete spatial separation. The result is the sanctuary, a form of heterotopian space. Foucault’s concept of the heterotopia has been applied to many different manifestations of space, and, according to Peter Johnson, is perhaps overused, but it can be a productive way of understanding spaces “in the context of Foucault’s ongoing quest for a ‘critical morality’”.52 James Faubion describes heterotopias as “concrete technologies”, and “rhetorical machines”, open but isolated spaces – sanctuaries or asylums with policed entries and exits.53 For Foucault these are spaces “of deviation: those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed”, such as rest homes and psychiatric hospitals.54 Thus, to the lengthy list of heterotopias can be added chimpanzee sanctuaries and their deviant freight of similar but not same, not human, dangerous primate beings.

For Cheeta, the removal of animals from the wild and from responsibility for their own lives by humans invokes powerful moral imperatives, in that once such a step has been taken, and once it has been made irrevocable by domestication, humans should seek to preserve and enrich the animal lives they have chosen to take responsibility for. The moral question of captivity itself is posed, but no answer is provided for the novel’s human readers – one is left alone to ponder the morality and

50 Hua, Ahuja, ‘Chimpanzee Sanctuary’, p.628.
51 Hua, Ahuja, ‘Chimpanzee Sanctuary’, p.628.
politics of withdrawing an animal’s wild autonomy, whether casually or in order to mitigate the effects of habitat destruction, once again actuated by humans. Cheeta’s chimpanzee abstention from a human dilemma about the moral issues invoked by animal captivity in principle is acute, but he makes no comment on his own liberty as a sanctuary-dweller. Although his early life is defined by the close limitations of a cage, once in the more sympathetic environment of the sanctuary his textual awareness of impassable boundaries and doors diminishes. Nevertheless, limits on Cheeta’s liberty certainly exist. Philo and Wilbert describe the escape of Cholmondely the chimpanzee from London Zoo in 1951, noting the consternation of passengers when he allegedly boarded a number 53 bus, although not mentioning that he may have bitten two pedestrians in Albany Street.\textsuperscript{55} Cholmondely, they say,

transgressed a number of spatial boundaries widely accepted by the human occupants of London: not just that which separates animals in cages from the public, but also those which separate the zoo from the immediate locality, which designate a bus as something for travelling on with a purpose […] and which frown upon buses as sites for jumping on people.\textsuperscript{56}

Like Cholmondely, Cheeta has a history of biting humans, and however quotidian an event biting is in chimpanzee society, it is a deviation from normal human standards of socially acceptable behaviour. Thus, separating human and chimpanzee spheres of activity is entirely sensible, each having sanctuary from the threat of the other – famous actresses and innocent bystanders are safe from chimpanzee teeth, and “critically acclaimed world-famous primates”\textsuperscript{(p.236)} are protected from ugly-sticks, or a prolonged and painful death at the hands of human scientists in a laboratory. Faubion’s “concrete technologies” enable this separation in the form of enclosures and locks, but it is the “rhetorical machines” that ensure the locks are primate-proof and that it is the chimpanzees who are enclosed in a heterotopian space of criminality. Although chimpanzee bites seem in no way comparable with human threats to animals (destroying their habitats, electrocuting them, sending them into space without intending to bring them back, and so on) it is the chimpanzees who are damned by species to incarceration for failing to behave like humans, for being out of their proper

\textsuperscript{55} ‘Two Bitten by Ape’, \textit{The Times} [online] (Wednesday 10 January 1951), iss.51895, (p.6, col. 1).
\texttt{http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.lincoln.ac.uk/tinyurl/basicSearch.do?sessionid=BF6066BA98FA}
\texttt{A1FC99BCC942D9560044} [accessed 3 February 2015].
\textsuperscript{56} Philo, Wilbert, \textit{Animal Spaces, Beastly Places}, p.14.
place. As Hua and Ahuja’s chimpanzee sanctuary caregiver observes, “it’s not their fault but they have to live in a cage. They’re in for a crime they didn’t commit”.

Cheeta is inducted into the human world without his consent in order to function as an animal “aping” a human, monkeying about with acceptable standards of behaviour and autobiographical conventions for comic effect. As a real creature who worked in show business and as a character in a novel, he is the dark hairy shadow of Tarzan and Johnny Weissmuller, throwing his hero into sharp relief by being physically and intellectually less than human. As a narrative voice, with all the power of wit and irony offered by the English language at his command, Cheeta is haunted by his silent, impenetrable, living original, saying what is unsayable and probably unimaginable for the real chimpanzee and thus amplifying the anthropomorphic image of an animal already perceived through the filter of an anthropomorphic filmic and stereotyped identity. G. Thomas Couser recommends that, rather than attempting to claim an impossible veracity, all memoirs should bear the legend “based on a true story”, both to provide credence to the identity at the core of the work and to act as a disclaimer of any obligation to factual truth. Cheeta’s triumphant opening claim to his memoirist’s narrative “I” comes with an automatically generated disclaimer twenty words into the novel as he reveals his claim to be an ape, but the fiction that is his narrative voice is heavily crossed with non-fiction in a manner which obliges his readers to take important features of what he says seriously. Films come with a disclaimer, Cheeta says: “that ‘No animals were harmed during the making of’ thing” reassures us that we can look at animals and be entertained by them with a clear conscience. But, he says,

somewhere in the forests, during the making of your film, somewhere in the seas, animals are being harmed all the time. ‘Many millions of animals were continually harmed during the making of this film’ would be more accurate. It should go on the end credits of every single motion picture, just so you don’t forget the way the world really is. Many millions of animals are always being harmed.

There is not any innocent space for humans to occupy in the discourses which frame their treatment of animals; even though animals harm each other, this is dwarfed by the scale of the harm caused by humans, and failing to look beyond comforting cultural

---

57 Hua, Ahuja, ‘Chimpanzee Sanctuary’, p.627.
stories is as harmful as being directly responsible for mass extinction. In Cheeta’s opinion, even if we care little for the animals themselves, we as humans need them for, “[w]ithout us, you’re left staring around at the terrifying monotony of yourselves, yourselves, yourselves” (p. 142).

**WE ARE ALL COMPLETELY BESIDE OURSELVES: THE “SAME NOTSAME” GAME**

Karen Joy Fowler’s 2013 novel *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* is founded on a thorough interrogation of “the question of the animal”, and performs a problematisation of ideas concerned with what Derrida calls the “logic of the limit” that divides the “so-called human” (the human that names himself and others) from “The Animal”. In a fictional replication of twentieth century chimpanzee cross-fostering experiments, the novel synthesises the history and science of ape-language research with a meditation on the emotional and practical costs of human self-obsession for the hapless beings of whatsoever species that become its collateral damage. The weighting of anthropocentric conditions which prefer human qualities as the measure of value, is analogised in a game the novel’s narrative voice, Rosemary, calls “Same/NotSame”. The game foregrounds the “limitrophy” – the feeding of the limit of the human – of the political and ideological grounds upon which are built linguistic distinctions of kind between humans and chimpanzees. Enquiry here will consider the place of human language and chimpanzee language experimentation in the story of human exceptionalism, the relationship between narratives of human priority and the narrative structure of *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, and the rules of the ideological game which make Rosemary’s sister Fern less valuable than the rest of her family. Although Fern can “talk”, she fails to demonstrate a command of syntactical language indicative of human levels of cognition, and even if she were able to satisfy this criterion she would still spend her adult life in a cage, for Fern is a chimpanzee and the rules of the Same/NotSame game ensure that being a chimpanzee will always exceed being an individual person and a beloved sister.

