Disposable Life: The Literary Imagination and the Contemporary Novel

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how the contemporary Anglophone novel asks its readers to imagine and respond to disposable life as it emerges in our present-day biopolitical landscape. As the project frames it, disposable life is not just life that is disposed of; it is life whose disposal is routine and unremarkable, even socially and legally sanctioned for such purposes as human consumption, scientific knowledge-production, and economic and political gain. In the novels considered, disposability is tied to excess—to the “too many” who cannot be counted, much less individuated on a case-by-case basis.

This project argues that the contemporary novel forces a global readership to confront the mechanisms of devaluing life that are part of everyday existence. And while the factory-farmed animal serves as the example of disposable life par excellence, this project frames disposability as a form of normalized violence that has the power to operate across species lines to affect the human as well. Accordingly, each chapter examines the contemporary condition of disposability via a different figure of disposable life: the nonhuman (the animal in J. M. Coetzee’s The Lives of Animals and Disgrace), the replicated human (the clone in David Mitchell’s Cloud Atlas and Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go), the woman (in Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy), and the postcolonial subject (the victim of industrial disaster in Indra Sinha’s Animal’s People and political violence in Michael Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost). Chapter by chapter, the dissertation demonstrates how the contemporary novel both exposes the logic and operations of disposability, and, by mobilizing literary techniques like intertextual play and uncanny narration, offers up a set of distinctively literary solutions to it.

The dissertation argues that the contemporary novel disrupts the workings of disposability by teaching its audience to read differently—whether, for instance, by destabilizing the reader’s sense of mastery over the text or by effecting paradigm shifts
in the ethical frameworks the reader brings to bear on the encounter with the literary work. Taken together, the novels discussed in this dissertation move their readership away from a sympathetic imagination based on the potential substitutability of the self for the other and toward a form of readerly engagement that insists on preserving the other’s irreducible difference. Ultimately, this project argues, these modes of reading bring those so-called disposable lives, which are abjected by dominant social, economic, and political frameworks, squarely back into the realm of ethical consideration.
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1. Introduction: A Theory of Disposability

“Animals are my concern,” Jacques Derrida declared at the 1997 Cerisy conference (Derrida, The Animal 35). Responding to the conference theme, “The Autobiographical Animal” (The Animal ix), Jacques Derrida delivered a lecture that traced the ruptures, reductions, and elisions that underwrite the category of “the animal” in Western philosophy. In this talk, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” which was subsequently published in The Animal That Therefore I Am, Derrida frames “the question of the animal” as the current that runs through his entire body of work (The Animal 8): his oeuvre, Derrida explains, perhaps counterintuitively, is comprised of “… arguments that for a very long time, since I began writing, in fact, I believe I have dedicated to the question of the living and of the living animal. For me that will always have been the most important and decisive question. I have addressed it a thousand times, either directly or obliquely, by means of readings of all the philosophers I have taken an interest in …” (The Animal 34). In other words, Derrida insists, it is not just that his texts have grappled with animals, and it is not just that they draw upon an entire “bestiary” full of “animal figures” to examine philosophy, literature, and politics (The Animal 36, 35). What is significant here is that for Derrida to give an account of himself, to produce a narrative about the human that he is, he would have to situate that “human” in relation to “the animal” through and against which mankind has defined itself; this would mean telling the story of “the animal that [he himself is]” (The Animal 2). Producing his own autobiography for his audience, in other words, would mean “[undertaking] an anamnesic interpretation of all my animals. They certainly do not form a family, but they are the critters [bêtes] that I have been (following) from the start, for decades and from one ten-day conference to another” (The Animal 35).
Animals, then, are Derrida’s concern. But this concern is not just philosophical, textual, or figural. While Derrida frames his “bestiary” as an entry point into his life’s work, his lecture most squarely inhabits its own argument when it interrupts itself to reflect on the lives of the real animals that populate our world today. It is Derrida’s jarring invocation of these living, breathing creatures in the middle of an academic lecture—a technique that is replicated to equally unsettling effect three months later in J. M. Coetzee’s Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Princeton—that interests me here. Halfway through “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” Derrida takes the philosophical category of “the animal” that has been configured within Western philosophy as “the abyssal limit of the human,” as “the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself” (*The Animal* 12), and considers its real-world implications for flesh-and-blood animals by tracing the “unprecedented transformation” that characterizes contemporary modes of relating to animal life (*The Animal* 24):

It is all too evident that in the course of the last two centuries these traditional forms of treatment [“hunting, fishing, domestication, training”] of the animal have been turned upside down by the joint developments of zoological, ethological, biological, and genetic forms of knowledge, which remain inseparable from techniques of intervention into their object, from the transformation of the actual object, and from the milieu and world of their object, namely, the living animal. This has occurred by means of farming and regimentalization at a demographic level unknown in the past, by means of genetic experimentation, the industrialization of what can be called the production for consumption of animal meat, artificial insemination on a massive scale, more and more audacious manipulations of the genome, the reduction of the animal not only to production and overactive reproduction (hormones, genetic cross-breeding, cloning, etc.) of meat for consumption, but also of all other sorts of end products, and all of that in the service of a certain being and the putative human well-being of man. (*The Animal* 25)

Industrial animal agriculture, Derrida explains, is not just making use of animals, but is concurrently transforming the animals it is making use of. “[T]he living animal” that is subject to the operations of knowledge-power within contemporary animal enterprises is thus no longer the same “living animal” that existed prior to the scientific and
technological advances of the last two centuries. And it is not just that the techniques for commoditizing animal life have been streamlined; what’s equally discomfiting is the fact that these techniques have changed the makeup—both social and biological—of the creatures that are being rendered into products for human consumption. Simply stated, the term “animal” no longer means what it once did, or what we now think it does. In light of current industry practices, “the animal” is a two-hundred-year old fantasy that we hold on to in order to shield ourselves from what animals today have become: raw material that is processed into the products that satisfy human appetites. And we are not just literally, physically hungry. We are also hungry to expand our “zoological, ethological, biological, and genetic forms of knowledge”—knowledge that we can then use, in an ever more efficient feedback loop, to further optimize the ways in which we process, package, and parcel out animal lives.

It is the logic that underwrites this violent relationship to animal life that my project interrogates. Specifically, my project turns to the contemporary Anglophone novel to consider the normalization of violence that characterizes our present moment. This is a kind of violence that doesn’t register as violence, a kind of violence that is so routine and mundane that it goes largely unnoticed; the subject upon which this particular kind of violence is inflicted is what I call disposable life. Disposable life is thus not just life that is disposed of; it is life whose disposal is unremarkable, socially and legally sanctioned for such purposes as human consumption, scientific knowledge-production, and economic and political gain. At its most extreme, it is life that is produced solely so that it may be disposed of.

In the end, disposable lives are lives that, according to dominant cultural narratives, “have utility” or “serve a purpose”; they are lives that, as with the animals used for food or scientific research, we make use of or derive benefit from on a daily basis. In these cases, the perceived utility of these lives serves as its own justification, so
that the question that gets asked is not, “Is it ethically acceptable that these lives are used as they are?” but rather, tautologically, “Is the way in which these lives are used useful?” And while the figure of the animal in Derrida’s rendering serves as the example of disposable life par excellence, in my project I demonstrate how disposability cuts across species lines to take up the human as well. In addition to the animal, therefore, this project will consider other figures of disposable life—among them the clone, the woman, and the postcolonial victim of industrial disaster—who are abjected by dominant social, economic, and political frameworks.

To the degree that disposability has the power to take the human as its object, my work resonates thematically with scholarship by Kevin Bales, who chronicles present-day human slavery in *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*, Rob Nixon, who considers the victims of industrial disaster and environmental injustice in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, and Melissa W. Wright, who attends to female factory workers in Mexico and China in *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*. In contradistinction to Bales’s and Wright’s ethnographic work,  

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1 In this text, Bales explains the production of “disposable people” within contemporary slavery as follows: “Slaveholders get all the work they can out of their slaves, and then throw them away. The nature of the relationship between slaves and slaveholders has fundamentally altered. The new disposability has dramatically increased the amount of profit to be made from a slave, decreased the length of time a person would normally be enslaved, and made the question of legal ownership less important. When slaves cost a great deal of money, the investment had to be safeguarded through clear and legally documented ownership. Slaves of the past were worth stealing and worth chasing down if they escaped. Today slaves cost so little that it is not worth the hassle of securing permanent, ‘legal’ ownership. Slaves are disposable” (*Disposable People* 14). See also Bales’s introduction in the collaborative work *Documenting Disposable People: Contemporary Global Slavery*, a text of primarily documentary photography on the contemporary slave trade. For a treatment of refugees as disposable people, see Judy A. Mayotte’s *Disposable People: The Plight of Refugees*. She frames the category of “disposable people” as follows: “Refugees, the by-products of war, become disposable people—political pawns of leaders, their own as well as those who have a strategic interest in the conflict” (7).

2 I discuss Nixon’s work at greater length in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.

3 Wright frames the myth surrounding the female factory worker’s disposability as follows: “The myth of the disposable third world woman revolves around the trials and tribulations of its central protagonist—a young woman from a third world locale—who, through the passage of time, comes to personify the meaning of human disposability: someone who eventually evolves into a state of worthlessness. The myth explains that this wasting process occurs within the factories that employ her, as she, within a relatively short period of time and at a young age, loses
however, my project is particularly invested in understanding disposability through the workings of the literary—that is, through the question of how contemporary novels by writers like J. M. Coetzee, David Mitchell, and Margaret Atwood both take up the problem of disposable life and offer their own formal solutions to it.

My project also contributes to critical conversations surrounding formulations like Giorgio Agamben’s bare life, Judith Butler’s precarious life, and Eric L. Santner’s creaturely life. The difference between disposable life and these other forms of “life,”

the physical and mental faculties for which she was initially employed, until she is worth no more than the cost of her dismissal and substitute. In other words, over time, this woman turns into a form of industrial waste, at which point she is discarded and replaced. … Yet, paradoxically, even as this protagonist turns into a living form of human waste, the myth explains how she simultaneously produces many valuable things with her labor” (2).

Rob Nixon’s book is a work of literary criticism that takes as its focus writings produced by “writer-activist” figures (22), “combative writers who have deployed their imaginative agility and worldly ardor to help amplify the media-marginalized causes of the environmentally dispossessed” (5). My project, though it touches lightly on environmental questions in Chapters 4 and 5, is primarily concerned with the production of figures of disposable life within the contemporary Anglophone novel.

By “formal” I mean having to do with literary form.

More broadly speaking, though, it is a problem that is bound up with different forms of artistic representation; see Mrinalini Chakravorty and Leila Neti for a treatment of disposability in contemporary cinema.

More to come on this in the “Biopolitics and the Animal” section later in this chapter.

In Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?, Butler writes, “Precariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all” (Frames 14). This is to say that while Butler recognizes that the animal is also subject to precarity (“there ought to be recognition of precariousness as a shared condition of human life (indeed, as a condition that links human and non-human animals)” [Frames 13]), she only considers the figure of the human as a site of both precarious and grievable life. Butler accordingly frames the project of Frames of War as follows: “This work seeks to reorient politics on the Left toward a consideration of precarity as an existing and promising site for coalitional exchange. For populations to become grievable does not require that we come to know the singularity of every person who is at risk or who has, indeed, already been risked. Rather, it means that policy needs to understand precariousness as a shared condition, and precarity as the politically induced condition that would deny equal exposure through the radically unequal distribution of wealth and the differential ways of exposing certain populations, racially and nationally conceptualized, to greater violence. The recognition of shared precariousness introduces strong normative commitments of equality and invites a more robust universalizing of rights that seeks to address basic human needs for food, shelter, and other conditions for persisting and flourishing” (Frames 28-29). The animal, and its relation to the human in Butler’s work is thus left untheorized. See also Butler’s Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence.

In On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald, Eric Santer takes up a particular strand of “twentieth-century German—and above all, German-Jewish—thought” that engages with “how human bodies and psyches register the ‘states of exception’ that punctuate the ‘normal’ run of
however, is that while they are concerned with human lives, and more precisely with the figure of the human who is somehow debased, abjected, or animalized, disposable life operates as an interspecies category that regards the animal as the legitimate subject of violence as well. Specifically, my work seeks to trace a logic that underwrites a particular kind of violence that affects some (but not all) animal lives\textsuperscript{10} (as well as some (but not all) human lives. This is what I call—having adopted the term from Ranjana Khanna—disposability (Khanna, “Disposability”).\textsuperscript{11} To put it another way: this project seeks to think ethics from a different starting point than Agamben, Butler, Nixon, and so forth. Namely, it asks what happens when one does not take the human/animal dichotomy as the jumping-off point for ethical reasoning. And here I want to pause to clarify: in this dissertation, I am not seeking to compare human and animal lives, or to set them alongside each other for the purposes of valuation. Instead, I am interested in

social and political life” (xix). For Santner, creaturely life is human life that has become subsumed within the domain of biopolitics (12), a construct that strongly resembles Agamben’s rendering of \textit{homo sacer}. Santner frames creaturely life as “less a dimension that traverses the boundaries of human and nonhuman forms of life than a specifically human way of finding oneself caught up in the midst of antagonisms in and of the political field” (xix). For my purposes, therefore, creaturely life falls short in the same way that Agamben’s conception of bare life does—it takes the human as its subject and remains inoperative across species lines.\textsuperscript{10} For example, in my framework for disposability, animals that belong to species that are considered endangered would not be regarded as disposable. Animals that are bred to be disposed of in scientific labs and agricultural enterprises, however, are the prime exemplars of disposable life.

\textsuperscript{11} In this article, Khanna theorizes the concept of disposability, beginning by tracing the two registers upon which the term “disposable” operates, proposing that “the throwaway and the available bleed into each other, always referencing each other in the English word \textit{disposable}” (“Disposability”185). In this piece, Khanna is particularly interested in disposability as a way “to understand the new political subject,” the disposable \textit{human subject} who is to be understood “not solely in production or reproduction or enrichment, but rather in impoverishment, desubjectivation, disintegration, or disposability” (“Disposability” 196-197). The terrain that this opens up is particularly wide-ranging: ‘‘Disposability’ allows for an understanding of capital and its excess, including the gradations of pleasures and pains it supplies, the throwaway product, the self-generating machinery that annihilates without noticing, the purposeful and direct exploitation of genocide, and the gendered way in which contemporaneous—creedal wars writ large as global civil wars—states, families, and most contemporary conceptualizations of community are part of its machinery” (Khanna, “Disposability”194). In my project, I take up Khanna’s concept of disposability, but I narrow its scope to focus particularly on the ways in which the contemporary Anglophone novel takes up a range of different figures of disposable life (a category that I also open up to the animal) in order to both reveal and undo the logic of disposability.
understanding the operations of the forms of violence that render certain kinds of lives (be they human or animal) disposable. In other words, this project explores what happens when we shift the focus from the ontological status of the victim of violence to the logic and operations of violence itself, as such.

In this introduction, therefore, I stay with the figure of the animal, reading the rest of Derrida’s discussion of our “unprecedented transformation” in relation to animal life as a tool for framing the broader category of disposable life that is the focus of my project. More specifically, in what follows, I read this selection from Derrida alongside the fiction of J. M. Coetzee in order to frame the various political, philosophical, and cultural discourses that today converge to produce the problem of disposability: the imperative to valuate forms of life across species lines via a comparative framework in which human life is the touchstone of value and sanctity; contemporary biopolitical frameworks that fail to adequately account for lives that exist beyond the pale of “the human”; and the structural limitations of the sympathetic imagination, which, because predicated on the degree of similarity that the other bears to the self, falls short as an ethical paradigm for responding to figures of radical alterity.

In the dissertation at large, I read a selection of contemporary novels that “render” disposable life—that is, novels that 1) portray forms of life that are, within the world of the text, regarded as disposable, and 2) showcase the ways in which these disposable lives are broken down into their constituent parts. In her work Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times, Nicole Shukin explores the ways in which these two types of “rendering” become mutually imbricated within “the cultural and material politics of animal capital” (24):

Rendering signifies both the mimetic act of making a copy, that is, reproducing or interpreting an object in linguistic, painterly, musical, filmic, or other media ... and the industrial boiling down and recycling of animal remains. The double sense of rendering—the seemingly incommensurable (yet arguably supplementary) practices that the word
evokes—provides a peculiarly apt rubric for beginning to more concretely historicize animal capital’s modes of production.

The double entendre of rendering is deeply suggestive of the complicity of “the arts” and “industry” in the conditions of possibility of capitalism. It suggests a rubric for critically tracking the production of animal capital, more specifically, across the spaces of culture and economy and for illuminating the supplementarity of discourses and technologies normally held to be unrelated. Such an interimplication of representational and economic logics is pivotal to biopolitical critique, since biopower never operates solely through the power to reproduce life literally, via the biological capital of the specimen or species, nor does it operate solely through the power to reproduce it figuratively via the symbolic capital of the animal sign, but instead operates through the power to hegemonize both the meaning and matter of life. (Shukin 20)

For Shukin, the dual meaning of rendering marks “the discomfitting complicity of symbolic and carnal technologies of reproduction” (21); she reads the cultural representations of animal life and the industries that break it down and repackage it for human consumption as co-constitutive players in a larger biopolitical “hegemonic logic” that structures the operations of “animal capital” in the world today (28). As a counterpoint to these forms of rendering, Shukin offers up “Rendering as [a] critical practice” (28) that would “[draw] attention to the role that symbolic power plays in the reproduction of market life” (25). Such a practice would highlight the ways in which cultural and artistic forms of representation collude with market forces to reconstitute animal life as animal capital. For Shukin, rendering as a “counterhegemonic” critical practice offers a way to read through and against the relay that runs between the literal (i.e. slaughterhouses, rendering plants) and figurative (i.e., cultural artifacts, works of art) renderings of animal life (28).

In my project, the concept of “rendering” remains of central importance, but I differ from Shukin in that I draw literary forms of rendering life, specifically those of the contemporary Anglophone novel, out of the realm of complicity with industrial-technological forms of rendering animal life. That is, I take up the contemporary novel as a literary form that renders (represents) the rendering (breaking down into constituent pieces) of disposable lives. However, I posit that rather than naturalizing
“symbolic and carnal economies of capital,” as Shukin understands “the arts” to do (28), the novel renders (represents) the logic of disposability in order to expose and critique it. In this sense, the contemporary novel’s rendering of disposable life becomes, as I see it, a literary practice that shares a set of investments with Shukin’s notion of “rendering” as a “counterhegemonic” critical practice. In other words, the novels I examine take up “disposable life” to expose it for what it is: a category that is neither natural nor given, a cultural construct that serves as an alibi for the everyday violence that is perpetrated upon those who are marked (in various ways) as less-than-human. These novels take as their focus forms of life that are routinely devalued (such as the human clones produced to serve as organ “donors” for society’s “real” human population in Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go) in order to reveal the ways in which the value that is ascribed to “fully human” lives is inextricably entangled with a “rendering disposable” of lives that are excluded from this frame.

The novels I consider challenge the logic and operations of disposable life in another way as well: they enact a shift in scale, confronting us with disposable life on a different register from the one we are used to. Because disposable life is normally engaged and processed on the level of the multitude, rather than the individual, lives that are deemed disposable are rendered indistinguishable from each other, replaceable and interchangeable. It is only when one encounters these lives outside the frame of the multitude of which they normally form a part that one is confronted by the points of rupture and contradiction latent in the narratives that have been constructed about them. Timothy Pachirat models this disjoint in his first-hand account of industrialized slaughter, Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight. Pachirat opens his book with an anecdote about six cattle that escaped from an Omaha slaughterhouse in 2004 (1), explaining that the one that evaded capture longest was eventually cornered and shot by police in front of a number of slaughterhouse workers
(2). Pachirat gives an account of one worker’s response: “‘They shot it, like, ten times,’ she said, her face livid with indignation, and her words sparked a heated lunch-table discussion about the injustice of the shooting and the ineptitude of the police” (2).

Pachirat’s reader can hardly avoid doing a double take. Why should it trouble slaughterhouse workers when one cow is shot and killed by police, if they are tasked with contributing to the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of cows each year? Why does it become a problem only in exceptional cases such as this one, when one learns that the “cream-colored cow” that has made a run for its freedom subsequently refuses to load “into the waiting trailer” that is to take it back to the slaughterhouse (Pachirat 2)? How is it possible to care about this one cow so deeply, and yet to feel so little for the more than 33 million cattle that are killed each year (Pachirat 2)?

The contemporary Anglophone novel poses precisely this question and opens it up even further, moving its readers beyond the bounds of the slaughterhouse and into a wider contextualization of the category of disposable life. Taking us to the site of inassimilable difference to confront us with all kinds of disposable lives, the works of fiction I consider present us with singular faces—faces like that of the cream-colored cow—that would normally be subsumed by a faceless multitude going to its death en masse. But if my project traces the ways in which the contemporary novel grapples on an ethical register with the present-day political reality of disposability, then it does something else as well; it argues that in taking up the problem of disposability, the contemporary novel also destabilizes the discourse of sympathy that has for so long shaped the ways in which we read fiction. The novels I consider accordingly suggest that when we are faced with the insurmountable chasm that separates the lives that matter from the lives that don’t, the sympathetic imagination no longer serves as a viable basis for engaging ethically with the other. Because sympathy works by

12 This is the figure that Pachirat gives for 2009.
reframing the other’s experience in terms of one’s own, when it comes to the radical difference embodied by disposable life, something else is needed.

In light of this, I argue that the contemporary novel doesn’t just produce a new kind of narrative about what it means to be disposable. I argue that it produces a new kind of reader as well—a reader who must learn to operate outside the bounds of the sympathetic imagination. Whereas sympathy, in Adam Smith’s rendering, depends on the individual’s capacity to imagine himself into the position of the other who is suffering, the contemporary novel, in its rendering of disposable life, confronts the reader with lives that lie, constitutively and from the outset, beyond the reach of the sympathetic imagination. Denied the familiar comforts of the sympathetic imagination, the reader hovers at the limit-line between identification and dis-identification, her “sympathies” paradoxically aligned with those to whom the extension of sympathy is a priori disallowed, constitutively disavowed. In this project, therefore, I trace the ways in which novels like J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, and Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy, among others, engage in their own modes of meaning-making, instantiating new forms of reading that confront us with the cost at which our own “sufficiently valuable” lives are secured in an ever-globalizing world marked by the uneven allocation of resources, risk, and precarity. Ultimately, I argue that these contemporary novels that seek to expose the logic and operations of disposability also offer up—via narrative techniques like intertextual play and uncanny narration—a set of distinctively literary solutions to it.

### 1.1 Thinking with the Holocaust

In this section, I turn back to the figure of the factory-farmed animal as the paradigmatic exemplar of disposable life (a category that, in later chapters, I will

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13 This is a move that reduces difference to sameness by reframing the other’s experience in terms of one’s own (Adam Smith 3-4). See “The Limits of the Sympathetic Imagination” section at the end of this introduction.
develop through different figures of abjected humanity) in order to draw out a driving force behind the production of disposability: the impulse to compare, which seeks to set different forms of life side by side so as to valuate and order them over and against each other. In order to interrogate this comparative impulse that lies at the heart of ethico-political discourse, therefore, I return to Derrida’s discussion of the “unprecedented transformation” in man’s relation to animals, which reaches a fever pitch in his account of the ways in which human knowledge-power imposes itself upon animal life. What is most jarring—and in this case, most compelling—about Derrida’s account of contemporary animal enterprises is the fact that in describing the standardization of animal “processing” on a mass scale, Derrida raises the specter of the Holocaust, invoking the genocide of six million people as a point of comparison. He says:

Such a subjection, whose history we are attempting to interpret, can be called violence in the most morally neutral sense of the term and even includes the interventionist violence that is practiced, as in some very minor and in no way dominant cases, let us never forget, in the service of or for the protection of the animal, but most often the human animal. Neither can one seriously deny the disavowal that this involves. No one can deny seriously anymore, or for very long, that men do all they can in order to dissimulate this cruelty or to hide it from themselves; in order to organize on a global scale the forgetting or misunderstanding of this violence, which some would compare to the worst cases of genocide (there are also animal genocides: the number of species endangered because of man takes one’s breath away). One should neither abuse the figure of genocide nor too quickly consider it explained away. It gets more complicated: the annihilation of certain species is indeed in process, but it is occurring through the organization and exploitation of an artificial, infernal, virtually interminable survival, in conditions that previous generations would have judged monstrous, outside of every presumed norm of a life proper to animals that are thus exterminated by means of their continued existence or even their overpopulation. As if, for example, instead of throwing a people into ovens and gas chambers (let’s say Nazi) doctors and geneticists had decided to organize the overproduction and overgeneration of Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals by means of artificial insemination, so that, being continually more numerous and better fed, they could be destined in always increasing numbers for the same hell, that of the imposition of genetic experimentation, or extermination by gas or by fire. In the same abattoirs. (The Animal 25-26)
As it progresses, the preceding passage shifts registers, moving from the discomfiting to the brink of the obscene. To call the routine operations of industrial animal enterprises “violence in the most morally neutral sense of the term” is already to go much further than social and cultural norms allow: there is nothing “violent,” mainstream voices opine, about using animals to serve the purpose for which they are intended, namely, the production of meat that will be used to feed an ever-growing and ever-hungrier human population. This reasoning, of course, is precisely what Derrida terms “disavowal” and “dissimulation”: we focus on utility in order to mask the “cruelty” and “violence” that underwrites our relationship with animal life. To draw a connection between the routine slaughter of animals for food and the enormity of the Holocaust, however, is to go beyond a critique of man’s relation to animals. On the most basic level, Derrida’s “comparison” (I use this term only provisionally), violates the un-interrogated conviction that human life is “worth” more than animal life. Within the staunchly anthropocentric modes of thought that characterize our cultural landscape, to even set the two side-by-side as though some equivalence might be drawn between them is not just in poor taste; it is misguided and dangerous. To treat humans like animals is to behave criminally; as history has shown, this is a logic that underwrites colonialism, enslavement, and genocide. To anthropomorphize animals, meanwhile, is to elevate the animal beyond its station, to pose a threat to the established hierarchy within which humans are securely stationed on top and animals are distributed below. Within the scope of this logic, therefore, any comparison that is drawn between human and animal life must begin and end with the understanding that the former is always more valuable than the latter. From the point of view of operant power structures, the act of comparing the two is legitimate only if it upholds or re-entrenches this relation.

In the preceding passage, therefore, Derrida does nothing less than flout the established order. By taking up the victims of the Holocaust in the service of his argument about animals, rather than vice versa, he intentionally draws his comparison in the “wrong” direction. In so doing, Derrida is keenly aware that such an “inappropriate” analogy runs up against the “right” kind of comparison, which would uphold a normative understanding of the relation between human and animal life—the relation that allows the former to exert its power over the latter.

The same “inverted” comparison appears in J. M. Coetzee’s Tanner Lectures on Human Values, “The Lives of Animals,” which Coetzee delivered only a few months after Derrida’s talk at Cerisy. In Coetzee’s lectures, which take the form of fiction, the character Elizabeth Costello replicates Derrida’s Holocaust analogy almost precisely, declaring to her audience at Appleton College, “we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock, ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them” (The Lives of Animals 65). The Lives of Animals, however, further unpacks Derrida’s argument by also incorporating within itself a critique of it. In Coetzee’s work, the most compelling criticism leveled against Elizabeth Costello deals with the difference between the “right” and “wrong” kind of comparison. In Coetzee’s text, Abraham Stern insists that Costello draws the comparison between those killed in the Holocaust and animals going to slaughter in the wrong direction (which is precisely what Derrida does as well), violating the sanctity of human life, and therefore of all the human lives that were lost in the Holocaust, in the process. In a letter to Costello, Stern writes:

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. You misunderstand the nature of likenesses; I would even say you misunderstand willfully, to the point of blasphemy. Man is made in the likeness of God, but God does not have the likeness of
man. If Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews. The inversion insults the memory of the dead. It trades on the horrors of the camps in a cheap way. (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 94)

The “trick with words” for which Stern condemns Costello is that of abusing the function of the word “like”—the logic of likeness and of comparison. Stern believes that Costello uses the logic of comparison to erase the difference between the two terms, so that, as he understands Costello’s argument, “A is like B” (Jews were treated like cattle) is readily inverted to yield “B is like A” (cattle were treated like Jews), which then collapses the two terms into each other to yield something along the lines of “A = B” (“Jews and cattle were treated the same”). In his interpretation of Costello’s talk, Stern collapses this relation even further to yield something like “Jews and cattle are the same.” From Stern’s perspective, Costello’s talk does away with each term’s constitutive difference, arriving at the distasteful conclusion that the two terms, Jews and cattle, are more or less equivalent to each other. Or, to put it another way, Stern seems to understand Costello to be placing human life and animal life on the same level; it is to this act that he takes offense.

Stern’s interpretation, however, is limited by his frame of reference, which presumes a hierarchy that organizes the value of different forms of life in relation to each other, and in which the human is always situated on top. Stern’s critique, I argue, doesn’t meet Costello’s argument on its own terms because it fails to recognize that Costello is making use of the logic of comparison in order to undermine it. To put it another way: Costello’s “inverted” comparison is only inverted if one takes the violent forms of knowledge-power that are exerted over animal life as “natural” and unproblematic. The moment we refuse to take the established hierarchy at face value, as Costello does, we reject the logic of comparison that tells us how we ought to “order” various forms of life in relation to each other. Because it is such ordering that serves as an alibi for the human domination of animal life, Costello’s a priori rejection of
hierarchical thinking produces something different from what Stern perceives. That is, Costello isn’t “elevating” cattle brought to slaughter to the level of Holocaust victims, nor is she “lowering” Holocaust victims to the level of slaughtered cattle. If Costello draws any “comparison” between these two groups, it is not about the value of their lives—human lives vs. animal lives—or even about the relation between them. It is about the forms of violence to which both are subjected and about the power structures that render them disposable.

Costello “inverts” the accepted logic of comparison in order to scandalize her audience, in order to expose the inherent violence that underwrites the “proper” workings of that logic. It is the act of assigning value to some lives in relation to and over others that becomes the wellspring of precisely the kind of violence (i.e., the violence of treating human beings like cattle) that such acts of comparison are intended to safeguard against. In other words, drawing the comparison in the “right” direction—the direction that asserts the value of some (“human”) lives over other (“nonhuman”) ones—offers no guarantee of the inviolability of those who would seem to belong to the former category.

Cary Wolfe makes this clear in Animal Rites, speaking of the dangers that speciesism poses even to those of our own species:

The effective power of the discourse of species when applied to social others of whatever sort relies, then, on a prior taking for granted of the institution of speciesism—that is, of the ethical acceptability of the systematic ‘noncriminal putting to death’ of animals based solely on their species. And because the discourse of speciesism, once anchored in this material, institutional base, can be used to mark any social order, we need to understand that the ethical and philosophical urgency of confronting the institution of speciesism and crafting a posthumanist theory of the subject has nothing to do with whether you like animals. We all, human and nonhuman alike, have a stake in the discourse and institution of speciesism; it is by no means limited to its overwhelmingly direct and disproportionate effects on animals. (7)

In this passage, speciesism is one particular form of the comparative, hierarchical valuation of beings that both Derrida and Costello critique. For Wolfe, the tendency to discriminate on the basis of species constitutes a threat to all beings, even to those who,
at a first glance, might stand to benefit from such logic. Derrida and Coetzee are thinking in a similar vein, but beyond it as well. It is not just a question of discrimination, they insist, but fundamentally a question of valuation—a question of how we compare, how and why we go about the seemingly (although never actually) neutral task of assigning value to some lives over others. The production of disposable life is itself a consequence of this process. As R. Radhakrishnan puts it, “The epistemology of comparison is willed into existence by a certain will to power/knowledge. Such a will is never innocent of history and its burden” (454).

In returning to Derrida, it becomes evident that while on the surface, Derrida sounds like Costello (or rather, to be chronologically accurate, Costello sounds like Derrida), the passage that opens this section is haunted by the specter of a Sternian critique as well. To put it another way: Derrida articulates an intentionally “inverted” comparison that both foresees and preemptively responds to the indictment leveled against it. “One should neither abuse the figure of genocide nor too quickly consider it explained away,” Derrida observes, and then proceeds to outline the mechanisms through which “the annihilation of certain species is indeed in process”—mechanisms that paradoxically operate “through the organization and exploitation of an artificial, infernal, virtually interminable survival” (The Animal 26, emphasis mine). For Derrida, the language we normally use to speak about the production of animal life in the service of its never-ending annihilation—language grounded in notions of efficiency and utility, and, on the flip-side, of animal rights and welfare—fails to adequately apprehend the enormity of the violence at hand. For his words to measure up, therefore, Derrida must appropriate the language of human extermination; that is, he must invoke the specter of genocide, which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, operates strictly within the realm of mankind as “the deliberate and systematic extermination of an ethnic or
national group” (“Genocide”). This is another way of saying that Derrida’s power of critique depends on his capacity to draw this “inappropriate” comparison between present-day abattoirs and Nazi gas chambers, on his ability to re-formulate our understanding of genocide so as to render it operative across species lines. His attack on the industrialized extermination of animal life is, at the same time, an attack on the language we use to speak about it.

What Derrida’s seemingly gratuitous Holocaust comparison makes clear is that when it comes to speaking about animals, and especially about animals that are regarded as disposable, the language that is available to us is limited; when we deviate from the standard vocabulary, as both Derrida and Costello do, Sternian forms of critique serve to bring us back in line with the norm. To insist that animals may be the subjects of genocide is thus as much an attack on received language as it is an indictment of man’s treatment of animals. In other words, to speak of animal “genocide” is not just to pose a critique of the comparative logic that underwrites the ways in which contemporary industrial society disposes of animal life. It is to reconfigure the term, to de-segregate language itself so that the non-human may come to be recognized as a legitimate victim of the kind of organized and methodical violence that has heretofore been strictly the provenance of the human. In this case, Derrida is writing out of and against an anthropocentric history that has from the beginning dismissed “the question of the animal” as insignificant—or at least, as insignificant in comparison to the human.

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15 Of this passage in Derrida, Cary Wolfe writes: “Similarly, the ‘animal Holocaust’ of factory farming does not abide by the logic of genocide per se, since the minimal conditions of genocide agreed on by most scholars are that a sovereign state declares an intention to kill a particular homogeneous group not for economic or political reasons but rather because of that group’s biological constitution, and that such a project of killing will be potentially complete, resulting in the extermination of all members of the targeted group. Indeed, this is part of what makes the ‘animal Holocaust’ not just horrible but in an important sense perverse” (Before the Law 45).

16 By this I mean that Derrida is working to show us that using different language to describe the same acts as they occur in the realm of the human vs. that of the animal needs to be done away with.
It is no accident that Derrida has chosen the Holocaust, the worst genocide in modern history, to showcase the violence of the modes of comparison that valuate life both within and across species bounds. By invoking the Holocaust, Derrida presents us with an impossible comparison, with the very impossibility of comparison, even as he’s relying on this “comparison” to frame the enormity of present-day violence against animal life. Therefore, it is imperative to ask what it means to invoke the Holocaust not in order to speak first and foremost about it, but rather to use it to speak for and about something else.17 As Naomi Mandel explains, the Holocaust, as a singular historical event that stands apart from all others, is regarded as the paradigmatic instance of the worst kind of “suffering, trauma, horror, and pain” and, paradoxically, also as a marker of the impossibility of ever fully conceptualizing or giving voice to this kind of “suffering, trauma, horror, and pain” (6). In other words, Derrida challenges the normative logic of comparison by drawing an unsanctioned comparison to an event that is widely understood to allow for no comparison.