---


60 Karen Joy Fowler, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2014 [2013]), p.80. All subsequent references are to this edition, and are incorporated in the body of the text.
The inspiration for *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* is an intriguing though destructive twentieth century scientific vogue for families, mostly in the USA, to cross-foster chimpanzees. Psychologists researching the evolution of the human brain placed infant chimpanzees in human families to conduct comparative studies of chimpanzee development and language acquisition. *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* sets out to imagine the experiences of a fictional human child, Rosemary, and her chimpanzee sister, Fern, in a cross-fostering family, placing the contention that language is a decisive marker of human distinctiveness at the centre of the novel’s concerns. In *Zoontologies*, Cary Wolfe argues that the basic formula for ethics in the relationships between humans and animals has been “no language, no subjectivity”, and Fowler’s novel develops a narrative which questions the terms of this ontology, critiquing the methods which determine both what counts as a language and what constitutes the proper human.61

The first documented cross-fostering experiment took place in Moscow in 1913, when the Kohts family raised an infant chimpanzee called Joni as if he was their own child and brother to their human son, Roody. Their attempts to teach Joni human speech were unsuccessful, but they came to an intimate appreciation of the complexity and sensitivity of his internal life.62 In the early 1930s an infant female chimpanzee named Gua lived with the Kellogg family in the USA for nine months, with the Kelloggs’ infant son Donald acting as an experimental control subject. Gua did not learn to speak English, and neither, during this period, did Donald, although the chimpanzee noises he did learn to make resulted in Gua’s rapid removal from the family home. She died shortly after being returned to the Yerkes biomedical research facility which supplied her. In the late 1940s the attempts of Cathy and Keith Hayes to teach cross-fostered Viki to speak English also failed, and Viki died of encephalitis in 1954 at the age of six. In 1966 R. Allen Gardner and Beatrix Gardner, having abandoned teaching chimpanzees to verbalise human language, succeeded in teaching the young female chimpanzee Washoe to use 132 communicative signs in American

Sign Language (ASL) in a reliable and context-appropriate manner. Following Noam Chomsky’s contention that syntax is the logical essence of the human mind, psychologist and linguist Herb Terrace established the Nim Chimsky project in the 1970s to search for signs of human-like language structures in the communications systems and mind of the chimpanzee Nim. Terrace concluded that Nim’s ASL usage lacked conviction, and that there was no evidence proving apes are capable of more than, at best, simple domain specific communication. The failure of chimpanzees to communicate with scientists such as Terrace in ideologically approved ways has thus reinforced the longstanding Western commitment to an anthropocentric metaphysics of human exceptionalism, and commitment to a single inflexible model of cognition – the human kind – has been an inhibiting factor on more positive and open research in how apes and other animals think and communicate.

The human model of complex, conceptualising, syntactical language is, then, taken to mark the human species’ most decisive break from all other animals. Philosopher Mortimer J. Adler argues that language is what confirms a difference in kind between human and nonhuman animals, for “all reputable scientists” agree that “man and man alone possesses a propositional language or has the power of syntactical speech”, and thus “man and man alone has the power of conceptual thought”. Richard Sorabji argues that the syntax defence marks the end of a long history of human exceptionalist goalpost-moving, progressing from Aristotle’s denial of reason to animals to a point at which it began to appear that animals might lack only certain kinds of reasoning, and a stand was taken on their not having speech. When this defence too, began to be questioned, a retreat was made to the position that they lacked syntax. ‘They lack syntax, so we can eat them,’ was meant to be the conclusion.


64 Domain-specific language is a language usage which refers only to that which is present and related to satisfying immediate need, such as asking for a visible food item, and which satisfies the way an animal inhabits its environment; ie. that it possesses evolved abilities necessary to perform or problem-solve in response to its typical conditions of existence.


Adler subjects palaeoanthropological and evolutionary evidence to philosophical analysis to define the conditions for what constitutes a difference of degree and a difference of kind, and grants a scientific validity to the existence of this qualification. He does not, though, treat to the same scientific and philosophical analysis the idea that the question of differences of kind and degree is itself, as Sorabji argues, not scientific but discursive and ideological. It is the language and form, and indeed the existence, of the question which assigns importance to the concepts of kind and degree.

The origins of human language are unclear, and experiments with language acquisition in great apes have attempted to discover the means by which correlative human systems of conceptualisation, speech centres in the brain, and the ability to vocalise language could have evolved. Predicated on the phylogenetic proximity of humans and apes, and the assumption that apes possess at least a degree of human-like intelligence, research – primarily with chimpanzees and, more latterly, bonobos – over the past ninety years focused first on trying to teach apes to speak, then on teaching them to communicate using a variation of American Sign Language (ASL), a system predicated on human communicative needs. Recently, psychologist and primatologist Sue Savage-Rumbaugh has moved away from this anthropocentric method. Working with bi-species social groups of humans and bonobos in which all members are socially active participants in the mutual performance of communication, Savage-Rumbaugh has developed a communication system with a number of bonobos, including Kanzi, Panbanisha and Nyota Wamba, using keyboard symbols (lexigrams) which the bonobos can combine and recombine spontaneously to make sentences. Kanzi acquired language by listening and observing in the same way as a human child (he understands human speech), rather than by being taught, and this seems to have enabled such an unusual flexibility of language usage that the system of lexigrams must be continually updated to provide him with a way to say what he wants to talk about. Unlike, for example, Terrace, Savage-Rumbaugh does not centre communicative methods around the more anthropocentric forms of ASL, instead bringing together the bonobos’ fluent understanding of spoken English and ideograms with their own gestures, facial expressions and vocal replies. Her method allows, she says, an ape/human and ape/ape exchange of “complex linguistic narration and

questioning in a free-flowing manner on essentially any topic connected meaningfully
to their lives.”  
Further challenging the conventions of scientific knowledge formation
and practice, Savage-Rumbaugh includes the comments and critical reflections of the
bonobos on their own welfare in the article from which the last quoted remark is taken,
and cites them as co-authors. The insertion of the linguistically stated, if mediated,
thoughts and opinions of nonhuman animals about their own lives into human debates
is transformative in its decentring of human knowledge. It participates in a slowly
nudging progress toward more careful thinking about the internal world of animals,
and rejects conventional assumptions that only humans have complex mental and
social lives and the capacity to reflect and conceptualise.

For cognitive ethologist Donald Griffin, writing in *Animal Minds*, it seems
clear that Kanzi and other bonobos “can use the equivalent of words to communicate
a rich array of feelings and thoughts”, but others, such as Joel Wallman (*Aping
Language*) and Steven Pinker (*The Language Instinct*), are unwilling to be persuaded
that this amounts to a language and continue to subscribe, Griffin says, “to the deep-
seated faith in language as a unique human attribute separating humanity from the
beasts”.  
Apes, and other highly intelligent nonhuman animals, are increasingly
revealed by ethological and biological research to experience themselves and the world
in many different ways, some of which are comparable to human experience, and some
of which operate in domains outside human percepts. Thinkers such as Griffin and
Mary Midgley hope that humans will cease to see the capacities of other animals as
“subsets” of our own, and cease to build “a supposed contrast between man and
animals” based on “projections of our own fears and desires”. A bad metaphysics
which insists that human language is the material of a difference in kind from all
nonhuman animals instead of a difference among other differences, and which assumes
that our chief object of concern should be whether or not other animals represent
challenges to the value of what it means to be human, impedes our ability to learn how

---

69 Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, Kanzi Wamba, Panbanisha Wamba, Nyota Wamba, ‘Welfare of Apes in Captive Environments: Comments On, and By, a Specific Group of Apes’, *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 10.1 (January 2007), 7-19 (p.9). Savage-Rumbaugh has, more latterly, been involved in some controversies, but these have not been taken as a denial of earlier work.
to share the world with the many creatures threatened with harm or extinction by our activities.

Research into animal cognition has developed rapidly, even in the few years since Griffin published *Animal Minds*, indicating that traditional preconceptions about animals’ diminished consciousness, capacity for affective states, or ability to process complex information are as limited as Griffin believed them to be; for example, research by Sana Inoue and Tetsuro Matsuzawa at Kyoto University has demonstrated that young chimpanzees consistently out-perform human students in tests of recall of numerical sequences. The chimpanzees showed “extraordinary working memory capability for numerical recall”, say Inoue and Matsuzawa.\(^{73}\) Other research documents elephants’ long friendships, and the refusal of rats to take food if this results in an electric shock to another rat, revealing significant acts of memory, empathy and cognition structures of a kind previously treated as the preserve only of humans.\(^ {74}\)

The assumption that richness of experience can be arranged hierarchically from higher mammals, down through lower mammals and birds, and finally dwindling away in reptiles, fish and arthropods is also increasingly viewed as untenable. At the 2012 Francis Crick Conference at Cambridge University a group of cognitive neuroscientists, neuropharmacologists, neurophysiologists, computational neuroscientists, and neuroanatomists issued ‘The Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness’, arguing that the neocortex, which is unique to the mammalian brain and of advanced size and ratio in the human brain, can no longer be thought of as the only source of conscious experience. The substance of the *Declaration* is that:

The absence of a neocortex does not appear to preclude an organism from experiencing affective states. Convergent evidence indicates that nonhuman animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviors. Consequently, the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Nonhuman animals, including all mammals and birds, and


In the rapidly evolving field of Consciousness Studies, there are, they say many new, readily available non-invasive techniques and strategies with which to carry out human and nonhuman animal research on the brain and the quality of affective experience. Birds, for example, and the Declaration refers specifically to magpies and African grey parrots, evidence in their behaviour what appears to be a “parallel evolution of consciousness” of “near human-like levels”, and do so without a mammalian-type neocortex.\footnote{Low, ‘Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness’.} As Richard Kerridge points out, such a declaration does not necessarily make clear what consciousness is taken to include here. Locating the boundary of consciousness and “deciding whether the boundary has been crossed is famously difficult”, he says.\footnote{Richard Kerridge, Cold Blood: Adventures with Reptiles and Amphibians (London: Vintage, 2015 [2014]), p.88.} At present, one can do no more than wonder what self-awareness might be like for an octopus.