The Holocaust, of course, does not lend itself to easy accounting or articulation. If, as Rolf Tiedemann observes, following Theodor Adorno, the Holocaust serves as the point of rupture between art that was created before and the art that comes after (Tiedemann xvi),18 then in critical discourse, the Holocaust also becomes, as Naomi Mandel explains, “a marker of the challenge…to meaning, to writing, to comprehension, and to aesthetics” (65).19 Setting Adorno’s famous dictum that “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” alongside his subsequent retraction of it (Adorno, Prisms 34; qtd. Mandel observes, “For … Derrida, the Holocaust—along with the implications of its representation—is not itself the object of their study but, rather, a catalyst that activates a sense of moral urgency and heightens the discussion’s implicit stakes” (32-33). Tiedemann writes, “Adorno…insisted merely that writing poetry before Auschwitz and writing poetry after were separated by an unbridgeable gulf” (xvi). Mandel is here giving an account of critical positions on Adorno’s statement; she herself diverges from this perspective by considering “Adorno’s concern not with history or with modernity but with complicity” (65). Mandel is interested in querying the notion of “the unspeakable” of which the Holocaust becomes the exemplary event (7).
in Tiedemann xvi)—“it may have been wrong to write that after Auschwitz poetry could no longer be written” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 362; qtd. in Tiedemann xvi)—speaks not just to the difficulty of creating art in the wake of the Holocaust, but also to the more fundamental problem of *speaking about* the Holocaust, and of knowing precisely what we mean when we do so.

I am therefore interested in the ways in which the Holocaust, as the limit-case between that which must be thought and that which remains unthinkable, between that which must be spoken and that which remains unspeakable, operates in the service of Derrida’s critique of the violence we perpetrate against animals. What, in particular, are we supposed to gather from a comparison when its grounding point of reference—the “known” term in the analogy—never fully lends itself to our comprehension? To explain: saying that “A is like B” presumes that we know what we mean by “B.” B is the “known” term in the comparison, and we come to understand A in terms of its relation to B. However, this only makes sense if we know what B signifies. What happens, though, when we say “A is like B,” and we can’t articulate precisely what we mean by “B”? What happens when “B” defies not just articulation, but even comprehension? In Derrida’s account, therefore, we are confronted with the fundamental impossibility of the analogy he’s set up—not because the two terms don’t line up, and ought never to be lined up, as a Sternian critique would posit, but because the second term doesn’t lend itself to any ready summation to begin with.

The “comparison” between the contemporary plight of animals and the Holocaust, therefore, is as much about the impossibility of drawing this comparison—it is a dramatization of the difficulty and danger that marks such forms of comparative

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20 Whether we take the Holocaust to be “unspeakable,” or whether acquiescing to its “unspeakability” actually “promotes evasion of moral and historical responsibility,” in which case, the ethical imperative would be to speak the unspeakable (Peter Novick 15; qtd. in Mandel 7), what interests me here is not so much the question of whether one must or must not speak of it, but simply the fact that in critical and cultural discourse, the Holocaust serves the limit-case for thought and speech.
thinking—as it is about the need, as Derrida sees it, to shift out of the comparison-based register that we use to talk about animal slaughter. We can’t account for the Holocaust by saying that 6 million people were killed any more than we can sum up the contemporary annihilation of animals by saying that 9 billion animals are slaughtered for food-production purposes each year. “These are numbers that numb the mind,” Elizabeth Costello says (Coetzee, Lives of Animals 19). But if numbers numb us, then invoking the Holocaust shocks us out of our complacency. Why situate animals and Holocaust victims side-by-side? Not because they are in any way “equivalent,” or “comparable,” but because they are both subject to a logic of violence that pushes up against the limits of our capacity for comprehension.

Violence is violence, Derrida insists, and employing different vocabularies to speak about the violence inflicted upon humans and the violence inflicted upon animals does not alter the nature or degree of that violence. This is where comparison fails us: it teaches us that when we speak about the normative treatment of the animals that are routinely disposed of, we are not dealing with “cruelty” or “violence,” but simply with the unexceptional, mundane, routine processing of raw material into final products; only humans are to be recognized as the legitimate victims of violence, of atrocity, of genocide. So in drawing this tasteless, impossible analogy, Derrida both pushes up against the limits of comparative thinking (by invoking the Holocaust as an event that allows for no comparison) and suggests that the ways in which we are used to comparing (as a means of re-entrenching already-extant hierarchies) serve to sanction the very forms of violence they are meant to hold at bay.

If Derrida’s work invokes the logic of comparison in order to undermine it, then Coetzee thinks through this problem in literary terms. In his 2007 novel Diary of a Bad Year, Coetzee stages a series of “strong and soft opinions,” penned by the writer J. C., and situates them alongside two other narratives, J. C.’s personal reflections on his
young Filipina typist, Anya, and Anya’s account of her interactions with J. C. and her boyfriend Alan. While J. C.’s “opinions” cannot be mapped out onto Coetzee, and while they are themselves undercut by the text’s other voices, they also take up the logic of comparison much as Derrida does—in order to disrupt it. If there is anything that Derrida and Coetzee share, and if there is anything in their work that will help us to unpack the category of disposable life as it appears within the contemporary novel, it is their conviction that the impetus to compare is too often a red herring that distracts us—helps us “to dissimulate this cruelty or to hide it from [our]selves” (Derrida, The Animal 26)—from the more important questions at hand. In his “soft opinion” entitled “On Having Thoughts,” J. C. writes:

The presumption that any and every set of elements can be ordered leads, in the realm of moral questions, straight into a quagmire. Which is worse, the death of a bird or the death of a human child? Which is worse, the death of an albatross or the death of an insentient, brain-damaged infant hooked up to a life-support machine? (Coetzee, Diary 205)

In this case, the purpose of this intensely discomfiting line of questioning is not to seek answers, but to expose the flawed assumptions that underwrite these questions to begin with. Specifically, these questions stage both the logic and the limits of comparative thinking. In seemingly asking us to choose between “the death of an albatross” and “the death of an insentient, brain-damaged infant hooked up to a life-support machine,” J. C. confronts us with the impossibility of “ordering” elements “[i]n the realm of moral judgments” (Coetzee, Diary 205). His question poses a genuine problem: given the information we have about these individuals—a fully functioning albatross and an only nominally alive human infant—we lack the tools to decide which one “matters more” than the other. And if the first question in the passage above seems to offer up an easy, straightforward answer, then the second, impossible question speaks back to the first, destabilizing its apparent transparency.
To put it another way: the second question isn’t *an outlier* within a larger realm of moral thinking that derives from the obvious, implicit answer to the first question. For Coetzee, that discomfiting, even offensive second question is itself *a constitutive part of* our moral system; it serves to reveal that system’s underlying mechanism, rather than to disrupt it. That is, the second question, in all its unsettling specificity, unmasksthe underlying assumptions that make the first question (“Which is worse, the death of a bird or the death of a human child?”) seem so easy to answer. Those assumptions are tethered to the hierarchy through which we valuate various forms of life on the basis of broad categories rather than their individual specificity. Thus, “the death of a human child” (i.e., of *any* human child) is understood, by default, to be worse than “the death of a bird” (i.e., of *any* bird); we can answer this question readily, without a second thought. However, the second question shows us what we sacrifice in order to arrive at this easy answer: not just the particularity of each being under consideration (i.e., the fact that the bird is a fully-functioning albatross, and that the human child is “an insentient, brain-damaged infant hooked up to a life-support machine”), but also its singularity. We don’t encounter either the child or the albatross on its own terms; instead, in being pushed to set them side by side, we have recourse to ready-made categories that we use to overwrite the singular beings in question. Once again, we are asked to negotiate something akin to the tension between the single “cream-colored cow” and the larger category of “cattle” to which it also belongs.

Finally, the questions J. C. poses reveal something else about our comparative frameworks, especially as they deal with human and animal lives: they offer up false dichotomies, and in so doing, naturalize them. Why must we choose *either* the welfare of animals *or* the welfare of humans, the death of the albatross *or* that of the infant? Why must we pit the human against the nonhuman, as if they are naturally opposed? These are the unspoken questions that underlie the ones that J. C. verbalizes. Both Coetzee
and Derrida ask: What would it mean for our world if we came to view the human/nonhuman “opposition” differently? What would happen if we came to see it as a cultural construct, manufactured and unstable?

1.2 “The Politics of Sight”

In her work Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era, which examines the rise of the US biotech industry and corporate agriculture, Melinda Cooper argues that we inhabit a historical moment in which life itself has become the object of capitalist modes of production (19), so that “the promise of a surplus of life [is] predicated on a corresponding move to devaluate life” (49). In the case of the industrial agriculture system, animal life is this ever-replaceable surplus, rendered infinitely disposable in the service of both individual appetites and corporate capital. As it turns out, however, disrupting this carefully calibrated logic is surprisingly easy—all that is needed is a good look into the system. This Derrida makes clear in his account of humanity’s “unprecedented transformation” in relation to animal life, wherein he alludes to (without even explicitly detailing) what goes on within present-day animal enterprises:

I don’t wish to abuse the ease with which one can overload with pathos the self-evidences I am drawing attention to here. Everybody knows what terrifying and intolerable pictures a realist painting could give to the industrial, mechanical, chemical, hormonal, and genetic violence to which man has been submitting animal life for the past two centuries. Everybody knows what the production, breeding, transport, and slaughter of these animals has become. Instead of thrusting these images in your faces or awakening them in your memory, something that would be both too easy and endless, let me simply say a word about this “pathos.” If these images are “pathetic” if they evoke sympathy, it is also because they “pathetically” open the immense question of pathos and the pathological, precisely, that is, of suffering, pity, and compassion … (The Animal 26)

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21 This is a reference to the title of Timothy Pachirat’s work, Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight, which is discussed later in this section.
By invoking the power of “a realist painting” to transmit “terrifying and intolerable pictures” of what goes on inside factory farms and slaughterhouses, Derrida, like Coetzee and Elizabeth Costello (who observes to her audience, “I will take it that you concede me the rhetorical power, to evoke these horrors and bring them home to you with adequate force, and leave it at that” [Coetzee, The Lives of Animals 63]), invokes the power of sight, which exerts its hold over its audience even in absentia, by proxy of the visual imagination. As Derrida and Coetzee both suggest, and as Pachirat argues in his ethnography of industrialized slaughter, visibility is the terrain upon which the war over disposable life is waged. Change will come through what Pachirat calls “a politics of sight, defined as organized, concerted attempts to make visible what is hidden, and to breach, literally or figuratively, zones of confinement in order to bring about social and political transformation” (15).

The political power of visibility, and with it, of the visual imagination, is something that business interests and state legislators have also recently come to recognize as undercover videos by animal-rights groups\(^{22}\) have begun to the chip away at the public image (and thus at the bottom line) of industrial agriculture operations. Faced with the loss of business and a public relations nightmare,\(^{23}\) the solution, as the agriculture industry sees it, is to keep such information out of the public eye to begin with. This is to say that in response to recurrent footage documenting the unsanitary living conditions and cruel treatment of animals on factory farms, the agriculture industry and the legislators that support it have chosen to take aim not at the inadequate

\(^{22}\) These groups include PETA, Mercy for Animals, and Compassion Over Killing.

\(^{23}\) One of the best examples of this is the case of the Central Valley Meat Co. in California in 2012. In that instance, undercover video taken by the group Compassion Over Killing “showed cows that appeared to be sick or lame being beaten, kicked, shot and shocked in an attempt to get them to walk to slaughter” (Cone). This triggered widespread public outrage, the temporary closure of the plant by the USDA, and the suspension of contracts with McDonald’s, In-N-Out Burger, Costco, and the National School Lunch Program (Cone).
laws that dictate animal welfare standards, but rather at the groups and individuals that work to expose industry abuses.24

Implicit in the logic that undergirds so-called “ag-gag” legislation, which, as of June 2013, has been introduced in eighteen states and has been passed in three of them (“Ag-gag laws”),25 is the fact that for certain lives to be rendered disposable, they must first be made invisible. In March of 2012, Governor Terry E. Branstad of Iowa signed into law House File 589 (“Governor Branstad Signs House File 589 and Senate File 2071 Into Law”), which criminalized the act of “agricultural production facility fraud,” making it illegal to “[Obtain] access to an agricultural production facility by false pretenses” (An Act Relating To An Offense Involving Agricultural Operations 1). This bill and others like it—most notably Utah’s House Bill 187, which was signed into law in 2012 and established the crime of “agricultural operation interference” (Agricultural Operation Interference 2)—aim to clamp down on those who seek to take undercover audio or video footage of agricultural operations. Utah’s House Bill 187, for instance, states:

(2) A person is guilty of agricultural operation interference if the person: (a) without consent from the owner of the agricultural operation, or the owner’s agent, knowingly or intentionally records an image of, or sound from, the agricultural operation by leaving a recording device on the agricultural operation;

24 As Wolfe explains, the regulations that govern the treatment of farm animals fail to protect the large majority of the animals used for food production: “The two primary laws regulating the treatment of nonhuman animals in the United States are the Animal Welfare Act (AWA) and the Humane Methods of Livestock Slaughter Act (HAS). The latter was passed by Congress in 1958, amended in 1978 and 2002, and stipulates that cattle, horses, and other livestock killed for food must be slaughtered with minimal pain and suffering … It is worth noting, however, that 99 percent of the animals killed for food in the United States each year (namely, chickens) are excluded from protection by the HAS—a fact that is doubtless driven by the additional expense that would be incurred by the poultry industry were they to be protected by the law” (Before the Law 12).

25 As of June 2013, “ag-gag” legislation has been introduced in Arkansas, California, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, Wyoming. Ag-gag laws are on the books in Iowa, Utah, and Missouri. Older laws that are geared toward preventing property damage and trespassing onto animal facilities operations have been on the books in Montana, North Dakota, and Kansas since 1990 and 1991. For the most up-to-date information, see “Ag-gag Laws.”
(b) obtains access to an agricultural operation under false pretenses;
(c) (i) applies for employment at an agricultural operation with the intent
to record an image of, or sound from, the agricultural operation;
(ii) knows, at the time that the person accepts employment at the
agricultural operation, that the owner of the agricultural operation
prohibits the employee from recording an image of, or sound from, the
agricultural operation… (Agricultural Operation Interference 2)

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that legislating this kind of enforced blindness is
achieved via a firm dichotomizing (as in Coetzee’s staging of the albatross/infant
comparison) of human and animal interests. An NPR piece on Iowa’s legislation
captures this tension, detailing that the bill’s sponsor, State Senator Joe Seng, affirms,
“Agriculture is one of our most important industries … It’s sort of a protection
mechanism that’s saying we do not want to put up with this in our state” (Masterson).
Supporters of these laws—who refer to them not as “ag-gag” but as “farm protection”
bills—insist that we face an either/or choice: either shore up the animal agriculture
industry and safeguard it against activist “sabotage,” or allow undercover operations to
continue unchecked and watch the industry on which so many human livelihoods
depend crumble to pieces. Within this narrative, affirming the value of human life
requires, to use Cooper’s words, “a corresponding move to devaluate [animal] life” (49).
Industrial animal agriculture thus depends on differential valuation and disposability—
on the belief that certain lives are produced so that they might be disposed of in the
service of other, more valuable lives. In this case, the value of animal life is reduced to
its capacity to be cheaply rendered into food for human consumption.

Even as “ag-gag” legislation aims to occlude what takes place within animal
enterprises, it is itself exceptionally transparent—that is, in its commitment to upholding
the agriculture industry’s interests. Such legislation takes at face value corporate
agriculture’s claim that what goes on inside factory farms and slaughterhouses is well-
regulated “standard practice” (Masterson) and is thus inherently unobjectionable; at the
same time, and paradoxically, it moves to criminalize the act of revealing precisely what
those unobjectionable “standard practices” entail. This is, of course, an implicit avowal—namely, an acknowledgment that exposure will hurt public opinion—of that which is constitutively disavowed: the fact that there are serious problems with the treatment of animals within the industrial agriculture system. In a final accounting, therefore, ag-gag legislation has more in common with activist footage than it cares to admit. If undercover video confronts us head-on with the knowledge we routinely disavow, then ag-gag legislation serves up a very similar dish: in acknowledging the threat of exposure even before it occurs, it confirms for the public that there is, indeed, something to hide.

While disposability runs on occlusion and denial, visibility places both its logic and its operations under siege. Thus, if undercover footage poses a threat to the image and profits of corporate agriculture, then it also raises the question of what else the act of shining light in dark places might achieve. What might it mean to understand visibility not just as a threat to the accumulation of capital, but also as an opportunity to elucidate the workings of power and to trace the ways in which it operates across species lines? As I will show, this is precisely a question of the “use value” of literature. In a world in which global capital operates according to its own self-aggrandizing logic, I argue that the contemporary novel deploys the literary imagination against the forms of political and economic reasoning that produce and sanction disposability. The novel achieves this first and foremost by entering into a space in which disposable lives (be they factory-farmed animals, organ-donor clones, or women used as sex slaves) are processed on a mass scale and re-focusing our gaze from the abstract “many” to an embodied, singular “one.” From there, however, it’s no longer just a question of what we see—it’s a question of what we do. More precisely, it’s a question of how the act of reading will change us. After all, as Derrida reminds us, even if seeing has the power to “overload [us] with pathos,” there is no guarantee that even the deepest grief will translate into
action (*The Animal* 26). What my project seeks to trace, therefore, are the ways in which the encounter with the disposable other through literature might come to serve as a supplement\(^{26}\) to its rendering via the visual imagination. Reading, I want to suggest, is not just a task performed by a reader. It must also be understood as an encounter with the inner workings, what I term “the literary,” of a given text. The aim of this project, as it takes shape in each of the following chapters via a different figure of disposable life, is to demonstrate that this encounter is one from which the reader does not emerge unchanged.

### 1.3 Biopolitics and the Animal

The preceding account of the recent proliferation of ag-gag bills across the United States sought to demonstrate that the large-scale management of animal life, no matter how well “regulated,” always leaves behind a social and political trace. In this section, I want to propose that this trace must be understood in relation to normative theorizations of biopolitics, which in their traditional forms have failed to account for the ways in which biopower extends beyond the limit-lines of the human. To put it another way: because ag-gag legislation functions as a tacit avowal of that which it sets out to disavow—that the ways in which industrial agriculture engages with animal life warrants ethical and political concern—it simultaneously becomes a *symptom* of that which has had to be repressed in order to home in on the management of *human* life on a mass scale. This, of course, is the large-scale management and processing of the animal lives that are harvested for human consumption.

In *Before the Law:Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame*, Cary Wolfe points to this gaping hole that marks “biopolitical thought” from Arendt through Foucault to Agamben, explaining, “It is all the more ironic, then, that the main line of biopolitical thought has had little or nothing to say about how this logic effects [sic.]

\(^{26}\)This I understand in Derridean terms.
nonhuman beings—a cruel irony indeed, given how ‘animalization’ has been one of its main resources” (10). In other words, Wolfe works to account for the fact—up to this point little-remarked within discourses of biopower—that in the present moment, it is animals who are most bound up by and within the workings of biopower, and animals who, on a bodily level, most feel its effects:

From the vantage of a Foucauldian biopolitics, then, we are forced to conclude that current practices of factory farming and the like ... constitute not just some embarrassing sideline of modern life that has nothing to do with politics proper, and which can be well regulated by an adjacent set of anticruelty laws that do not intersect with politics as such in any fundamental way. Rather, such practices must be seen not just as political but as in fact constitutively political for biopolitics in its modern form. Indeed, the practices of maximizing control over life and death, of “making live,” in Foucault’s words, through eugenics, artificial insemination and selective breeding, pharmaceutical enhancement, inoculation, and the like are on display in the modern factory farm as perhaps nowhere else in biopolitical history. It can hardly be debated, I think, that “the animal” is, today—and on a scale unprecedented in human history—the site of the very ur-form of that dispositif and the face of its most unchecked, nightmarish effects. (Before the Law 46)

So here we come up against the unconscious of biopolitics—the fact that in concerning itself exclusively with the human, it has disavowed its most entrenched loci of operation. As Wolfe points out, Foucault’s, Arendt’s, and Agamben’s respective formulations of biopolitics all fail to register that which both Derrida and Coetzee so thoroughly interrogate—the ways in which biopower operates within “the modern factory farm” (Before the Law 6-10).

27 Nicole Shukin makes a similar point, although she does it via an interrogation of Agamben: “In Agamben’s influential theorization of ‘bare life,’ for instance, animals’ relation to capitalist biopower is occluded by his species-specific conflation of zoē with a socially stripped-down figure of Homo sacer that he traces back to antiquity. However, the theorization of bare life as ‘that [which] may be killed and yet not sacrificed’—a state of exception whose paradigmatic scenario in modernity is, for Agamben, the concentration camp—finds its zoopolitical supplement in Derrida’s theorization of the ‘non-criminal putting to death’ of animals, a related state of exception whose paradigmatic scenario is arguably the modern industrial slaughterhouse. Indeed, the power to reduce humans to the bare life of their species body arguably presupposes the prior power to suspend other species in a state of exception within which they can be noncriminally put to death” (10). Ranjana Khanna also remarks, “When Agamben situates naked life, or homo sacer, who can be killed but not sacrificed, as on the threshold of man and animal, he fails to address the way in which the animal is brought into the biopolitical sphere” (“Disposability” 189).
As Michel Foucault initially frames it and as Giorgio Agamben later articulates it in his formulation of “bare life,” biopower takes mankind as its sole object of inquiry. For Foucault, who pinpoints its emergence to “the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” (*Society Must be Defended* 245), biopower

... is applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man-as-living-being; ultimately, if you like, to man-as-species. ... the new technology that is being established is addressed to a multiplicity of men, not to the extent that they are nothing more than their individual bodies, but to the extent that they form, on the contrary, a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on ... we have, at the end of that century, the emergence of something that is no longer an anatomo-politics of the human body, but what I would call a ‘biopolitics’ of the human race. (*Society Must be Defended* 243)

For Foucault, biopower works on the level of human populations, exerting itself through, among other things, “institutions [designed] to coordinate medical care, centralize information, and normalize knowledge” (*Society Must be Defended* 244). In his work, the possibility of opening up biopolitics to make room for the non-human is conceivable only insofar as animals serve a supporting role (e.g., as sustenance) in the large-scale management of human life. That is, animals figure in a Foucauldian accounting of biopolitics only to the extent that biopower concerns itself with “control over relations between the human race ... and their environment, the milieu in which they live” (Foucault, *Society Must be Defended* 245); within this schema, therefore, the animal would be of biopolitical interest only insofar as it is subsumed within the broader category of mankind’s “environment” or “milieu.” It would not, however, matter in and of itself.

Meanwhile, Agamben’s formulation of “bare life” appears, at a first glance, to offer a ready entry point into a biopolitical accounting of nonhuman life. Agamben opens *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, with an account of the two terms that, for the Greeks, encompassed “what we mean by the word ‘life’”: “ζωή, which expressed
the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and \textit{bios},
which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (1). From
these terms, Agamben constructs the category of “bare life,” which he frames in the
following two ways:

1) “…the entry of \textit{zoe} into the sphere of the \textit{polis}—the politicization of
bare life as such—constitutes the decisive event of modernity…” (4)
2) “The peculiar phrase ‘born with regard to life, but existing essentially
with regard to the good life’ can be read not only as an implication of
being born (\textit{ginomene}) in being (\textit{ousa}), but also as an inclusive
exclusion (an \textit{exceptio}) of \textit{zoe} in the \textit{polis}, almost as if politics were the
place in which life had to transform itself into good life and in which
what had to be politicized were always already bare life. In Western
politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose
exclusion founds the city of men.” (7)

Taken together, these two statements give an indication of what, exactly, “bare life”
might signify and what kinds of beings might fall under this heading. Statement 1
above appears to define “the politicization of bare life” as “the entry of \textit{zoe} into the
sphere of the \textit{polis};” and because “politicization” is framed as “entry into the sphere of
the \textit{polis},” this leaves bare life and \textit{zoe} as ostensibly equivalent to each other. From
Statement 1, therefore, we derive the definition of “bare life” from “\textit{zoe},” or “the simple
fact of living common to all beings.” (In his critique of Agamben, Derrida also perceives
the collapse between these two terms, arguing that \textit{zoe} is “audaciously translated as
‘bare life,’ and therefore life without qualities, without qualification, the pure and simple

Statement 2, however, renders this first accounting slippery, or at least incomplete. It
makes it clear that “bare life” is something more than “\textit{zoe};” “bare life” is that \textit{zoe} that is
brought into the \textit{polis} only to be excluded from it. It is “an inclusive exclusion…of \textit{zoe} in
the \textit{polis},” “that whose exclusion founds the city of men.” In other words, for Agamben,
bare life is \textit{zoe} that has been brought into the \textit{polis}—turned into \textit{bios}—and then expelled.
What is implicit but unstated in this reasoning is the fact that \textit{only man} can ever be
brought into the \textit{polis}—only man can ever count as \textit{bios}. Thus, in Agamben’s
theorization, bare life can only ever be human life; for this reason, bare life is not, in fact, tantamount to zoē as such. For Agamben, it would seem, bare life can never manifest itself in the figure of the animal, but only as some variation of homo sacer, the “sacred” man “who may be killed and yet not sacrificed” (Agamben 8).

In Homo Sacer, the multi-fold slippage between zoē and bare life and between bare life and homo sacer ends up obscuring the nonhuman beings who were never part of the state to begin with. To put it another way: for Agamben, animals can only ever fall on the zoē side of the zoē/bios distinction. And because, as Wolfe also observes, animals never have been and never can be incorporated into the political community in the same way that man is (Before the Law 45), they can never move from the realm of zoē into the category of bare life. Within the schema that Agamben has instantiated, therefore, the entire spectrum of nonhuman life that is produced, regulated, and processed in service of what we call “the human” ultimately fails to register as a political problematic—as a problem for contemporary theorizations of biopolitics.

Finally, the other fundamental problem that plagues Agamben’s thinking, as Derrida, Shukin, and Wolfe all see it, is the tenuous nature of the distinction he draws between zoē and bios, between “the simple fact of living” and “the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group,” upon which the entirety of his argument is predicated. And if the difference between zoē and bios is not as clear-cut as Agamben assumes it to be, then his rigid consignment of the animal to the domain of zoē—to the domain of “mere life,” of life devoid of social or communal qualities—opens itself up to interrogation and critique. Both Cary Wolfe and Nicole Shukin criticize Agamben’s

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28 For further analysis, see the paragraph that follows the next one.
29 Derrida, for instance, writes, “I don’t believe, for example, that the distinction between bios and zoē is a reliable and effective instrument, sufficiently sharp and, to use Agamben’s language, which is not mine here, sufficiently deep to get to the depth of this ’[so-called] founding event’ [of modernity]” (The Beast 326). See p. 326-331 of The Beast & the Sovereign, Vol. I, for Derrida’s closer unpacking of this problem in Agamben’s thought. For Shukin’s and Wolfe’s respective takes on this problem, see what follows in this paragraph.
theory for its failure to see the connection across species—the relation between human beings who have been rendered into forms of bare life, and animals who were always already “outside” the polis, who were subjected to a “non-criminal putting to death” to begin with (Derrida, “Eating Well” 278). The main difference between these groups, in Agamben-inflected terms, is that animals never had any claim on the state or the sovereign to begin with; they are not a form of bare life, no matter how much they resemble it.

Both Shukin and Wolfe offer correctives to this aspect of Agamben’s work, imagining alternative ways of framing biopower that leave room to account for how it operates across species lines. Shukin, for one, delivers a “zoopolitical” “critique” of Agamben’s biopolitics, “one beginning with a challenge to the assumption that the social flesh and ‘species body’ at stake in the logic of biopower is predominantly human”; she wants, instead, to invoke “zoopolitics” to “[suggest] an inescapable contiguity or bleed between bios and zoe, between a politics of human social life and a politics of animality that extends to other species” (Shukin 9). Wolfe, meanwhile, turns to Derrida’s discomfiting analogy between systematized animal violence and the Holocaust in order to connect Agamben’s homo sacer to the animals that are consigned to death-in-life, and eventually to death, in slaughterhouses and factory farms. He writes:

For example, in the Nazi camps, we find those who had been citizens, members of the community, now stripped of every legal protection and right by means of the declaration of a “state of exception,” whereas in the factory farm, we find those who never were members of the community nevertheless afforded at least some minimal protection (humane slaughter laws, for example), even if those laws are in fact minimally enforced...

... it hardly needs pointing out that the practices of modern biopolitics have forged themselves in the common subjection and management of both human and animal bodies. (Before the Law 45; emphasis original)

In outlining the distinct modes through which the victims of the Holocaust and today’s factory farmed animals are, respectively, “subject[ed]” by “the practices of modern
biopolitics,” Wolfe provides a mechanism for how each group is made into the object of biopower. He does not, however, use that logic to draw a comparison between them, nor to speculate on the nature or relative degree of the violence to which each group is subjected. Wolfe’s explication of Derrida’s Holocaust analogy demonstrates that what matters is not the difference between those who once belonged to the *polis* and those who always existed outside of it, or, to put it another way, the difference between the human and the nonhuman, but rather the bare-bones fact of being subjected, in corporeal terms, by and to a power that operates indiscriminately on the level of the multitude. This power is one that produces, manages, and disposes of certain kinds of lives in the service of a particular conception of “life”—the kind of life that qualifies, on whatever basis, as sufficiently “human.”

On the most basic level, Shukin and Wolfe set out to demonstrate that biopolitics is not solely the provenance of the human, that biopower operates within and upon the domain of the animal as well. And while Shukin offers up “zoopolitics” as a corrective to Agamben’s human-centric biopolitics, Wolfe concludes *Before the Law* on a similar

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30 This is very different from what an Agamben-esque rendering of this scene would look like. That would hone in on the concentration camp as the paradigmatic site of the “inclusive exclusion” that produces bare life but would leave the factory farm untouched; within this framework, the relation between sovereign power and animal life, which has always resided outside of the *polis*, is not immediately evident.

31 To put this in Foucauldian terms: the problem, as Wolfe frames it, is that we are able to recognize “race war,” but not, citing Jonathan Safran Foer, “a ‘war’ on our fellow creatures” (*Wolfe, Before the Law* 105). Our capacity to recognize the animal as the “ur-form of that *dispositif*” depends on our capacity to trace the workings of biopower across species lines; it depends upon our capacity to perceive and understand the workings of disposability. In *Before the Law*, Wolfe draws a connection between Foucault’s notion of race war as outlined in *Society Must be Defended* and speciesism: “As we have seen, Esposito’s immunitary paradigm seizes on and develops this realization by Foucault, but the point I want to emphasize here is Foucault’s recognition that you can’t talk about biopolitics without talking about race, and you can’t talk about race without talking about species, simply because both categories—as history well shows—are so notoriously pliable and unstable, constantly bleeding into and out of each other. Exhibit A here, of course, is the analogy between humans and animals that characterizes much of the literature of the Holocaust” (*Wolfe, Before the Law* 43). This passage assumes as givens the parallels between race war and speciesism, for the simple reason that “race” and “species” as modes of categorization have, historically speaking, been mutually imbricated. And it’s not just because racism has often taken the form of animalization, that these categories are “so notoriously pliable and unstable.” It’s that both operate according to the same logic—the biopolitical logic that dictates that it is acceptable to kill some populations in the service of others.
"The biopolitical point is no longer ‘human’ vs. ‘animal’; the biopolitical point is a newly expanded community of the living and the concern we should all have with where violence and immunitary protection fall within it, because we are all, after all, potentially animals before the law" (105). Like Shukin and Wolfe, I am suspicious of the impulse to draw a strict dividing line between *bios* and *zoe*, between human and animal, when it comes to conceptualizing the operations of biopolitics. In my formulation, disposable life resists reinscribing the human/animal dichotomy, concerning itself not with the identity of the beings in question, but rather with the forms of violence to which they are subjected. For the purposes of my project, therefore, what matters is not the ontology of disposable life—whether it’s human or animal—but rather the basic fact that it is viewed and treated as disposable.

Finally, although my framing of disposable life is deeply indebted to Shukin’s and Wolfe’s critiques of Agamben’s work, it differs from them in that it is more closely concerned with the question of representation. When it comes to disposable life, I propose that representation operates in two ways. First, for life to be disposed of routinely and without objection, it must come to be *perceived as disposable*; that is, it must be regarded as devoid of inherent value, as insignificant and replaceable. Second, for the public to realize that the lives that are being disposed of *have been made to be disposable* (i.e. that they have been *represented* as such, but are not naturally so), another act of representation must expose the artifice latent within the first act of representation, the act that made the lives in question *appear* disposable. This second layer of representation is that which unveils the logic of disposability for what it is: the consequence of the unequal distribution of power among different groups, a dynamic that presents itself as natural but is in fact produced in the service of convenience and expediency. The novels I examine comprise both layers of representation—the first, whereby disposability is naturalized within the world of the novel, and the second,
whereby the novel reveals (on a formal level, and as a means of undoing the logic of disposability) precisely how these disposed-of lives (not just animal lives, but also, among others, the lives of the victims of corporate negligence and political violence) have come to be framed as disposable.

In my dissertation, therefore, disposable life manifests itself as a distinctively literary problem to which the novels I read offer up distinctively literary solutions. These “solutions” engage not only with the question of how we ought to understand the relation between human and nonhuman life “in a biopolitical frame” (as per Wolfe)\(^{32}\), but more importantly, with the problem of how the fabric of disposable life might be unraveled, how it can be made to come apart at the seams. The contemporary novel reveals the workings of disposability by teaching us to read differently, whether by instigating paradigm shifts in the ethical frameworks we bring to bear on our reading experience, or by destabilizing our sense of mastery over the text, turning us into necessary re-readers of the stories we consume. Ultimately, the reading practices that the contemporary novel cultivates in its audience push aside existing models of the sympathetic imagination; in their place, we discover new ways of reading that make room for those “disposable” lives, human and nonhuman alike, that dominant ethico-political frameworks are not yet fully capable of welcoming into the fold.

1.4 The Limits of the Sympathetic Imagination

In “Democratic Citizenship and the Narrative Imagination,” Martha Nussbaum locates the value of literature in its capacity to teach compassion and empathy for others; for Nussbaum, literature is a building block for the kind of democratic “world citizenship” (“Democratic Citizenship” 156) that “cultivates a sympathetic responsiveness to another’s needs, and understands the way circumstances shape those

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\(^{32}\) This is a reference to the subtitle of Wolfe’s book *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame.*
needs, while respecting separateness and privacy” (“Democratic Citizenship” 148). Her claim, in other words, is that literature can make us into better people, and that it does so via the workings of the sympathetic imagination.