*We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* demonstrates an assured grasp of the debates surrounding the relationships between research in language and cognition, and cultural beliefs about human-ape equivalences. Comparing the scientific assumptions that prevailed in the 1960s and 70s – those that argued for the scientific validity of chimpanzee cross-fostering while skating over any ethical implications – with more recent scientific research on human and ape cognition and development, the novel asks searching questions about processes of knowledge formation. It focuses on the particular conditions of a misconceived and ill-fated experiment on a chimpanzee to stage philosophical scenarios which rest on and reflect upon scientific research, and integrates them into a textual structure that frustrates confidence in the power of contemporary cultural narratives to tell the whole story. The cultural and scientific discourses targeted by the novel, and the research it accords higher value to, indicate its sympathies, but there is a resistance to permitting easy readings of or simplistic, sentimental conclusions about how chimpanzee and human being may overlap. The
chimpanzee cross-fostering experiments attempted to humanise apes by inserting ASL as a facsimile of a human linguistic conduit into them, and simultaneously to measure them against humans by seeking or denying them human-like language and cognition capacities. *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* foregrounds how central language is to human self-conception, but problematises the value placed on it by drawing attention to its instabilities and exclusionary effects.

*Ape Absence*

There are close connections between the discursive methods of *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* and its thesis that social, scientific, political and cultural discourses are characterised by the absence of animals’ stories. Rosemary, commenting on the real history of cross-fostering, observes that although the findings of cross-fostering experiments are well-documented, information about the fate of the chimpanzees used in them is harder to find (p.156). When experiments were terminated, chimpanzees such as Gua and Nim, who had learned to talk in ASL and were accustomed to living in human social groups, vanished into laboratories, although Nim was eventually extricated. The fictional chimpanzee, Fern, disappears from her human sister’s life in a similar way, and the narrative takes Fern’s absence as a structuring premise to meditate on the discourses which render animals as silent, even when they can talk in a language humans understand. Fern’s story, although fictional in its details, broadly follows the trajectory of real cross-fostered chimpanzees.

Fern the chimpanzee is born in Africa in 1974, and orphaned a month later when her mother is killed and sold as food. Two months later, human Rosemary Cooke is born in Bloomington, Indiana, and her parents foster Fern, intending to raise her as their human daughter’s twin sister. Fern is to be the subject of a long term linguistic and psychological study conducted by Rosemary’s father, Professor Cooke, to compare the development of the chimpanzee child with that of the human child. For five years Fern lives happily with Rosemary, her older brother Lowell, and their parents, learning ASL and playing games that are really experiments, but otherwise spending her days approximately as a human child would. The household is unorthodox, and having a chimpanzee sister is, for Rosemary and Lowell, liberating in some ways and limiting in others, but for Rosemary in particular, it is also entirely normal. One day, Rosemary is unexpectedly sent to her grandparents’ house; when she
returns some weeks later Fern has gone, and the sisters do not meet again for another twenty-two years. Although the Cookes have brought Fern up as their child she has remained the property of Indiana University, the administrators of which, justifiably fearful that Fern’s increasingly superior strength coupled with her unpredictability as a different species make her a lawsuit risk, remove her to a more secure location. The remaining members of the Cooke family are distraught at her loss; Rosemary suffers severe and lingering emotional trauma, her mother has a breakdown from which she never fully recovers, her father drinks heavily, and Lowell becomes increasingly delinquent before running away from home at seventeen, eventually to join the Animal Liberation Front. In an attempt to escape her Bloomington “monkey-girl” (p.102) moniker and the realisation that her father had experimented on her as much as he had on Fern, Rosemary later moves away to college in California, but the learning experiences of infancy are not so easily shed, and her ingrained chimpness hinders her ability to perform a properly human identity. Lowell, wanted by the CIA for his illegal animal liberation activities, finds Fern incarcerated in a language research laboratory in South Dakota. Rosemary is eventually reunited with her sister through the bullet-proof glass of Fern’s cage, but is unable to gain her release. The chronological rendering of the plot given here is not readily available in the novel, for We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves is highly disorderly and Rosemary a thoroughly unreliable narrator; even once a reader has assembled the events of the plot in their proper order there is no certainty that the narrative which emerges tells the whole story.

We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves is as much a novel about narrative as it is about chimpanzees; it constantly draws attention to the ways the narratives we choose to identify with, and our interpretations of them, structure how we think the world is. The novel uses narrative form to question and dismantle those stories that define essential and unassailable differences between humans and animals, and Rosemary, as a highly intrusive and self-reflexive, autodiegetic narrative voice, is the method by which the storytelling process is intensively managed. Rosemary highlights the structural, expectational significance of two key narrative absences in her story. The first concerns Fern’s species; Rosemary withholds until page 77 the information that the sister whose existence she revealed on page five is not the human one might have expected her to be. Rosemary explains, metafictively, that “I wanted you to see how it really was. I tell you Fern is a chimp and, already, you aren’t thinking of her as
my sister. You’re thinking instead that we loved her as if she were some kind of pet”(p.77). Rosemary insists that “Fern was not the family dog”(p.78), she was a sister and daughter whose species was not a marker of difference and inferiority, but only part of her individual self; for five years of shared life Fern was “my twin, my fun-house mirror, my whirlwind other half. […] I was also all those things to her”(p.79). The disclosure of such a crucial fact disturbs expectations about how this particular character has occupied both human and narrative spaces, for though, to Rosemary, the most important thing about Fern is that she is a sister, what matters for a reader is the absence of her chimpanzeeness from the text up to this point – that the person and identity who occupied the first seventy-seven pages of the novel seemed human because her social location and familial relations indicated that this was so.

The second absence concerns how Rosemary narrates her own and Fern’s engagement with human life; human child and chimpanzee child manifest a blurred species ontology which, for Rosemary, makes relationships with normal social and cultural roles difficult. Rosemary is a little different from other people; brought up with a chimpanzee who has no interest in human social boundaries, she is a little like a chimpanzee. She stands too close, plays with strangers’ hair, pant-hoots, bites, has a slightly ape-like gait, makes people uncomfortable in ways they do not quite understand. They look into her face and see another human, but with a sense that something is not quite right, and this not-quiteness challenges the Western sense of what Derrida calls “the abyssal limit of the human” and its assumption of clear behavioural, cognitive and, in the end, metaphysical distinctions between humans and animals.78 Rosemary’s oddness, argues Matthew Calarco, “speaks to the fact that making a clear distinction between human beings and animals is less a matter of denotation and more a matter of performativity”.79 Her breaching of the boundary between the proper human and something else is not a distortion of any supposed essentially human properties, but a failure to perform the role of human girl in the socially approved way. For Nicholas Royle, such not-quite-humanness can be described as “outlandish”. Royle takes the condition of “outlandishness” as a concept in which “lies the potential for unsettling or dissolving the distinction between human and nonhuman animals”; “the outlandish” is the strange or bizarre, and when inflicted

78 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.11.
with its archaic sense of “foreign” or “alien” describes the oddity of a parrot in the Joseph Conrad short story, ‘Amy Foster’, screaming for help in English when it is attacked by a cat. The parrot’s plea in a language not of its own species is, says Royle, “something like a figure of linguistic xenogenesis”. As the parrot’s voice startles with its *in extremis* human performativity, so does Rosemary’s xenogenesis of human language coupled to a chimpanzee-inflected human body and chimpanzee social performance. She is made in the image of God, but degenerate as an ape, and her outlandishness draws attention to an essential unruliness in the cognitive encounter of whatsoever species with the world – the surprise for a human when something does not behave according to expectations. Caught in the outlands of the category of the human by her monkey-girlness, Rosemary’s encounter with the world emerges as too unruly to represent in traditional realist narrative forms; her unreliable storytelling and her disorderly narrative draw attention to her inability to render her experience of an unprecedented life coherently.

Rosemary’s narrative follows two interwoven strands; one strand of the narrative, early adulthood, is in broadly chronological although fragmented order, and another, her specular narrative of her childhood, is made from unstable memories and characterised by ellipsis, uncertainty, fracture and disorienting disorder. Language is, she says, an “imprecise vehicle”(p.85) which is inadequate to the full rendition of human experience or communication of meaning, but if she struggles to assemble her own extraordinary life into a narrative which orders, explains and makes meaningful a set of experiences that have no analogue in the lives of other “normal” humans, she cannot find a narrative for Fern’s life at all. Fern’s mysterious disappearance leaves seventeen years of emptiness, a hole in the story around which Rosemary draws a narrative “chalk outline”(p.304). This narrative outline, evoking a police drawing of the space where a now absent murdered body has lain, represents the strategy for telling a story from which the actual removal of a living body is replicated by the removal of text about it. Fern’s textual absence is further analogous with what Calarco calls her “radical alterity” – her chimpanzee “fundamentally unobservable interiority” which will always be inaccessible to humans.81

80 Nicholas Royle, ‘Even the Title: On the State of Narrative Theory Today’, *Narrative*, 22.1 (January 2014), 1-16 (p.9).
The psychological and linguistic research which brings Rosemary and Fern together as babies seeks to discover the narrative of how humans came to be thinking, talking, complex beings, and is underpinned by the assumption that no other species seems to have evolved comparable capabilities. Rosemary’s brother Lowell complains that

Dad was always saying that we were all animals, but when he dealt with Fern, he didn’t start from that place of congruence. His methods put the whole burden of proof onto her. It was always her failure for not being able to talk to us, never ours for not being able to understand her (p.202).