Nussbaum’s work is indebted to the model of sympathy that Adam Smith sets forth in his 1759 work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In particular, the empathy that forms the crux of Nussbaum’s “democratic citizenship,” a sentiment that entails “a capacity for ‘positional thinking,’ the ability to see the world from another creature’s viewpoint” (Nussbaum, *Not for Profit* 36), derives from Smith’s account of sympathy. This he describes as follows:

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him; and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels. (A. Smith 3-4)

From this account, it is clear that sympathy is fundamentally self-referential—that the self is the touchstone to which one of necessity harkens back when sympathizing with the other.33 If “[i]t is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our

33 Citing the same passage from Adam Smith that I do, David Palumbo-Liu makes a similar point, observing, “We cannot be the other, but we can try to imagine what her or his situation would make us feel like” (8); Palumbo-Liu also writes that “Smith’s moral sentiments…rely on sameness to understand and facilitate practical moral action” (10). Palumbo-Liu’s larger argument about the world novel turns on the recognition that “The encounter provided by literary texts involves both sameness and difference in an unpredictable relation” (13). He goes on to propose that “The adjudication of how much otherness we need to encounter and grapple with in order to be better people and how much will prove to be our undoing is, again, both a logistical one and a political
imaginations copy,” then this raises the question of precisely how the other enters into
the equation at all—and which kinds of others are even allowed in to begin with. The
point here is that sympathy is first and foremost about “fellow-feeling” (A. Smith 5),
that it turns on some basic recognition of the other as our “fellow”; in this case, it is “our
brother…upon the rack” whose suffering touches us. Within this model of sympathy,
this recognition of fellowship must come first—sympathy can develop only afterward,
after one has established that the other is sufficiently like oneself. This logic, of course,
leaves outside of the realm of moral consideration those beings who are not instinctively
regarded as our “fellows”—most obviously, those beings who belong to a different
species, but in some cases also those who are of a different race, gender, or class from
ourselves. The final problem with this model of sympathy is that even at the point when
the other has been shown to be “sufficiently” our “fellow,” sympathy operates as a kind
of assimilation of the other; the impulse to “enter as it were into his body, and become in
some measure the same person with him” becomes a way of subsuming the other within
problem…. The line between the requirements of, on the one hand (rhetoric and Smith’s social
tory) and, on the other hand, difference (modern literature) is not at all as clear as I have
initially drawn it, for literature, it seems, demands both identification and difference at once. We
find a vacillating dynamic between empathy and critique, sameness and difference, that creates
in the texts I examine a particular image of what it is to live with others in the contemporary
world” (13-14). While my interest lies specifically in the figure of disposable life as it figures in
the contemporary novel, Palumbo-Liu’s text is a larger meditation on how literature brings us
into contact with otherness in our globalized world: “Perhaps the search to find the ‘right’ or
necessary balance for the encounter with otherness, along with the related issue of transparency
of meaning … is indeed an abysmal task and a question impossible to resolve. How does one
codify and set conventions for encounters with others? What protocols can anticipate every kind
of meeting between such vaguely defined entities as ‘same’ and ‘other’? I suggest that rather
than focusing entirely on meaning-making, and whether we get it or not, we should think of how
literature engenders a space for imagining our relation to others and thinking through why and
how that relation exists, historically, politically, ideologically. This in turn creates new forms of
narration and representation, which I will put forward in analyses of four novels. Reading with this
in mind would attempt to ascertain how and why our relationship to others is not natural or
immutable, but rather the result of a number of complex and often contradictory forces, some
that draw us closer, others that drive us apart. Notions of radical alterity are herein considered
just as tentative as notions of universalism and unproblematic commonality” (14).
34 Adam Smith writes, “Pity and compassion are words appropriated to signify our fellow-feeling
with the sorrow of others. Sympathy, though its meaning was, perhaps, originally the same, may
now, however, without much impropriety, be made use of to denote our fellow-feeling with any
passion whatever” (5).
the self. That is, although it might be “our brother” who “is upon the rack,” our sympathetic feelings for him take root only to the degree that we are first capable of feeling for ourselves. Sympathy for the other, in other words, always operates via a relay through the self.

The present-day biopolitical moment, however, runs up against Adam Smith’s eighteenth-century understanding of what it means to open oneself up to the suffering of the other. This tension is captured in the passage that concludes the account with which I began this introduction, Derrida’s digressive reflection on the lives of the animals who pass through factory farms, labs, and slaughterhouses:

If these images are “pathetic,” if they evoke sympathy, it is also because they “pathetically” open the immense question of pathos and the pathological, precisely, that is, of suffering, pity, and compassion; and the place that has to be accorded to the interpretation of this compassion, to the sharing of this suffering among the living, to the law, ethics, and politics that must be brought to bear upon this experience of compassion. What has been happening for two centuries now involves a new experience of this compassion. In response to what is, for the moment, the irresistible but unacknowledged unleashing and the organized disavowal of this torture, voices are raised—minority, weak, marginal voices, little assured of their discourse, of their right to discourse, and of...

35 In Scenes of Subjection, Saidiya V. Hartman offers a damning critique of the sympathetic imagination and the kind of self-referential empathy it produces. In her analysis of abolitionist John Rankin’s letters about the horrors of slavery, in one of which he imagines himself and his family in the position of the enslaved, Hartman explains: “Properly speaking, empathy is a projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other or ‘the projection of one’s own personality into an object, with the attribution to the object of one’s own emotions.’ Yet empathy in important respects confounds Rankin’s efforts to identify with the enslaved because in making the slave’s suffering his own, Rankin begins to feel for himself rather than for those whom this exercise in imagination presumably is designed to reach. Moreover, by exploiting the vulnerability of the captive body as a vessel for the uses, thoughts, and feelings of others, the humanity extended to the slave inadvertently confirms the expectations and desires definitive of the relations of chattel slavery. In other words, the ease of Rankin’s empathetic identification is as much due to his good intentions and heartfelt opposition to slavery as to the fungibility of the captive body” (18-19).

36 This is an argument that I develop especially in my third chapter on Kazuo Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go and David Mitchell’s Cloud Atlas. In a recent article titled “The Affective Turn in Contemporary Fiction,” Nancy Armstrong makes a similar argument, positing that “As it dawns on us that what we initially construed to be a relationship with a more or less traditional narrator has taken place within and among a biologically marked population usually invisible to us, Adam Smith’s model of sympathy becomes laughably inadequate. Ishiguro not only exposes the third person hidden behind the second person so as to make sympathy’s claim to inclusivity seem perniciously deceptive; by elevating the third person to the status of protagonist, his novel also demands a different order of response” (455-56).
the enactment of their discourse within the law, as a declaration of rights—in order to protest, in order to appeal (we’ll return to this) to what is still presented in such a problematic way as animal rights, in order to awaken us to our responsibilities and our obligations vis-à-vis the living in general, and precisely to this fundamental compassion that, were we to take it seriously, would have to change even the very cornerstone (and it is next to that cornerstone that I wish to do my business today) of the philosophical problematic of the animal. (The Animal 26-27)

We have structured our violence against animals on such a scale, and we have simultaneously numbed our ethical sensibility to such a degree, Derrida argues, that the very decision to allow ourselves to feel will be a revolutionary act. Within the confines of the system we have erected, the only way of rethinking the path we are on will be not through reason, whose various incarnations as biopolitical and economic efficiency have brought us to where we are today, but rather through a “fundamental compassion” that presents itself as “the sharing of this suffering among the living.” For Derrida, if we open ourselves to this compassion, which is natural to the human condition but which we have repressed, then the way we think about animals—“the philosophical problematic of the animal”—will of necessity be reformulated as well.

I want to pause on Derrida’s conception of compassion for a moment in order to differentiate it from the kind of compassion we find in more mainstream work like Nussbaum’s. For the latter, compassion “requires…the ability to imagine what it is like to be in that person’s place (what we usually call empathy)” as well as “a sense of one’s own vulnerability to misfortune”; within her framework, “To respond with compassion, I must be willing to entertain the thought that this suffering person might be me” (Nussbaum, “Democratic Citizenship” 149). Here, as with Smith’s framing of sympathy, compassion is intensely self-reflexive, operating via a re-entrenchment of the self—it shows up only when it is possible to imagine “that this suffering person might be me.” This construction clearly leaves much to be wanting. The problem is not just the reference to the “suffering person,” which automatically excludes non-humans from the realm of moral and sentimental consideration. The fact is that this kind of compassion is
constitutionally incapable of operating in instances in which one cannot reasonably expect to ever occupy the same position as the suffering being in question. In our lives, none of us will ever be animals in factory farms; and in being shielded from that fate, we are also, in Nussbaum’s model of compassion, shielded from the necessity of feeling fully for those who are subjected to it.

As Derrida renders it, however, “this fundamental compassion” is neither self-reflexive nor self-affirming. Derrida’s version of compassion is both instinctual and impractical; it is neither economically profitable nor politically popular, but it is native to the human condition, and remains so, despite all that has been done to disavow and suppress it. Within this schema, compassion doesn’t involve a relay back to the self, as Smithian sympathy does—it’s a response that short-circuits the ego, and with it both common sense and reason. As Derrida frames it, compassion doesn’t reaffirm the self or re-entrench it, but rather unsettles it, laying it bare to the vulnerability of being-in-the-world, of living together with those whose suffering cannot be denied.

The kind of compassion that results in the undoing of the self is, perhaps unsurprisingly, also central to J. M. Coetzee’s literary work. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, we come up against the limits of the sympathetic imagination via the figure of the animal. In the “soft opinion” “On Compassion,” J. C. gives the reader an account of his neighbor Bella, who seems to take her sympathy for her non-human fellow-creatures to absurd extremes:

Every day for the past week the thermometer has risen above the forty-degree mark. Bella Saunders in the flat down the corridor tells me of her concern for the frogs along the old creek bed. Will they not be baked alive in their little earthen chambers? she asks anxiously. Can we not do something to help them? What do you suggest? I say. Can we not dig them out and bring them indoors until the heatwave is over? she says. I caution her against trying. You won’t know where to dig, I say.

Toward sunset I observe her carry a plastic bowl of water across the street, which she leaves in the creek. In case the little ones get thirsty, she explains.

It is easy to make fun of people like Bella, to point out that heatwaves are part of a larger ecological process with which human beings
ought not to interfere. But does this criticism not miss something? Are we human beings not part of that ecology too, and is our compassion for the wee beasties not as much an element of it as is the cruelty of the crow? (Coetzee, *Diary* 211).

J. C.'s discourse “On Compassion” initially reads a little bit like a joke, a spoof of people like Bella, who imagine that placing a bowl of water in a dried-up creek-bed might be enough to “save” all the frogs from being “baked alive” in the scorching mid-summer heat. This is easily read as a metaphor as well: Bella’s act is a drop in the ocean; through it she takes on forces that dwarf her—climate, ecology, evolution, even—forces that will persist long after she’s gone. What difference, then, can Bella make? Practically speaking, not much. Nevertheless, there is something important at stake in this scene: if for Aristotle, man is a political animal, then for J. C., man is a compassionate animal.

What the last sentence in the passage above seems to suggest is that the native state of man, which is as natural to him as “cruelty” is to the crow, is to be compassionate. So, if what we see as “cruelty” is nothing other than the crow’s natural instincts, geared toward its own self-preservation, then our “compassion” (or Bella’s absurdity), is our own most basic, fundamental instinct that is also geared toward our own self-preservation—in this case, the preservation of the community, of the human as a social animal. If this is the case, this passage seems to suggest, we’ve strayed very far from our nature if Bella’s act comes across as ludicrous rather than quotidian. To put it another way: Bella seems ridiculous only if we have closed ourselves off to what it means to feel compassion. While it is Bella who initially seems to be the butt of the joke here, the passage turns the mirror back on us, posing the question: What’s wrong with us that we end up viewing Bella’s behavior as ridiculous?

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37 Foucault references this well-known Aristotelian precept as follows, arguing that for Aristotle, man was “a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence” (*History of Sexuality* 143).
A partial answer emerges in J.C.’s strong opinion “On the Slaughter of Animals,” which also raises the question of compassion. Here, J. C. unveils what we normally term “compassion” to be a kind of diversionary tactic that isn’t really compassion at all:

And indeed common sense is on the workers’ side. If an animal is going to have its throat cut, does it really matter that it has its leg tendons cut too? The notion of compassionate killing is riddled with absurdities…But how can an animal be in a calm state of mind after being goaded off a ship onto the back of a truck and driven through teeming streets to a strange place reeking of blood and death? The animal is confused and desperate and no doubt difficult to control. That is why it has its tendons hacked. (Coetzee, Diary 65)

This passage suggests that a “compassion” that is confined within the parameters of “common sense”—which we might understand to mean something like “efficiency” or “rationality”—isn’t actually compassion at all. Again, as with Derrida, to open ourselves up to “compassion” as compassion, we would have to refashion not just the entire “philosophical problematic of the animal,” but also the political and social problematic of how we relate to the animal—and to all manner of other disposable others—as well. And this is precisely what Diary of a Bad Year does—as do the rest of the novels I consider in this dissertation.

From within our dominant frames of reference, wherein the animal is taken up via “the joint developments of zoological, ethological, biological, and genetic forms of knowledge, which remain inseparable from techniques of intervention into their object” (Derrida, The Animal 25), someone like Bella comes off as ridiculous because she has misunderstood the “natural” order of things; she has not realized that the frogs, in the grand scheme of things, are simply not worth worrying over. She is ridiculous not just because her act of kindness is futile, but also because it comes across as deluded—she is, after all, trying to save frogs. The reader’s reaction to her would probably be different if she were trying to save children, or even dogs; that would be more socially acceptable. And yet, the text is invoking the specter of this kind of false comparison precisely in order to reproach its reader for acceding to it. It brings us back to the falsely
dichotomized question, “Which is worse, the death of an albatross or the death of an
insentient, brain-damaged infant hooked up to a life-support machine?” (Coetzee, Diary
205). The point, once again, is not to answer the question, since that would presume the
possibility and viability of “ordering” (Coetzee, Diary 205), but simply to expose it as a
red herring. In asking us to choose between the two, the question forces us to say which
deserves more compassion. As both Coetzee and Derrida see it, however, compassion is
not a spectrum. Rather, it operates more like a 0-1 binary: either it’s off or it’s on. And if
it’s on for Bella, then it’s off for those who find her ridiculous.

In the end, these novels are structured in such a way as to turn us into precisely
the kind of “ridiculous” reader we find in Coetzee’s portrait of Bella Saunders. The kind
of compassion that both Derrida and Coetzee put stock in makes irrational demands on
the self, not as a means of aggrandizing the self or building it up, but rather as a way of
effecting its undoing. Insofar as it grapples with the problem of disposable life,
therefore, the contemporary novel operates in a similar way upon its readers. In
particular, the works I consider resist the logic of consumption and assimilation, moving
us away from a form of sympa(th)y\textsuperscript{38} based on the potential substitutability of the self for
the other, and toward a form of readerly engagement that preserves the other’s
irreducible difference. To some degree, the disposable protagonists in the novels I
examine are always fundamentally disappointing, slipping away or eluding our
readerly grasp. What these novels accordingly teach us, each via its own formal logic
that produces a different kind of reading experience, is that the other is not there to be
subsumed by the self.

In tackling the seemingly intractable problem of disposable life, these novels
engineer new kinds of solutions that are more appropriate to the historical moment we

\textsuperscript{38} As per Derrida, this is the logic that operates on the level of our appetites as both physical
hunger and the hunger for knowledge-power.
inhabit than an updated version of the Smithean sympathetic imagination would be.39 Simply stated, in championing the nonhuman or the liminally human other, they do not insist on a model that renders the other worthy of ethical consideration on the basis of his or her similarity to ourselves. Rather, these novels reject the mechanisms of comparison that assign value to different kinds of lives; as we saw with both Derrida’s and Coetzee’s intentionally discomfiting, “impossible” comparisons between the Holocaust and mechanized animal slaughter, comparative frameworks are complicit in the production of disposable lives and in the perpetuation of the logic of disposability. The contemporary novel, speaking out of and back to the world from which it emerges, is pushing toward something else. It works to fill in the blind spots of biopolitical thought as well as to call into question the centrality of the sympathetic imagination that has been so instrumental in shaping both our understanding and our experience of what it means to read fiction. Ultimately, what the contemporary novel does is offer us new ways of situating ourselves in relation to the disposable other via the literary imagination.

In the following chapter, therefore, I show how J. M. Coetzee, in The Lives of Animals (1999) and Disgrace (1999), takes up animal lives that are rendered disposable—specifically, factory-farmed animals in the US and unwanted dogs in South Africa. In navigating the fraught relation between the singular animal whose suffering calls on us to respond and the disposable “too many” to which it belongs, Coetzee’s novels insist

39 Nancy Armstrong also argues that the contemporary novel demands new forms of readerly engagement that go beyond Adam Smith’s model of sympathy, concluding her article with the following proposition about Never Let Me Go: “For the third person to emerge from behind the second person, Ishiguro suggests, the novel must expand the readership’s sensorium beyond the limits of sympathetic identification; it must move us to acknowledge those with whom we share vital organs yet whom we exclude from the mirroring relationship of sympathy, as Adam Smith defined it. By forcing us to feel beyond the present limits of personhood, for all we know, contemporary novels may be developing a generation of readers with an emotional repertoire more attuned to the demands of our time” (464). She does this, however, via an analysis of “the heroine’s rise from third to first personhood in Austen’s” Northanger Abbey vs. Ishiguro’s Never Let Me Go (Armstrong 448), whereas in my chapter on Ishiguro, I am concerned with forms of uncanny narration.
that even if non-human life must, from a managerial point of view, be disposed of, this can (and must) be done without rendering it disposable. In this case, Coetzee’s texts invoke a literary tradition that goes all the way back to Franz Kafka and Thomas Hardy in order to produce a revamped version of Levinasian ethics that makes room for the animal as a subject of ethical consideration; via intertextual play, these novels ask us to think ethics anew by throwing its foundational anthropocentrism into question. In so doing, Coetzee’s works both expose and invalidate the assumption that non-human life may logically and ethically be rendered disposable.

In Chapter 3, I consider Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004), in which clones are disposable bodies to be mined for the organs and labor they contain. Engaging ethical questions raised by cloning technologies, both novels ask what happens when “unoriginal” life ends up being utilized for whatever purpose society sees fit. Having recourse to Freud’s work on the origins of civilization and his theory of the uncanny, I argue that the figure of the clone enables us to trace the genealogy of disposability to our repressed anxiety about the boundary we have drawn between the human and the nonhuman and the authority we have given ourselves to take life on the basis of it. Both Ishiguro and Mitchell address this problem through what I call the formal uncanny, whereby the novels’ readers are constituted as re-readers for whom the act of reading becomes the site of their own doubling. In other words, in reading Ishiguro’s and Mitchell’s novels, the reader is no longer the master of the narrative he consumes, but is instead mastered by it, turned into a secondary version of himself that—like the novels’ disposable clones—is drafted into the service of the narrative that both constitutes and consumes him.

In Chapter 4, I read Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy, which is comprised of the novels *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013). Set in a future in which transnational corporations operate as nation-states, climate
change has caused mass species extinction, and socio-economic disparity has turned cities into war zones, Atwood’s novels imagine a world in which the logic of disposability turns back upon itself, marking the human race for extinction. As the series grapples with the question of how humankind might come to reconstitute itself at the end of the Anthropocene, Atwood gestures toward a solution by interrogating the “anthropos” that is at its center. Ultimately, the MaddAddam trilogy suggests that any future that divests itself of the logic of disposability will require not just that we reconstitute “humankind” as one species among many, but also that we unsettle mankind’s primacy in relation to womankind as well. Atwood achieves this by offering up sexual difference, which becomes coterminous with a “disruptive” form of feminine writing, as a tool for deconstructing disposability.

Finally, in my last chapter, I turn to Indra Sinha’s 2007 novel Animal’s People, which is a fictional re-imagining of the 1984 Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, in order to consider the ways in which the contemporary human rights novel grapples with the production of disposable human lives in the global South. Taking up the figure of the postcolonial victim of environmental injustice in the character of Animal, who is the novel’s eponymous, four-legged human narrator, this chapter argues that Sinha’s work fails to disrupt the workings of disposability because it remains confined within the logic of human rights discourse. Specifically, in this chapter I argue for an understanding of disposable life as a byproduct—or rather, as a waste-product—that is abjected through the production of the normative figure of the rights-bearing human subject. The dissertation concludes with a consideration of Michael Ondaatje’s human-rights novel Anil’s Ghost (2000), set in civil-war era Sri Lanka, in order to offer a meditation on (and a rewriting of) the face as the paradigmatic site of the ethical encounter with the disposed-of other.
2. Literary Animal, Disposable Animal: J. M. Coetzee’s Posthumanist Ethics

“(Let me add, entirely parenthetically, that I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defenses against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so)” remarks J. M. Coetzee in a 1992 interview with David Attwell (Doubling the Point 248). Although literally bracketed off by parentheses, this statement, when situated alongside Coetzee’s subsequent works, is anything but parenthetical. As Coetzee frames it, fiction is a response to the problem of being-in-the-world. That is, even if literature can do nothing to alleviate the enormity of real suffering that abounds in the world, or even do it justice through artistic representation, for Coetzee it still provides a foothold, no matter how “paltry” or “ludicrous,” from which to confront the problems that threaten to incapacitate him. In this sense, this statement points to a concern that threads its way through Coetzee’s entire oeuvre: in a world that is so full of suffering, human and animal alike, what is literature good for?

This is a question that Coetzee stages several years later in his 1997-1998 Tanner Lectures on Human Values at Princeton, “The Lives of Animals,” which was subsequently published as a two-part novella, collected alongside an introduction and four critical responses from across the disciplinary spectrum. The work, a generic hybrid classified as “Fiction/Philosophy,” not only explores the relations among humans and animals, but more fundamentally, thinks through the relation of literature to other disciplines and discourses—in this case, ethics and philosophy. As Coetzee’s protagonist Elizabeth Costello declares in opening her lecture at Appleton University, “I have that language [philosophical language] available to me and indeed for a while will be resorting to it. But the fact is, if you had wanted someone to come here and
discriminate for you between mortal and immortal souls, or between rights and duties, you would have called in a philosopher, not a person whose sole claim to your attention is to have written stories about made-up people” (The Lives of Animals 22). And it is not just Costello, but also, on a larger scale, Coetzee’s staging of “The Lives of Animals” that asks: What, then, are the claims that “stories about made-up people” make upon us? What possibilities do they open up that philosophical modes of discourse cannot? To put it another way: the fictionalized Appleton College invites Elizabeth Costello to speak about her literary works and she chooses to speak about animals; Princeton University invites Coetzee to give the Tanner Lectures on Human Values, and he chooses to present a work of fiction about a writer who chooses to speak about animals. Latent in these acts is an implicit avowal that the literary work is in and of itself a meditation on ethics or “values,” that it engages in its own forms of ethical thinking. This raises the question: How, within Coetzee’s works, does literature do ethics?

This question is prompted as much by Coetzee’s lectures as it is by critical responses to them, which tend to read Coetzee’s narratives as meta-commentary on animal-rights issues—and in so doing, run the risk of allowing the lectures’ generic status as fiction to drop out of sight. And indeed, it’s easy to see why respondents to The Lives of Animals engage with the lectures largely on these terms: conditioned at least in part by a realist tradition in which fiction is understood to stand in some kind of mediating relation to something “real” that exists outside of the text, it is to be expected that critics will hone in on Coetzee’s obvious doubling of himself with Costello, as well as refer to his public statements about the treatment of animals in interviews and op-eds. It accordingly makes sense that philosopher Peter Singer would ask, in his own

1 This question resonates with Marjorie Garber’s broader astute observation at the conclusion of her response to The Lives of Animals: “Could it be, however, that all along [Coetzee] was really asking, ‘What is the value of literature?’” (84).
2 For instance, in a recent op-ed entitled “Nothing Biblical in Factory Farming,” Coetzee concludes an otherwise grim piece on a positive note, observing that “children provide the
fictionalized response-piece to Coetzee, “But are they Coetzee’s arguments? That’s just the point—that’s why I don’t know how to go about responding to this so-called lecture. They are Costello’s arguments. Coetzee’s fictional device enables him to distance himself from them” (91). Even literary critic Marjorie Garber, who reads Coetzee’s “lecture-narratives” within a literary tradition that includes the academic novel, approaches The Lives of Animals in a similar vein, regarding it as “a strategy of control” on Coetzee’s part (76), a work whose “effect is to insulate the warring ‘ideas’ (about animal rights, about consciousness, about death, about the family, about academia) against claims of authorship and authority…We don’t know whose voice to believe” (79, my emphasis).

In this chapter, I do not seek to determine which of the novella’s “warring ‘ideas’” Coetzee might be propounding, nor to pinpoint what arguments about animals and animal rights The Lives of Animals might be setting out to make. In this sense, I align myself with Cora Diamond’s critique of the text’s respondents, who tend to read the character of Elizabeth Costello as “a device for putting forward (in an imaginatively stirring way) ideas about the resolution of a range of ethical issues, ideas which can then be abstracted and examined” (48-9). That is, I do not read The Lives of Animals, to touch on Barbara Smuts’s response, as a vehicle for presenting “a discourse on animal rights” (108)—although the text itself might very well elicit a response in its audience that coincides with the goals of the animal-rights agenda. Instead, I take up the basic question posed by Coetzee’s lectures, namely: Why fiction? Simply stated, if Coetzee had only wanted to present an argument about animals, there would have been no need for him to tell a fictional story about a woman who is meant to give a lecture about her own fictional stories, but who talks about animals instead. He need not, on the one

brightest hope. Given half a chance, children see through the lies with which advertisers bombard them…It takes but one glance into a slaughterhouse to turn a child into a lifelong vegetarian.”

3 This tendency to treat Coetzee’s work as if it is making an argument is less intense in Garber’s work than it is in Singer’s.
hand, have invited such easy, persistent comparisons between himself and Costello, nor, on the other hand, have insisted on preserving a distinction between himself and her in his answers to the Tanner audience’s questions. As Derek Attridge relates, “Coetzee tended to avoid the customary first-person consideration of points made to him, preferring locutions like ‘I think what Elizabeth Costello would say is that…’” (J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading 193).

In this chapter, therefore, I trace the ways in which *The Lives of Animals*, while engaging with contemporary animal rights debates and with the Western humanist philosophical tradition, ultimately goes beyond these discourses to articulate something else—a specifically literary consideration of the lives of animals and the ways in which they are enmeshed with our own. Of course, given the range of disciplines that *The Lives of Animals* engages—poetry, philosophy, literary criticism, cognitive science, and ethology—any attempt to treat this text purely as a “literary” work becomes of necessity a fraught enterprise. This is due not just to the slippery nature of what we term “the literary,” but also to the inexhaustibility of the literary work, to its capacity to always open out onto more meaning than any particular set of discourses or interpretive paradigms stand to draw from it (Derrida, “This Strange Institution” 38-39). And yet, even if *The Lives of Animals* is a work in which “the literary” and “the non-literary” are particularly tightly bound, with the fiction-writer Costello drawing on arguments from a range of non-literary disciplines, it is with “the literary” that Coetzee ultimately casts his

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4 And indeed, this is not a problem unique to Coetzee’s lectures; as Derek Attridge argues, “all attempts since the Renaissance to determine the difference between ‘literary’ and ‘non-literary’ language have failed…this is a necessary failure, one by which literature as a cultural practice has been continuously constituted” (Singularity 1).
5 My understanding of “the literary” comes from Attridge’s *The Singularity of Literature* and Derrida’s *Acts of Literature*. In the former work, Attridge points to “literature’s evasion of rules and definitions” (1), its tendency to “always…present itself in the final analysis as something more than the category or entity is claimed to be …” (5). In the latter, Derrida observes that literature contains “a certain promise of ‘being able to say everything’” (“This Strange Institution” 39), and that the writer has the power, or rather, the “duty of irresponsibility,” to usher in the “endless promise” of a future that is always still “to-come” (“This Strange Institution” 38).
lot. In particular, when it comes to “the question of the animal,” the ethical potential of the lectures is bound up with Costello’s expert wielding of the literary tradition into which Coetzee is writing.

2.1 The Literary Animal

In The Lives of Animals, Elizabeth Costello begins by tackling the Western philosophical tradition; moving from Saint Thomas Aquinas to Plato, Descartes, and Kant, she calls into question “reason” as the basis for elevating mankind over animals, interpreting it not as evidence of man’s “partak[ing] in the being of God” but simply as the self-valuating and validating “being of a certain spectrum of human thinking” (23). In invoking this philosophical tradition, however, Costello (and we might intuit, Coetzee as well) refuses to engage it on those terms, to “join [herself] like a tributary stream running into a great river, to the great Western discourse of man versus beast, of reason versus unreason…foreseeing in that step the concession of the entire battle” (The Lives of Animals 25). Responding in accordance with philosophical and academic conventions, Costello insists, would mean capitulating from the outset. Rather than propose a series of counter-arguments, therefore, Costello speaks on her own, literary terms—about and through a humanoid ape fictionalized by Franz Kafka nearly a century earlier.

The problem with reason, Costello insists, is that it doesn’t make allowances for those things that stand outside of it; simply put, there is no ground from which one may speak out against reason and be taken seriously. Costello’s solution, therefore—and

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6 “The question of the animal” is a reference to Derrida’s central point of investigation in The Animal That Therefore I Am, and to what Matthew Calarco explores after him in Zoographies. In that work, Calarco observes, “‘The question of the animal’ is thus a question deriving from an animal who faces me, an interruption deriving from a singular ‘animal,’ an animal whom I face and by whom I am faced and who calls my mode of existence into question” (5). For a more detailed account of the valences of this phrase, see Calarco, p. 4-6.

7 This problem is encapsulated later in the lectures by Norma’s assertion that “There is no position outside of reason where you can stand and lecture about reason and pass judgment on reason” and John Costello’s response, “Except the position of someone who has withdrawn from
this is Coetzee’s as well—is to change the terms of the debate by speaking through literature. Channeling the voice of Kafka’s Red Peter, Costello asks, “If I do not subject my discourse to reason, whatever that is, what is left for me but to gibber and emote and knock over my water glass and generally make a monkey of myself?” (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 23). What is left, it would seem, would be to speak from a place of “unreason,” to give voice to the discomfiting, borderline obscene analogies that Costello draws between factory farms and Nazi death camps. What is left is “know[ing] what it’s like to be a corpse” (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 32), and with that the desire and capacity to imagine one’s way into the lives of other animals, human and non-human alike. What is left is the literary imagination, which circumvents the claims of reason altogether; as Costello says, “If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life” (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 35).

In *The Lives of Animals*, and in Coetzee’s oeuvre as a whole, the ethical potentiality of the literary imagination has to do with the capacity to respond to the claims of the other—claims that, as Cora Diamond has powerfully argued, present themselves in Costello’s account of what it means to be a “wounded animal” (Diamond 49). It is to the figure of the wounded animal that I would now like to turn, and to a reason” (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 48). This is what I refer to as “unreason” later on in this paragraph.

Diamond wants us not to read the lectures primarily as ethical arguments about how we treat animals, but about what it means for Elizabeth Costello to understand herself as a wounded animal. She writes, “Elizabeth Costello’s responses to arguments can be read as ‘replies’ in the philosophical sense only by ignoring important features of the story, in particular the kind of weight that such responses have in Costello’s thought. In the life of the animal she is, argument does not have the weight we may take it to have in the life of the kind of animal we think of ourselves as being. She sees our reliance on argumentation as a way we may make unavailable to ourselves our own sense of what it is to be a living animal … (Another way of trying to confront the issues here: to think of Coetzee’s lectures as contributing to the ‘debate’ on how to treat animals is to fail to see how ‘debate’ as we understand it may have built into it a distancing of ourselves from our sense of our own bodily life and our capacity to respond to and to imagine
consideration of what it means for the wounded animal to exhibit its woundedness to an audience by telling its story. This figure is one that stands outside normative accounts of the animal, be they Cartesian ones of the animal-as-machine or animal-rights ones of the human-like animal (e.g. the great apes) that activists argue ought to be granted “humanoid rights” of the kind “that we accord mentally defective specimens of the species Homo sapiens: the right to life, the right not to be subjected to pain or harm, the right to equal protection before the law” (The Lives of Animals 26). What Costello is expressing in her lectures, and what Coetzee is showcasing through Costello, is not an attempt to forge a new paradigm for animal rights or to reconfigure philosophical discourse to make room for a new, more liberal understanding of “the animal,” but rather to introduce into the mix a distinctively literary animal that disrupts the logic of these other discourses.

The prototype of this literary animal in Coetzee’s lectures is Red Peter, who is not just a fictional animal, but rather a wounded animal whose woundedness is bound up with the story he has to tell. Invoking him to confront the animal-rights position, Costello remarks:

“That is not what Red Peter was striving for when he wrote, through his amanuensis Franz Kafka, the life history that, in November of 1917, he proposed to read to the Academy of Science. Whatever else it may have been, his report to the academy was not a plea to be treated as a mentally defective human being, a simpleton.

“Red Peter was not an investigator of primate behavior but a branded, marked, wounded animal presenting himself as speaking testimony to a gathering of scholars. I am not a philosopher of mind but an animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which I cover up under my clothes but touch on in every word I speak. (Coetzee, The Lives of Animals 26)

I’m interested in bringing together Diamond’s reading of Costello as a wounded animal with a reading of Red Peter as a wounded animal, a singular, literary animal who stands in contrast to the disposable animal found in factory farms and slaughterhouses.
In this passage, Coetzee establishes a line of descent: Elizabeth Costello is the inheritor of Red Peter, and Coetzee is the inheritor of Kafka. Meanwhile, in this account, Red Peter comes to inhabit the same plane of existence as his creator, commissioning Kafka to transcribe his story. As Costello figures him, therefore, Red Peter is a “literary animal”—not just an animal from Kafka’s stories, but an animal with a story to tell. As such, he serves as a counter-example to the various conceptions of “the animal” that Costello finds herself countering, among them the “humanoid” animal that is spoken for by activists and the experimental animal that is subjected to cognitive testing by scientists.

The Red Peter resurrected by Costello thus comes to stand against both the paradigms set forth in Wolfgang Köhler’s The Mentality of Apes, which Costello reads as an intertext for Kafka’s story, and more notably, against the Tanner Lectures that immediately preceded Coetzee’s, Dorothy L. Cheney’s “Why Animals Don’t Have Language” (co-authored with Robert M. Seyfarth). In both works, human modes of cogitation become the standard against which animals are measured—and in relation to which they always invariably fall short. Thus, what Costello ultimately finds in Köhler’s experiments on the ape Sultan is a system that is rigged from the start, primed to reaffirm our assumptions that the mental capacities of animals are inferior to our own: “At every turn Sultan is driven to think the less interesting thought. From the purity of speculation (Why do men behave like this?) he is relentlessly propelled toward lower, practical, instrumental reason (How does one use this to get to that?) and thus toward acceptance of himself as primarily an organism with an appetite that needs to be satisfied” (Coetzee, The Lives of Animals 29). Costello’s rendering of Red Peter accordingly serves as a foil to Köhler’s portrait of Sultan, as an embodiment of those

The same is true of Coetzee and Costello; we find this dynamic in Coetzee’s act of deferring the questions posed to him to Costello, as Attridge recounts.
capacities (e.g., “the purity of speculation” through which he recounts his “arduous descent from the silence of the beasts to the gabble of reason” [Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 26]) that Köhler’s experiments on Sultan screen out.

Meanwhile, Cheney’s Tanner Lectures, delivered only half a year before Coetzee’s, in March of 1997 at the University of Cambridge, offer an account of the research conducted on “the link between communication and cognition in apes” (175) in order to argue that animals “don’t have language” (which is here understood in terms of “syntax” and the capacity to adopt “new words”) (176). In that paper, Cheney, who is a professor of biology at the University of Pennsylvania, asks such questions as: Given that “a wide range of animals in addition to apes can be taught by humans to use artificial labels to designate objects or properties of objects” (175), “why do the same animals not explicitly label these concepts except when tutored by humans?” (176); “Why should an animal that already possesses a small number of semantic signals in its vocal repertoire be unable to create new labels for other objects and events in its environment?” (176); and, “[I]f animals can be taught to obey sentencelike commands by humans, why do they not also spontaneously produce sentences, and why is there no evidence for syntax in the natural communication of animals?” (176). For Coetzee, these are, of course, the wrong questions to be asking. I want to suggest that if Costello offers an indictment of Köhler’s methodology through her analysis and puppeteering of Red Peter, then Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* counters Cheney’s privileging of human language in her account of ape cognition. Even as she acknowledges in her conclusion that “natural communication” among apes may amount to something other than

10 As Costello frames it, the “descent” from animal to man here implies a movement downward, from a noble “silence” to an indiscriminate “gabble.” This speaks to the stock evolutionary notion that man has descended from lower life forms and but simultaneously inverts this logic by proposing that this descent is actually an ascent, marked by the acquisition of capacities lacking in his non-human ancestors.