Fern understands verbal English, and can talk with and be talked to in ASL – a language designed by humans to signify matters of concern to humans – representing the achievement of learning the language of another species, and (like all the real chimpanzees who could use ASL) of talking in an abstraction of a communicative mode that chimpanzees do not have – that of speech-based language. This is a point not laboured by the text, and is of little concern to Professor Cooke, who is interested only in Fern’s failure to use human language in a manner indicative of human-like grammatical structures. He interprets her failure as a silence in chimpanzees: they have nothing to say and no language to say it in. Fern does not represent herself to humans as a thinking, conscious, compassionate being in a linguistic manner compatible with Professor Cooke’s empirical science, and therefore she is not such a being. She, like other chimpanzees, is animal property, having not proved her entitlement to human levels of ethical concern. As an animal she can be sold onwards by Indiana University, and shut inside a cage which is further shut inside a laboratory; here her story ceases to exist for the wider human world, her signed pleadings to be allowed to go home rendered invisible by walls and by the assumption that to interpret them as meaningful to her is to anthropomorphise her.

Fern is thus absent from Rosemary’s narrative because human material practice conceals her and poor science renders her speechless, but while the novel argues that Fern has a complex mental world with powerful similarities to that of a human, it also insists upon Calarco’s “radical alterity”. Rosemary’s narrative can sketch around Fern’s body, describe her ears, her fur, the things she does, the magazines she likes, the deep attachment to her, but her chimpanzee mind and motives are fundamentally inexplicable and not amenable to human interpretation. If chimpanzees have cognitive structures that can generate a narrative-based mode of being, or have inter-
chimpanzee, communicable narratives, then they are not accessible to humans, and the novel does not propose to enter Fern’s mind or imagine her internal world. Despite human insistence that the world should yield up its secrets, *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* refuses to assume that it is entitled to Fern’s interior world, or that it should fill the narrative void with an anthropomorphic and ideological invention. Fern’s chimpanzee perspective cannot be heard in conventional human language, forms and concerns, and so it is absent from the narrative.

*The Rules of the Same/NotSame Game*

*We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* is a novel that is deeply invested in imagining lives that are part human and part chimpanzee, entering into posthumanist and Harawayesque conceptualisations of a meeting between species. The “sameness” that characterises Fern and Rosemary’s species-boundary blurring is, though, countered by “notsameness”; “notsameness” consists both in Fern’s “radical alterity” and in the Western metaphysical tradition which holds her up to an anthropocentric measure of language-based cognition and finds her wanting. The tension between these conceptions of similarity and difference between a chimpanzee and a human are developed in the novel by the “Same/NotSame” game, a plot element which is extrapolated across the novel in an analogy naming what is at stake in trying to make clear distinctions between species. “Same/NotSame” evokes the history of similitude and exclusion in human-ape relations, foregrounding that traditional terms of distinction draw an untidy and fragmented line between ideas of the proper human and of the aping not-human. The work the novel does in destabilising assumptions about what humans think they and chimpanzees really are is admirable, but there are questions to be asked about the relationships between its literariness and its metatextual activity, for although *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* argues for careful attention to be paid to the rules and structure of the “Same/NotSame” game, the book in its entirety deploys a quantity of paratextual matter that exceeds the carefully nurtured indeterminacy of the fiction it encloses.

The “Same/NotSame” game is a research method used by Professor Cooke to compare Rosemary’s and Fern’s linguistic development. Fern is given two poker chips, one blue and one red, and asked to offer the red chip if two items she is shown are the same, and the blue chip if they are different, for example, two apples.
or one apple and a tennis ball. This is an apparently simple game, with clear right and wrong answers. Fern seems not to understand the sameness of two apples or the notsameness of an apple and a tennis ball, and her answers cannot be treated as reliably right or wrong. Rosemary, who at three or four years old exceeds substantially Fern’s linguistic sophistication, is asked to compare items on lists to see what does not match. There are no right or wrong answers in this game, she is instead being asked to talk about different ways that items can be the same or not the same. The scientific validity of such tests and their comparability, or what the results might be when applied to real beings, cannot be gauged directly from the text. Rather, the novel argues by analogy that there are conditions at play when humans seek to compare human abilities to possible expressions of the same abilities in nonhuman animals. Where Rosemary plays an infinitely flexible and subjective game that she “can’t lose” (p.80), and is allowed to explain the multiple ways she thinks a particular list item does not fit, Fern must give her answer using just two symbols – red chip for yes, blue chip for no. The rules she must play by strictly prescribe her answers, in a much less interesting game than Rosemary’s that inadvertently measures her ability to work out whether the researcher wants her to recognise that two apples are the same because they are apples, or that an apple or a tennis ball are the same because they are round, or green. Unlike Rosemary’s free-associating version of the game, which is predicated on the possession of an imagination the existence of which requires no questioning, Fern’s rule-bound game does not search for the workings of her imagination, or for evidence that she has one at all, for it is unaware it has assumed in advance that she does not. As a comparative structure the Same/NotSame game thus rests on unstable ground, and its conclusion that Fern and Rosemary are cognitively NotSame – that, in comparison to Rosemary, Fern lacks the ability to conceptualise by category – is likewise unstable. These are the rules, says We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves, that frame human conceptualisations of themselves in comparison to other animals; human cognition is the measure against which other animals are defined, but it is a measure that is fluid when applied to humans, rigid when applied to other animals, and ignores the unknowability of what it enquires into.

In works such as When Species Meet and The Companion Species Manifesto, Donna Haraway argues that the modern geometrical vision of the world, drawn in oppositions, hierarchies and categories, obstructs the possibility of a “becoming with”
of humans and their companion animals. In Derrida’s terms the geometric view establishes “the logic of the limit”: the limit of the human is “fed, is cared for, raised, and trained” by the language that erects it and is taken to be its most unassailable feature. Language creates “Man with a capital M and Animal with a capital A” to enable men “to speak of the animal with a single voice and to designate it as the single being that remains without a response, without a word with which to respond”. Both Haraway and Rosemary in We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves challenge the hierarchical, centralised status of language to define the quality of a being’s encounter with the world, disempowering traditional emphasis on the linguistic response. In When Species Meet Haraway and her companion Australian Shepherd dog, Cayenne Pepper, kiss, precipitating a vision of a posthumanist, material impurity:

Ms Cayenne Pepper continues to colonize all my cells […]. There must be some molecular record of our touch in the codes of living that will leave traces in the world […]. Her red merle Australian Shepherd’s quick and lithe tongue has swabbed the tissues of my tonsils, with all their eager immune system receptors. Who knows where my chemical receptors carried her messages or what she took from my cellular system for distinguishing self from other and binding outside to inside […]. We have had forbidden conversation; we are bound in telling story upon story with nothing but the facts. We are training each other in acts of communication we barely understand. We are, constitutively, companion species. We make each other up, in the flesh.

The posthumanist writing of permeable boundaries and inter-corporeal stories that Haraway speaks of, their non-linguistic and unrationalised communication, is evoked by Rosemary as she attempts to describe her relationship with Fern, and the enormity of the loss she feels when her lifelong companion is gone:

I felt her loss in a powerfully physical way. I missed her smell and the sticky wet of her breath on my neck. I missed her fingers scratching through my hair. We sat next to each other, lay across each other, pushed, pulled, stroked, and struck each other a hundred times a day […]. Fern used to wrap her wiry pipe-cleaner arms around my waist from behind, press her face and body into my back, match me step for step when we walked, as if we were a single person. […] Sometimes it was encumbering, a monkey on my back, but mostly I felt enlarged, as if what mattered in the end was not what Fern could do or what I could do, but the sum of it – Fern and me together (pp.107-108).