11 Cheney argues that this shows that animals (in contrast to young children) lack “theory of mind,” or the ability to ascribe feelings and motivations to others (176).
language as we experience it (197), Cheney raises this possibility only to ultimately
dismiss it. Coetzee’s work, on the other hand, does not take the possession of human-
style “language” as an adequate measure of the mental faculties and communicative
capabilities of animals; instead, his fiction suggests that such measuring might in itself
be a misconceived enterprise, particularly if it ends up constituting the basis for
determining what kind of ethical consideration different forms of life are due.

This difference between Cheney and Coetzee is evidenced most starkly in their
lectures’ respective titles. While Cheney’s work takes it both as a given and as a matter
of central importance that animals “don’t have language”—a phrase that she
understands in wholly anthropocentric terms—it also begs to be understood in relation
to “Humans, Who Do.” Coetzee’s title, on the other hand, is left open, uncircumscribed.
“The Lives of Animals” does not present an argument, does not explicitly set up an
opposition between humans and animals; of course, the lives of animals might be
understood in relation or opposition to the lives of humans, but it also leaves itself open
to the understanding that humans are animals too. In Coetzee’s work, therefore, what
matters are the lives of animals, not their capacities in the way that Cheney conceives of
them—that is, as tools for establishing a hierarchy among species. It is not, for Coetzee
or Costello, a matter of ranking animals on the basis of whatever attributes science and
philosophy have deemed constitutive of “the human difference” that supposedly sets
humans apart from and above the animals.

In Coetzee’s Tanner Lectures, therefore, what is implicitly called into question is
the logic that underwrites these kinds of hierarchical comparisons—the fantasy that

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12 Cheney observes, “While it is sometimes asserted that chimpanzees’ and bonobos’ gestures
may convey more information than their vocalizations … these assertions are based on intuition
rather than fact; almost nothing is known about the possible ‘semantic’ content of these species
calls” (197-98).

13 For example, as Cheney observes, “The linguistic capacities of even one-year-old children
probably surpass those of vervets, however, because even at the one-word stage children not
only comprehend sentences but are also extremely sensitive to the syntactical relations among
words” (189).
there exists a scale along which widely divergent forms of life can be categorized and ordered and valuated. For Coetzee, the question of “Why Animals Don’t Have Language” gets nowhere near the heart of the matter. The heart of the matter belongs to the realm of literature, which can render visible the lives of those animals that we all are—wounded animals with stories to tell, whether or not these stories are ever told. To return to this figure: the literary animal is the wounded animal, human or non-human, whose singular suffering elicits a response from those who are made to know about it. In The Lives of Animals, and as we will see later, in Disgrace as well, the literary animal who exhibits his or her wound stands both alongside and against the disposable animal whose wounds remain unseen and whose suffering remains unheard.

The figure of the wounded animal is one that Coetzee, or rather, Costello, takes from Kafka’s “A Report For an Academy.” In that story, Red Peter gives an account of his two wounds—the wound that earns him his name and the wound that stands in the way of his complete assimilation into the ranks of “the human”:

They fired; I was the only one hit; I got two wounds.

One in the cheek; it was light, but left a large, red, naked scar, which has earned me the repulsive, thoroughly inappropriate name—which only an ape could have come up with—of Red Peter, as if the red spot on my cheek were all that distinguished me from that locally popular trained ape-animal Peter, who recently died. (I mention all that merely in passing.)

The second bullet lodged below my hip. The wound was severe; it still causes me to limp slightly today. In a recent essay by one of the ten thousand newshounds that carry on about me in newspapers, I read that my ape nature is not yet fully suppressed; the proof being that whenever I have company, I always take down my trousers to show the entry point of the bullet. That scoundrel should have every finger of his writing hand blasted off one by one! I—I have the right to take down my trousers in front of anyone I care to; people will find nothing there but a well-groomed fur and the scar left—to avoid any misunderstanding, let us choose a specific word for a specific purpose—the scar left by a heinous shot. Everything is open and straightforward, we have nothing to hide; when it comes to plain truth, great minds will shed the very finest of manners. (Kafka, “A Report for an Academy” 283)

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14 This response is not always a positive one, as we observe in the discomfort and even outright disapproval with which Costello’s audience meets her account of her wound.
Red Peter’s wounds form the very basis of his identity: the first is the one whereby he is named; the second is one that he exhibits to his audience as a means of confirming the “plain truth” of his history—or rather, of his story. More than that, the latter wound—the scar from the shot that precipitates Red Peter’s transition from wild ape to humanoid vaudeville performer—marks his liminality, his status as no-longer-animal and simultaneously not-yet-fully-human. In recognizing his nakedness, for instance, he is no longer fully an animal that, as Derrida puts it, “doesn’t feel its own nudity” (The Animal 5). That is, he recognizes his nakedness as such, as humans would; at the same time, his lack of shame at being naked marks him as an animal whose “ape nature is not yet fully suppressed.” The wound, in this case, places Red Peter outside the normative categories of “human” and “animal.” Simultaneously, and crucially, it doubles as the knowledge that he needs to make public. The wound is the story he has to tell—it is his report to the academy.

All at once, therefore, Costello’s invocation of Red Peter—which doubles as Coetzee’s intertextual engagement with Kafka—throws us into a domain in which the distinction between human and animal is no longer the condition that determines who has the capacity to address an audience, to tell one’s story, and who does not. With this line blurred, it becomes conceivable that one can be “address[ed]” by the animal, as Jacques Derrida finds himself “address[ed]” by the cat who sees him naked in The Animal That Therefore I Am (13). In delivering his report to the academy, therefore, Red Peter stands before his audience precisely on the basis of his generic indeterminacy. In giving her lectures at Appleton College, meanwhile, Elizabeth Costello does the same, casting her lot with the animals in an effort to dissociate herself from a “human-kindness” that exclusively benefits humankind (Coetzee, The Lives of Animals 69). With both Costello and Red Peter, what matters is the potential for their wounds to be made visible, so that others can be called upon to respond to them, and to the stories they tell.
Once these wounds are exposed—in this case, given narrative form—the onus shifts from the speaker to the audience: to Red Peter’s audience, to Costello’s audience, and through them, to Coetzee’s audience as well.

Literature, as Coetzee is keenly aware, offers up others who call upon us, as readers, to respond. Both The Lives of Animals and Disgrace, however, grapple with the question of what is to be done in a world in which it is no longer viable to expect that otherness will present itself in discrete units, one individual other at a time. The difficulty that Coetzee confronts is thus one of scale: if literature can bring us face-to-face with wounded animals only one-by-one, how can it address the kind of violence that operates on the level of the multitude, defying enumeration?

2.2 The Disposable Animal; or, Analogizing the Holocaust

Following in the tracks of Red Peter, therefore, Elizabeth Costello is a wounded, literary animal who, as Cora Diamond observes, is “haunted by the horror of what we do to animals. We see her as wounded by this knowledge, this horror, and by the knowledge of how unhaunted others are. The wound marks her and isolates her” (46). In a sense, Costello’s wound is a conduit for other wounds that go unreported and unobserved; like her creator, she is wounded by her overpowering responsiveness to others’ suffering—“and not only human suffering,” as Coetzee would say (Doubling the Point 248). In “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” Diamond goes on to argue that while philosophy “deflect[s]” “the difficulty of reality,” literature makes it manifest, forcing us to confront it (57-58). In The Lives of Animals, accordingly, “Coetzee gives us a view of a profound disturbance of soul, and puts that view into a

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15 This is not a new proposition; it is one that Derek Attridge sets forth in The Singularity of Literature and in J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading and one that David Palumbo-Liu articulates in The Deliverance of Others: “I suggest that rather than focusing entirely on meaning-making, and whether we get it or not, we should think of how literature engenders a space for imagining our relation to others and thinking through why and how that relation exists, historically, politically, ideologically” (Palumbo-Liu 14).
complex context” (Diamond 56); within this schema, Elizabeth Costello is the vehicle for this confrontation.

Costello’s talks at Appleton College put into play “the difficulty of reality” by bringing the literary animal into dialogue with another figure that populates Coetzee’s works: the disposable animal. If the literary animal is one who, like Red Peter and Elizabeth Costello, testifies about his or her wound, then the disposable animal is one whose wounds remain invisible and whose story remains untold. It is the animal whom others cannot “afford to know” (Coetzee, The Lives of Animals 19), the animal who fails to make an ethical claim on others because it cannot be distinguished from the faceless multitude of which it forms a part. In her contentious first lecture, Costello frames the disposable animal by situating her account of the industrialized slaughter of animals in factory farms alongside the Nazi death camps of World War II:16

I was taken on a drive around Waltham this morning. It seems a pleasant enough town. I saw no horrors, no drug-testing laboratories, no factory farms, no abattoirs. Yet I am sure they are here. They must be. They simply do not advertise themselves. They are all around us as I speak, only we do not, in a certain sense, know about them.

Let me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them. (Coetzee, The Lives of Animals 21)

This fraught passage, in which Costello analogizes our present-day exploitation of animals to Hitler’s mass murder campaign, inspires discomfort, anger, and indignation. As the poet Abraham Stern puts it to Costello in a letter detailing why he has refused to “break bread” with her, “The Jews died like cattle, therefore cattle die like Jews, you say. That is a trick with words which I will not accept” (Coetzee, The Lives of Animals 50). As distasteful as Stern finds it, Costello’s speech is not, as I have already touched upon in

16 Diamond also observes, “The imagery of the Holocaust figures centrally in the way she is haunted and in her isolation” (46-7).
my introduction, “a trick with words” that equates the lives and deaths of cattle in slaughterhouses with the lives and deaths of Jews in concentration camps. It is, instead, a way of raising the problem of disposable life as something whose very condition of existence is its disavowal. By suggesting that concentration camps and contemporary animal enterprises are subject to a similar logic—that they have in common not just the forms of “degradation, cruelty, and killing” that take place within them, but also the fundamental condition of invisibility that shields what goes on inside from outside eyes—Costello both invokes the problem of disposability and insists that it cuts across species lines. For Costello, and for Coetzee as well, opacity is a necessary precondition of disposability: in contrast to literary animals, animals in abattoirs are made to be disposed of without ever having the opportunity to make visible the wounds that are inflicted upon them. Thus, the “analogy” that Costello gives voice to, echoing Jacques Derrida’s argument at a conference in Cerisy only three months earlier, works by homing in on the shared conditions that make such monstrous enterprises possible in the first place—namely, the “certain willed ignorance” (Coetzee, The Lives of Animals 20), what Derrida calls “the disavowal” (The Animal 25) “on a global scale” (The Animal 26) of those who stand by and assume a studied blindness.

“They are all around us as I speak, only we do not, in a certain sense, know about them,” Costello says (Coetzee, The Lives of Animals 21). What would it mean to know, in that “certain sense”? For Derrida, it would mean to be moved by compassion, to fall on the right side of the “War [that] is waged over the matter of pity” (The Animal 29). For Costello, as for Coetzee, knowing in this “certain sense” would mean responding; not just responding, but being rendered incapable of not responding. In the case of the Holocaust, Costello insists, by refusing to know what was happening in camps like Treblinka, standers-by “lost their humanity”; “Under the circumstances of Hitler’s kind of war, ignorance may have been a useful survival mechanism,” but it was
also an ethical failing, “an excuse which, with admirable moral rigor, we refuse to accept” (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 20). To put it another way: as Costello frames it, “Germans of a particular generation” were guilty of standing by while human life was turned into disposable life (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 20); people of this generation are guilty of standing by while non-human life is turned into the same. And it is the line between standing by and responding—in whatever capacity, however limited—that is for Costello, and for Coetzee as well, the provenance of ethics.

A central implication of Costello’s lectures is that the fact of being put to death is a crime against life itself, regardless of the form it takes: “To be alive is to be a living soul. An animal—and we are all animals—is an embodied soul,” she says (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 33). Taking as her central premise the conviction that every life matters dearly to the being who holds it (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 65), however, leads Costello into thorny territory. The notion of life itself as the foremost good, to be defended at all costs, is one that Coetzee himself shows to be untenable in the world we inhabit. This is especially true in cases in which—as we will see with the dogs that are “too many” in *Disgrace*—circumstances beyond any single individual’s control dictate that a life, or, more often, many lives, must be disposed of. What we find in such instances, however, is that even if these lives may not be saved, the ethical imperative as Coetzee frames it lies in keeping them from being rendered disposable. Thus, what Elizabeth Costello and J. M. Coetzee both seek, the former less successfully than the

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17 Costello tells her audience, “Anyone who says that life matters less to animals than it does to us has not held in his hands an animal fighting for its life. The whole of the being of the animal is thrown into that fight, without reserve. When you say that the fight lacks a dimension of intellectual or imaginative horror, I agree. It is not the mode of being of animals to have an intellectual horror: their whole being is in the living flesh” (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 65).

18 This point is akin to Donna Haraway’s statement, made in a 2009 interview, that “This [in this case, eating animals] is about how you kill without making killable. Companion species is not about companion animals as pets, it’s about being at table together; it’s about *cum panis*, with bread, when who’s on the menu is not clear; it’s about eating and being eaten, but not equally” ("Science Stories” 162, emphasis mine).
latter, is an ethically grounded solution to the biopolitical problem of managing non-human life on a mass scale.

Ultimately, Costello’s invocation of the Holocaust alongside the present-day mass slaughter of animals works by pressing her audience to reflect on what it means to know—what our determination to not know says about us and about the world we’ve brought into being. It is a world not just devoid of ethical accountability, she insists, but a world lacking even the most basic ethical sensibility. In concluding her first lecture, Costello says, “I return one last time to the places of death all around us, the places of slaughter to which, in a huge communal effort, we close our hearts. Each day is a fresh holocaust, yet, as far as I can see, our moral being is untouched. We do not feel tainted. We can do anything, it seems, and come away clean” (Coetzee, The Lives of Animals 35); the same is true of us, she argues, as of those we wholeheartedly denounce, those “Germans and Poles and Ukrainians who did and did not know of the atrocities around them... We like to think they woke up haggard in the mornings and died of gnawing cancers. But probably it was not so. The evidence points in the opposite direction: that we can do anything and get away with it; that there is no punishment” (Coetzee, The Lives of Animals 35). We inhabit a morally bankrupt world, Elizabeth Costello concludes. It is a world that renders some lives a priori disposable without acknowledging this disposability as such. Because disposability is something that we cannot bear witness to or even be fully, morally, cognizant of, our consumption of these lives depends on our capacity to not know about them as best we can, and, paradoxically, at least in the case of the animals we consume, on the fantasy that in dying, they fulfill the purpose for which they were created. The moral toll that this blindness takes reaches grotesque proportions in Costello’s elaboration of it at the end of The Lives of Animals: “It is as if I were to visit friends, and to make some polite remark about the lamp in their living room, and they were to say, ‘Yes, it’s nice, isn’t it? Polish-Jewish skin it’s made of, we
find that’s best, the skins of young Polish-Jewish virgins” (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 69). The danger for all of us is that the logic of disposability renders unproblematic, even mundane, the act of killing.

At this point, I would like to return to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter: in a world so full of suffering, what is literature good for? The short answer is that literature has the potential to radically unsettle our world, to disrupt us in order to exert, through a character like Elizabeth Costello, its own forms of logic, ethics, and ultimately, reality. In confronting us with the question of what it would mean to be Elizabeth Costello, what it would mean to “know” in that “certain sense,” *The Lives of Animals* asks us to imagine what it would mean to inhabit the contradictions that underwrite popular and philosophical discourses about the lives of humans and animals. In excess of all this, however, the text leaves us with another question: if the model that Costello offers up, that of indiscriminately valuing life itself, as such, is inadequate for navigating our present-day biopolitical landscape, what exactly does Coetzee propose instead?

## 2.3 “Done because we are too menny”

To put it another way: if there are instances in which non-human life must, from a biopolitical, managerial, even humanitarian point of view, be disposed of, how can this be achieved without rendering life disposable? As the rest of this chapter will argue, this turns on determining how that which is routinely relegated to the domain of disposable life might come to be understood otherwise: namely, as comprised of numerous instantiations of singular life, each demanding ethical consideration. It is a matter of bridging the gap between disposable animals and literary animals, between animals whose wounds remain unseen, and animals who, like Elizabeth Costello and Red Peter, have the opportunity and the wherewithal to present their wounds to an audience. How, however, is such an audience supposed to know, in that “certain
sense,” about those who cannot give their own reports, those who are instead propelled headlong toward their deaths en masse? And what of the problem of that “en masse,” of mass death? “Between 1942 and 1945 several million people were put to death in the concentration camps of the Third Reich: at Treblinka alone more than a million and a half, perhaps as many as three million,” Costello says. “These are numbers that numb the mind. We have only one death of our own; we can comprehend the deaths of others only one at a time. In the abstract we may be able to count to a million, but we cannot count to a million deaths” (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 19). How, in other words, is it possible to “comprehend,” to apprehend these millions of deaths? How is it possible to comprehend the billions of animal deaths that take place in labs, slaughterhouses, and shelters each year? And, as Coetzee and Costello both ask, what is the place of “the literary” in navigating these murky waters?

If Coetzee’s self-aware, generically complex meta-lectures raise these questions, then his 1999 Booker-prize winning novel *Disgrace* gestures toward a solution. In the novel, the problem of disposable life is raised not through references to factory farms and slaughterhouses, but rather through the representation of forsaken animals in post-apartheid South Africa. In this case, the “uncountable” are South Africa’s unwanted dogs: “The dogs are brought to the clinic because they are unwanted: because we are too menny. That is where he enters their lives” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 146, original emphasis).

In the novel, David Lurie’s work at Bev Shaw’s animal clinic constitutes the first line of defense against the problem of the “too menny,” although practically speaking, Lurie’s efforts are futile, even “stupid, daft, wrongheaded” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 146). Little is achieved, Lurie is aware, by striving to “[save] the honour of corpses”—especially the corpses of animals (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 146). And yet, even as Lurie is aware that the problem of the disposed-of “too many” is not one that he can solve, the novel makes it clear that any response to the individual creatures that comprise this
category constitutes “a statement of hope whose ‘unhappiness’ and meager survival are better than silence” (Said 553). It is, in other words, the difference between recognizing that singular lives are being disposed of, and standing by as animal life is indiscriminately being rendered disposable.

As in The Lives of Animals, this difference manifests itself through the workings of the literary, particularly through Coetzee’s intertextual engagement with the literary tradition that precedes him. Specifically, in his depiction of these doomed dogs, Coetzee speaks to the problem of disposable life from within a literary tradition that can be traced back to Thomas Hardy’s 1895 novel Jude the Obscure. Lurie’s rendition of “because we are too menny” harkens back to the suicide note that explains Old Father Time’s decision to free Jude and Sue from the burdens of raising himself and his siblings: “Done because we are too menny” (Hardy 264). And if, as Said observes, Hardy’s novel makes use of Saint Jude, the “patron saint of lost causes” (Said 534), to envision how one might live in the world when one “is incapacitated from the start” (Said 537), then by citing Jude, Disgrace does something similar. In its portrayal of a South Africa haunted by the specter of apartheid, the novel asks on what terms it is possible to operate within the realm of a lost cause. By posing this problem in relation to animal (rather than human) suffering and death, moreover, Coetzee poses a further question: What does it mean to co-opt the catastrophe of Jude’s dead children in the service of the novel’s abandoned dogs?

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19 Said is here giving an account of Theodor Adorno’s thinking about the lost cause. I reference Said’s “On Lost Causes” because the logic of the lost cause brings together Jude the Obscure and Disgrace, which in turn will lay the foundation for my larger argument about ethics and intertextuality. On a fundamental level, Lurie has devoted himself to a “lost cause” akin to the ones that Edward Said locates in Jude the Obscure, as well as in novels like Sentimental Education and Don Quixote—and also, within the domain of international politics, in “the Palestinian cause” (546).

20 Rita Barnard also notes Coetzee’s reference to Hardy (222).
Within Coetzee’s literary landscape, “because we are too menny” thus comes to signify something more than “the dogs are killed because they are too many.” If we understand Coetzee’s act of citation as “engender[ing]” “disruptive ‘anomalies’” that rework the meaning of words and phrases “from one repetition to the next” (Derrida, “Law of Genre” 226-27), then this instance of intertextuality signifies something like this: We recognize being “too menny” as a tragedy in Hardy’s novel; what happens when we extend the logic of Hardy’s doomed children to these doomed dogs? What assumptions, what disavowals become manifest when we consider life alongside life? Within a humanist framework, of course, this would be a wholly inappropriate question. As with Costello’s ill-received Holocaust analogy, the act of setting the deaths of dogs alongside the deaths of children runs the risk of suggesting some sort of equivalence between them. At best, we would be anthropomorphizing animals; at worst, valuating animal life at the expense of human life, elevating the animal by debasing the human.

I posit that the novel conducts its thinking on another register, one that requires a different critical approach and methodology. By calling into question the anthropocentric systems through which we categorize and order our world—especially those that frame relationships between humans and animals—Disgrace does nothing less than pose a fundamental challenge to the humanist modes of thought that we assume as givens. To put it another way: if humanism constructs its subject, “the human,” via a

21 Derek Attridge likewise finds in Disgrace a critique of humanism: “As with his treatment of artistic creation, Coetzee strips away all the conventional justifications for kindness to animals—implying not that these are empty justifications, but that they are part of the rational, humanist culture that doesn’t get to the heart of the matter. Indeed, the heart of the matter, the full and profound registering of animal existence that Coetzee is using his own art to evoke, constitutes, like art, a fierce challenge to that culture” (J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading 184-85). While animals serve as one point of elaboration within Attridge’s larger account of how Coetzee puts “the notion of cost, the measurement of profit and loss…to the test” via the novel’s attention to “unpredictability, singularity, excess” (J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading 191), my essay takes Coetzee’s rethinking of humanism as its central subject and focuses on animals to consider precisely what Coetzee offers us instead—that is, what his posthumanist vision of the world amounts to. Mine is also a different account from Elizabeth Anker’s astute reading of Disgrace as a “[critique] of human rights discourse” (“Human Rights, Social Justice” 245), which ultimately remains concerned primarily with human beings (e.g., she remains skeptical of animals’ capacity
constitutive exclusion of the animal\textsuperscript{22} from the realms of ethical and political consideration,\textsuperscript{23} then \textit{Disgrace} imagines a world in which these limitations do not obtain. In modeling Coetzee’s commitment to a form of ethical thinking that not only makes room for animals, but actually articulates itself through them, \textit{Disgrace} serves as a literary staging-ground for a form of posthumanism that recognizes “our irreducibly multiple and variable, complexly valenced, infinitely reconfigurable relations with other animals, including each other” (B. H. Smith 16).\textsuperscript{24}

In the rest of this chapter, I take animal life and death as the starting point for an analysis of the ethical possibilities that Coetzee’s novel invites us to imagine.\textsuperscript{25} By

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reading *Disgrace* in relation to Emmanuel Levinas’s ethics of the Other,26 I argue that Coetzee inaugurates a new value system that not only makes use of Levinas’s thinking, but also goes beyond it by pioneering a world in which the Other is expanded to accommodate the animals that live and breed and suffer and die within his work. What we end up with, consequently, is an ethics that forces us to imagine the singular ethical subject as no longer exclusively human—and disposability as no longer the acceptable provenance of the animal. This is an ethics that sets South Africa’s unwanted dogs alongside Jude’s lost children while simultaneously preserving the incommensurability of the two; each counts, ethically speaking, but neither is reducible to the other.

To put it another way: if Elizabeth Costello comes under fire for comparing animal life to human life, then *Disgrace* demonstrates why, within the broader scope of Coetzee’s thinking about animals, that attack is misguided. As it turns out, Costello’s “comparisons” aren’t comparisons as such; instead, they are speech-acts that evince her deeply-rooted concern for the singularity of individual beings, regardless of species. Coetzee’s fiction, in other words, insists that even if some lives must be disposed of, no life may justly be rendered more “disposable” than another. In its turn, *Disgrace* doesn’t just reiterate this claim: it turns it into a baseline for rethinking ethics. Through its homeless dogs and Lurie’s relation to them, the novel gestures toward the possibility that disposable life might be recuperated and reformulated so as to render visible (if not...
always savable) the singular wounded animals that comprise it. The way it does this, I will argue, is through the ill-defined, amorphous, yet ever-proliferating power of “the literary.”

Whereas critics have examined the ways in which Disgrace negotiates ethical relations through gendered and racialized human bodies, and even across species boundaries, through the bodies of animals, both living and dead, I will consider how the novel, as a literary enterprise that operates on an intertextual register, asks us to think ethics anew by throwing its foundational anthropocentrism into question. In so doing, I will also confront the novel’s painful final scene, in which Lurie consigns to death the crippled dog with which he has unexpectedly bonded: “Yes, I am giving him up,” is Lurie’s closing affirmation (Coetzee, Disgrace 220). It is in this moment that the difference between The Lives of Animals and Disgrace makes itself felt. In the former, we find that Costello attacks not just the logic of disposability, but also the taking of life itself, as such. The latter text, on the other hand, grapples with the thornier question of what acting ethically would entail within the frame of the “too many”; it asks how it might be possible to effect a bringing-to-death that remains entrenched in a recognition of and respect for the individual animal’s singularity. Faced with this always already lost cause, therefore, Disgrace thinks through the question of what the ethical treatment of non-human others in an imperfect world would entail. To put it in terms of the novel’s title: it asks where and how one might discover a glimmer of grace in a world plagued by seemingly unremitting disgrace.

In the end, therefore, Lurie’s final pronouncement of “Yes, I am giving him up” leaves the reader with the sense that in the dark world that Coetzee has created, it is not

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27 For critical race and gender readings of Disgrace, see Attwell, Boehmer, Graham, Farred, and McDonald.
28 Nearly all critics who write about Disgrace at least touch upon the subject of dogs in the novel. For readings of Disgrace that consider animals at some length, see: Attridge, J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading; Brittan; Danta; Donovan; Faber; Herron; O’Sullivan; Summers-Bremner; Tremaine; and Weil.
just impractical, but impracticable, to hold out for some kind of saving grace. And yet, there is a danger in seizing upon the novel’s title as a roadmap for reading Coetzee’s text, since to do so would be to miss the commitment to an openness of signification and a proliferation of meaning—as exemplified by the novel’s engagement with *Jude the Obscure*—that ushers in new modes of imagining the world. With this commitment in mind, I examine the multivalent nature of the “disgrace” that underwrites Coetzee’s novel of the same name, in particular by reflecting upon the ethical possibilities that are opened up by Coetzee’s engagement with animals in this text.

### 2.4 Writing in the Tracks of Kafka

Within *Disgrace*, “disgrace” is a thorny term. While critics generally agree that Coetzee’s protagonist has been disgraced by engaging in a coercive affair with a student, and that “the times’ in which the characters find themselves living” are steeped in disgrace (Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* 165), there is little consensus as to what exactly “disgrace” means or how it functions within Coetzee’s text. So, for instance, for Alice Brittan, “disgrace” is a form of “imaginative poverty” in which “[Coetzee’s] characters inhabit worlds that have prohibited them from learning to imagine one another, especially across the divides of race and gender” (482); for Alyda Faber, “disgrace” harnesses the potential for ethical change, “transform[ing] [Lurie] from a man confessing to be invulnerable to others to one acknowledging an unwitting and sometimes unwanted, transforming exposure to others” (304); and for Derek Attridge, the “disgrace” of “the times” weaves the cultural fabric out of which a

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29 Lurie uses this term in his first exchange with Bev Shaw:

“He is silent. Then: ‘Do you know why my daughter sent me to you?’

‘She told me you were in trouble.’

‘Not just in trouble. In what I suppose one would call disgrace.’” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 85, emphasis mine)

Later in the story, he tells Melanie’s father, “I am sunk in a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 172, emphasis mine).
“secular” form of “grace” (as manifested through dogs and music) can emerge (J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading 180).

I propose another reading of “disgrace,” one that develops out of an understanding of Disgrace as a work that functions intertextually. Whereas in The Lives of Animals I explored the figure of the literary animal by tracing the intertextual connection between Kafka’s Red Peter and Coetzee’s Costello, when it comes to Disgrace, I argue that what I am calling Coetzee’s posthumanist ethics is constituted as a thoroughly literary enterprise that turns upon a sustained engagement with Kafka’s 1914 short story “In the Penal Colony.” Although Coetzee’s utilization of this story in Disgrace is not as explicit as his use of “A Report for an Academy” in The Lives of Animals, it is clear that Coetzee is both familiar with and influenced by Kafka’s oeuvre, of which this story forms an integral part. In the 1992 book of essays and interviews Doubling the Point, Coetzee responds to David Attwell’s queries regarding the parallels between Kafka’s stories and Coetzee’s Life & Times of Michael K and Waiting for the Barbarians by observing (198):

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30 For Attridge, this “grace” manifests itself in the fact that “by the close of the novel...[Lurie’s] daily behavior testifies to some value beyond or before the systems—moral, religious, emotional, political—of reward and punishment, of blueprint and assessment, of approbation and disapprobation, that have brought about his disgrace; that he is true to an excess, an overflow, an alterity that no calculation can contain, no rule account for” (J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading 182). Other critics approach the question of the ethical implications of “disgrace” in Disgrace from a variety of angles: through the question of imaginative identification (Marais, “J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace”); the novel as embodying a shift from an early “scientific, anthropological [form of Darwinian] enquiry” to a later version of Darwinism that emphasizes “the continuity of life across species” (Coleman 598, 599); and the novel as a staging-ground for specifically post-apartheid power structures, interpreted through the lenses of race and gender (Attwell, Boehmer, Graham, Farred, McDonald). Herron finds “disgrace” widespread in the novel, arguing that its “articulation of disgrace cannot succeed without animals” (472), reading “the animal as embodied disgrace” (487), and locating “disgrace” also within “David’s individual fall,” “Lucy’s rape and subsequent silence,” and “postapartheid South Africa” (472). For a formalist reading of “disgrace,” see Sanders. For a reading that connects “animal being,” the knowledge of “death,” and “shame” (a term that becomes closely aligned with “disgrace”), see Tremaine.

31 For an account of how Coetzee makes use of Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony” in Waiting for the Barbarians, see Moses 121. For other intertextual readings of Disgrace, see Spivak’s reading of the “father-daughter” story of Lurie and Lucy in relation to Shakespeare’s King Lear, and of Lurie in relation to Kafka’s The Trial (“Ethics and Politics” 20-22). See also Pechey’s account of Lurie alongside Dante’s Inferno (375-76), Danta’s consideration of the figure of the scapegoat in Kafka and Coetzee, and O’Sullivan’s treatment of Kafka’s “The Burrow” alongside Coetzee’s work.
In a more general sense, I work on a writer like Kafka because he opens up for me, or opens me to, moments of analytic intensity. And such moments are, in their lesser way, also a matter of grace, inspiration. Is this a comment about reading, about the intensities of the reading process? Not really. Rather, it is a comment about writing, the kind of writing-in-the-tracks one does in criticism. For my experience is that it is not reading that takes me into the last twist of the burrow, but writing. No intensity of reading that I can imagine would succeed in guiding me through Kafka’s verb-labyrinth: to do that I would once again have to take up the pen and, step by step, write my way after him…

You ask about the impact of Kafka on my own fiction. I acknowledge it, and acknowledge it with what I hope is a proper humility. (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 199)

As Coetzee describes it, his relationship with Kafka is more than one of influence—for Coetzee, attaining “moments of analytic intensity” in his own work is less the consequence of reading Kafka than it is that of “writing after him,” of writing from within the space that has been opened up by critically analyzing Kafka’s work. Whatever the nature of the pursuit, Coetzee is clear about the magnitude of his indebtedness, about the impossibility of not following in the tracks of his predecessor. What I propose, therefore, is that Kafka’s work needs to be understood not just as the condition of possibility for Coetzee’s writing, but also as the condition of possibility for reading *Disgrace*.

To begin with Kafka, therefore: in “In the Penal Colony,” a traveler encounters an apparatus that metes out punishment to condemned men in a penal colony. Within this failing judicial system, which is in its death throes when the traveler arrives, the condemned man remains not only uninformed of his crime and his sentence, but, until the moment of his subjection to the apparatus, which inscribes the judgment against him onto his flesh, he is unaware even of the fact that he has been condemned. Halfway through the story, these violations of justice and humanity are tacitly acknowledged by the officer, the “sole representative” of the apparatus (Kafka, “In the Penal Colony”)
209), who asks the traveler: “Are you aware of the disgrace?” (Kafka, “In the Penal Colony” 212).

“The disgrace,” it turns out, is the disgrace that has been cast upon the officer for his single-handed preservation of a broken system of justice, and Kafka’s story, in turn, is largely about the means through which the officer endeavors to secure some form of “grace” for himself. The problem, however, is that as within Christian theology, wherein grace signifies “The free and unmerited favour of God as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowing of blessings” (“Grace,” def. 11a), grace in the penal colony cannot be sought or secured—it must be granted freely by a higher power. In this case, the officer latches onto the worldly traveler as the superior being who, by bestowing his blessings upon the apparatus, might validate his entire life’s work and therein reaffirm the ethical system that undergirds it. The officer’s appeal falls flat, however, as the traveler perceives the extent of “the disgrace”: with “justice” in the penal colony grounded in the principle that “guilt is always beyond doubt,” and the officer serving as both judge and executioner, employing the former post to funnel forth human fodder to the latter (Kafka, “In the Penal Colony” 199), Kafka configures the apparatus and the judicial system to which it belongs as lying beyond the reach of redemption.

In both works, “justice” and punishment inscribe themselves upon the body. For the condemned man in Kafka’s story, crime and punishment are not understood verbally, via the pronouncement of his sentence (or of the charge against him), but rather physically, through the body: “It would be no use informing him. He’s going to

32 Unless stated otherwise, all references to Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony” come from the Joachin Neugroschel translation.
33 From the German, the sentence “Merken Sie die Schande?” (Kafka, “In the Penal Colony,” Best Short Stories, trans. Appelbaum 142) is translated as “Do you observe the disgrace?” (Kafka, “In the Penal Colony,” Best Short Stories, trans. Appelbaum 143). While “Schande” can also mean “shame,” this alternate (and similar) definition by no means precludes understanding it also, or primarily, as “disgrace.”
experience it on his body anyway” (“In the Penal Colony” 198). The fundamental flaw in the system that the officer describes, then, is the fact that the judicial process and the penal procedure amount to one and the same thing—he even conflates the two by saying, “Now the *judicial procedure* is over, and we—I and the soldier—bury him quickly” (Kafka, “In the Penal Colony” 205). This is a problem that finds its counterpart in *Disgrace*. In the South Africa that the white college professor David Lurie and his adult daughter Lucy inhabit, a new world order is being established, and, as in Kafka’s story, this paradigm is pioneered through the violation of bodily integrity. Thus, the trio of black men who force their way into Lucy’s home are there to serve a perverted brand of “justice” that is as absurd in its logic as the one delivered by Kafka’s apparatus. It is a discriminatory justice (spurred by a history of racial injustice that, for these men, demands retribution) delivered in an indiscriminate fashion. The hatred that the three men evince for their victims is not just a hatred of Lucy and Lurie as individuals. It is something more basic, a reaction against the old world order that Lucy, Lurie, and even the dogs in the kennel represent. Lurie, in the aftermath of the attack, intuits that there is something adamantly impersonal about the entire transaction—that despite the fact that for the victims, the assault is intensely personal, for the perpetrators it exists within a larger system of calculations: “Too many people, too few things … Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. Otherwise one could go mad” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 98).

In *Disgrace*, as in “In the Penal Colony,” judgment amounts to punishment, which in this case is delivered by a rogue tribunal that leaves its mark upon the bodies of the condemned. With Lucy, the trio’s sentence takes the form of rape and an unwanted pregnancy—of a child that, as Lurie muses, will be the product of “seed driven into the woman not in love but in hatred, mixed chaotically, meant to soil her, to
mark her, like a dog’s urine” (Coetzee, Disgrace 199). For Lurie, the skullcap and the bandaged, shrunken ear, the upshot of having been doused with alcohol and set aflame, serve as external markers of a deeper disgrace. What they flag is Lurie’s failure to save his daughter from being subjected to the grossest form of indignity: “She would rather hide her face, and he knows why. Because of the disgrace. Because of the shame” (Coetzee, Disgrace 115). In the wake of the attack, what remains is “Lucy’s secret; his disgrace” (Coetzee, Disgrace 109)—the two are intimately connected, and all the more so because Lurie’s initial “disgrace,” the coercive relationship with a student that costs him his university post, bears an uncanny resemblance to the crime perpetrated against Lucy by her attackers.

This is a connection that Lucy eventually articulates between the men who violated her and the father who wasn’t there to stop them: “Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know … doesn’t it feel like murder, like getting away with murder?” (Coetzee, Disgrace 158). And Lurie, in detailing his encounters with Melanie Isaacs at the novel’s inception, has already answered that question. If it’s not murder, Lurie realizes, then it’s something like it, and Melanie’s only way of preempting it is by laying claim to a kind of death-in-life—“[a]s though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck” (Coetzee, Disgrace 25). As it presents itself in these acts of violence, “disgrace” attaches itself to the perpetrators of injustice rather than to its victims—most glaringly, to the three men who attack Lucy and Lurie and the dogs, but also to Lurie, who initially forces himself on Melanie and later fails to prevent Lucy’s rape. Hence, “Lucy’s secret; his disgrace” (Coetzee, Disgrace 109); here,

34 Marais likewise notes the similarity between Lucy’s rape and Melanie’s, and thus Lurie’s alignment with Lucy’s attackers (“Little enough” 175-176; “J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace” 76).
35 My reading of Lurie’s failure to protect Lucy coincides with Kochin’s, who observes: “In the new South Africa, the deepest disgrace is the lack of power to protect one’s own, Lurie realizes in the aftermath of Lucy’s rape” (5).
“disgrace” is marked by the personal possessive pronoun, as belonging to Lurie. Meanwhile, Lucy “would rather hide her face…because of the disgrace” (Coetzee, Disgrace 115); in this case, the word is marked by the definite article and is neither personal nor possessive. The victim suffers, and may indeed be subjugated and “marked” by the violence perpetrated against her, but “the disgrace” ultimately belongs to those who disregard her call for help and exploit her vulnerability.

2.5 Human, Animal, Other

The question Coetzee’s novel stages is that of how the veritable penal colony that is Lucy’s farm and its bleak environs might offer some prospect of redemption to those who have been “soiled,” “marked,” and tainted by it. Where can we locate the “grace” within Disgrace, and how does Kafka’s penal colony, with its staunchly unredeemed and unredemptive ending, help us to discover it? And what, in the end, does this signify for the dogs who are “too menny”?

To address these questions, I will turn to Levinas to show how Disgrace opens up a space in which ethical possibilities are negotiated on the basis of the response—or, as with Kafka, the all-encompassing lack thereof—to the call of the Other. For Levinas, this call of the Other manifests itself through the face, which constitutes an appeal for help from one who is imperiled. This appeal is a “demand” (Levinas et. al. 169), a manifestation of “the frailty of the one who needs you, who is counting on you” (Levinas et. al. 171). In coming face-to-face with the Other who needs one’s help, Levinas explains that the self is interrupted, unmanned. In a sense, the tables are turned, so that in the moment of the ethical encounter, it is no longer that “I am strong and you are weak,” but rather, “I am your servant and you are the master” (Levinas et. al. 171). One’s response to the call of the Other is thus the condition out of which ethics
can emerge: “The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics” (Levinas, *Totality* 43).

If Levinas’s notion of alterity is meant to be unpredictable, “prior to every initiative, to all imperialism of the same” (*Totality* 38-39), then the implication is that we can never know what form the Other will take prior to the face-to-face encounter. And it is this fundamental belief in the singularity of the ethical encounter that renders Levinas’s thinking, at least in theory, rife for seeking the Other beyond the bounds of humanity.\(^{36}\) In practice, however, things are more complicated; as critics have noted, even certain groups of human beings run the risk of being marginalized within Levinas’s thinking.\(^{37}\) That is, Levinasian ethics finds itself historically situated and politically implicated, invariably producing others who fail to count as Other (Chanter 76). Tina Chanter points to the woman and the Palestinian as two such figures of “strategic exclusion” (76), arguing that the former is circumscribed by Levinas’s politically problematic rendering of “the feminine” (74) as that which is “relegate[d]…to the home, to the dwelling, to sexuality, to the carnal, to the maternal,” while the latter is denied “the status of radical alterity…because of the colonial relationship…that pertains between the Israelis and the Palestinians” (76). For Chanter, both figures “are always already abjected by an ethics that does not grant them the status of others whose destitution has an absolute claim” (76). These, obviously, are just two instances among many. Depending on the cultural context—apartheid-era South Africa serving as just one, glaring example—the other that is denied the protections reserved for the human

\(^{36}\) See Calarco, p. 55-77, for his insightful treatment of this aspect of Levinas’s thought.

\(^{37}\) As Rachel Ann Walsh points out, “Despite his repeated insistence that the other cannot be ‘thematized’ or assimilated into a preexisting cognitive scheme that I possess, many of Levinas’s readers, from Luce Irigaray to Alan Badiou to Slavoj Žižek to Judith Butler, have observed that Levinas’s writings contain ethnic, monotheistic, and gendered qualifiers suggesting that in his work the neighbor/other is far more socially circumscribed than Levinas would have us believe” (173).
Other is, frequently, human. It is the marginalized, racialized, feminized, dispossessed, oppressed human other. As such, my uneasiness with Levinas’s thought parallels my concern with humanist discourse, more broadly speaking, as both raise the question of who does not get to count as the Other worthy of ethical consideration. What I am suggesting is that we must interrogate the idea of “the human” as it defines itself against all those it deems less-than-human— and that because the animal is the figure, par excellence, that humanist discourse has had to expel in order to lay claim to the category of “the human,” animals can serve as extreme limit-cases for testing just how far a Levinasian ethics of the Other might be poised to reach.

At a first glance, the boundary-line for ethical consideration does not seem to stretch very far. This is because the assumption of an “abyssal rupture,” to use Derrida’s term (The Animal 30), between “human” and “animal” constitutes the precarious line upon which Levinas’s theory of the face is drawn. When asked about the possibility of extending “the face” to animals, Levinas observes:

I 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. A more specific analysis is needed.

But there is something in our attraction to an animal…. In the dog, what we like is perhaps his child-like character. As if he were strong, cheerful, powerful, full of life…

... it is clear that, without considering animals as human beings, the ethical extends to all living beings. We do not want to make an animal suffer needlessly and so on. But the prototype of this is human ethics ... in relation to the animal, the human is a new phenomenon ... You ask at what moment one becomes a face. I do not know at what moment the human appears, but what I want to emphasize is that the human breaks with pure being, which is always a persistence in being. This is my principal thesis. A being is something that is attached to its own being. That is Darwin’s idea. The being of animals is a struggle for life. A struggle for life without ethics ... However, with the appearance of the human—and this is my entire philosophy—there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other. (Levinas et. al. 171-72)

38 Here, I follow theorists like Cary Wolfe and Jacques Derrida.
In his momentary equivocation about whether or not a snake might have a face, Levinas gestures toward the possibility that the ethical might reach beyond the human. And yet, any ethical opening onto the animal is almost immediately foreclosed as Levinas emphasizes the primacy of the human face (“only afterwards do we discover the face of an animal”) and raises alongside it the specter of anthropomorphism. If we might ever attribute faces to dogs, Levinas implies, it would be because they remind us of ourselves. This reasoning, coupled with Levinas’s declaration that “the prototype” for the ethical treatment of animals is always already “human ethics,” signals the implausibility of responding to animals as such, on their own terms. Ultimately, even though Levinas’s insistence that ethics only comes into being with the human is called into question several times within his own work,\(^ {39}\) we might safely conclude from the preceding passage that the overall form of Levinas’s thinking about “the animal” does not easily lend itself to radical appropriation by non-anthropocentric thought. As Matthew Calarco contends, for Levinas “the Other is always and only the human Other” (56).\(^ {40}\) And yet, given Levinas’s commitment to the a priori unknowability of the Other, one cannot help but ask, as Calarco does, “What today remains of Levinas’s thought for animal ethics?” (56).\(^ {41}\)

\(^ {39}\) E.g., in Levinas’s account of the stray concentration-camp dog Bobby in “The Name of a Dog, Or Natural Rights.”

\(^ {40}\) In *Zoographies*, Calarco on the one hand offers a critique of the Continental philosophical tradition that upholds the human-animal division, and on the other hand opens up a space within that tradition that gestures “toward a nonanthropocentric or critically anthropocentric thought” (13). Of Levinas, Calarco observes: “The two dominant theses in Levinas’s writings concerning animals are: no nonhuman animal is capable of a genuine ethical response to the Other; and nonhuman animals are not the kinds of beings that elicit an ethical response in human beings” (56).

\(^ {41}\) Calarco interrogates Levinas’s ethics to offer an answer to this question in philosophical terms, calling for a “generous agnosticism” (72) that “begin[s] from a notion of ‘universal consideration’ that takes seriously our fallibility in determining where the face begins and ends” (73)—asking, moreover, “By what right can we delimit who the Other is in advance of such encounters? Should we not, then, take Levinas literally when he says, ‘I cannot say at what moment you have the right to be called “face”?’” (71). This is Calarco’s most compelling argument for the applicability of a Levinasian ethic to the question of the animal, since it is a consequence of taking Levinas’s insistence on the prior unknowability of the nature of the ethical encounter strictly at its
What remains of Levinas’s thought for animal ethics, I propose, is Coetzee’s fiction. The latter’s debt to Levinas’s work has been documented by a number of critics, chief among them Mike Marais; it has also been acknowledged by Coetzee himself, whose engagement with Levinas is made explicit in a recent, unpublished Elizabeth Costello piece, “The Old Woman and the Cats.” In this story, delivered orally by Coetzee at the 2011 Jaipur Literary Festival, and then again in July 2012 at the Minding Animals International Conference in the Netherlands, Elizabeth Costello and her son John debate the question of whether or not cats have faces. And while mother and son initially reflect on the relationship between the face and the soul, the face and one’s character, and even the face and the “fine musculature around the eyes and mouth” that human beings possess but animals supposedly lack (Coetzee, “The Old Woman”; approx. min. 16), the definition of the face that John ultimately has recourse to, the account of the face that he was given by his mother as a child, is a pure Levinasian understanding of the term: he tells his mother, “…I remember how years ago you used to lecture me on the regard of the other, on the appeal that we do not refuse when we meet the other face-to-face unless we are to deny our own humanity. An appeal that is prior to and more primitive than the ethical. That is what you called it” (Coetzee, “The Old Woman”; approx. min. 32). And the central inconsistency of this ethics is precisely the one we traced in Levinas’s work; as John remarks, speaking to his mother, “The problem, you said, was that the same people who talked about being interpellated by the other did not want to talk about being interpellated by animals. They would not

word: “...there is something fundamentally wrong with this entire approach to moral consideration, for it proceeds as if the question of moral consideration is one that permits of a final answer. If ethics arises from an encounter with an Other who is fundamentally irreducible to and unanticipatable by my egoistic and cognitive machinations, then how could this question ever be answered once and for all?” (71). For another of Calarco’s astute interrogations of Levinas’s thinking, see his reading of Bobby (57-59), the oft-cited concentration-camp dog who recognizes the humanity of the Jewish prisoners when the camp guards themselves fail to do so. While Calarco addresses these questions in philosophical terms, my chapter aims to respond in literary-critical terms.
accept that in the eyes of the suffering beast, we may conjure an appeal that can likewise be denied only at a heavy cost” (Coetzee, “The Old Woman”; approx. min. 32).

In “The Old Woman and the Cats,” the question of whether the Levinasian face can ever be found in the animal is raised and debated, and then let drop. In Disgrace, the same problem is posed, albeit in less explicit terms; in this case, however, an implicit answer—namely, that the face can exist beyond the realm of the human—does emerge. This is to say, by re-constituting the Other as potentially non-human, Coetzee gives us a revamped version of Levinasian ethics—what Calarco calls “an agnostic form of ethical consideration that has no prior constraints or boundaries” (55). To see how he does this, we must consider the workings of “the literary” as they manifest themselves in Coetzee’s act of “writing-in-the-tracks” of Kafka; oddly enough, it is in Coetzee’s re-imagining of Kafka’s dismal penal colony that we will discover the possibility for grace within Disgrace.

### 2.6 Citing Kafka, Framing “Disgrace”

To turn to Kafka, therefore, and the potential for grace at the story’s conclusion: in “In the Penal Colony,” redemption is sought but not secured. Although the story is largely about the means through which the officer struggles to recover some form of grace for himself—first by endeavoring to win over the traveler with a description of the apparatus, then by exhibiting its workings upon the condemned man, and finally by subjecting himself to it in an attempt to attain the “enlighten[ment]” he perceived in the prisoners who went before him (Kafka, “In the Penal Colony” 205), there is no reprieve from “the disgrace” to be found. Freeing the condemned man and strapping himself into the apparatus just as it begins to fall apart, the officer subjects himself to the wreckage of the machine and thus to the material manifestation of his disgrace. In the aftermath of this act, however, there is no hoped-for enlightenment, only the gruesome remnants of a desecrated body. The traveler remarks of the corpse, “It was as it had
been in life; no sign of the promised redemption was perceptible; the officer had not found what all the others had found in the machine. His lips were squeezed tight, his eyes were open, with the same expression as in life, his gaze was calm and convinced, the point of the large iron spike had passed through the forehead” (Kafka, “In the Penal Colony” 226). The officer’s self-subjection to the apparatus thus marks the impossibility of sacrifice—it is a failed attempt to convert his disgrace into a life-(and death-) affirming grace.

What makes Kafka’s story an apt counterpoint to Coetzee’s novel, however, is not simply the officer’s failure to attain some form of grace as the story closes. More importantly, the problem is that the very possibility of redemption is in itself exposed as an illusion. As the traveler draws away from the penal colony, the narrator relates of the soldier and the condemned man:

They probably wanted to force the traveler to take them along in the last moment. While the traveler was below, negotiating with a ferryman to row him to the steamer, the two men dashed down the stairs, holding their tongues, for they did not dare shout. But by the time they arrived below, the traveler was already in the rowboat, and the ferryman was already casting off. They might have jumped into the boat, but the traveler pulled the heavy, knotted rope from the floor and threatened them with it, thereby preventing them from jumping in. (Kafka, “In the Penal Colony” 228-29)

The sense of disillusionment at the conclusion is bound up with the figure of the traveler, who throughout the story has embodied a different world order from the one that undergirds the penal colony—one that is presumed to be more just, humane, and civilized.42 The cruelty that marks the story’s ending, therefore, exposes both the traveler and the ideals he represents as delusions. This, in turn, signals the absence of grace not only within the bounds of the penal colony, but in the world beyond it as well.

42 Even the officer deems the traveler “trapped in European attitudes—perhaps…opposed on principle to capital punishment in general and this kind of mechanical execution in particular” (Kafka, “In the Penal Colony” 212).
The traveler’s refusal of the men’s silent plea to be rescued constitutes an ethical failure that is best understood through Levinas. Specifically, the response to the “expressivity and vulnerability” of the Other (Calarco 64) is what is at stake at the end of Kafka’s story. In his violent denial of the silent claim (“for they did not dare shout”) that the men make upon him, the traveler fails to live up to the ethical responsibility that he bears as one human being toward another: it is clear that at no point in the final scene are the traveler’s “egoistic pursuits” “interrupted” by “the face of the Other” (Calarco 65). What’s more, the men’s appeal is refused in the same way that one might refuse a mute, charging animal: by assuming its inaccessibility to language and reason and warding it off with whatever weapon is on hand. This is in keeping with the rest of the story, throughout which the condemned man has served as a human embodiment of the figure of the animal: at the outset, he is described as “so doglike and cringing that they could, no doubt, have let him run free over the slopes and would have needed only to whistle for him to come at the beginning of the execution” (Kafka, “In the Penal Colony” 191; emphasis mine); more than that, the condemned man’s unfamiliarity with French, in which the officer and traveler converse, excludes him from the realm of language, ultimately leaving him to decipher the workings of the apparatus as any beast would, through his visual and tactile senses (Kafka, “In the Penal Colony” 194, 197). In the story’s closing scene, we are accordingly confronted with the limit-case for ethical consideration as the human—in what amounts to grave injustice within a humanist framework—is reduced to the level of the animal.

Operating on a different register, Disgrace offers an apt counterpoint to Kafka’s bleak configuration of irredeemable disgrace. Whereas in Kafka’s story, the failure to respond to the animalized human serves as the final and definitive marker of “the

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Levinas states, “Your reaction to the face is a response. Not just a response, but a responsibility” (Levinas et. al. 169).
disgrace” that has overtaken the penal colony, in Disgrace, Coetzee revises this paradigm, framing “grace” as the opening-up of the ethical response onto non-human animals. By taking up this disjoint between what Derrida calls “‘The Animal’ in the singular and without further ado” (The Animal 31) (which reaches its tragic endpoint in the logic of the “too menny”) and individual “animals” in their “unsubstitutable singularity” (The Animal 9) (as we will see with the crippled dog at the novel’s conclusion), Coetzee makes the human treatment of animals a measure of grace and disgrace within his text.

To begin with disgrace: we must consider what is arguably the novel’s most visceral scene, the slaughter of Lucy’s dogs by the men who attack Lucy and Lurie, and the only one of the three attacks to which the reader is granted full visual access. From the bathroom in which he is trapped, Lurie witnesses the carnage:

Now the tall man appears from around the front, carrying the rifle. With practiced ease he brings a cartridge up into the breech, thrusts the muzzle into the dogs’ cage. The biggest of the German Shepherds, slavering with rage, snaps at it. There is a heavy report; blood and brains splatter the cage. For a moment the barking ceases. The man fires twice more. One dog, shot through the chest, dies at once; another, with a gaping throat-wound, sits down heavily, flattens its ears, following with its gaze the movements of this being who does not even bother to administer a coup de grâce.

A hush falls. The remaining three dogs, with nowhere to hide, retreat to the back of the pen, milling about, whining softly. Taking his time between shots, the man picks them off. (Coetzee, Disgrace 95-96)

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44 Derrida famously frames his account of animals’ “unsubstitutable singularity” through his close-reading of the cat that sees him naked (The Animal 3-13). This experience, Derrida relates, is profoundly unsettling, as it calls into question the construct of “the human” and the divisions upon which knowledge itself is constituted: “As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called ‘animal’ offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human” (The Animal 12). Both Attridge and Spivak make note of the similarities between Coetzee’s and Derrida’s framing of animals. Attridge observes, “Like Derrida … [Coetzee] resists the generalization implicit in the category ‘animal,’ preferring the impossible task of acknowledging the singularity of each individual creature” (J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading 188). For Spivak’s footnoted consideration of Derrida’s “The Animal That Therefore I Am,” see p. 25, footnote 10 of “Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching.”

45 For a reading that regards the silence surrounding the rape as an ethical call to action for the reader, see Graham, p. 444.
If Lucy and Lurie are attacked as punishment for their presumed complicity in a former, apartheid political order, then the dogs are subjected to a similar logic. (Here, it is important to observe that even though the slaughter of Lucy’s dogs is the most visible instantiation of disgrace in Coetzee’s text, it does not stand in for the other two attacks, even though Lucy’s rape, in particular, is kept from our view. Rather, what we encounter here is a dynamic akin to the one we find between Jude’s tragic children and Lurie’s forsaken dogs: Lucy’s rape and Lurie’s assault are each singular events, not to be compared to the killing of the dogs, nor to each other.) In all three cases, violence operates according to a common logic that strips living beings—human and animal alike—of their claims to the face. The singularity of the individual is thus obliterated as each being is converted into the emblem of a type and punished not for what it has done, but for what it represents. Consequently, if Lucy, as a woman with the capacity to bear children, represents for the trio the social and biological reproduction of a political paradigm that must be unseated, then the dogs likewise invoke a history of racism and violence that needs to be “set right” through slaughter. As Ranjana Khanna relates, citing an instance of police brutality in 1998 in which South African police dogs were willfully set loose upon three black men (“Indignity” 41), and as Lurie himself observes, noting that this is “a country where dogs are bred to snarl at the mere smell of a black man” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 110), dogs in South Africa inhabit an uneasy position within the national imaginary. Within recent South African discourse, Khanna argues, these so-called “racist dogs” have become scapegoats for an entire history of social ills, with the prospect of their destruction holding the (empty) promise of redemption for the people.

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46 For Levinas, the commandment, “Thou shall not kill,” which manifests itself in the face of the Other, extends to more than literal acts of killing. In “The Paradox of Morality,” he states, “In the Old Testament, there is the sixth commandment, ‘Thou shall not kill.’ This does not mean simply that you are not to go around firing a gun all the time. It refers, rather, to the fact that, in the course of your life, in different ways, you kill someone. For example, when we sit down at the table in the morning and drink coffee, we kill an Ethiopian who doesn’t have any coffee. It is in this sense that the commandment must be understood” (Levinas et al. 173).
of South Africa (“Indignity” 42); viewed in this light, the men’s massacre of the dogs constitutes both an act of retribution for and an attempt to break away from a history of racial strife, injustice, and dehumanization.

In the scene of the dogs’ massacre, the disgrace that Coetzee depicts is much more than a function of the gratuitous killing of innocent animals—it is a consequence of the kind of allegorizing that Derrida describes, whereby individual beings are denied their singularity and reduced to the categories to which they have been preemptively assigned (The Animal 6, 9). The disgrace at the heart of this scene lies not so much in the act of killing in and of itself—Bev Shaw’s animal welfare clinic, of course, also performs that kind of work—but in a failure of the ethical response to the call of the other. This manifests itself in the attacker’s refusal to recognize the call for pity that each dog, after the first German Shepherd is killed, makes upon him. That is, after the first dog is shot, “the barking ceases” as the remaining animals smell death and signal their submission (their whining and retreating to the back of their cages must be read against the first dog, “The biggest of the German Shepherds, [who,] slavering with rage, snaps at [the gun]” [Coetzee, Disgrace 95]). Like the officer in Kafka’s story, however, the man who “picks them off” is both judge and executioner (Coetzee, Disgrace 96), and he carries out his bloody work with such impassivity that he fails even to deliver a “coup de grâce” (Coetzee, Disgrace 95)—literally, a “blow of grace”—to the dog that has been shot in the throat and left to expire.

Ultimately, the response, if not exactly the counterpoint, to the scene of the dog-killings is Lurie’s taking up of the role of dog undertaker, which begins with his burial of the massacred dogs and continues through his work at Bev Shaw’s animal clinic. As Khanna observes, “It was as if killing the dogs could serve as a remedial act of violence that would maintain the dignity of peoples, hallowed in the new South African constitution. The tainted dog would be killed to save the idea of both dog and human and the distinction between the two” (“Indignity” 42).

The counterpoint, I will argue later in this essay, lies in Lurie’s treatment of the crippled dog at the novel’s conclusion.
Coetzee makes clear, even though this work can do little to assuage living animals’ suffering, Lurie’s actions serve as an act of resistance against a world that is stripped of fellow-feeling and ruled by the imperative to turn a profit. Even on the hospital grounds where Lurie bears his weekly burden, there is no reference to anything but exchange-value, so that “if what [Lurie] brings to the dump does not interest [those who loiter there], that is only because the parts of a dead dog can neither be sold nor eaten” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 145). This, then, is the extent of the instrumentalism, underwritten by poverty and suffering, that drives society: as Lurie perceives it, the only thing that keeps the dead dogs from being feasted upon as carrion is the euthanizing injection that renders their flesh unfit for consumption.

If Lurie himself might ever be granted any form of saving grace, therefore, it will be through the “idea of the world” that is in many ways a reaction against the original source of his disgrace (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 146): his Romantic idealization of beauty (as perceived in Melanie, and appropriated for himself) and of the kind of impartial, legalistic judgment he demands from the university tribunal that hears his case. For Lurie, this “idea of the world” takes shape through animals. It is one in which dead dogs’ bodies are not beaten by the furnace workers “with the backs of their shovels before loading them, to break the rigid limbs” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 144-45), and in which animals do not make a gruesome reappearance after their consignment to the flames, re-emerging “blackened, grinning, smelling of singed fur, [their] plastic covering burnt

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49 Attridge reads Lurie’s devotion to his “idea of the world” as “not a practical commitment to improving the world, but a profound need to preserve the ethical integrity of the self” (*J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* 187). Although I agree with Attridge’s idea that this “idea of the world” makes “room for the inconvenient, the non-processable” (*J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* 187), I am not entirely convinced that Lurie’s actions constitute an active endeavor to “preserve” his “ethical integrity.” I read his behavior as something along the lines of devotion to a lost cause—a devotion that subsequently sets the stage for the emergence of ethical encounters, rather than facilitating the preservation of an already-extant “ethical integrity.” For more on this, see the next section, “Beyond Kafka: Coetzee’s ‘Animot.’”

50 After pleading guilty to the charges against him, Lurie refuses the committee’s demand that he deliver a statement “from his heart” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 54), saying, “That is beyond the scope of the law” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 55).
away” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 144). It is an “idea of the world” which, when confronted with the reality of that world—“that the dogs...are simply too many” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 142)—forces Lurie to re-conceptualize his place within it.

2.7 Beyond Kafka: Coetzee’s “Animot”

Lurie’s re-conceptualization of his own being-in-the-world is grounded in a new way of relating to animals, so that by the novel’s conclusion, “the question of the animal” for Lurie is different from what it was at the novel’s inception, when he observed to Lucy, “As for animals, by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different. So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 74). Indeed, by the novel’s conclusion, Lurie’s service to the dogs, both living and dead, is no longer a matter of “generosity” bestowed upon one’s assumed inferiors, but rather a matter of responding—of being unable not to respond—to the claim they make upon him.

Within this framework, the endpoint is an unmanning in the face of the Levinasian appeal of the Other. This entails “an infinite subjection of subjectivity” (*Levinas Reader* 84) that manifests itself in the scene in which Lurie, deeply affected by his work at the clinic, breaks down: “The more killings he assists in, the more jittery he gets. One Sunday evening, driving home in Lucy’s Kombi, he actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 142-43).

This being-taken—“hostage” by the Other (*Levinas Reader* 84) opens up the possibility of grace—a grace that comes about through a radical, Derridean re-

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51 In Lurie’s devotion to the dead dogs, Attridge finds a commitment to “the singularity of every living, and dead, being” (*J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* 188).
52 Weil makes a similar point about the scene I cite at the end of this paragraph, p. 93-94. See also Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, p. 185.
conception of the relation between humans and animals. In *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, Derrida argues for the need to create a new notion of the animal, *l'animot*, that will not lend itself so readily to violence against animals (47-48). The *animot* will make this possible by first and foremost “[having] the plural *animals* [les animaux] heard in the singular”; in this way, the term “*l'animot*” will not represent a reductive “single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity,” but rather will reference within itself the heterogeneity and difference that exists among animals (Derrida, *The Animal* 47).

More than that, this notion of the *animot* will entail a radical rethinking of animals’ relationship to language, so that “It would not be a matter of ‘giving speech back’ to animals but perhaps of acceding to a thinking, however fabulous and chimerical it might be, that thinks the absence of the name and of the word otherwise, and as something other than a privation” (Derrida, *The Animal* 48).

That Lurie’s “idea of the world” is not exposed as delusional, as the traveler’s is at the end of “In the Penal Colony,” is because his interaction with the crippled dog at the novel’s conclusion aligns itself with Derrida’s notion of the *animot*. It is not just that Lurie recognizes the singularity of the wounded animal that has attached itself to him—a singularity that becomes visible in, but is not exhausted by, the animal’s physical handicap (“It is a young male with a withered left hindquarter which it drags behind it” [Coetzee, *Disgrace* 214-15]) and devotion to Lurie (“he is sensible of a generous affection streaming out toward him from the dog” [Coetzee, *Disgrace* 215]). What is more significant is that by the novel’s conclusion, Lurie is able to conceive of a space in which the dog, though lacking human language, is not deprived of a voice. Specifically, the piece that Lurie is at work on, an operetta entitled *Byron in Italy*, opens up a space in which human-animal relations might yield something akin to the chimerical vision that Derrida conjures. Lurie relates:

The dog is fascinated by the sound of the banjo. When he strums the strings, the dog sits up, cocks his head, listens. When he hums Teresa’s
line, and the humming begins to swell with feeling...the dog smacks its lips and seems on the point of singing too, or howling.

Would he dare to do that: bring a dog into the piece, allow it to loose its own lament to the heavens between the strophes of the lovelorn Teresa’s? Why not? Surely, in a work that will never be performed, all things are permitted? (Coetzee, Disgrace 215)

The possibility that Lurie imagines for his operetta is thus one that challenges common conceptions of what the animal is and what its relation to man can or should be. The “idea of the world” that Lurie has formulated by the novel’s conclusion is one in which he can imagine finding common ground with the dog—in this case, by allowing it to enter into a uniquely human form of expression and to contribute to it in its own distinctively canine capacity. And if Lurie’s ambition for the operetta is to draw out “a single authentic note of immortal longing” (Coetzee, Disgrace 214), who’s to say that this note cannot take the form of the crippled dog’s howl? As Lurie reflects, “Surely, in a work that will never be performed, all things are permitted?”

Given this degree of openness to the crippled dog, what do we make of Lurie’s final decision to give him up? Does this act convert the wounded animal into just another instance of disposable life? And what of the fact that the dog’s story, were he to let “loose its own lament,” wouldn’t be decipherable to a human audience? Must one be a literary animal, one who can make its story known to others through language, to inspire an ethical response? Most unnervingly of all, how do we understand Lurie’s choice in light of the unexplained, unconditional love that the dog sheds upon him: “Arbitrarily, unconditionally, he has been adopted; the dog would die for him, he knows” (Coetzee, Disgrace 215)? In this case, must we read Lurie’s final failure to reciprocate—to adopt the dog, to save him from death, much less to die for him—as an act of betrayal, a decisive seal of Lurie’s disgrace?

I want to suggest that Lurie’s failure to reciprocate is not necessarily a failure to respond. Rather, if we understand this instance of coming face-to-face with the animal in relation to the ineffectual mute appeal made by the soldier and the condemned man
at the end of Kafka’s story, wherein the traveler ultimately embodies a false “idea of the world” and the men’s appeal to him becomes a marker of mislaid hope, it becomes possible to interpret Lurie’s final act as something other than abandonment and betrayal. Ultimately, we can understand Lurie as having recognized the dog’s appeal and having responded to it by delivering a final, merciful coup de grâce—not just a death-blow, but a de facto act of grace—to an animal that cannot be accommodated in any other way by the world it inhabits.

Lurie’s act of consigning the dog to the needle thus marks his recognition of the unbridgeable gap between his “idea of the world” and the reality of it. Nevertheless, there is something to be said for the fact that despite Lurie’s awareness that his service to the animals is, practically speaking, futile, this final act is carried out with a degree of kindness and openness to the animal other that transcends Lurie’s innate capacity for such behavior. “Worst are those that sniff him and try to lick his hand. He has never liked being licked, and his first impulse is to pull away,” we learn about Lurie when he first begins working at the shelter (Coetzee, Disgrace 143). At that point, any openness that Lurie exhibits toward the animals is rationalized, measured: “Why pretend to be a chum when in fact one is a murderer? But then he relents. Why should a creature with the shadow of death upon it feel him flinch away as if its touch were abhorrent? So he lets them lick him, if they want to …” (Coetzee, Disgrace 143). By the novel’s conclusion, however, openness is just that: open, unreflective, unbounded. In the novel’s final scene, Lurie lays himself bare, exposed before the dog, just as the dog lays itself bare before him: “‘Come,’ he says, bends, opens his arms. The dog wags its crippled rear, sniffs his face, licks his cheeks, his lips, his ears. He does nothing to stop it. ‘Come!’” (Coetzee, Disgrace 220; emphasis mine). In Levinasian terms, this act of kindness that marks an excess of Lurie’s natural capabilities is grace: “Something that is done gratuitously, that is grace. Grace begins there. It is gratuitous, a gratuitous act...The idea of the face is the
idea of gratuitous love, the commandment of a gratuitous act” (Levinas et. al. 176).
What’s more, nearly the same is true if we read this final scene in Coetzean terms. As we discover in *Doubling the Point*, grace for Coetzee does not manifest itself in the religious sense (“As for grace, no, regrettably no: I am not a Christian, or not yet” [250]), but rather, as “a measure of charity” (249); this, he says, is “the way in which grace allegorizes itself in the world” (249). In this case, Lurie’s imperfect act of charity in the novel’s final scene might be understood, in Coetzean as well as in Levinasian terms, as opening up onto the possibility of grace in a world haunted by seemingly unremitting disgrace.53

To put it another way: when it comes to the dogs in *Disgrace*, “the ethical” is not drawn by the line between killing the animal Other and the commandment “Thou shalt not kill” (Butler, *Precarious Life* 134), but rather between killing the animal Other aggressively, disgracefully, as the three men do, and delivering it from an imperfect world with openness and grace when no better alternative is available. And herein we find Coetzee’s debt to and revision of Levinas. Coetzee’s is an ethics that is posthumanist in its configuration of the ethical subject as potentially animal, in its imagining of the Other who need not be human. What we get in the novel’s final pages with Lurie and the crippled dog is thus an emphasis on the shared (though by no means identical) vulnerability that marks both Lurie and the dog, so that each comes to be, alternately, the “I” who is responsible for the “Other” within the ethical encounter. The radical nature of this mutual (though again, not identical) responsibility, wherein the dog responds to Lurie (bestowing “a generous affection” upon his chosen master

53 A possible objection: in *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler argues that Levinas’s idea of the face, which brings with it the injunction “Thou shalt not kill” (134), points to the fact that within Levinas’s construct, “the desire to kill [the Other] is primary to human beings. If the first impulse towards the other’s vulnerability is the desire to kill, the ethical injunction is precisely to militate against that first impulse” (*Precarious Life* 137). On a surface level, then, Lurie’s act of consigning the dog to euthanasia might appear to constitute a failure of responsibility for the Other. I have argued, however, that “the desire to kill,” as a form of “aggression” (*Precarious Life* 137), is nowhere manifested in Lurie’s relationship with the dog.
[Coetzee, *Disgrace* 215]) and Lurie responds to the dog (“Sometimes … he releases it from the pen and lets it frisk, in its grotesque way, around the yard, or snooze at his feet” [Coetzee, *Disgrace* 215]), manifests itself in Lurie’s conviction that it is as much in the dog’s power to “adopt” him as it is in his power to adopt the dog.