82 Donna Haraway, When Species Meet (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p.4.
83 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.29.
84 Derrida, The Animal That Therefore I Am, p.29, p.32.
85 Haraway, When Species Meet, pp.15-16.
The sum of Rosemary and Fern consists in intimate non-verbal understanding – a signifying system of smell, gesture, attitude, of touch and entwining bodies. Their enlargement emerges from a species entanglement, and, Calarco says, invites questions of how relations between species may live differently together.86

In this condition of living Rosemary and Fern are, says Calarco, “co-constituted” by the closeness of their shared infancy, of never having known living as distinct beings. Their relationship is characterised by “indistinction”, a kind of subjectivity which “operates at the level of a profound, unanticipated, and deeply shared condition, […] one that is grounded in common conditions of finitude and affect”.87 Although Rosemary and Fern are fictional, the possibility that such “indistinction” could occur is validated by Rosemary’s allusion to real-world research. The children’s behavioural co-constitution – Rosemary’s “monkey-girl” identity and Fern’s belief in her own humanness, the latter expected and the former apparently unanticipated – evolved because, Rosemary says, “the neural system of a young brain develops partly by mirroring the brains around it”(p.101), and these brains do not have to be from the same species. Psychologists and neuroscientists Peter Marshall and Andrew Meltzoff have demonstrated that human infants are prolific imitators; infant imitation drives pre-linguistic early learning and “serves a social-emotional function of communication and bonding”, and “a cognitive function, as a mechanism for acquiring motor skills, causal information, and tool-use techniques”.88 Thus, as Fern mirrors the humans around her, so also do Rosemary’s brain- and behaviour-loops print neural mirrors of what she sees of Fern’s behaviour, committing her to a learned neural circuitry of chimpness that she can attempt to repress and conceal with “counterfeit” human performances, but not expunge. Rosemary points out that, “[c]ontrary to our metaphors”,

humans are much more imitative than the other apes. For example: if chimps watch a demonstration on how to get food out of a puzzle box, they, in their turn, skip any unnecessary steps, go straight to the treat. Human children overimitate, reproducing each step regardless of its necessity. There is some reason why, now that it’s our behavior, being slavishly imitative is superior to being thoughtful and efficient, but I forget exactly what that reason is. You’ll have to read the papers (p.101).

The traditional, comically pathetic figure of the aping ape, the ape who aspires to be human, is subverted by Rosemary and by science, for Rosemary is far more the aper than Fern, and the science backs up the fiction. Beings and their individual self-conceptions participate in their own and the constitution of others through bodily, intellectual and environmental interactions; we are all beside ourselves, and there is no definitive Same or NotSame.

We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves is richly populated with specific references to scientific research: Jean Piaget’s theory of the preoperational phase of cognitive thinking and emotional development (p.52); Premack and Woodruff, and Call and Tomasello on theory of mind (p.186-188); Endel Tulving’s theory of “episodic memory” (p.301). There are also many allusions to other studies, including Harry Harlow’s infamous experiments on infant rhesus monkeys, uncanny-valley responses in macaque monkeys, empathy and fairness in chimpanzees and humans. Rosemary’s disapproval of the ethics of the cross-fostering experiments is clear, as is her rejection of science which insists on an unproven faith in human exceptionalism. She avoids actively approving of scientific work which supports her own belief that humans are not as unusual as they claim; overall, though, the novel indicates, by the general field of the research it chooses to include, that it endorses science which proposes thinnings and perforations in the limit humans have erected between themselves and apes.

These scientific intertexts are accompanied by multiple literary intertexts and references that speak in some way of traditional categorial assumptions. Each of the six sections of the novel are prefaced and framed by an epigraph from Kafka’s ‘Report to an Academy’; further, Rosemary explains herself through reference to Thomas More’s Utopia (in which the Utopians outsource everything distasteful), Macbeth, fairy tales, Charlotte’s Web, and assorted films. These notable quantities of intertextuality, combined with the text’s disorderly temporality, its elisions, the rendition of childhood memories framed by speculative doubt, an unreliable narrative voice, and Fern’s multi-faceted absence, create a fragmented, incomplete story. Its many different parts fail to produce a full and coherent narrative, and exemplify the novel’s contention both that the differences between species are untidy, incoherent and fragmentary, and that conventional novel structures and their dependence on a unified, distinct human identity are not currently capable of rendering the experience of a
perm

We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves is located its distinctive literariness, its
textuality – its rejection of cultural and scientific master-texts, its refusal to be
available as an empirical or social document of a particular historical moment. It is a
masterpiece of twenty-first century literary mongrelisation of fiction and non-fiction,

Fowler’s novel is at least in part characteristic of an orientation that Patricia
Waugh identifies as beginning in the 1980s and 1990s. Populist scientists such as E.
O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins began to “write like novelists, spinning fascinating
stories, creating mysterious characters and manipulating points of views”, and
novelists of the 1990s, reacting to postmodernist aestheticising and subversion of the
realist sciences, “showed a marked orientation towards and engagement with the
biological sciences”. As a number of the novels in this study demonstrate – Me
Cheeta, Beatrice and Virgil, Anthill, and A History of the Novel in Ants – such an
orientation has continued into the twenty-first century. In fictions interested in the
multiple forms of relationships between humans and animals, the literary turn to the
ever widening and thickening horizons of scientific discovery suggests an earnest
desire on the part of writers and readers to find something upon which to settle an
understanding of animals and our obligations to them. Literature of this kind, Waugh
says, turns its metafictional energies “towards an interrogation of the relative
epistemological status and value of the understanding of life, the ‘stories’ offered by
scientists, on the one hand, and humanistic understanding on the other”. Not all
novels manage this well; E. O. Wilson’s Anthill, for example, creates an ideologically
inflected blurriness between the novel’s fabular objectives and scientific
underpinnings by failing to reflect on its use of analogy. We Are All Completely Beside
Ourselves is mindful of the pitfalls of engaging with scientific material in fiction, and
tags as research the scientific matter from which it constructs its arguments, while
avoiding creating an idealised chimpanzee by locating Fern’s unknown interior world
inside her “chalk outline”. The fiction also resists making Fern into a figuration of the
human-animal distinctions it wishes to complicate – she is not a symbol of something
else, she is only herself. Science, the fictional novel says, while the best method we

---

89 Patricia Waugh, ‘Science Fiction in the 1990s’, in British Fiction in the 1990s, ed. by Nick Bentley
(Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2005), pp.57-77 (p.60), (p.63).
90 Waugh, ‘Science Fiction in the 1990s’, p.65.
have of understanding our bodies and the world we live in, takes shape amidst the muddle and conflict of human relationships and desires. If some scientists hope to change the rules of the Same/Notsame game – to leave behind the metaphysical language that feeds the limit of the human – then *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* participates in the game-changing by problematising old exceptionalist narratives and opening a debate on new intra-species narratives.

There is a codicil; the intertexts and fiction of the novel are further mongrelised by a variety of peritexts. As well as prefatory epigraphs from ‘Report to an Academy’, there is an autobiographical piece by Fowler, questions for book clubs, references to authoritative websites about chimpanzees and primate research, and an essay by primatologist Richard Wrangham. Gerard Genette defines the peritext (under the general heading of paratextuality) as the “threshold” or “vestibule” of a book, a zone of uncertain ownership without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world’s discourse about the text), an edge, […], a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the text.\(^1\)

Peritexts in *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* operate in the way Genette describes, by emphasising the real-world import (“import” signifying both “importance”, and “bringing in”) of the ideas in the novel they frame and mediate. In combination with the real world science and literary and cultural intertexts imported into the fiction, the peritexts blur in a notable manner the boundaries of fiction, non-fiction and world. But, if metafiction and intertextuality ask interesting questions about the permeability of fictional and disciplinary boundaries and thus participate in the novel’s depleting of the limits between humans and animals, the non-fictional textual matter that follows the ending of the fictional text unintentionally provokes important questions about the value of literature.

Fowler’s autobiographical peritext entitled ‘Karen Joy Fowler on writing *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*’(p.311), relates a childhood experience which is clearly formative of the debates the novel constructs. In a corner of the laboratory where her psychologist father carried out rat-and-maze experiments, someone else

kept caged rhesus monkeys. They would scream and attempt to grab and bite anyone who approached them. These monkeys, says Fowler, were “mad in both senses of the word – terribly angry and completely insane”, and she has since been “haunted by the misery of those monkeys” (p.312). The novel, then, is framed as at least in part an atonement for their suffering, supported by a body of evidence which argues that when Fowler perceives the monkeys to be “angry” she is not anthropomorphising, but describing a genuine emotional state little different to that which would be felt by a human in the same situation. In these terms, the monkeys’ rage and emotional distress at their abusive incarceration have significant ethical implications. Ethics and science are further extrapolated from fictional to non-fictional world in a peritext entitled ‘More Information and Further Reading’ (p.321). It lists the website for The Great Ape Project (an animal rights based group which argues for humanlike protection for great apes on the basis of their likeness to humans), the Iowa Primate Learning Sanctuary, and websites about Kanzi, Nim Chimpsky and Washoe. Scientific references include the Primate Cognition Laboratory in Columbia, and the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. In some respects, this list echoes the marginalisation of animal interests that the novel sets out by drawing attention to the multiple discourses centred on ape-human similarity and difference. Those organisations enclosed by a university are somewhat at odds with those which are not: the websites of the latter group have either disappeared, offer rather restricted information, or have suffered some kind of internal problem; the websites of the former offer well-resourced institutional facilities and access to research. The lower visibility and difficulties of those organisations which focus on protecting captive apes and on espousing a change in their legal status implies – when compared with the reputational merit inspired by lists of peer-reviewed papers on the Columbia website – that their non-mainstream politics and objectives, as Rosemary also argues, are likely to remain marginal. Interesting as these websites are as cultural indicators, they are also significant from a Literary Animal Studies perspective, for such postface material impacts on the literariness of fictional animal representation.