In configuring the ethical response in *Disgrace* as a form of receptivity—a receptivity that in this case is exemplified by Lurie’s act of baring himself before the dog and accepting everything the dog has left to give—Coetzee frames the ethical response to the appeal of the Other as an act of “welcom[ing]” the Other, an act of “receiv[ing] from the Other beyond the capacity of the I” (Levinas, *Totality* 51, original emphasis; qtd. in Derrida, *Adieu* 18). In other words, the act of being-taken-“hostage” by the Other becomes, in *Disgrace*, a form of “being-host” to the Other, so that by the novel’s conclusion, it is no longer a matter of hierarchical generosity bestowed upon beings that belong to a “different order of creation”; it is a matter of supreme hospitality to beings that have come to be recognized as belonging to the same “order of creation.”

At this point, we might assume that this recognition is grounded in what Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals* calls the “substrate of life” that we share with the animals (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 35). However, in *Disgrace*, there is something more than this in Lurie’s final gesture of kindness to the crippled dog, just as there is in his devoted “undertaking” of the dead dogs. Lurie’s performance of these acts points to the difference between philosophy and literature—the difference between ethical

54 Calarco argues that the form of the ethical response cannot be delimited to “the examples Levinas typically employs” (70). He observes, “Likewise, the transformations of my specific mode of being that follow from an ethical encounter will not always take the standard Levinasian form of a responsibility that involves ‘giving with both hands.’ Sometimes an ethical response might involve simply leaving the Other alone, or perhaps joining with the other in celebration or protest, to name just a few possible responses” (Calarco 70).

55 For Derrida’s account of the “kinship” between the response and the welcome, between being-taken-hostage-by and being-host-to in Levinasian thought, see *Adieu*, p. 55-57.

56 In Derrida’s terms, what we find in *Disgrace* is “poetic thinking”: “For thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry. There you have a thesis: it is what
systems that are (even when they resist it) subject to a universalizing logic, and literary works that, as both Coetzee and Costello are well aware, have the capacity to create meaning, ethical and otherwise, one single, singular, even illogical encounter at a time.

2.8 “Like a dog”: Coetzee’s Posthumanist Ethics

If Kafka’s ending shows us what irredeemable disgrace looks like, then Coetzee opens up the interpretive field so that the possibility of grace can be located on its horizon. This isn’t made evident through any single act of clear-cut redemption, so much as through the recognition that as Coetzee has constructed it, the realm of meaning is multivalent, and grace and disgrace cannot be completely disentangled from each other after all. With this in mind, we return to the problem of the novel’s conclusion. There is no question that the novel’s closing scene invokes the Pietà: Lurie as a Virgin Mary figure bears the Christ-like crippled dog “in his arms like a lamb” and affirms with the last line (“Yes, I am giving him up”) that what we have come upon is a scene of sacrifice (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 220). What is less clear, however, is how we are supposed to interpret this “last” dog (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 220). If he, like Christ, is intended to be the last sacrifice, the sacrifice that redeems the world, does he succeed in fulfilling this function? Or does he, like the officer who substitutes himself for the condemned man in Kafka’s story, embody the impossibility of sacrifice?

It is my contention that this set of questions demonstrates the impossibility of settling upon a definitive answer—and that this is exactly how Coetzee intends it. By engaging with the question of the animal, the novel opens up the literary realm in such a

philosophy has, essentially, had to deprive itself of. It is the difference between philosophical knowledge and poetic thinking” (*The Animal* 7).

57 Coetzee writes, “He crosses the surgery. ‘Was that the last?’ asks Bev Shaw. ‘One more’” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 220).

58 Marais states of this scene, “The lamb, here, suggests a sacrifice, a *willing offering*, to death” (“Little enough” 178). By contrast, Danta reads the dog as a scapegoat, which he interprets as “a sign of unredeemed finitude” (735) that “resists being appropriated for religious or symbolic ends” (732).
way that it becomes possible to envision not just the animal, but also the human, in
different terms. Because the terms that we tend to take for granted (e.g., “dog”) are not,
in *Disgrace*, assumed as givens, we can read the crippled dog as a potential ethical
subject in Coetzee’s work. Even if animals’ capacities to respond to the call of the Other
are limited (and yet, we have seen the crippled dog who attaches himself to Lurie, and
who “would” sacrifice himself for him, as Lurie imagines it), animals incontrovertibly
come to inhabit the position of the Other that makes an ethical appeal for help upon the
human “I.” In other words, for Lurie at least, animals become the bearers of grace, since
it is their “demand” on him that elicits his ethical response to them.

In offering a new perspective of the crippled dog at the novel’s conclusion, and
of Lurie along with it, Coetzee’s posthumanist ethics also engenders a more nuanced
way of understanding the new world order that is being pioneered at the end of
*Disgrace*. In particular, it brings together the novel’s two storylines, Lucy’s and Lurie’s,
so that if early on in the book, “Lucy’s secret; [Lurie’s] disgrace” were intimately
connected, then by the end, Lucy’s choice, Lurie’s grace, must also be understood in
relation to each other. In taking up Lucy’s final decision to stay on the farm under the
“protection” of Petrus, therefore, we must consider what it might mean for her to begin
her life over again “like a dog” as the novel closes (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 205). Outlining her
vision of the future in the new South Africa, Lucy tells her father:

> “Go back to Petrus…Propose the following… Say I accept his protection.
> Say he can put out whatever story he likes about our relationship and I
> won’t contradict him. If he wants me to be known as his third wife, so be
> it. As his concubine, ditto. But then the child becomes his too. The child
> becomes part of his family. As for the land, say I will sign the land over
to him as long as the house remains mine. I will become a tenant on his
> land.”

> “A *bywoner*.”

> “A *bywoner*. But the house remains mine, I repeat that. No one
> enters this house without my permission. Including him. And I keep the
> kennels.”

> …

> “Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to
> start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at
ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. *With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.*” [Lucy speaking.]

“Like a dog.”

“Yes, like a dog.” (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 204-05; emphasis mine, except “bywoner”)

As a number of critics have observed, the final lines of the preceding passage come from Kafka’s 1925 novel *The Trial*, in which these are Josef K’s last words upon being executed for unknown reasons for an unspecified crime: “‘Like a dog!’ he said, it was as if the shame of it should outlive him” (196). Clearly, the phrase “Like a dog,” which is doubled in this scene (uttered first by Lurie and then by Lucy), resonates first and foremost with the shame that marks K at the end of his life. And yet, K’s death need not dictate the terms of Lucy’s life. My point is that while we might read Lucy’s statement as “I am like a dog, because I am reduced to the level of the animal that has nothing,” the novel holds open the possibility, via acts of revisionary citation and the radical potentiality of “the literary,” that to be “like a dog” in this emergent new world is not necessarily to be subhuman, after all. If the crippled dog challenges reigning assumptions about what it means to be human and what it means to be animal in this text, then Lucy, through her vision of “start[ing] at ground level” like an animal, comes to imagine new non-hierarchical forms of relationality among human beings as well. To wit: in place of a nuclear family, Lucy prepares to forge a diffuse “familial” unit based on alliance—even if this is an alliance that has emerged out of an originary act of brutal violence.60

60 The upshot of Anker’s reading of this scene in “Human Rights, Social Justice” is similar to mine, although we arrive at our readings in different ways. I argue that the figure of the “dog” has been redefined over the course of the novel from what we normally take it to be, and as such, Lucy’s statement, “Like a dog,” must be understood to harness multivalent and contradictory meanings simultaneously. The subtle difference between myself and Anker, as I see it, is that Anker reads the scene in terms of Lucy’s choice to “start at ground level,” “like a dog,” as a radically egalitarian, *active* political decision on her part: “Embracing the need for an existence divested of economies of dominance, superiority, and subordination, Lucy instead *endorses* equality not only with other people but also with other beings. What Lurie perceives as shameful
Although the conclusion of Lucy’s story in *Disgrace* certainly isn’t optimistic—in fact, it’s marked by Lucy’s grim determination to adapt to a world in which the rules aren’t even remotely her own—61—it nevertheless produces an image of a future in which human relations of race, class, and gender might be reworked to yield something new within the space of rural post-apartheid South Africa.62 Counterintuitively, such a prospect is rooted in the novel’s interspecies ethical imaginary. It derives from the possibility of taking a phrase like “like a dog” and making it mean something new—something that levels hierarchies and stresses the elements of sameness in the simile (“like a dog”) over its points of exclusion and difference (“like a dog [as opposed to a human]). As Coetzee conceives of it, any way of reimagining South African society must do the same.

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61 Boehmer offers a bleak reading of Lucy that falls along these lines; she argues that Lucy “has abnegation forced upon her,” that “She must…make herself ready for more violation,” and that “For her, any sympathy for the other must mean to live in inevitable disgrace” (349).

62 In “Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching,” Spivak reads this scene as “the casting aside of the affective value-system attached to reproductive heteronormativity as it is accepted as the currency to measure human dignity” (21). While I agree with Spivak’s reading and align myself with her analysis that “in Lucy’s vision of ‘starting with nothing,’ in the reproductive situation shorn of the fetishization of property, in the child given up as body’s product, the ethical moment can perhaps emerge—at least so fiction says” (“Ethics and Politics” 29), I read this scene through the question of what it means to be like a dog, rather than the question of what “nothing” signifies here. It is important to note that Spivak also gestures toward this connection between dogs and Lucy in her lengthy footnote on animality in *Disgrace*: “I have often felt that the formal logic of Coetzee’s fiction mimics ethical moves in an uncanny way. The (non)relationship between the cogitation of animality and the setting-to-work of gendered postcolonialism in *Disgrace* may be such an uncanny miming” (“Ethics and Politics” 25fn10). Meanwhile, Rita Barnard also locates the potential for a new world order in Lucy and her child at the end of the novel; however, she offers a different line of reasoning from my own, namely, that the novel asks us to “imagine the farm in the Eastern Cape as … a place where the difficulties of cultural translation may be overcome, wordlessly, by bodily experiences: pregnancy, field labor, the materiality of dwelling on the land” (220).
In this chapter, I have examined the workings of the literary and its capacity to confront the ethical quandaries that are the inevitable consequence of the (mis)management of animal life in our present-day biopolitical landscape. In taking up this problem of the “too many,” which shows up in *Disgrace*, *The Lives of Animals*, and even “The Old Woman and the Cats,” Coetzee addresses it in ethical, rather than political terms—via an emphasis on singularity and the imperative to respond to the appeal of the other, whomever that other may be. In other words: when faced with the necessity of managing animal life on a large scale, it is almost invariably the case that some lives will end up—for economic, if not other reasons—being disposed of. What Coetzee’s works do, however, is posit that this real-world impossibility of accommodating all lives need not constitute—and certainly *ought not* to constitute—the basis out of which an ethics of human-animal relationality emerges. Such a collapse of the biopolitical into the ethical is, of course, precisely what renders animal life disposable in the first place.

What Coetzee offers up instead is not so much a solution to the problem of the “too many” as a response to it: a posthumanist version of Levinasian ethics that is reconfigured to make room for the animal. In conceiving of how this new ethics might feed back into the system to address the problem of how animal life is managed on a mass scale, however, neither *Disgrace* nor *The Lives of Animals* offers easy answers. Literature delivers to us the singular animal, the ethical imperative, one at a time. Indeed, even if it were possible for the singular animal—in this case, Lurie’s crippled dog—to somehow “stand in” for others in similar circumstances (e.g., all the other dogs that are put to death in Bev Shaw’s clinic, and in shelters like hers throughout South Africa, and in the world at large)—such “standing in” would go against the logic of

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63 In this story, Elizabeth Costello has taken to feeding feral cats that breed and overpopulate the Spanish mountain village she inhabits.
singularity, without which the foundation of Coetzee’s posthumanist ethics would crumble. To put it another way: even if we, as readers, were to attempt to imagine all those others that Coetzee has had to leave out of his fiction in order to give literary shape to his one or two wounded animals, like Elizabeth Costello and Lurie’s crippled dog, we would still eventually come up against the problem of those “numbers that numb the mind” (Coetzee, Lives of Animals 19). Such a move would end up simply leading us back into the realm of the too many, only to leave behind the ethical power of the singular that made it possible to transcend the biopolitical in the first place. In the absence of any practical means of widely implementing Coetzee’s posthumanist ethics, therefore, perhaps all that remains is to keep one’s eyes (and ears, and heart) open so that one might recognize the appeal of the wounded animal, whenever and however it might arrive.
3. Tracking the Literary: Un-Staging Sympathy in Kazuo Ishiguro’s and David Mitchell’s Clone(d) Narratives

But creative writers are valuable allies and their evidence is to be prized highly, for they are apt to know a whole host of things between heaven and earth of which our philosophy has not yet let us dream.

Sigmund Freud, *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen’s Gradiva* (1907), p. 8

... the writings of Otto Rank ... have brought more and more evidence to show the extent to which the interest of creative writers centres round the theme of incest and how the same theme, in countless variations and distortions, provides the subject-matter of poetry. We are driven to believe that this rejection is principally a product of the distaste which human beings feel for their early incestuous wishes, now overtaken by repression.

Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (1913), p. 17

... satisfaction is obtained from illusions, which are recognized as such without the discrepancy between them and reality being allowed to interfere with enjoyment. The region from which these illusions arise is the life of the imagination; at the time when the development of the sense of reality took place, this region was expressly exempted from the demands of reality-testing and was set apart for the purpose of fulfilling wishes which were difficult to carry out. At the head of these satisfactions through phantasy stands the enjoyment of works of art—an enjoyment which, by the agency of the artist, is made accessible even to those who are not themselves creative. People who are receptive to the influence of art cannot set too high a value on it as a source of pleasure and consolation in life. Nevertheless the mild narcosis induced in us by art can do no more than bring about a transient withdrawal from the pressure of vital needs, and it is not strong enough to make us forget real misery.

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), p. 27-8

The passages above touch on the question of “the literary” (and in the latter case, of “art” more generally) as Freud formulated it over the course of his career. The story of Freud’s entanglement with the literary, told through the (necessarily narrow) lens of these three selections, reads as one of gradual disengagement, even disillusionment. The first passage, which derives from *Delusions and Dreams*, his 1907 study of Wilhelm Jensen’s short novel *Gradiva*, frames the literary as a kind of excess, as a form of opening-
up that, in theory, has the potential to reveal to us the as-of-yet unspoken and unseen.¹ In practice, however, Freud’s lofty theory of the literary cannot withstand the blow delivered by his application of it. In this case, *Gradiva* becomes for Freud an opportunity to pin down the universal laws that he believes govern the human psyche; Jensen’s novel is accordingly reduced from a work of art to a case study through which Freud can test, and ultimately corroborate, the theories he has laid out in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900).² Six years later, in *Totem and Taboo*, Freud articulates a different theory of the literary, wherein literature becomes the canvas upon which those things that we repress nevertheless leave their mark. In other words, in our artistic productions we find the trace of that which we are unable to own or acknowledge in waking life. In this rendition, literature asks to be read symptomatically, gesturing toward something that lies beneath the surface, waiting to be unearthed. As the second epigraph formulates it, therefore, we no longer look to literature to discover things that “our philosophy has not yet let us dream” (Freud, *Delusions* 8); now, we turn to literature to extract proof of those things that (psychoanalytic) theory has already set out for us. Finally, in the third passage above, which is penned a full twenty-three years after the first, literature is reduced to a mere diversion from the real world, “a mild narcotic” that “can do no more than bring about a transient withdrawal from the pressure of vital needs” (Freud, *Civilization* 28). In this rendering, the literary serves the purpose of wish-fulfillment within the realm of fantasy; it takes us away from the real world, but it does so only temporarily, and as a means of occluding, rather than elucidating, our relation to it.

¹ It is worth noting that here, Freud draws on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and specifically on Hamlet’s declaration to Horatio that “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy” (*Ham.* 1.5. 168-169). See Coda of this dissertation for further analysis of these lines.

² Along the way, Jensen’s work of fiction metamorphoses for Freud into “a perfectly correct psychiatric study, on which we may measure our understanding of the workings of the mind—a case history and the history of a cure which might have been designed to emphasize certain fundamental theories of medical psychology” (Freud, *Delusions* 43).
From this reading, it would appear that as Freud’s work develops, he places less and less stock in the transformative, revelatory power of the literary; instead, he increasingly comes to think of literature in utilitarian terms, subjecting it to the kinds of symptomatic readings he offers in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. At best, he employs literature as *evidence* in the elaboration of his theories (as he does in *Delusions and Dreams* and *Totem and Taboo*); at worst he regards it as a plaything that temporarily distracts us from the real world that impinges itself upon us. In neither of these formulations is “the literary” regarded as significant in and of itself—its value always lies in what might be extracted from it.

And yet, this bare-bones portrait I have painted of the relation between Freud and “the literary” strikes me as reductive and incomplete. In this chapter, therefore, I want to turn this relation on its head to explore not so much what psychoanalysis suggests we should be able to *extract from* “the literary,” but rather to consider what it is that the literary, when brought into conversation with psychoanalysis, *brings into being*. I want to return to Freud’s early, enthusiastic proclamation that writers “are apt to know a whole host of things between heaven and earth of which our philosophy has not yet let us dream” not in order to suggest that novelists are privy to some secret knowledge that is withheld from the rest of us, but in order to insist that “the literary” produces its own forms of meaning-making that are not subject to external (scientific or philosophical) validation.

In this chapter, I will examine “the literary” as it manifests itself in two novels that raise the problem of disposability through the figure of the clone: David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005). Engaging ethical questions raised by genetic engineering technologies, both novels ask what happens when artificially-produced, “unoriginal” life ends up being disposed of for whatever purpose society sees fit. In taking up these works, therefore, I confront the paradox that
marks the clone: if it is always already a copy, by definition one-too-many, how does the clone’s story come to register as significant for readers who count themselves original, individual, unique? As this chapter will show, the answer to this question lies, counterintuitively, not so much in what these novels do with the figure of the clone as in what they do with the figure of the reader. Namely, in these novels about clones, “the literary” manifests itself in the instantiation of a reading experience that produces a new kind of reader-subject, one who is rendered, like the clones whose stories she consumes, unavoidably multiple. Although structurally dissimilar, *Cloud Atlas* and *Never Let Me Go* both produce a reading experience that constitutes the reader as a re-reader—not, as one might expect, in order to bolster and re-entrench her initial consumption of the narrative, but rather in order to destabilize and atomize it. In each case, it’s not just that the reader discovers that the novel’s seemingly unitary narrative is actually multiple; she finds that in the process of reading, she has also been rendered multiple, so that she can no longer be sure of who she is or what ground she stands on. And in both novels, this assault on the reader’s self-same identity is directed toward the same end: it calls into question the viability of the sympathetic imagination, interrogating its efficacy in the face of the fundamental inassimilability of disposable life.

In a nutshell, the sympathetic imagination works by reframing the other in terms of the self, valuing sameness over difference. As a consequence, it is complicit in the workings of disposability, which consigns to death those lives that are not, on whatever basis, sufficiently similar to the ones that matter—namely, our own. In Mitchell’s and Ishiguro’s works, therefore, the fragmentation of the once-unitary readerly “self” short-circuits the sympathetic imagination, revealing its inadequacy when confronted with the clone who, within the worlds of these novels, is an irreducibly different, alien other who cannot be welcomed into the (human) fold. What these novels produce for us, in other

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3 This is neither symptomatic reading nor its counter-reaction, surface reading.
words, is a way of relating to this disposable other—this replicated human who is not quite human—and who is yet, at the same time, our mirror image and our double.

Ultimately, this new mode of approaching the alien other will come from discovering not that it resembles us, but rather from realizing that we are alien ourselves, that we are alien to ourselves. These novels ask: if we are not the self-same subjects that we once thought we were, if we are rendered uncanny to ourselves through the process of reading, then where does that leave us? If sympathy is no longer a viable basis for engaging ethically with each other, then how can we any longer lay claim to what we call, so problematically, our humanity?

At their core, these novels interrogate “what it means to be human” (Black 785); that the answers they provide are negotiated through the figure of the clone is particularly telling. In both works, the clone straddles the tenuous boundary we’ve erected between the human and the nonhuman; its defining feature is that it thwarts every attempt to definitively assign it to either of these categories. In other words, the clone shows us that we can never fully pinpoint the basis on which we’ve drawn the

4 Martin Puchner makes a similar point, observing, “By confronting us with a literary fabrication such as Kathy H., Ishiguro forces us to probe the essence and limits of humanity” (36).
5 Both Anne Whitehead and Rebecca Walkowitz observe that Never Let Me Go grapples with the implications of the dividing line we draw between human and nonhuman. Whitehead states, “In this holding open the status of clones, Ishiguro seems to (re)direct us to the ethical question of whether we can, or should, rely on such absolute categories of difference as ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman.’ In this, he raises questions similar to Donna J. Haraway’s in her recent work on ‘companion species’ (3-6); namely, should we think in more contingent and messy terms about how we relate to ‘nonhuman’ species and materialities, and how we are in turn reshaped and redefined by those relationships? Are there more correspondences and affinities between the ‘human’ and the ‘nonhuman’ than we often prefer to acknowledge? In Never Let Me Go such messiness is implied, as Griffin rightly notes, in the very process of organ harvesting, which necessarily entails that the boundaries between ‘human’ and ‘non human’ are blurred or contaminated, because ‘their [the clones’] organs survive in others’ bodies’ (652)” (65).
Walkowitz, meanwhile, remarks, “It is arguable that Ishiguro has written Never Let Me Go as a critique of anthropocentrism, the idea that it is ethical or acceptable to sacrifice non-human animals to the needs and desires of human life” (224). Neither of these critical engagements seem to me to think in sufficient depth about the way in which the novel troubles the logic that governs the distinction we draw between the categories of “human” and “nonhuman”; in this chapter, I am less interested in precisely where the novel draws the dividing line between human and nonhuman and more interested in showing how this dividing line is always under erasure, always in the process of being re-negotiated and re-scripted to best serve the aims of those who stand to benefit from it.
dividing line between human and nonhuman, although for all kinds of purposes—social, political, economic—we assume that this distinction is self-evident. This discrepancy, therefore, gives the figure of the clone a central role to play when it comes to conceptualizing not just the nature, but also the origins of disposable life. And it is at this point that “the literary” and Freudian theory, in particular as it traces the origins of civilization, must be understood in relation to each other. That is, the two enter into a symbiotic relationship so as to cut, jointly, a new figure—in this case, to tell a story about the genealogy of disposability. In this chapter, therefore, I bring together Mitchell’s and Ishiguro’s novels with Freud’s work to trace the genesis of disposable life to our repressed anxiety about the boundary we have drawn between the human and nonhuman and the authority we have given ourselves to take life on the basis of it. From there, I detail how these novels, via their distinct forms of uncanny narration, produce a reading experience whose multiplicity militates against the unitary, scripted narrative of disposability.

3.1 The Origins of Disposability

Writing “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” as World War I was raging in 1915, Freud reflected on the “bewilder[ment]” and “mental distress felt by non-combatants,” who were struggling to make sense of the mass carnage being carried out on the battlefield in their name (275). For Freud, the magnitude of this violence flew in the face of the so-called “unity among civilized peoples” (“Thoughts for the Times” 276), leading to a profound sense of disillusionment among civilians on both sides of the war effort. In this essay, Freud goes on to interrogate the widespread “disillusionment” at the inhumanity that characterized this new, no-holds-barred war by deconstructing the category of “civilization”:

6 “Civilized” is a category that Freud here problematically applied only to European nations.
Nor should it be a matter for surprise that this relaxation of all the moral
ties between the collective individuals [European nations] of mankind
should have had repercussions on the morality of individuals; for our
conscience is not the inflexible judge that ethical teachers declare it, but in
its origin is ‘social anxiety’ and nothing else. When community no longer
raises objections, there is an end, too, to the suppression of evil passions,
and men perpetrate deeds of cruelty, fraud, treachery and barbarity so
incompatible with their level of civilization that one would have thought
them impossible. (Freud, “Thoughts for the Times” 280)

Disillusionment is the consequence of being forced to let go of a dearly-held illusion—in
this case, the illusion that so-called “civilized” people are inherently better, more ethical,
more virtuous, and more humane, than the nature and scale of this war has revealed
them to be. Freud’s point, however, is that “disillusionment” is the wrong term to
invoke here because the bottom that we think has all of a sudden fallen out was never
there to begin with: “In reality our fellow-citizens have not sunk so low as we feared,
because they had never risen so high as we believed” (“Thoughts for the Times” 285). In
other words, for Freud, that which made man “good” and “moral” has always been the
“social anxiety” that has forced him to inhibit and reformulate his most “primitive”
“instinctual impulses” so as to fall in line with the reigning social order (“Thoughts for
the Times” 281). Once the social fabric that holds “civilization” together begins to
disintegrate, as in the case of war, the individual lets the trappings of civilization fall
away as well in order “to grant a temporary satisfaction to the instincts which [he] had
been holding in check” (Freud, “Thoughts for the Times” 285).

“When community no longer raises objections,” then, “there is an end, too, to the
suppression of evil passions, and men perpetrate deeds of cruelty, fraud, treachery and
barbarity” (Freud, “Thoughts for the Times” 280). This is a dark, pessimistic view of
mankind. More importantly, this is a dark, pessimistic view of human society. It is an
account that calls for close analysis not just of the individual, “among whose instinctual
endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness,” but of the
communities that bind individuals together as well (Freud, Civilization 58). This is
especially important when it comes to disposability, which is produced by and within communities and operates on the level of the multitude. In other words, an account of the origins of disposability requires not that we detail a one-to-one relation between a creature who is disposed of and another who disposes of it, but rather that we chronicle a relation of the many who are disposed of to the many who sanction their disposability.

If disposability is a cultural disease that manifests itself in relation to collectivities, then psychoanalysis, which concerns itself with the psyche of the individual, is limited in its capacity to detail its etiology. As Freud writes at the conclusion of Civilization and its Discontents:

> In an individual neurosis we take as our starting-point the contrast that distinguishes the patient from his environment, which is assumed to be ‘normal’. For a group all of whose members are affected by one and the same disorder no such background could exist; it would have to be found elsewhere. And as regards the therapeutic application of our knowledge, what would be the use of the most correct analysis of social neuroses, since no one possesses authority to impose such a therapy upon the group? But in spite of all these difficulties, we may expect that one day someone will venture to embark upon a pathology of cultural communities. (91)

It would be presumptuous to suggest that this chapter is “embark[ing] upon a pathology of cultural communities”; nevertheless, it is endeavoring to trace a pathology of disposability, which is just one of many “pathologies” that afflicts our cultural landscape. In this case, “the literary” makes the study of community-based pathologies possible by offering up a solution to the problem that plagues Freud, namely, the fact that “For a group all of whose members are affected by one and the same disorder no such background [of the ‘normal’] could exist; it would have to be found elsewhere.” If we take literature as our object of study, then the “real” world out of which it emerges—the world that we all generally agree we inhabit, the world we consider “normal”—itself serves as its “background.” Once the literary reveals the pathology of disposability, therefore, we are poised to compare the apparently “normal” background that we’ve taken from “reality” to the “abnormal” disorder that we’ve found in literature. My
hunch is that upon closer analysis, we will discover that the two have more in common than we would like to admit—that the literary will bring to light that which the “real” world works so hard to keep in the dark. And if this is indeed the case, then Freud’s concern about “the therapeutic application of [this] knowledge” will find a built-in solution as well. Because the novels in question don’t just feed the reader a story, but produce a new kind of reader-subject, the works themselves become the “therapy [that operates] upon the group.” In other words, “the literary” both diagnoses the cultural disease that is disposability and offers itself up as a treatment for it.

Through its six nested narratives, Mitchell’s Cloud Atlas offers a trans-historical panoramic view of the “cruelty, fraud, treachery, and barbarity” that Freud wrote about in 1915 (“Thoughts for the Times” 280). In the novel, we circulate among the various forms of interpersonal predation that emerge out of the deeply embedded race-, class-, gender-, and age-based inequities that characterize existing societal structures. Fittingly, the novel’s first page, which also marks the start of “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing,” opens with a literalization of this dynamic, with the Englishman Dr. Henry Goose scrounging for cannibals’ teeth on the shore of an unnamed island in the Pacific. Speaking with the first narrative’s journal-writing protagonist, Goose relates:

Cloud Atlas opens up like an accordion fan with a vertical axis of symmetry, each narrative embedded within the one that bookends it. The stories it houses are six-deep, and all but the central narrative are told in two parts. Sliced down the center, the text is structured as a mirror image of itself, the narrative progression of the first half of the novel duplicated in reverse in the narrative resolution of the second half. The text, in other words, is predicated on nothing so much as on the principle of return. Most clearly, we return to stories that have been half-told and left to dangle mid-action and mid-sentence; less obviously, in each nested narrative, we return to the story within which that narrative is embedded. Every nested narrative speaks back to the larger narrative that houses it; and while each narrative we enter into presents itself as authentic, asking us to suspend our disbelief, it simultaneously undoes the realist claims of its mother-narrative, exposing it as inauthentic, as just another artifact—a journal of questionable veracity, a set of love-letters, a detective thriller, a tragicomic film, or a holy text—within the story we’re presently consuming. Each time we resume one of Cloud Atlas’s narratives, therefore, we are returned to a narrative that has been exposed as an act of representation within another act of representation, within another act of representation, and so on. In the end, or rather in the middle, the novel’s central narrative is both the product of all the narratives that have come before it and the vehicle through which each narrative that precedes it is exposed as just another made-up story, a fabrication that pushes back against our readerly suspension of disbelief.
“Teeth, sir, are the enameled grails of the quest in hand. In days gone by this Arcadian strand was a cannibals’ banqueting hall, yes, where the strong engorged themselves on the weak. The teeth, they spat out, as you or I would expel cherry stones. But these base molars, sir, shall be transmuted to gold & how? An artisan of Piccadilly who fashions denture sets for the nobility pays handsomely for human gnashers” (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* 3). Goose’s accounting, wherein “the strong [engorge] themselves on the weak,” serves as a blueprint for the rest of Ewing’s narrative and for the rest of the novel as well. In this case, the cannibals in question are not just the native islanders who supposedly, in days past, chewed up their victims and “spat out” their teeth. The true cannibals on the scene are now the English who, like Goose, reap the benefits of their nation’s imperial enterprises: in this literalized metaphor, the English upper classes commandeer the dead natives’ laboring “gnashers” so that they may even more efficiently assimilate the bounty of empire into their own bodies.

When asked about his novelistic rendering of cannibalism in an interview for the *Paris Review*, Mitchell observed, “One of my serial repeating themes is predacity, and cannibalism is an ancient and primal manifestation of predacity” (“David Mitchell: The Art of Fiction, No. 204”). While an OED search for predacity yields “the state or condition of being predacious” (“Predacity”), the word “predacious” possesses two distinct definitions. The first, which is reserved for people, is “Seeking to exploit others; rapacious; given to, or living by, plunder or marauding” (“Predacious,” def. 1); the second is “Of an animal; that preys on other animals; that subsists by the capture of living prey; predatory, raptorial” (“Predacious,” def. 2). In other words, the two meanings of the adjective “predacious” depend on the ontological status of the subject to which the word is applied. To be a predatory animal is simply a description of the means

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8 The third definition, “3. Of or relating to predatory animals or predation,” is mainly an elaboration of the second (“predacious”).

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through which a non-human animal subsists. It is a shorthand account of the basic mechanisms of its existence; there is no moral valence attached to the term. To be a predatory person, however, is something else entirely; here, the word expresses not a description, but a judgment. Simply stated, the kind of behavior that qualifies as “predation” in the human world is a return-to, or a letting-loose-of the instincts that we’ve had to overcome to become “civilized.” And if, as Freud explains, “the word ‘civilization’ describes the whole sum of the achievements and the regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors,” then predation in the human realm signals not just a lack of “civilization,” but also the very real risk of falling back into the world of “our animal ancestors” that we’ve worked so hard to disavow (Civilization 36, emphasis mine). Our latent predatory instincts, in other words, pose a threat to the story we tell ourselves about ourselves—the story through which we have risen above the natural world that is the provenance of the animals. As Derrida sums it up, “this whole anthropocentric reinstitution of the superiority of the human order over the animal order … [testifies] to the panic Freud spoke of: the wounded reaction not to humanity’s first trauma, the Copernican (the earth revolves around the sun), nor its third trauma, the Freudian (the decentering of consciousness under the gaze of the unconscious), but rather to its second trauma, the Darwinian” (The Animal 136).

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9 In his Paris Review interview, Mitchell continues his discussion of predation by relating: “I remember watching an animal documentary in school, where a cheetah successfully pursued an antelope. As the cheetah ripped the antelope to shreds, a cute girl called Angela said, Oh Miss, that’s cruel. The teacher answered, Yes, Angela, but nature is cruel” (“David Mitchell: The Art of Fiction, No. 204). In other words, if nature itself is what we, in the human world, might call “cruel,” then an animal simply struggling for survival within the bounds of that world would not, itself, be cruel.

10 As Freud puts it, “Civilization has been attained through the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction, and it demands the same renunciation from each newcomer in turn … The influences of civilization cause an ever-increasing transformation of egoistic trends into altruistic and social ones by an admixture of erotic elements [i.e., ‘the human need for love, taken in the widest sense’]” (“Thoughts for the Times” 282).

11 There is a fine line to be drawn between social Darwinism and predacity. As I see it, social Darwinism is characterized by struggle and competition, but not outright predation.
As we conceptualize it in our post-Darwin era, the natural world is structured as a struggle for survival without reference to so-called moral principles. Nature doesn’t exhibit “good” or “bad” behavior; civilization, on the other hand, does. These moral principles, of course, amount not to universal ethical percepts but rather, as Freud accounts for them, to a form of social conditioning whereby the “external” “compulsions” imposed upon individuals by their culture and environment are replaced by “internal” “compulsions” that manifest themselves as guilt or shame (“Thoughts for the Times” 282). In human societies, the backbone of civilization is “the rule of law” (Freud, Civilization 42). As Freud explains:

12 Freud explains: “It is not until all these ‘instinctual vicissitudes’ have been surmounted that what we call a person’s character is formed, and this, as we know, can only very inadequately be classified as ‘good’ or ‘bad’….The transformation of ‘bad’ instincts is brought about by two factors working in the same direction, an internal and an external one. The internal factor consists in the influence exercised on the bad (let us say, the egoistic) instincts by eroticism—that is, by the human need for love, taken in its widest sense. By the admixture of erotic components the egoistic instincts are transformed into social ones. We learn to value being loved as an advantage for which we are willing to sacrifice other advantages. The external factor is the force exercised by upbringing, which represents the claims of our cultural environment, and this is continued later by the direct pressure of that environment. Civilization has been attained through the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction, and it demands the same renunciation from each newcomer in turn. Throughout an individual’s life there is a constant replacement of external by internal compulsion” (“Thoughts for the Times” 282).