If the literariness of a fictional work has anything to offer to making more conscientious and just textual representations of animals, it is in the provoking of disquiet about narratives of knowledge and their relationships with ethical structures. The interruptive gaps in Rosemary’s narrative in We Are All Completely Beside
*Ourselves* disrupt an anthropocentric narrative of knowledge; the refusal to enter Fern’s internal world is a textual refusal of theoretical systematisation. It foregrounds that theorising literary animals involves applying concepts and thus necessitates drawing lines, and tells us that what is available for theorisation in its text are line-drawing formations and human ideas about animals, rather than making animal representations themselves available. But there is a distinction to be made between the novel *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* and the book *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*. The novel – the fiction, its prologue and prefaces – metafictively and self-reflexively withholds its animals, but the totality of the book – the novel and all its postface, factual material – changes this dynamic.

Psychologists Ulrike Altmann et al, argue that the human brain processes stories differently according to whether they are believed to be fact or fiction. They performed experiments in which test subjects were given a short, unfamiliar story to which would be attached a paratext defining the story as either fact or fiction, regardless of its actual fictionality. During reading neural activity was measured, and “verification tasks” were carried out. Results demonstrated that a story believed to be factual engages different neural processes and areas of the brain to those engaged when the same story is prefaced by a paratext claiming it is fictional. When reading fiction, say Altmann et al, a reader agrees that the text is a simulation – an “as if” of a factual narrative – and engages neural processes involved with working memory, attention, and empathetic theory of mind, to initiate perspective-taking, relational inferences and “what if” thinking. Factual reading guides comprehension along different neural processes to produce a situational model which must be integrated into the reader’s world knowledge. The researchers conclude that reading texts as fictional “appears to exceed mere information gathering”, leading “to an active simulation of events”, and the construction of flexible situation models and simulation of processes of motivation.92 Factual reading, however, produces faster responses because fact has “higher personal relevance”, and elicits more accurate memory recall; that is, memory is more responsive to what is perceived to be realness.93

---

*We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves,* is a novel permeated with scientific research, and demonstrates that, as David Shields says, fiction cannot be cleanly cut away from non-fiction, but the factual matter enclosed in the novel is carefully sited in a discourse of problematisation which questions the ideas that can be used to fill up Fern’s “chalk outline”.\(^94\) The peritexts that follow the fiction – clearly signalled as information, and clearly distinct from the preceding fiction – elicit, according to Altmann et al, more immediate and less thoughtful responses because they are “truth” – they do not initiate imaginative or questioning responses. Whether fact is in principle a more “useful” kind of narrative than fiction, or vice versa, is not the question here; the point is that in the specific case of *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves,* and if the research has drawn valid conclusions about neural processing of stories, the factual peritexts lead to more memorable answers (whether they are good answers is a different matter) rather than asking questions which require careful thought. In this way, the factual matter acts to supersede the literariness of the novel; it fills up Fern’s outline and smooths away the disruptiveness of her intransigently indeterminate animal representation.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The history of human knowledge of other great apes is quite short, and until recently was marked far more by the tension between simultaneous and contradictory notions of sameness and difference than by any engagement with the lives and concerns of the apes themselves. Human thinking about apes remains plagued by an apparent need to maintain what are now, surely, redundant distinctions based on binaries of consciousness / lack of self-awareness, linguistic complexity / domain-specific communication, reason and high intelligence / instinct; however, the past sixty years has seen developments in fieldwork, the institution of cognitive ethology, and research interested in what apes can do rather than what they cannot. Primatologist Jane Goodall argues that

> our intellectual abilities are so much more sophisticated than those of even the most gifted chimpanzees that early attempts made by scientists to describe the similarity of mental processes in humans and chimpanzees were largely met with ridicule or outrage. Gradually, however, evidence for sophisticated mental performances in the apes has become ever more convincing. There is proof that they can solve simple problems through processes of reasoning and

---

insight. They can plan for the immediate future. The language acquisition experiments have demonstrated that they have powers of generalisation, abstraction and concept-forming along with the ability to understand and use abstract symbols in communication. And they clearly have some kind of self-concept.\textsuperscript{95}

Humans are justly proud of the advanced intellectual abilities to which Goodall refers, and the human world, with all its injustices and destructive tendencies, is an extraordinary one, but as \textit{We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves} consistently points out, our self-congratulatory habits lead us to construe animal capacities not the same as ours as failed capacities.

Chimpanzees (including bonobos) and humans share 98.4 per cent\textsuperscript{96} of their genetic material, and some taxonomists now argue that there is sufficient evidence in evolutionary trajectories to put humans, currently alone in the genus \textit{Homo}, in the same genus as chimpanzees and bonobos. This, says Jared Diamond, makes humans “the third chimpanzee or human chimpanzee”.\textsuperscript{97} It is not at present clear, Diamond says, what functionally significant differences are contained in the 1.6 per cent of genetic material which is not chimpanzee, but this 1.6 per cent difference influences our thinking sufficiently to make placing chimpanzees on the other side of an ethical boundary acceptable.\textsuperscript{98} The ethical distinction allows chimpanzees to become props in the entertainment industry, and to be experimented upon in various kinds of invasive, harmful military and medical research, but pressure to end such practices is increasing. European Commission Directive 2010/63/EU, which took effect in 2013, banned research on great apes in Europe, and other countries around the world have similar legislation, with some also granting specific rights to apes. The United States, though, continues to maintain a steady population of great apes for invasive research purposes.\textsuperscript{99} On 20 April 2015 the Nonhuman Rights Project (NhRP) appeared to have won a writ of \textit{Habeas Corpus} from a Manhattan judge to grant freedom to two


\textsuperscript{96} This figure varies according to the method of calculation used, but 98.4 per cent seems to be the most frequently applied number.


\textsuperscript{98} Diamond, \textit{The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee}, p.23.

chimpanzees, Hercules and Leo, living in a biomedical laboratory at Stony Brook University, New York; such a writ implies that legal personhood had been extended to Hercules and Leo or that legal person status is in principle possible. The following day, the same Manhattan judge struck out the writ of Habeas corpus on the basis that personhood could not be granted without also hearing from Stony Brook University.100

The judge’s embracing of and then hesitation at granting two chimpanzees the same bodily freedom as a human is understandable. However alike the two species are, chimpanzees are not humans, and neither can nor should be expected to live in ways that respect the freedoms, protections and sanctions implied by legal personhood.

In *Me Cheeta*, Cheeta dedicates himself to perfecting the performance of being human – even though he is employed in the role of simian stooge – to avoid being sent to “the lab”. He smokes, drinks, carries out household tasks, eats off (plastic) crockery, plays the piano and paints, and, in his opinion, the only real difference between him and humans is their extravagant creativity and that they are not the ones in a cage. For him, humans and chimpanzees are actors of the same roles – “acting big, acting injured to save yourself from worse, acting unconcerned to avoid conflict”(p.15), and argues that, like chimpanzees and any other nonhuman animal, “every single action performed by an adult human male […] can be thought of as an attempt to attract the attention of some sexually receptive females”(p.127). He does, however, admit that his “atonal noodles”(p.287) on the piano could never be described as music, and that his paintings (although he says they are all of Johnny Weissmuller) are strictly abstract. Chimpanzees have not developed in such a way that paintings or music have meaning for them in the way that art does for humans, but if supplied with the necessary materials many primates do seem to derive considerable pleasure from applying colour to surfaces. Primatologist Frans de Waal remarks that the easiest way to get the chimpanzees he works with into the testing facility “is to show them the cart with the computer on top. They rush into the doors for an hour of what they see as games and what we see as cognitive testing”.101 In other words, as well as being able to understand the abstractions necessary to interact with symbols on a screen, chimpanzees want to

---


play computer games. Apparently, they seek and enjoy many of the same kinds of mind-pleasures as humans.