13 If, as in the First World War, we are shocked by “the brutality shown by individuals whom, as participants in the highest human civilization, one would not have thought capable of such behavior” (“Thoughts for the Times” 280), then by extension, “such behavior” ought also to bring a sense of shame or unease to the individuals who engage in it. This sense of shame, however, is precisely what Freud finds lacking in the men who return home from the trenches, and, as we will see shortly, what Mitchell shows to be lacking in the antagonists of Cloud Atlas as well. In his examination of “[t]he first and most important prohibition made by the awakening conscience,” the commandment “Thou shalt not kill,” Freud declares: “This final extension [to one’s enemies] of the commandment is no longer experienced by civilized man. When the furious struggle of the present war has been decided, each one of the victorious fighters will return home joyfully to his wife and children, unchecked and undisturbed by thoughts of the enemies he has killed whether at close quarters or at long range” (“Thoughts for the Times” 295). “Civilized man,” in other words, does not behave as a civilized man ought. “Uncivilized man,” however, is a different story. Freud continues: “Savages—Australians, Bushmen, Tierra del Fuegans—are far from being remorseless murderers; when they return victorious from the war-path they may not set foot in their villages or touch their wives till they have atoned for the murders they committed in war by penances which are often long and tedious. It is easy, of course, to attribute this to their superstition: the savage still goes in fear of the avenging spirits of the slain. But the spirits of his slain enemy are nothing but the expression of his bad conscience about his blood-guilt; behind this superstition there lies concealed a vein of ethical sensitiveness which has been lost by us civilized men” (“Thoughts for the Times” 295). In this reading, “civilization” itself is the corrupting influence that does away with the “vein of ethical sensitiveness” native to the human condition, which, according to Freud’s intensely racist formulation, “savages” still retain. Here,
Human life in common is only made possible when a majority comes together which is stronger than any separate individual and which remains united against all separate individuals. The power of this community is then set up as ‘right’ in opposition to the power of the individual, which is condemned as ‘brute force’. This replacement of the power of the individual by the power of a community constitutes the decisive step of civilization. The essence of it lies in the fact that the members of the community restrict themselves in their possibilities of satisfaction, whereas the individual knew no such restrictions. The first requisite of civilization, therefore, is that of justice—that is, the assurance that a law once made will not be broken in favor of an individual. This implies nothing as to the ethical value of such a law. (Civilization 42, emphasis mine)

In this formulation, the formation of community requires that its constituent members give up their individualistic impulses and predatory instincts; acting out against the principles of the community to satisfy one’s own desires becomes, in this context, a form of “brute force,” subject to punishment under the law. The operative term in this passage, of course, is “brute,” which is readily glossed here as “One of the lower animals as distinguished from humans” (“Brute”). In other words, individuals who let loose their lowest instincts on the community or its members are reduced to the level of beasts; such behavior threatens the social fabric of which cultural communities are made, and as such, must be contained. This, Freud explains, is what the law is for: it aims to restrict “brute force,” either by imposing criminal penalties or by de facto expelling pathological individuals from the community via incarceration. But the law, as Freud points out, has nothing to do with ethics; it is simply the safeguard that civilization has put in place to protect itself against the baser instincts of the individuals who comprise it. To think ethically, I propose, we will have to think literarily.

In Mitchell’s novel, this first line of defense against interpersonal predation, the juridical, shows itself to be inadequate for confronting the kind of deeply embedded race-, class-, gender-, and age-based forms of oppression that characterize existing

however, I want to propose an amendment: it is not that this ethical impulse that Freud points to has not been lost in “civilized” societies; rather, it has been carefully and methodically overwritten to make room for disposability to emerge.
societal structures. Each of the novel’s narratives tells a story of unchecked power run rampant: in “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing,” white British imperialists colonize and decimate native Pacific Islander populations; in “Letters from Zedelghem,” the English composer Vyvyan Ayrs employs the impoverished Robert Frobisher as his amanuensis and then blackmails him in a gambit to take credit for his work; in “Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery,” the Seaboard Corporation seeks to kill off those who, like the journalist Luisa Rey, threaten to expose the dangers posed by its nuclear power plant; in “The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish,” the elderly eponymous protagonist finds himself imprisoned against his will in a nursing home; in “An Orison of Sonmi-451,” humanoid fabricants are used as slave labor in the futuristic, corpocratic state of Nea So Copros; and in the after-the-Fall world of “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After,” Zachry and his Valleysmen are enslaved and slaughtered by the savage Kona warriors who, in a return to a lower, animal state, take what they need by force.

Speaking for the last time to the man he has pushed to the brink of death, Goose gives a bare-bones account of this dynamic:

“Surgeons are a singular brotherhood, Adam. To us, people aren’t sacred beings crafted in the Almighty’s image, no, people are joints of meat, yes, but meat made ready for the skewer & the spit. … Well, Adam, even friends are made of meat. ’Tis absurdly simple. I need money & in your trunk, I am told, is an entire estate, so I have killed you for it. Where is the mystery? ’But Henry, this is wicked!’ But, Adam, the world is wicked. Maoris prey on Moriori, Whites prey on darker-hued cousins, fleas prey on mice, cats prey on rats, Christians on infidels, first mates on cabin boys, Death on the Living. ‘The weak are meat, the strong do eat.’”

14 Of the novel’s structure, and its relation to the leitmotif of the comet birthmark, Louise Economides writes: “This innovative narrative structure suggests that the evolution of human societies is, in contrast to Western, teleological accounts, profoundly iterative: a movement akin to Eastern and/or Buddhist models of time structured by ‘samsara’ (recurring cycles of birth, suffering, death, and rebirth). Indeed, the recurring motif of a comet-shaped birthmark which appears in all but one of the novel’s narratives strongly suggests not only samsara, but also that several of the novel’s characters may actually possess the same ‘soul’ which transmigrates over time. This idea also holds a key to the meaning of the novel’s title. As Zachry, the narrator of the post-apocalyptic hinge chapter, puts it: ‘souls cross the skies o’time … like clouds crossin’ skies o’ the world’ (302)” (618).
Goose checked my eyes for sentience & kissed my lips. “Your turn to be eaten, dear Adam. You were no more gullible than any other of my patrons.” (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas 503-4)

For a narrative that begins with Goose (metaphorically) feasting on his find of cannibals’ teeth, it is oddly fitting that the story—and the novel—concludes with him professing that he is, in every way but the literal, a cannibal himself. By anyone’s standards, the aptly named Goose is a “brute” who takes the logic of survival of the fittest and turns it into a no-holds-barred war of all-against-all. For Goose, that “cats prey on rats” and “Christians on infidels” can be uttered in the same breath because they both form a part of the same world, the world of nature, in which “civilization” does not figure and in which survival is the provenance of the most cunning and the most ruthless. In this formulation, Goose reminds us of something else that we’ve worked so hard to repress: “people are joints of meat, yes, but meat made ready for the skewer & the spit.” Despite all we do to convince ourselves otherwise, it turns out that we, like the animals we consume, are also made of flesh, are also part of the food chain. If the greatest feat of civilization has been to take us out of the food chain and make us forget that we were ever a part of it to begin with, then Goose remind us, in no uncertain terms, that we share both our predacity and our vulnerability with the animal life we disavow.

And yet, Cloud Atlas shows us that we are different from the animal world from which we so forcefully distance ourselves. The problem, however, is that this difference isn’t what we assume it is. It isn’t our ascendance above the realm of predatory instincts and animalistic aggression; it is, instead, our channeling of those instincts in a socially acceptable direction. It is the power we wield over lives we deem disposable—a power that is subject to neither legal penalties nor social judgments. And if human predation, captured in Goose’s refrain “The weak are meat, the strong do eat” (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas

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“This is a truth that Sonmi’s story later gives narrative form to via the figure of the fabricant. For a first-person account of what it means to be thrust back into the food chain, see Val Plumwood, “Being Prey.”
marks a breakdown of “civilization”, a return to the “brute force” of the animal world that we’ve supposedly left behind, then disposability emerges out of what we might call an “excess” of civilization. In this case, rather than representing man’s aggressive instincts as external to the workings of civilization and subjecting them to the law as a means of neutralizing their “brute force,” disposability operates by incorporating man’s aggression into the frame of civilization itself, so that it comes to be understood as a constitutive part of what it means to be “civilized.”

Disposability, then, is a form of predation that refuses to recognize itself as such. It operates as a kind of disavowal; insofar as we do acknowledge it to ourselves, it becomes not a symptom of our latent animality, but a marker of the ways in which we’ve streamlined and sanitized the problem of our own survival within the framework of civilization. By crafting a narrative in which “disposable” lives are there for the taking, we can, paradoxically, give free rein to our latent aggression while simultaneously reveling in our own ascendancy as a species.

Finally, disposability diverges from outright predation in one important way: it is characterized by none of the contingency that marks the contest between predator and prey. Predation in both the animal and human realms operates as a contest between two parties in which the stronger hunts the weaker; the difference is that the animal predator physically incorporates into its own body the body of its prey, whereas the human predator has a wider range of possibilities for exploitation. What these two forms of predation share, however, is their unpredictability: in neither case is the outcome of the contest guaranteed. While the predator must succeed frequently enough in capturing his prey (or he would not, by definition, be the predator), he must also periodically fail. So, for instance, in nature, the antelope eludes the cheetah, while in Cloud Atlas, Ewing narrowly escapes death at the hands of the murdering medicine-man Goose. My point is that whether we find ourselves in the realm of the human or the realm of the animal,
the predator/prey relationship is always one of struggle without guarantee; as such, moreover, it always, invariably, leaves behind a trace. If the predator succeeds, then the imprint of his conquest remains: either the cheetah leaves behind the carcass of the antelope or the supposed cannibals at the novel’s inception leave upon the beach the teeth of the men they have consumed. And if the prey escapes, he leaves behind his tracks as well: there are the antelope’s hoof-divots in the grass, or the supposed cannibal’s footprint in the sand in the vein of Robinson Crusoe.

It is when predation comes with a guarantee, however, that it can no longer be called predation, but must be understood as disposability. In nature, the predator-prey relationship is not scripted; every creature, at least in theory, has a shot at survival. Disposability, on the other hand, takes root when the prey, structurally speaking, has no chance of eluding the predator. This, of course, is how we’ve organized our industrial animal agriculture system, and, as we’ll see shortly, it is the case with Sonmi’s narrative in Cloud Atlas as well. In this fabricant’s account of her struggle against the system that exploits her, we discover that the narrative’s events have been scripted by Unanimity, the corpocratic regime that Sonmi believes she is rebelling against. In the “Orison,” therefore, we find a chronicle not just of predation, but of disposability: in contrast to Ewing or Luisa Rey, whose lives are always, to some degree, in their own hands, Sonmi’s fate has been set out for her from the beginning. On a psychical level, this pre-scripted narrative that thwarts the natural order deeply troubles us, even if we cannot precisely articulate the reasons for our unease. Cloud Atlas, I propose, lays out these reasons for us—and it shows us what the literary can do to confront them.

3.2 Tracking the Literary

The fantasy of disposability is that it is possible to wipe away the traces of the lives that are taken in its service. Hence, the saran-wrapped cuts of meat that line the walls of our supermarkets; the neatly packaged, refrigerated packets we drop into our
carts bear more resemblance, as objects of consumer consumption, to the bags of potato chips we find a few aisles over than to the real-live animals they once comprised. The ideal of disposability, therefore, is that we only view the final product (e.g., our meat) as a commodity possessed of an exchange-value, without contemplating what it was before or how it came to assume its present form. In “An Orison of Sonmi~451,” the corpocratic regime Unanimity takes up this fantasy in order to perfect it. This time, however, it’s not nonhuman animals that are rendered disposable, but rather another kind of nonhuman—genetically engineered, cloned “fabricants” who are artificially produced (as our livestock are today) to satisfy a need within a larger anthropocentric social order.

Of the novel’s six narratives, the fifth story, “An Orison of Sonmi~451” marks the point at which interpersonal predation, framed as a form of no-holds-barred survival of the fittest, tips over into a logic of disposability that offers no possibility of escape for those who are constituted as society’s “natural” prey. In the corpocratic state of Nea So Copros, a futuristic, dystopian incarnation of South Korea, citizenship reconstitutes itself as consumerism and genetic engineering structures the social strata; it is a world in which corporate “xecs” use ubiquitous “AdV” (adverts) to exploit the complacent masses, while “pureblood” humans reap the benefits of the enforced labor undertaken by society’s “fabricant” underclass (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas). This section’s narrator, Sonmi~451, is one such fabricant who has been designed to work in the fast-food chain Papa Song’s. There, the labor arrangement operates ostensibly as a form of indentured servitude, whereby the clones who have served their full twelve-year term to “Papa Song” are honored and transported via Papa Song’s Ark to a Hawaiian retirement community called “Xultation.” What Sonmi’s eventual infiltration of “Papa Song’s slaughtership” reveals, however, is that fabricants are not just slaves, but disposable lives whose bodies are recycled as soon as their labor-power has been expended (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas 347). From above, Sonmi watches it all unfold:
There was only one door: the entrance from the holding pen. How had all the previous servers left? A sharp ‘clack’ from the helmet refocused my attention on the dais below. The server’s head slumped unnaturally. I could see her eyeballs roll back and the cabled spine connecting the helmet mechanism to the monorail stiffen. To my horror, the helmet rose, the server sat upright, then was lifted off her feet into the air. Her corpse seemed to dance a little; her smile of anticipation frozen in death tautened as her facial skin took some of the load. …

Finally, I managed to obey Hae-Joo and crawl along the hangway thru a soundlock into the next chamber. Here, the helmets conveyed the cadavers into a vast violet-lit vault; the space must have accounted for a quarter of Papa Song’s Ark’s volume. As we entered, the celsius fell sharply and a roar of machines burst our ears. A slaughterhouse production line lay below us, manned by figures wielding scissors, sword saws, and various tools of cutting, stripping, and grinding. The workers were bloodsoaked, from head to toe. I should properly call those workers butchers: they snipped off collars, stripped clothes, shaved follicles, peeled skin, offcut hands and legs, sliced off meat, spooned organs … drains hoovered the blood … (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas 342-43)

Indeed, the fabricants’ lives come to an end not in some heavenly retirement community, as is promised them, but rather in much the same way that the lives of factory farmed animals do in our present-day slaughterhouses: suddenly, with a bolt driven through the skull.¹⁶ From there, a conveyor belt carries the fabricants’ lifeless corpses down a disassembly line where they are dehided and dismembered, hacked into serviceable slabs of meat to be repackaged for cannibalistic consumption—in this case, fed to unwitting Papa Song’s customers and literally rendered into the “Soap” upon

¹⁶ Timothy Pachirat describes the equivalent of this scene within an industrial slaughterhouse as follows:
“The knocker presses a button that moves the metal conveyor forward, bringing the cow’s head out of the rectangular box. If the cow thrashes or struggles, the knocker activates the side walls to further constrict it. Suspended on the conveyor and squeezed by the side walls, the animal can now move only its head. …

Seizing what may be only a fraction of a second when the cow’s head is still, the knocker angles the gun down and presses it against the cow’s head, between and slightly above the eyes. … The knocker pulls the trigger, which releases a retracting cylindrical steel bolt approximately five inches long and an inch in diameter. The bolt penetrates the cow’s skull, then quickly retracts. …

After the cow has been shot, the knocker advances the conveyor, and the cow drops onto another conveyor, of wide green plastic, about five feet under the metal conveyor. … Once the animal is on the plastic conveyor, the shackler … wraps a metal hook around its left leg. The hook is suspended from a chain connected via a wheel to an overhead rail. The rail moves the wheel forward, lifting the cow into the air by its left hind leg until it is suspended vertically, head down” (54-55).
which the chemically-stupefied, amnesiac fabricants who work there subsist. As her fellow revolutionary (but actually undercover Unanimity operative) Hae-Joo explains to Sonmi, what is served by this enterprise is “The economics of corpocracy” (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* 343):

The genomics industry demands huge quantities of liquefied biomatter, for wombtanks, but most of all, for Soap. What cheaper way to supply this protein than by recycling fabricants who have reached the end of their working lives? Additionally, leftover ‘reclaimed proteins’ are used to produce Papa Song food products, eaten by consumers in the corp’s dineries all over Nea So Copros. It is a perfect food cycle. (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* 343)

In other words, the regime that has engineered fabricants to be a source of free labor has not just rendered them disposable; it has perfected the workings of disposability by creating an airtight recycling system that leaves behind no trace of the lives it has disposed of. In an ingenious move, the logic that underwrites fabricant disposability is that of a “perfect” cannibalism that is both mandated (fabricants expire if they go without “Soap” for too long) and unwitting (the fabricants are not aware that in consuming “Soap,” they are ingesting their former friends). As such, it covers its own tracks, leaving behind not even—as in Dr. Goose’s account—the teeth of those who have been consumed.

As Derrida reminds us, however, we may do everything we can to cover our tracks, but this does not mean that we can erase them: “Granted, every human can, within the space of doxic phenomenality, have the consciousness of covering its tracks. But who could ever judge the effectivity of such a gesture? Is it necessary to recall that every trace, in consciousness, can leave a trace of its erasure whose symptom (individual or social, historical, political, etc.) will always be capable of ensuring its return?” (The *Animal* 136). Derrida’s psychoanalytically inflected formulation of the trace helps frame

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17 Louise Economides also observes that this process “Mirror[s] the cannibalistic food chain of industrially produced livestock” (625).
the dynamic of systemic exploitation and disavowal that characterizes Sonmi’s narrative. That is, Unanimity’s attempt to erase the traces of the fabricant lives it disposes of—in this case, by turning them into the lifeblood of the fabricants that are still being exploited—leaves its own trace behind. This secondary trace must, in its turn, be reckoned with. In the novel, the trace of the attempted erasure of the originary trace—that is, the trace of Unanimity’s disavowal of the fact that fabricants have been designed to be disposable (a disavowal that is effected not just by the secrecy that envelops Papa Song’s slaughtership, but also by narratives about the fabricants’ duty to Papa Song and the promise of Xultation)—manifests itself as “An Orison of Sonmi-451,” as the narrative that Sonmi has left behind for us to read. To put it another way: the symptom of Unanimity’s disavowal of everything it has done to render fabricants disposable is Sonmi’s story.

Therefore, while at the end we learn that Sonmi’s “whole confession is composed of ... scripted events” pre-arranged by Unanimity (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas 348; ellipses original, italics mine), the narrative that she produces about these events explodes the confines of the script in which she has been playing a pre-determined part. And herein we find the power of the literary: if Unanimity’s goal is to use Sonmi as a prop in its ploy to set the public against fabricants so that it may naturalize the latter’s disposability, then the narrative that Sonmi provides for us serves as a counterweight to the “theatrical production” that Unanimity has staged (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas 348). If disposability

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18 Unanimity fashions a narrative whereby the fabricants are engaging in honorable service to Papa Song, which is figured as the duty of repaying his “Investment” in them. So, for instance, the fabricants go through a “Star Sermon” ceremony that marks the passage of each year of faithful service to Papa Song; the more stars pinned to their collars, the closer to “Xultation”—and thus to ascending to the more privileged strata of “consumers with Soulrings”—fabricants get (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas 186).

19 Sonmi answers the Archivist’s query as to “why Unanimity would go to the expense and trouble of staging this fake ... adventure story” as follows: “To generate the show trial of the decade. To make every last pureblood in Nea So Copros mistrustful of every last fabricant. To manufacture downstrata consent for the Juche’s new Fabricant Xpiry Act. To discredit Abolitionism” (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas 348-49).
aspires to leave no trace behind, because to do so would reveal that the lives that are disposed of are not naturally disposable, then Sonmi’s narrative is itself a symptom of Unanimity’s attempted self-erasure of its own tracks. It is a symptom that exceeds the bounds of Unanimity’s efforts to contain it, a symptom whose expression, as it turns out, is marked enough to radically alter the world that comes after. As Sonmi tells her archivist in concluding:

We see a game beyond the endgame. I refer to my Declarations, Archivist. Media has flooded Nea So Copros with my Catechisms. Every schoolchild in corpocracy knows my twelve ‘blasphemies’ now. My guards tell me there is even talk of a statewide ‘Vigilance Day’ against fabricants who show signs of the Declarations. My ideas have been reproduced a billionfold. …

As Seneca warned Nero: No matter how many of us you kill, you will never kill your successor. Now, my narrative is over. (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas 349)

This “game beyond the endgame” is played out in the subsequent and final narrative, “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After.” There, Sonmi’s “Orison” has become the founding mythology of the dystopian after-the-Fall world that occupies the center of the novel, and Sonmi has ascended to the status of deity worshipped by the Valleysmen.²⁰

As “Sloosha’s Crossin’” makes clear, Sonmi’s narrative has transcended the moment of its narration to take on a life of its own, outlasting both the world out of which it emerged and the archive that endeavored to contain it. The question here, of course, is: how has Sonmi’s narrative ascended to such great heights?

The answer, I propose, is to be found by tracking the workings of “the literary” within it. If disposability seeks to cover up its traces, then Sonmi’s narrative insists on their indelibility, taking Unanimity’s unitary script and subjecting it to the vicissitudes

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²⁰ It is significant here that the “Orison” is not exposed as just another religious artifact in the novel’s last and center-most narrative, in the way that, for instance, “Half-Lives: The First Luisa Rey Mystery” is exposed as just another detective novel in “The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish” or “Cavendish” is revealed to be a twentieth-century film in Sonmi’s “Orison.”
of narrative form. As we find, the center cannot hold when faced with the latent multiplicity of the reading experience.21

“An Orison of Sonmi~451” is structured as an interview of Sonmi conducted by an obscure Archivist in service of an unnamed government “ministry,” with an eye toward “corpocratic historians of the future” (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas 185). Effectively, the text we consume is a debriefing before an execution, although this is not evident from the outset. What is significant from the beginning, however, is that “this final interview” is neither “an interrogation” nor “a trial” (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas 185), but rather “an orison”—in our language, an archaic term that means “prayer” (“Orison”),22 but in the world of Nea So Copros, a word that doubles as verb and noun, meaning something along the lines of “to record”23 and “a record” or “a silvery oval-shaped device that records.”24 From its title page, therefore, Sonmi’s narrative is doubled: on the one hand, this “orison” is a recording of Sonmi’s story, and on the other hand, it is a prayer that Sonmi casts up into the universe, an orison-prayer that her orison-recording will outlast both her death and Unanimity’s efforts to co-opt her story.

As we read the “Orison” for the first time, of course, it is the definition of “orison” as “recording”—as a recording of Sonmi’s story—that we encounter. It is only when we read the novel’s central narrative, and then afterwards, when we reach the end of Sonmi’s story, that we come to understand how Sonmi’s orison doubles as a prayer—

21 In response to the question of how Sonmi’s narrative has transcended Unanimity’s intended role for it, Economides offers up a related interpretation: “[Sonmi] realizes that there is ‘a game beyond the endgame’ (349): namely that, in Haraway’s words, ‘releasing the play of writing is deadly serious’ (175) and that once signification is recorded, this play can never be stopped. In short, she anticipates that future interpreters of her testimony may come to regard her words very differently than they are seen in the present, that her narrative may acquire unexpected new mutations over time” (628).
22 Economides also notes this inflection of the term, observing that “Sonmi’s ‘orison’ is also a prayer—language premised on a leap of faith, addressed to no one and to everyone, time bound and timeless” (628).
23 The Archivist explains, “…when I petitioned to orison your testimony, approval was granted before I had the chance to come to my senses” (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas 189).
24 Sonmi tells her interviewer, “I shall précis it for your orison, Archivist” (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas 325).
and not just as her prayer for a different kind of future, but also as a prayer that the Valleysmen who come after her will turn to for spiritual guidance. To put it another way: in this narrative, the reader is necessarily constituted as a re-reader when, in the final two pages, Sonmi asks the Archivist, “Did you not detect the hairline cracks in the plot? … You yourself suggested, would Union truly risk their secret weapon on a dash across Korea? Did Seer Kwon’s murder of the Zizzi Hikaru fabricant on the suspension bridge not underline pureblood brutality a little too neatly? Was its timing not a little too pat?” (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas 348).

The hint that we ought to have looked out for “the hairline cracks in the plot” is there from the story’s title page, when we are told that we are encountering “An Orison of Sonmi~451,” rather than “The Orison of Sonmi~451.” The use of the indefinite article here suggests that there is not just one “Orison of Sonmi~451,” the one we are currently reading, but instead gestures toward the text’s constitutive multiplicity, its veritable archive of potential readings and re-readings. This latent multiplicity materializes at the narrative’s conclusion, when the story we have just read doubles itself through Sonmi’s revelation that everything she has done and everything she has narrated has been staged by those in power. Obviously, the surprise ending requires that Sonmi’s story be understood not just as a revolutionary uprising by an outlaw fabricant working for a radical group against the dominant political order, but also as a carefully orchestrated and contained pseudo-rebellion meant to consolidate already-existing power structures. But the work of reframing the narrative rests with the reader, who must now double, or triple, or quadruple his reading of Sonmi’s “Orison.” In other words, the narrative’s exposure of itself as fraudulent does something more than raise questions about the limits of realism—it brings center-stage the nature of the reader’s engagement with the narrative he consumes.
The point, in this case, is that “An Orison of Sonmi~451” is structured in such a way as to resist easy “consumption” by the reader. If we look at the reading experience as a kind of “ingestion” of the narrative at hand, we find that this story, for lack of a better phrase, doesn’t go down easily. It’s not exactly that it’s hard to swallow. On the contrary—and this is precisely what Sonmi insists at its conclusion—on a first reading, the narrative is designed to be swallowed whole, to perfectly satisfy our readerly appetites. The problem with it, of course, is precisely that—it is all a little too tasty, “a little too pat” (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas 348). To put it another way: the wrong kind of reading, the reading that we’ve been set up to fall into, is precisely the kind of reading through which we end up devouring the story we’ve been fed; it is the kind of reading that underscores the story’s theme “a little too neatly,” the kind of reading that assumes that the words we read add up to the story we get (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas 348). This kind of reading, of course, parallels the fabricants’ unquestioning acceptance of the narrative about Xultation that Papa Song’s has fed them. It is a model of consumption (of the story) not just as assimilation (of its claims) but also as cannibalism (of the fabricants). In other words, it is a model of reading that brings us back to the slaughtership that takes fabricant life and processes it for easy, uncritical consumption by the complacent masses.

The right kind of reading, Cloud Atlas suggests, is one that doesn’t allow for such easy assimilation—it is precisely the kind of reading experience that Sonmi invokes at the end of her narrative, when she forces the reader to reread, reprocess, and reformulate the narrative he has just consumed. What’s important here, however, is that the novel is not calling for a substitution of the secondary, “unoriginal” reading for the original one; rather, the two (or three, or four) readings are additive; taken together, they comprise the narrative that is “An Orison of Sonmi~451.” Which orison? Any of them; all of them. In other words, Sonmi’s primary narrative, her orison-recording of her story
must be understood in conjunction with her orison-prayer (which the reader experiences temporally as secondary) that her doomed rebellion against Unanimity will not have been in vain after all.

One read-through of “An Orison of Sonmi~451” thus brings us not to the end, but rather back to the beginning, where we are impelled to sort through the story’s events in an attempt to distinguish the narrative’s “true” components from its false ones. The fact, though, is that the first, “false” reading we get—the narrative itself, verbatim—is the only one we can be sure of, even if we can only be sure of the fact that we cannot be sure of it. All re-readings that follow, ad infinitum, are subject to uncertainty. And it is this uncertainty, in all its permutations, that constitutes “An Orison of Sonmi~451” and makes any easy consumption of it impossible. Because the story does not go down the same way each time, it can never be fully assimilated; because the reader can never know when he has finally worked through all the narrative’s possible permutations, the “whole” story is never his to possess. Part of it always remains unassimilated, and it is precisely this constitutively incomplete rumination that holds off the kind of uncritical readerly cannibalism that goes hand-in-hand with the logic of disposability.

While in Cloud Atlas, the reader never fully “consumes” the narrative, the narrative does, by contrast, “consume” the reader. Having traveled halfway through Sonmi’s story to reach the novel’s final narrative, we encounter the first-person voice of Zachry, the last of the Valleysmen; what we discover in its last two pages, however, is that this voice has all along been ventriloquized by Zachry’s son, who is telling his father’s story to an audience of which we, the reader, also form a part. That is, as we wrap up “Sloosha’s Crossin’,” we realize that we are no longer just readers of Cloud Atlas, but that we are simultaneously inhabitants of the “Ev’rythin’ After.” And if we ourselves are of that world, then it stands to reason that Sonmi’s orison-prayer has
registered with us as well, that she has become not just the Valleysmen’s deity, but also, to some extent, our own.

At the end of “Sloosha’s Crossin’,” therefore, and for the first time in the novel, we, the readers, are met with a shift into the second person address, as the framing narrator calls on us to “Sit down a beat or two,” “Hold out [our] hands” for the “silv’ry egg” through which “a beausome ghost-girl appears in the air an’ speaks in an Old-Un tongue what no un alive und’stands nor never will” (presumably the orison that contains Sonmi’s testimony from the preceding narrative), and “Look” (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas 309). That is, as we reach the end of the novel’s central narrative, we are asked to re-engage both with the orison, the egg-like recording device that contains Sonmi’s testimony, and with her “Orison,” the narrative we’ve thus far read halfway through. We are, in other words, as characters in the novel, asked to return to the scene of our interrupted reading that we undertook as readers of the novel. The reader-as-character in the final narrative is not there just for the sake of novelty or shock-value; rather, he serves as the impetus for the telling of the second half of the novel. Structurally speaking, the rest of the book depends on our own doubling, on our turning into the character within “Sloosha’s Crossin’” to whom the remainder of the story is told.

And if “Sloosha’s Crossin’” transforms us from a reader of Mitchell’s novel into a character inside of it, and then back again, this is not in order to force us to swap out the former role for the latter, or vice versa, but instead to place us in the logically impossible position of inhabiting both subject-positions at the same time. In this moment, Cloud Atlas’s readers come to embody Freud’s figure of the uncanny, whereby “the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging” (“The Uncanny” 234). In reading Cloud Atlas, therefore, we are split,
doubled, no longer ourselves, no longer self-identical. Simply stated, we, the readers, are now rendered uncanny—to ourselves.

Ultimately, the operations of the structural uncanny in Mitchell’s novel force us to call our identity, that which is most quintessentially “us,” into question. By undercutting the stability of the readerly self, doubling the “I” that engages with the novel at hand, the novel forces us to ask whether the “I” that we give ourselves is really the “I” that we are, whether we are ever truly self-identical. In the end, we too are undone by our own “doubling, dividing, and interchanging of the self,” consigned to a position that echoes Freud too closely for comfort—we are left “in doubt as to which [our] self is” (“The Uncanny” 234). And if we are no longer unitary, we can no longer jealously proclaim our own lives, to the exclusion of others, original, originary, unique; or rather, if we are to safeguard our own value, it will have to be on terms other than these. As a result, the ways in which we attribute value to other kinds of lives will have to change as well. In teaching us that we are not even “like” ourselves, this novel insists that questions about who gets ethical and political consideration can no longer be decided by drawing a line between those who are sufficiently “like us” and those who are not. If the novel offers up anything like a model for how to approach such problems, it is the one we find in the last words of the (central narrative of the) novel: “Sit down a beat or two. / Hold out your hands. / Look” (Mitchell, Cloud Atlas 309). In other words: Pause. Receive. Attend. And then, taking a cue from the form of the novel as a whole, repeat as needed.

3.3 Un-Staging Sympathy

Together, the multiple narratives of Cloud Atlas comprise a historical trajectory of intraspecies predation, rotating among race-, class-, gender-, age-, and genetic-engineering based forms of exploitation within the realm of mankind. Of these, Sonmi’s “Orison” marks the point at which interpersonal predation tips over into a logic of
disposability that offers no possibility of escape for those who are constituted as society’s “natural” prey. From there, as the novel imagines it, it’s a short step to the downfall of civilization and the reversion of man to his lowest, animal state.

In *Cloud Atlas*, the fabricant is a liminal figure that renders particularly pressing the question of how we organize our social, political, and ethical frameworks around the categories of “human” and “nonhuman.” In Sonmi’s “Orison” in particular, the propensity to organize social structures on the basis of ontological categories is revealed to be a form of socially sanctioned misdirection. There, the scene of Papa Song’s fabricant “slaughternesship” is so disturbing precisely because it pulls the rug out from under our feet: we are confronted with the fact that the “dividing line” we’ve been used to drawing between the human and the animal no longer provides an easy rationale for the slaughter of this new category of nonhuman. Indeed, given that fabricants in Nea So Copros occupy the same place in human society that livestock did a century or two before, when “Dollars circulated as little sheets of paper and the only fabricants were sickly livestock” (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* 235), the novel makes it clear that the driving force behind disposability is not biology or species-difference (since fabricants are humanoid beings while livestock are nonhuman animals), but rather the differential distribution of power that organizes the social strata. Sonmi’s narrative, in other words, shows us how ontological categories of being are made into smokescreens for the ways in which power exerts itself as violence over some bodies in the service of others.

Meanwhile, the line that is drawn between human and nonhuman is even more arbitrary in *Never Let Me Go*, where we also encounter artificially produced, humanoid lives that are rendered disposable; here, human clones are created for the purpose of supplying society’s “real” humans with vital organs. While in *Cloud Atlas*, fabricants belong to a limited number of easily-recognizable “stem-types” that clearly distinguish them from society’s “pureblood” populations, in *Never Let Me Go*, the differences...
between clones and their human originals are invisible to the naked eye. Roughly summed up, the novel’s clones are physically identical to humans, except for the fact that they lack the capacity for biological reproduction; psychologically, the only difference seems to be that the clones are incapable of questioning the terms of their existence or of striving for a future beyond the one that has been prescribed for them. Their lives, like Sonmi’s, have been scripted; as the guardian Ms. Lucy tells them: “Your lives are set out for you. You’ll become adults, then before you’re old, before you’re even middle-aged, you’ll start to donate your vital organs. That’s what each of you was created to do. ... You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided” (Ishiguro 81). Unlike Sonmi, however, they more or less wholly acquiesce to the narrative that lays out the terms of their disposability.25

Critical pieces on Never Let Me Go model the difficulty of engaging with the figure of the conscripted organ-donor clone. Replicating what seems to be a near-universal reader response to this novel, Shameem Black interrogates the clones’ acquiescence to their dismal fates, asking, “Why is it that the characters in the novel fail to stage a rebellion, protest their fate, or move to France?” (793). The answer she provides is that the school’s emphasis on “humanist art,” which is a way of “[r]evealing when it comes to acquiescing to their fore-ordained fate, Ruth is a model “student.” Coming up on what will end up being her last donation, she observes, “I was pretty much ready when I became a donor. It felt right. After all, it’s what we’re supposed to be doing, isn’t it?” (Ishiguro 227; also quoted in Black, p. 793).

Leona Toker and Daniel Chertoff make a similar observation: “Yet, unlike the characters, or at least Kathy, the protagonist-narrator, the reader cannot but wonder why the students submit to being used this way, why they do not object, refuse, or simply run away. The characters seem never to consider these possibilities” (166). Meanwhile, Mark Jerng takes up the question of why the clones don’t run away in order to ask, as I do, what the act of asking this question tells us about the assumptions (in his case, assumptions about “narrative expectations” of what constitutes the human) that underlie its articulation. He explains, “I draw on these examples in order to foreground the desire to define humanness in terms of agency and separation, and thus to judge these students to be inhuman because they do not resist. This notion of a ‘fully realized person’ carries with it certain narrative expectations that re-inscribe the division between the form of humanity and the formless clones. That the definition of the human that these readers resort to is so obviously a culturally or nationally specific convention of what people expect of the human (humans are people who rebel) highlights how certain socially held narrative expectations codify definitions of the human in advance” (Jerng 382).
one’s insides, a commonplace way of praising the emotional authenticity and value of expression,” prepares its students for another “form of extraction”—that of their eventual “organ donation” (Black 798). Although I find this to be an insightful reading, it strikes me that it only tells part of the story; the answer I propose is more general and more basic. Simply stated, the clones don’t run or rebel because they have been rendered disposable; like Sonmi, their lives are scripted and their possibilities for action curtailed. Whether the clones’ behavior is proscribed by their environment (e.g., their indoctrination by their guardians at Hailsham, their relation to art, etc.) or by some form of genetic predisposition that makes them more docile than “normal humans” is not of import here. What matters is that they act within the realm of possibility that has been a priori laid out for them. To refer back to my introduction, in which I reference Timothy Pachirat’s account of the cream-colored cow that flees an Omaha slaughterhouse only to be cornered and shot dead shortly thereafter: that a cow (or six, as Pachirat tells it) would escape a slaughterhouse already borders on the inconceivable. But in a world in which a cow is destined to be meat in the same way that Ishiguro’s clones are destined to be organs, the slaughterhouse is part of a larger system that has other safeguards in place. In this case, when the cow is subsequently pursued by policemen with guns, we don’t ask why she doesn’t escape, or why she doesn’t stage an insurrection of her bovine brethren; the power gradient is simply too great to render such possibilities conceivable.  