In We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves, Fern is rejected from human society for failing to acquire the human language skills her experimenters hope she may, but this does not mean that she gains nothing from her time as a member of the Cooke family. Fern spontaneously teaches sign language to her daughter, Hazel, and this is a fictional replication of what chimpanzees have been seen to do in the real world. Roger Fouts and Deborah Fouts record chimpanzees teaching each other to sign in ASL, and holding chimpanzee to chimpanzee conversations in sign language. Countering arguments that chimpanzees sign only for food, the Fouts say that 88 per cent of inter-chimp signing is about play, social interaction and reassurance. Food is not a major topic, but if they do talk about it then they talk about what kinds of food they like or where food might be found, without the need for it to be present. Chimpanzees also sign to themselves, revealing an inner world of thoughts and imaginative activities.102 Not all scientists accept the Fouts’ interpretation of what these chimpanzees were doing, but Sue Savage-Rumbaugh’s creation of a bi-species culture of humans and bonobos argues for the point that chimpanzees’ lives are enlarged by having access to these symbolic languages. Whether or not they have developed language themselves, they appear to recognise the benefits of symbolic communication, and make use of and adapt the facility given to them by humans to act and think in ways they have not otherwise been seen to do.

However different Me Cheeta and We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves are in terms of their narrative techniques, both novels are acutely concerned with the precariousness of chimpanzee lives. As populations of chimpanzees, gorillas, orang-utans, and bonobos continue to dwindle in their wild habitats – according to WWF (World Wildlife Fund for Nature), these species are all either endangered or critically endangered – the question of how to prevent humans exterminating their closest living relatives is pressing.103 What matters is not whether they use or manufacture tools,
recognise themselves in a mirror, or understand English, although these are all significant in making the *Hominidae* the kinds of creatures they are; as great apes approach extinction what matters is that the importance of their own lives to them matters enough to humans to stop us using them, measuring ourselves by them, putting them in conflict with the humans who share their wild ranges, ending them.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

KNOWING MORE, FEELING MORE

My readings of animals in twenty-first century novels have attempted to make a forceful critique of the textual politics of animal representation, and open out new questions and lines of thought about the composition of the human-animal divide. I have tried to show that a project of sustained analysis in twenty-first century novels can articulate fundamental intellectual, ethical and political concerns about animals, and illuminate the effects of human assumptions about nonhuman generic inferiority. I have also tried to show that, as Donna Haraway says, questioning and no longer consenting to the tenets of human exceptionalism begins with “knowing more […] and feeling more” about human and nonhuman living beings and their dynamic entanglements in and with the world.¹ By drawing on thinking and research across many different disciplines, my study has practised a critical scrutiny attentive to the transformation of animals as they pass through human language and culture in literary representations, and has attempted to provoke affective responses to the ordinary lives of animals among humans by making them appear strange and raw.

As my analysis of fictional animal representations has shown, animals, whether real or literary, are, for humans, a complex composite of empirical and imagined features and functions, and human material and ethical engagements with animals are responses to this composition rather than to any “pure” original creature. The animals we imagine have material consequences for animals themselves, and I have given form to previously unarticulated questions and conditions to make visible some of those imaginings and their effects, or given new inflections to concepts already emerging in Literary Animal Studies. In Chapter One, Animal’s People has been read as a deconstruction of the figure of the proper human and the animal which makes conspicuous the discourses of human distinction, animality and animalisation. Postcolonialist criticism has been countering those imperialist abjecting and disempowering discourses known as animalisation for some time, but treating the category of the animal itself as problematic makes possible a re-imagining of all categories which legitimate oppression through identification with a naturalised

¹ Donna Haraway, When Species Meet (Minneapolis:University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p.295.
coupling of beastliness and moral inferiority. My analysis of Animal’s People set out existing problematisations of the animal and animalisation, and, aware of difficulties in these articulations, reads Animal’s People’s “hero”, Animal, as a signifying body who questions, disfigures and refigures the idea of the human and the animal. It has done so without consenting to arguments that making comparisons between human and animal suffering will move ethical thinking forward, or that more ethical treatment of animals will disable the animalisation of humans.

Animal’s abjection and severe disablement presses his upright human body down into a four-footed posture, causing him to adopt the generic identity of “animal” as a figuration of racist discourses of animalisation and their dependence on the inferiority implied by the denomination “animal”. Animal stages the complexity of political, cultural, legal and social encounters with animality, and can be read as a disfiguring of the discourses and practices which disfigure him. Drawing attention to discourses which identify the human subject through the figure of the face, my analysis has shown that the dissolving of the individual human face by moral distance and massification is a deforming practice which denies the possibility of any kind of response by the animalised, whether they are human or nonhuman. Examining the political structures that validate the neglect and oppression of disempowered peoples via analogical identification with the idea of the animal, this chapter established the discursive premises at play when an animal of the species Homo sapiens suffers apparently legitimate violence, exploitation and neglect at the hands of corporate imperialism.

Chapter Two, ‘Ants, Multiplicity, Anonymity and Metaphorical Boundaries’, discovered an unexpected and anxiety-ridden boundary created from our conceptions of ourselves and of ants. Literature swarms with ants, for they function as a multifaceted trope with which to envision human social and political organisation. Anthills figure utopian and dystopian models of human society which attempt to define what constitutes a harmonious or an inhuman social system, and the relationship between individual ant and colony bespeaks human fears about the dissolving of autonomous identity in massing, swarming modern life. Ants, I have found, are perceived as both disturbingly like, and very unlike, us. A brief natural history of ants and an indicative cultural and literary history of ants, followed by an interrogation of E. O. Wilson’s clumsy novel Anthill, A. S. Byatt’s novella ‘Morpho Eugenia’ in Angels and Insects,
and the little-known *A History of the Novel in Ants* by Carol Hart and *Entertaining Strangers* by Jonathan Taylor, identified that ant-based fictions are characterised by structural dependence on myrmecological knowledge contemporary to their time of writing. Ant stories invoke the problem of the One and the Many, evolving recursive metaphorical structures of human and ant to ponder human anxieties about self-determination and behavioural programming, and about individual meaningfulness and amorphous swarming. Analogical ants are shaped by a long history of human conceptualisations about what are perceived, at any given time, to be the most pertinent known features of real ants’ habits, and interest in the boundary constituted by comparisons between the social lives of humans and ants has created a mythology which constructs our ideas about ants. It is, therefore, hard to know, when looking at ants, whether one is looking at an empirically rendered ant or an anthropomorphic, mythical mediation of an ant. Those ant novels predicated on self-reflexive narrativisation demonstrate the slippage between scientific language about ants and cultural ant mythologising, and reveal how human imagining and conceptualising inhibit the drawing of neat boundaries between anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic animal representations. How, this chapter asks, is one to measure one’s ethical responsibility to a creature who is taken both to illustrate human sociality, and to mark the outer limits of meaningful living?

Chapter Three, ‘Fleshy Lives, Stitched Skins, and Meaty Bodies’, made direct engagement with the malleability of ethical responsibilities to domesticated animals. Humans have domesticated, bred, put to work, and slaughtered animals for thousands of years, and this points to what appears to be one of the most straightforward conditions of the human-animal distinction: animal flesh can be brought into existence, used and killed in an entirely legitimate manner, while human bodies are always, in principle (if not in fact), inviolable. Animal flesh as an industrial commodity is a generally accepted fact of modern life, but it is not necessarily a fact with which humans are uncomplicatedly comfortable. Literary representations of commodified animals inducted into human life either as living or dead bodies, stir up questions of objectionability as an articulation of the quality by which human society decides the appropriate standard of treatment for a fleshy body. Divided into three sections – flesh, skin, and meat – to reflect ways that animal bodies circulate among humans, this chapter examined how humans reconcile themselves to their implication in animal pain.
and suffering. It considered the boundaries made from law and material practice which permit violence to animals, and enable the creation of language and discourses which frame the proper place of animal products in human culture while concealing what installed those frames. My analysis of the language of violence found it to be unstable, and its dissimulating properties were shown to be a function of the marginalisation by mainstream discourses of attempts to make meaningful the unspokenness of animal experiences at the hands of humans. Unspokenness about industrialised animal flesh production indicates a mainstream reluctance to look beyond consolatory language, and at the same time reveals that a straightforward explicatory linguistic mapping of human experience onto that of animals obscures important differences between the kinds of violence inflicted by humans on other humans, and that inflicted on animals.

In Aryn Kyle’s *The God of Animals* a young girl and a young mare grow to maturity; their gendered bodies are constrained by financial hardship and the normalised cruelty of a masculinised environment. The frustrations of maintaining horse-breeding businesses and masculine reputations are played out in the flesh of horses, provoking questions about the justificatory principles of property ownership and the material conditions they permit. Yann Martel’s discomfiting and ambiguous novel *Beatrice and Virgil* confronts the terms of the human-animal divide in the most painful and disturbing ways, foregrounding representative conjunctions between the ordinary mass killing of animals, and the extraordinary mass killing of Jews. The skins of a taxidermied donkey and monkey figure a critique of politicised trends in Holocaust writing, and of genocidal human brutality to animals, in a literary form which I have described as narrative taxidermy. Narrative taxidermy is a metatextual structuring which draws attention to the artifice of realist literary forms – to the stitching together of preferred stories which then occlude difficult narratives. Martel’s narrative taxidermy picks at the raw edges concealed by such preferred stories to make what I have called an “art of pain”. Industrially produced meat is perhaps the animal substance which requires the most demanding efforts on the part of humans to occlude what they do not wish to see. In consequence, fiction about animals in factory farms and slaughterhouses are in short supply, although novels about humans as meat seem popular. Mark McNay’s *Fresh* is one of a very small number of novels which follow living nonhuman animals to their production line deaths; it makes compassionate identification with the lives and bodies of chickens, and with the humans who labour
in the same exploitative system. Fresh, like Beatrice and Virgil and The God of Animals, clearly articulates the doublethink of human passivity in the face of animal suffering, and the failure to reflect on what “normal” animal use really means.

Chapter Four, ‘The Sameness and Difference of Apes’, tracked the nature of human fascination with (other) great apes. Chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and orang-utans are both other from and strikingly similar to humans, and the history of ape representation demonstrates that our tendency to see these other apes as mirrors of our primitive selves and as failed humans is the dominating character of our imaginative and scientific encounters with them. The traditional scientific and philosophical denial of self-conscious and meaningful internal worlds to animals is the foundational justification for a clear distinction between humans and the homogeneous set of the animal, but this justification becomes very difficult to articulate along the species boundaries between nonhuman and human apes. High intelligence and syntactical language are the final proving ground of distinction for humans, and the lack of human-like speech and comparable levels of intelligence in great apes enables humans to treat them in ways that ignore or diminish their rich cognitive capacities, cultures and experiences. Great apes most powerfully confront us with objections to drawing solid and clean lines between human and animal, and this chapter has examined, in two novels, the nature of this confrontation.

James Lever’s Me Cheeta, the “autobiography” of a chimpanzee who claims to have played the part of Cheetah in Johnny Weissmuller’s Tarzan films, and Karen Joy Fowler’s We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves, a fictionalisation of chimpanzee cross-fostering experiments, draw attention to our fascination with ourselves, and set out the animal abuses which emerge from this fascination. Both novels question the ethics of the ways their respective chimpanzees are incorporated into human culture, and, as they foreground breaches in the discursive boundary erected to legitimate human priority, throw into sharp relief the centrality of language as a measure of the significance of animal lives, bodies and concerns in the twenty-first century. The novels’ respective textualisations of chimpanzees are markedly different; Me Cheeta transforms an animal biography (albeit a biography with an unstable relationship with historical facts) into an autobiographical conceit by granting a satirical voice to a chimpanzee, and even as the text draws attention to the fallacy of writing by an animal it refuses to deny that animal a rich perspective or a life story that can be made
meaningful to a human. Mocking his status as comic aper while textualising himself as a comedian, Cheeta is both amusing fiction and scathing iconoclast of human imaginings of trained apes. Cheeta invites one not so much into the presence of the originary animals in his story, but more into a life created by human appropriative intervention, a life entirely intelligible to a human reader. *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, in contrast, lambasts human self-obsession and its effects on apes by withholding fictional access to the internal world of a chimpanzee, and textually replicating the absence of interest in nonhuman responses and perspectives in the making of human discourses and practices. Unlike Cheeta, Fern is, as an animal representation, an invitation to judge human intervention into nonhuman lives through a foregrounding of the reader’s exclusion from her experiences — she is always silenced, and heavily mediated through memory, scientific abstraction, heterotopian boundaries, and the lack of a narrative form and language to speak of her extraordinary, hybrid life.

Overall, my study has aimed to make a clear statement of the forms that representations of animals take in twenty-first century fiction when their positions relative to the many and complex compositions of the human-animal divide are taken into account. It has contributed to the development of new concepts and terminology in Literary Animal Studies by articulating ways to read unusual or unacknowledged manifestations of the human-animal distinction, and the forms of their possible un-making in literary narrative. Such articulations emerge from close textual readings and detailed attention to the scientific, political, metaphorical and cultural stories encoded in animal representations. The texts and metatexts of the novels in this study are the signifying spaces where my animal-centred critical readings can uncover and thicken the stories of animals, stories for so long ignored by literary criticism.

The thesis of this study and the subjects it has chosen to focus on might, with the exception of analysis of *Me Cheeta*, have given the impression that the dominant character of novels about animals and their subjection to the human-animal distinction is gloominess. Other than the austere *The God of Animals* and discomfiting *Beatrice and Virgil*, however, the novels in this study are funny, and sometimes very funny. In the case of *Anthill* one suspects that the comedy is unintentional, but the prevalence of humorously ironic voices and narrative strategies which undercut presumptions of human propriety and morality indicates a fruitful future trajectory for Literary Animal
Studies to take. And perhaps the future of richer and kinder human engagements with other animals lies – without ever diminishing the gravity of the task in hand – in taking ourselves less seriously.


Buller, Henry ‘Individuation, the Mass and Farm Animals’, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 30.7/8 (December 2013), 155-175.


— ‘Boundary Issues: Human-Animal Relationships in Karen Joy Fowler’s *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 60.3 (Fall 2014), 616-635.


— *Of Grammatology*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997 [1976]).


Descartes, Rene, ‘Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences: Part V’, *The Philosophical Writings of*


Edge, Simon, ‘Is cheeta just a cheater?’ Express, [online] (Thursday 30 July 2009), www.express.co.uk/expressyourself/117233/is-cheeta-just-a-cheater [accessed 2 December 2014].


Gaard, Greta, ‘Reproductive Technology, or Reproductive Justice: an Ecofeminist, Environmental Justice Perspective on the Rhetoric of Choice’, *Ethics & The Environment*, 15.2 (Fall, 2010), 103-129.


Gibbons, Cedric (dir.), *Tarzan and His Mate* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1934).


— *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).


Hua, Julietta, Neel Ahuja, ‘Chimpanzee Sanctuary: “Surplus” Life and the Politics of Transspecies Care’, *American Quarterly*, 65.3 (September 2013), 619-637.


Hurn, Samantha, ‘What’s love got to do with it? The interplay of sex and gender in the commercial breeding of Welsh Cobs’, *Society and Animals*, 16.1 (March 2008), 23-44.


Inoue, Sana, Matsuzawa, Tetsuro, ‘Working memory of numerals in chimpanzees’, *Current Biology*, 17.23 (4 December 2007), R1004-R1005.


McKay, Robert, ‘What kind of literary animal studies do we want, or need?’ Modern Fiction Studies, 60.3 (Fall 2014), 636-644.

McNay, Mark, Fresh (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2008 [2007]).


— The Myths We Live By (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2004).


Naas, Michael, ‘Derrida’s Flair (For the Animals to Follow …)’, Research in Phenomenology, 40.10 (June 2010), 219-42.

Nixon, Rob, ‘Neoliberalism, Slow Violence, and the Environmental Picaresque’, 
*Modern Fiction Studies*, 55.3 (Fall 2009), 443-67.

Nonhuman Rights Project, ‘Update on Hercules and Leo Order to Show Cause’, [online] (21 April 2015), 


Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett [online] (Internet Classics Archive), 


Purvis, Andrew, ‘Pecking Order’, *The Guardian* [online] (24 September 2006),
http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2006/sep/24/foodanddrink.features8
[accessed 30 August 2015].


Rosen, Richard D. ‘Lie of the Jungle: The Truth About Cheeta the Chimpanzee’,
*Washington Post* [online] (Sunday 7 December 2008), 2-5,


Sallis, John, (ed.) *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, trans. by J. P. Leavey Jr


Savage-Rumbaugh, Sue, Wamba, Kanzi, Wamba, Panbanisha, Wamba, Nyota,

Schinke, Amanda, ‘PETA Germany’s display banned’, *PETA*, [on-line] (March 27 2009),
http://www.peta.org/blog/peta-germanys-holocaust-display-banned/
[accessed 19 August 2014].


Soper, Kate, ‘The Beast in Literature: Some Initial Thoughts’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 2.3 (October 2005), 303-309.


Trachsel, Mary, ‘Human uniqueness in the age of ape language research’, *Society and Animals*, 18.4 (October 2010), 397-412.


Tyson, Edward, *Orang-Outang Sive Homo Sylvestris: or, the Anatomy of a Pygmie compared with that of a Monkey, an Ape, and a Man. To which is added a philological essay concerning the pygmies, the cynocephali, the satyrs, and
sphinges of the ancients. Wherein it will appear that they are all either Apes, or Monkeys, and not Men, as formerly pretended (London: printed for T. Bennett and D. Brown, 1699) [online] (British Heritage Library). http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/ia/orangoutangsvieh00tyso#page/9/mode/1up [accessed 12 February 2015].


White, T. H., The Once and Future King (Fontana Books, 1962 [1939]).


— *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).


— ‘Chimpanzee’, [online] (2015),