Likewise, in Never Let Me Go, the clones’ story is one to which the outcome has already been decided; the question, as the novel frames it, is never that of whether the students will arrive at the end that has been dictated for them, but rather simply that of

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27 As Martin Puchner remarks, “This lack of outrage more than anything else makes one wonder whether [Kathy H] is not somehow deficient, perhaps in a way one might expect from a manufactured creature” (36).

28 This means that if disposability is a form of systemic predation in which the outcome is always guaranteed, then it is this vast power differential between predator and prey that secures it.
how they will get there. The novel itself begins with an indication of precisely how much time Kathy has left before she begins to donate (even though we’re not yet aware of what it means to be a donor): “My name is Kathy H. I’m thirty-one years old, and I’ve been a carer now for over eleven years. That sounds long enough, I know, but actually they want me to go on for another eight months, until the end of this year” (Ishiguro 3). What we learn from the novel’s outset, therefore, is that there’s an expiration date on Kathy’s tenure as a carer, and that neither Kathy nor the narrative she weaves together appear to be tortured by this fact. This is because, we realize as we begin to piece it together, the novel looks not to the future, but to the past. As Kathy explains, “I won’t be a carer any more come the end of the year, and though I’ve got a lot out of it, I have to admit I’ll welcome the chance to rest—to stop and think and remember. I’m sure it’s partly to do with that, to do with preparing for the change of pace, that I’ve been getting this urge to order all these old memories” (Ishiguro 37). The novel’s “action,” therefore, is constituted as the struggle of sorting through the past rather than striving toward the future. With this comes the fact that the novel’s narrative progress does not take on the form that we, the readers, are implicitly holding out for: the autobiographical, bildungsroman form, as exemplified by a novel like Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre. In that work, as in Never Let Me Go, the protagonist offers up a retrospective account of her life, periodically interrupting her first-person narration to break into the second person.

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29 As Bruce Jennings also observes, “Never Let Me Go is a coming-of-age novel with characters for whom coming of age ultimately has little point” (18). Nor, as Jennings points out, do we encounter in Ishiguro’s novel the bioethics-version of the coming-of-age novel, the “liberationist romance”—“a quest narrative in which the individual, seeking autonomy, struggles against limitations, constraints, and inhibitions imposed by forces…from the outside” (16). In a similar vein, Mark Jerng observes, “It is not that Ishiguro fails to portray these clones as human; rather, he writes a story that reverses the narrative trajectory of individuation. Ishiguro does not reveal the human as unfolding and developing from a given inert potentiality. This is a much more disturbing story because it withholds the reader’s desire for emancipation: the clones do not rebel and thus ‘become human.’ Rather, they learn to make sense of their lives as clones” (382). Jerng continues, “While the narrative follows a life from childhood up to the age of thirty-one more or less chronologically, the life-story that unfolds does not move from immaturity to maturity, from dependence to separation, or from childhood to adulthood, a narrative arc implicit in the construction of the enlightenment individual” (383).
with a direct address to the reader. The reason Ishiguro’s work is so much less satisfying than Brontë’s, however, is that as readers we’ve been primed to expect narratives that are future-oriented and characters who strive for more than they’ve been allotted. In a world in which our protagonists are rendered disposable, however, the conditions are such that characters can’t even imagine searching for something better because they have no futures as such to speak of. And in a work in which the narrative resists linearity and doubles back on itself over and over again, we, the readers, find ourselves “boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past”; we are herein left with the choice between “beat[ing] on … against the current” and adjusting our readerly expectations in order to reorient ourselves to the form of the story at hand (Fitzgerald 180).

In light of the way in which disposability operates within the world of the novel, the act of asking why Ishiguro’s clones don’t resist their fates tells us more about us, the readers, than it does about Kathy and her friends. Specifically, our critique of the clones’ inaction stems from our notions of how we would have behaved in the same situation. This impulse, of course, derives from the sympathetic imagination, which has trained us, as readers, to imagine ourselves in the place of our novels’ protagonists. As Martha Nussbaum argues, this is what novels are especially suited for: “It is the political promise of literature that it can transport us, while remaining ourselves, into the life of another, revealing similarities but also profound differences between the life and thought of that other and myself and making them comprehensible, or at least more nearly comprehensible” (“Democratic Citizenship” 156, italics mine). In this case, our

30 With respect to “Ishiguro’s use of second-person address throughout the novel, a device commonly used in Victorian fiction to enhance sympathetic connection,” Whitehead aptly observes that this “acts rather to unsettle the reader, and to call into question how or where she is indeed positioned in relation to Kathy” (58).

31 Anne Whitehead also situates herself against Nussbaum in her article on Never Let Me Go. She explains, “Working against the increasing commercialization of the academy, Nussbaum sets out a vision of the arts, and especially literature, as central to the functioning of a healthy democratic
impulse to imagine ourselves in the position of the other is explicitly encouraged by Kathy H, who opens the novel by addressing the reader as a fellow-clone.\textsuperscript{32} As Martin Puchner aptly sums it up in his article “When We Were Clones,” this is a form of sympathy that works backwards so that we, and not the novel’s protagonist, become its object: “What Ishiguro effects might be better understood as reverse sympathy: instead of making the reader feel sympathy for the character and thus likening the character to the reader, it is the narrator who assumes an underlying similarity with the reader” (47). While Puchner argues that this is “a similarity that the reader is called upon to question or accept” (47), to me it seems clear that Kathy’s treatment of us as fellow-clones lulls us into assuming a reciprocal affinity with her. Thus, while Kathy imagines that we are like her, we imagine, in turn, that she is like us. Our reference point for reading Kathy, in other words, is ourselves. If we wonder why the clones don’t attempt an escape, this is because we don’t yet know how to engage with the other in any way but via the sympathetic imagination.\textsuperscript{33}

The problem with this, however, is that it is conceptually impossible to “transport” ourselves, to use Nussbaum’s formulation, “while remaining ourselves,” into lives that have been a priori designated as disposable. This is because at their core, these

society, first because they underpin skills of reasoning, argument, and critique, and secondly because they cultivate imaginative, caring, and empathic citizens” (54). In her work, Whitehead takes issue with the fact that “predominant responses to this crisis [in the arts and humanities] are positioning literature as productive of an empathic sensibility, and such a sensibility as an inherent moral virtue” (55). She argues, instead, “that Ishiguro’s novel complicates this vision of the humanities and to a large extent unravels the connections that Nussbaum makes between reading, empathy, caring, and the healthy society” (56).

\textsuperscript{32} Kathy observes, “I know carers, working now, who are just as good and don’t get half the credit. If you’re one of them, I can understand how you might get resentful—about my bedsit, my car, above all, the way I get to pick and choose who I look after” (Ishiguro 3-4). For Jerng, this “double mode of address” “places being a human and being a clone side-by-side, as ‘you’ are made to shuttle in-between the universal condition of being human and the universal condition of being a clone” (391).

\textsuperscript{33} As I go on to show, however, this is not the kind of relationship that the novel encourages between its readers and its characters. I differ from Anne Whitehead here, who posits that “If Ishiguro thus critiques the notion of the sympathetic imagination within the dystopic society of the novel…it therefore seems as if it is only to reinstate such a literary model between clone and reader” (70).
lives are configured as irreducibly different from our own; they are taken with impunity, while ours are possessed of unquantifiable value. Simply put, we cannot imagine ourselves as disposable life because we cannot imagine our lives—which to us are invaluable—being valuated as expendable; it is a scenario against which not just our imagination, but our entire being revolts.\(^{34}\) And it is here that the limits of the sympathetic imagination manifest themselves. There are simply some scenarios into which we cannot imagine ourselves while still remaining ourselves,\(^{35}\) and disposability is, constitutively, one of these. As a result, the reader’s attempts to place himself in the position of the clone who has been rendered disposable—in this case, by asking a question that, within the world of the novel, would be as absurd as our asking why livestock in our factory farms don’t stage a coup to overthrow their human overlords—signals a profound misunderstanding of the nature of the lives in question.

As Ishiguro’s parallel universe of 1990s England frames it, sympathy hasn’t just fallen short of its promise—it is, as Anne Whitehead also observes,\(^{36}\) the underlying reason behind the production of a world in which “less valuable” human lives are artificially created to serve as organ banks for “more valuable” ones. This is a world in

\(^{34}\) There are resonances here with Elizabeth Costello’s observation in Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* that in confronting the thought of our own death, we “shy away from it, refuse to entertain it.” In other words, “We live the impossible: we live beyond our death, look back on it, yet look back as only a dead self can” (32).

\(^{35}\) One of these, as Cary Wolfe observes in quoting Richard Beardsworth on Derrida, is our own death: “the ‘relation to death is always mediated through an other’” (“Introduction: Exposures” 22).

\(^{36}\) Whitehead makes a similar point, observing, “I propose that empathy is rendered morally ambiguous by Ishiguro, so that it no longer represents—as in Nussbaum—an inherent virtue. I investigate, in particular, the paradoxical basis of the entire system of organ donation in a mode of care or empathy, which seeks to reduce the pain and suffering of family and friends. Here, then, one of the key moral dangers of basing a society or politics on empathy is exposed: it is often governed by identity or similarity, and hence is prone to exclusion and ethnocentrism. Empathy, in other words, is not unambiguously beneficial, and it can lead as readily to exploitation and suffering as to more altruistic behaviors” (57). Later in the same piece, she argues, “Here, then, the true horror of Ishiguro’s dystopic society is revealed: it is shown to be founded, precisely, on relations of care. Personal selflessness, wanting the best for those whom we love, shades here into a politics of exclusion” (77).
which sympathy for one’s own kind sanctions the disposability of those who are sufficiently different from oneself. As Miss Emily tells Tommy and Kathy:

However uncomfortable people were about your existence, their overwhelming concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer, motor neurone disease, heart disease. So for a long time you were kept in the shadows, and people did their best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren’t really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn’t matter. (Ishiguro 263)

Given that *Never Let Me Go*’s enforced organ donor scheme is the product of sympathy gone awry, it is unlikely that we will find a solution to the clones’ disposability via a modified or expanded version of the sympathetic imagination. In other words, arguing, as Shameem Black does, that the novel calls for “an empathetic inhuman aesthetics that embraces the mechanical, commodified, and replicated elements of personhood,”37 will not cut it (786).38 This is made nowhere more clear than at the novel’s inception, when Kathy is addressing the reader-cum-clone in order to explain, to one who has had a less privileged upbringing than she has, that as a carer, “when you get a chance to choose [your donor], of course, you choose your own kind. That’s natural” (Ishiguro 4). This statement rings sinister; it echoes the logic that underwrites the organ donation scheme, as Miss Emily articulates it later in the novel—namely, the fact that the public’s “overwhelming concern was” obviously, logically, for “their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends.” And because Kathy’s retrospective narrative is structured so that when she begins to tell her story, she has already lived through

37 Shameem Black explains that she uses the terms sympathy and empathy interchangeably “to denote the process of identifying with the experience of others” (787).
38 Mark Jerng makes a related point: “*Never Let Me Go*, on the other hand, expands our notions of the human by reflecting on the narrative modes that shape what it means to be human” (371). He concludes his essay by observing, “The notion of the human that emerges from this narrative is one that takes away the end-point as the culmination of a “fully realized” life, and directs us to other, more unlikely places, around which to seek the dignity and form of human life” (Jerng 391). I diverge from this argument because I do not see Ishiguro as “expanding,” via the clones, our understanding of what it means to be human. As I see it, the novel is not concerned with expanding the category of the human but rather with challenging the idea of “the human” that dominates ethical and political discourse.
everything she chronicles in it, it is clear that her insistence that it’s “natural” to “choose your own kind” derives from the narrative that has been fed to her, the narrative that provides the justification for her own disposability. In this moment, therefore, she takes the logic that those in power have used to oppress her and, perversely, feeds it back to the only creature over whom she can exert some kind of authority—the donor in her care.

If this is what the logic of sympathy has wrought within the world of the novel, then outside of it, in its relation to the reader, Never Let Me Go offers us something else: not just a critique of sympathy, but a different way of engaging with the disposable other who has always been beyond the reach of the sympathetic imagination. On the most basic level, Never Let Me Go denies us those readerly satisfactions that are the provenance of the sympathetic imagination. It’s not just that Kathy’s subdued, “bland”

39 While both Whitehead and I read the novel as posing a critique of the sympathetic imagination, she and I differ over the respective “solutions” that Ishiguro offers up instead. For Whitehead, “Ishiguro stages the act of reading itself as an event, so that the reader’s experience of finishing the book powerfully reenacts Kathy’s own closing action of moving on and leaving the past behind. At the same time, the resonant beauty of the closing paragraph holds our attention, as Kathy herself lingers for a while before getting into her car and driving away, so that the difficulty of ‘letting go’ of that past is again simultaneously enacted by both Kathy and the reader. The reader is made to occupy an uneasy position, caught between staying and leaving, holding on and letting go, and is therefore confronted with a powerful and unresolved dilemma of care or empathy … The importance of such complex, uneasy, and mobile modes of identification—which, coupled with a lack of explicit authorial guidance, characterize a great number of works of contemporary fiction—is not that they are directly or straightforwardly productive of altruism or of good world-citizenship, but rather that they self-reflexively and performatively discomfort and perplex readers, in order to open up, and to hold open, central ethical questions of responsiveness, interpretation, responsibility, complicity, and care” (58). Whereas Whitehead and I are both interested in the form of uneasy identification that marks the reader’s relationship with Kathy and the other characters of the novel, Whitehead’s reading of Ishiguro’s performativity (57) is unsatisfying to me because the connection between “the reader’s experience of finishing the book” and “Kathy’s own closing action of moving on and leaving the past behind” does not, in itself, seem to me to pose an alternative to the problem of sympathy in the novel; it seems simply to leave us suspended in the predicament in which Kathy finds herself throughout the duration of her narrative—the impossibility of making sense of her situation, of “moving on and leaving the past behind.” In other words, it seems to me that Kathy has not, in concluding her narrative, changed in any way from its inception. The solution to the problem of sympathy, in other words, must be found elsewhere; I propose that this is to be in the uncanny form of Kathy’s narrative, which (like Sonmi’s story) escapes and exceeds her articulation of it.
narrative style\textsuperscript{40} refuses to indulge our desire for emotional depth or vivid imagery. Indeed, on a stylistic level, the novel operates in the monochrome that its film adaptation subsequently renders onscreen. Even more infuriating is that we are repeatedly thwarted in our attempts to identify with the characters in the novel, to establish some kind of connection to them. The fact is that we want protagonists who are like us, characters who strive for the things that matter to us: love, and life. Instead, in \textit{Never Let Me Go}, we get love that comes too late and life that ends too soon; in Tommy and Kathy’s abortive request for a deferral, we are fed a climax that is at best an anti-climax; and worst of all, we are placed in the hands of a narrator who is not just consigned to her dismal fate, but who actually “welcome[s]” it (Ishiguro 37).\textsuperscript{42}

Against the backdrop of disappointments that the novel offers up to the sympathetically inclined reader, Tommy’s scream following the visit to Miss Emily offers a brief, haunting moment of narrative rupture. As Kathy describes it:

> The moon wasn’t quite full, but it was bright enough, and I could make out in the mid-distance, near where the field began to fall away, Tommy’s figure, raging, shouting, flinging his fists and kicking out.

> I tried to run to him, but the mud sucked my feet down. The mud was impeding him too, because one time, when he kicked out, he slipped and fell out of view into the blackness. But his jumbled swear-words continued uninterrupted, and I was able to reach him just as he was getting to his feet again. I caught a glimpse of his face in the moonlight, caked in mud and distorted with fury, then I reached for his flailing arms and held on tight. He tried to shake me off, but I kept holding on, until he stopped shouting and I felt the fight go out of him. Then I realised he too had his arms around me. And so we stood together like that, at the top of that field, for what seemed like ages, not saying anything, just holding each other, while the wind kept blowing and blowing at us,
tugging our clothes, and for a moment, it seemed like we were holding onto each other because that was the only way to stop us being swept away into the night. (Ishiguro 274)

The reason that Tommy’s primal scream in the dark, in the wind, in the mud, resonates so strongly with both the readers of the novel and the viewers of the film adaptation is that it registers as perhaps the only moment in which a character in the novel expresses something akin to our own frustration with the clones’ acquiescence to their own disposability. This is arguably the only instance in the novel in which our thirst to sympathize with the novel’s characters is given an outlet. And yet, this is a tempered sympathy, since the precise nature of what exactly we’re sympathizing with in this moment is difficult to pinpoint. In some sense, Tommy’s “jumbled swear-words [that continue] uninterrupted” gesture toward the impossibility of ever fully capturing in language what it means to be disposable. In this instance, therefore, if the reader identifies with Tommy, it is nevertheless with the sense that he will never be able to fully understand what it feels like to be him.

What we encounter in this scene, therefore, is the constitutive impossibility of articulating the experience of one’s own disposability—and by extension, of packaging it for easy delivery to another (as the operations of sympathy would demand). As it turns out, there is a structural reason for this: to speak about oneself as a self-same subject, one must have recourse to the “I”; however, the logic of disposability rejects the disposable one’s claim to this subject-pronoun. This fundamental contradiction is the reason why Tommy’s words are “jumbled,” delivered as an “uninterrupted” onslaught that falls somewhere on the continuum between an animal howl and human speech. And any

43 Another such moment (though a less intense one than the scene of Tommy’s scream) can be found in the wake of Ruth’s failure to track down her own possible, and in her subsequent attribution of it to the fact that she, along with her friends, are “modelled from trash” (Ishiguro 166).

44 Jennings makes a related point about “[t]he moral tension of Ishiguro’s novel,” which he locates “in the tension between the individual senses of self-identity and self-worth of human beings who see themselves as persons, on the one hand, and the reality of a system and situation of power that uses them merely as bodies, on the other” (18).

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attempt to narrate oneself as an object of disposability necessarily comes up against this contradiction in terms. How does one tell the story of disposable life from the inside out, if those trapped within the framework of disposability are denied recourse to the self, the “I” that would enable them to assert their own value in the face of a world that literally reduces them to their constituent parts?

Kathy’s story is not, so to speak, the story of a clone who awakens to her own disposability. That would be Tommy’s story, if such a story were possible to tell. And indeed, we find the shadow of Tommy’s story in the novel’s title, which asks to be understood not just as the song that plays such an important role for Kathy in the novel, but also as a hidden reference to the scene of Tommy’s scream. There too, we encounter the imperative “never let me go,” this time in Kathy’s account that “we stood together like that, at the top of that field, for what seemed like ages, not saying anything, just holding each other, while the wind kept blowing and blowing at us, tugging our clothes, and for a moment, it seemed like we were holding onto each other because that was the only way to stop us being swept away into the night” [Ishiguro 274].) Kathy’s story, on the other hand, is a retrospective account of those things that constitute her, in her own eyes, as a subject—community belonging, tortured love, her own most cherished memories. Hers is a story of disavowal, a story that, in her own relation to it, at least, leaves the workings of disposability firmly intact.

Consequently, if Tommy’s scream breaks through the subdued, measured tone that characterizes Kathy’s narration, its effect is not just to expose disposability for what it is, but also to unravel the fabric that, in the world of the novel, weaves disposability together—the narrative of progress that provides its justification. As Miss Emily explains it to Kathy and Tommy, they and the other donors are necessary to the

45 Here I mean to signal (eventually) that the reader’s relation to the logic of disposability is different from Kathy’s relation to the logic of disposability.
advancement of humanity: “There was no way to reverse the process. How can you ask a world that has come to regard cancer as curable, how can you ask such a world to put away that cure, to go back to the dark days? There was no going back” (Ishiguro 263). To put it in terms of Freud’s framework, therefore: in *Never Let Me Go*, the clones are the category of beings upon whose backs human civilization has elevated itself; it is via the clones that humans in the novel have “distinguish[ed] [their] lives from those of [their] animal ancestors” (Freud, *Civilization* 36). In light of all this, therefore, Tommy’s animalistic scream haunts us because it gets at the heart not just of what civilization has wrought, but of what civilization itself has become: a carefully contained, sanitized realm that organizes and perpetrates the most atrocious forms of violence as efficiently and invisibly as possible and then passes them off as the ever-upward trajectory of human progress.

### 3.4 Ishiguro’s Uncanny Narration

If this novel works to expose and undo the logic of disposability, then it does so not, as Shameem Black suggests, by re-entrenching our basis for sympathizing with Ishiguro’s clones,46 since this would bring us back to the problematic paradigm of extending ethical consideration to the other on the basis of its likeness to ourselves. In fact, both *Cloud Atlas* and *Never Let Me Go* imply that the logic of sympathy must be fundamentally flawed if it allows the figure of the clone to be rendered disposable. These

46 In her article, Shameem Black argues that Ishiguro leaves empathy in place in the novel, but expands it to make room for that which is replicated and inhuman—namely, the clone: “…Ishiguro’s novel offers an aesthetic based on cloning that works in opposition to the predatory “creativity” suffered by its characters. While discourses skeptical of humanist empathy have encoded gestures of refusal into the structure of their narrative, *Never Let Me Go* declines to abandon the possibility of empathy through art. Using stylistic characteristics of repetition and replication, Ishiguro expresses a solidarity with the students more forceful than any act of liberal empathy in the novel. His own inhuman style offers what Hailsham’s humanist art cannot” (798). Black’s account of the novel’s posthumanist version of empathy is as follows: “Yet despite the repudiation of humanist empathy, we are not allowed to give up on the empathetic potential of art….We come to value Kathy’s voice not in spite of her affiliation with automata—her role as a ‘speaking clock’—but because of such seemingly inhuman characteristics that bespeak her life as simulacrum. As she illuminates the aspects of our own lives that are less than fully human, identifying with Kathy generates a new aesthetics of empathy for a posthumanist age.” (803)
novels ask: if it is possible to deny ethical consideration to a being who is literally an identical copy of ourselves, then what promise does the sympathetic imagination any longer hold for us? Instead, I posit that *Never Let Me Go* shows us that what we need in order to take on the problem of disposability is a narrative aesthetic rooted in the experience of the uncanny. This would require reformulating the stories we tell about disposable life not so they become ever more comfortable and familiar to us, but rather deconstructing (and reassembling) the reading experience so that we, the “consumers” of these narratives, are rendered ever more alien to ourselves.

To begin, therefore, I propose that in *Never Let Me Go*, we track the clone as a figure of Freud’s uncanny, as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar”—in this case, ourselves (Freud, “The Uncanny” 220).

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47 With respect to the questions, “Is it still possible, the novel asks, to subscribe to the Romantic myth that literature can somehow redeem us? Does art have a value beyond the merely utilitarian …?” (Whitehead 63), I offer up uncanny narration as an answer. Whitehead gives us something else: “I argue that Ishiguro does not provide a single (or simple) answer to the valence of art in a bioconsumerist society. Although Kathy places belief in the notion that art can save her, this premise is revealed to be a false faith. Ishiguro also implies that any politics or ethics based on empathy and identification is problematic in its assumption of a receptive audience or listener. Yet the novel, it seems, cannot altogether abandon hope in the literary enterprise: for all of the potential pitfalls and problems, telling stories does enable us to relate ourselves to others and to begin to articulate, however tentatively, a language of care; and it can also provide a displaced version of our own social environment that confronts us not only with relations of empathy but also with less comfortable questions of implication and complicity” (63–64). It strikes me that while there are resonances between my project and Whitehead’s, hers remains open-ended in its articulation; it begs the question, What, exactly is this “language of care” that the novel settles upon? In the conclusion of her piece, Whitehead endeavors to develop this notion, but still leaves us without any clear sense of what the right kind of “care” might look like: “To be a ‘good carer,’ I have suggested, might involve an ability to see beyond the immediate needs of those who are closest to us, to balance their requirements against those of others in the complex entanglement of human relations. Arguably we, like Kathy and Tommy, should be caught between our desire to hold on and an ability to let go; we should care, but perhaps not too possessively or too exclusively. Reading ethically, Ishiguro implies, requires an engagement with care, but also an awareness of its limits and its limitations” (81). How do we balance the “near” and the “far”? What does it mean to “care,” but “not too possessively or too exclusively”? 48 In his work on the uncanny, Freud arrives at his definition of the term via both an etymological examination of the convergence of the terms *heimlich* (“homely” or “native” [“The Uncanny” 220]) and *unheimlich* (“everything is unheimlich that ought to have remained secret and has come to light” [“The Uncanny” 225]) and an analysis of the kinds of experiences that produce the sensation of the uncanny. Chief among these are “the phenomenon of the ‘double’” ("The Uncanny" 234), the “factor of involuntary repetition” (“The Uncanny” 237), as happens when one unintentionally encounters the same name, number, or situation over and over again ("The
This is a problem that Martin Puchner touches on, pinpointing the reader’s discomfort with the novel’s clone narrator to a quality of her voice that “hovers, uncannily, on the edge of the human” (Puchner 36). For Puchner, this unsettling quality is traceable to Kathy’s status as “a manufactured creature”; if her voice is “uncanny,” it is because it “captures the disturbing mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar characteristic of nonhuman automata and doubles, to which Sigmund Freud first attributed the term” (Puchner 36). In other words, Puchner’s account of the uncanny quality of the clones in *Never Let Me Go* turns on the fact that they are clones—that they are doubles of their human originals.

In my reading, the students are not necessarily rendered uncanny by virtue of their status as clones; after all, we never encounter their human originals in the novel, so as far as we, the readers, are concerned, the clones are the only versions of themselves on offer. What matters is not that the students are doubles, but rather that they are conscripted into society’s organ-replacement scheme without their consent. It is this fact that brings us back to the psychic roots of the uncanny as it manifests itself in the figure of “the double.” That is, within the world of *Never Let Me Go*, the clones are the upshot of mankind’s attempt to negotiate its anxieties about death and the unanswerable question of what comes after. Having recourse to the work of Otto Rank, Freud describes how such a struggle works itself out through the figure of the double:

Uncanny” (238), and presentiments or wishes that come to be fulfilled suddenly and without explanation (“The Uncanny” 239-240). 49 In other words, if we saw a clone in the real world, we would find it uncanny; but simply knowing that Kathy H and her friends are clones, within the frame of the text, doesn’t produce this effect. Freud also marks this difference between the uncanny in real life and the uncanny in literature, observing: “The uncanny as it is depicted in literature, in stories and imaginative productions, merits in truth a separate discussion. Above all, it is a much more fertile province than the uncanny in real life, for it contains the whole of the latter and something more besides, something that cannot be found in real life. The contrast between what has been repressed and what has been surmounted cannot be transposed on to the uncanny in fiction without profound modification; for the realm of phantasy depends for its effect on the fact that its content is not submitted to reality-testing. The somewhat paradoxical result is that *in the first place a great deal that is not uncanny in fiction would be so if it happened in real life; and in the second place that there are many more means of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life*” (“The Uncanny” 249).
… the ‘double’ was originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an ‘energetic denial of the power of death’ … and probably the ‘immortal’ soul was the first ‘double’ of the body … Such ideas, however, have sprung from the soil of unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism which dominates the mind of the child and of primitive man. But when this stage has been surmounted, the ‘double’ reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death. (“The Uncanny” 235)

In *Never Let Me Go*, the clone becomes the terrain upon which mankind’s struggle to control that which is beyond its control is inscribed. That is, clones have become real-life incarnations of the “energetic denial of the power of death”; here, organ-donor clones literally hold death at bay for their human organ-recipients. At the same time, these disposable beings also serve as “the uncanny harbinger of death”—they are walking, talking reminders of the fact that everyone is marching steadily toward death—some just faster than others. Finally, more than anything else, the clones stand in as a reminder to the novel’s human population that it has betrayed its humanity in order to extend its life span.50 As Miss Emily explains to Kathy and Tommy: “The world didn’t want to be reminded how the donation programme really worked. They didn’t want to think about you students, or about the conditions you were brought up in. In other words, my dears, they wanted you back in the shadows” (Ishiguro 264-65). To put it another way: the clones are the walking dead through which civilization has shored up the value of those lives that count as properly “human.” But for the novel’s humans to acknowledge this to themselves would threaten the precarious foundation upon which their conception of their own humanity—that which distinguishes them as human—is built.

This paradoxical position that the clones occupy—as both bearers of life and harbinger of death—points to a deeper duality that underwrites their role in the novel.

Jennings makes a similar point: “Ishiguro reminds us of the terrible cost of dehumanization and oppression that all of us, not only those who are oppressed, must pay... The recipients of body parts from the stockroom of the donor caste in this society gain enhanced health at the price of emaciated meaning. They may live longer thanks to their biopower, but they will not humanly prosper” (19).
Namely, understood in relation to the human world that has produced them, Ishiguro’s clones are 1) the figures who bear the brunt of our predatory instincts, beings we’ve rendered disposable under the guise of advancing our own civilization, but also, 2) projections of our better selves—or rather, embodiments of our nostalgia for a better kind of human, of the human as humane,\(^{51}\) that’s been lost somewhere along the way in our steady ascent up the ladder of “civilization.”

The uncanny aesthetics of Never Let Me Go, however, extends beyond the figure of the clone and its role as the canvas upon which the “proper human” projects both his best and worst selves. The uncanny is embedded in the very form of the novel, which the reader experiences as a journey of repeated return to the same events, but always with a difference. Freud’s experiential account of the uncanny proves useful here:

As I was walking, one hot summer afternoon, through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy which was unknown to me, I found myself in a quarter of whose character I could not long remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the small houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a time without enquiring my way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence was now beginning to excite attention. I hurried away once more, only to arrive by another détour at the same place yet a third time. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as uncanny, and I was glad enough to find myself back at the piazza I had left a short while before, without any further voyages of discovery. Other situations which have in common with my adventure an unintended recurrence of the same situation, but which differ radically from it in other respects, also result in the same feeling of helplessness and of uncanniness. (“The Uncanny” 237)

In ambulatory terms, therefore, the uncanny is a matter of taking a different path to arrive, unintentionally, at the same destination, without any clear sense of what its import might be. And yet, the fact of returning to it unwittingly, as though automatically, suggests that there must be some significance attached to it, likely one that’s been repressed. The task of psychoanalysis in this case is to unearth this

\(^{51}\) This version of the “human as humane” can be traced to society’s fantasy that the clones are willing “donors” who offer up their organs selflessly for the betterment of humankind.
significance, to dig up the signified that lurks beneath the signifier(s). This, in a way, has long been the task of the novel reader as well: that is, to produce a symptomatic reading that combs the surface of the text in order to get at something deeper that lies beneath.\footnote{Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus offer an alternative to symptomatic reading in their article, “Surface Reading: an Introduction.”}

And on one level, \textit{Never Let Me Go} certainly fosters this impulse by presenting the reader with a series of returns to the same events, each time told with a difference.\footnote{So, for instance, Kathy relates, “And for days afterwards I remember how we made Marge’s life an utter misery; in fact, that incident I mentioned before, the night we held Marge’s face to the dorm window to make her look at the woods, that was all part of what came afterwards” (Ishiguro 68). This is what Rebecca L. Walkowitz calls “the trope of the echo in Ishiguro’s work: the way that later scenes or phrases will sound like, or almost repeat, earlier scenes or phrases, and the way these repetitions will in retrospect seem to have preceded or motivated what appeared to be the originals” (223). While I agree that Ishiguro’s uncanny narration might be read simultaneously as narration that “echoes” itself, I disagree with Walkowitz’s subsequent assertion that “Ishiguro uses comparative devices like the echo to introduce complex patterns of world circulation” (223). There seems to me to be little basis for drawing a connection between the formal workings of the echo and overarching patterns of global literary circulation.} In such cases, whether or not the reader experiences it as uncanny, the mere act of repetition gestures toward a latent significance that, presumably, it is the reader’s task to unearth. At the same time, the novel structurally resists the kind of reading that allows for easy access to the signifieds that we assume lurk beneath the signifiers. For one, Kathy’s is a narrative perpetually deferred in the favor of its eventual elucidation. For instance, in her reflections on the enigmatic Miss Lucy, Kathy observes: “…chances are, at the time, I noticed all these things without knowing what on earth to make of them. And if these incidents now seem full of significance and all of a piece, it’s probably because I’m looking at them in the light of what came later…” (Ishiguro 78).\footnote{Of this dynamic, Jerng observes, “Instead of giving us a model of development and self-realization based on an end-point as the culmination of a life, Ishiguro’s narration more carefully imitates a life that only half-understands the significance of certain events and that creates ways of understanding—like the joke—that disavow knowledge. In other words, there is no total, whole experience or memory that provides the end-point for constituting personhood” (385). While I agree with his observation that Ishiguro resists giving us a narrative “of development and self-realization,” I disagree with Jerng’s assertion that in Kathy, Ishiguro gives us a character who “only half-understands,” who is “unable to traverse the gap between what she knew and understood in the past and what she knows and understands in the present” (385). It strikes me,}
this is Kathy's account of her own coming-into-knowledge as she comes of age, there is, in fact, no better summary of the reader's experience of reading Never Let Me Go than this. That is, in our relation to the text, we, too, find ourselves in a world of signifiers without immediate access to their signifie
ds. From the first page, we encounter signifiers—words like “donor,” “carer,” and “completion”—that are divorced from the meanings we normally attribute to them. Our understanding of what they mean within the framework of the novel only comes later, as a consequence of reading on.

To put it another way, if Freud’s psychoanalytic project is to dig for the signified that hides beneath the signifier, then Ishiguro’s project is to delay access to the signified in order to insist on the experience of the signifier as such. In a way, Ishiguro’s novel gives narrative form to Derrida’s call for “[a] becoming-literary of the literal”:

…despite several attempts made by Freud and certain of his successors, a psychoanalysis of literature respectful of the originality of the literary signifier has not yet begun, and this is surely not an accident. Until now, only the analysis of literary signifie
ds, that is, nonliterary signifie
d meanings, has been undertaken. (“Freud and the Scene of Writing” 230, original emphasis).

On a first reading, Never Let Me Go delivers something akin to what Derrida envisions: a form of readerly engagement that insists on the primacy of the signifier over and above the signified. In the novel, however, what this becoming-literary of the literal reveals is not just “the originality of the literary signifier,” but also its world-making potential. In the novel, signifiers have been divorced from what they once signified (i.e., a “donor” in Never Let Me Go no longer gives his organs of his own free will) and repurposed by those in power. This is a world in which words don’t just represent, but more importantly, shape reality; they demarcate the limits of individual experience and give life its embodied form. At the same time, if the world within the novel has taken old signifiers

on the contrary, that the gap that exists between the past and the present in Kathy’s narration is not a marker of Kathy’s failure to reconcile the two, but rather an integral element of Ishiguro’s uncanny narration.
and attached them to new signifieds that serve to re-entrench existing power relations, then on a formal level, in its relation to the reader, the novel counteracts this dynamic. Specifically, it produces a reading experience that takes seriously the signifier without insisting on tethering it to a signified. Tommy’s primal scream, for example, is the ultimate signifier detached from a signified; if it resonates with us, it is not because it means something, but rather because, in its base, raw state, it simply means means.

The novel’s insistence on preserving this gap between the signifier and the signified ultimately brings us back to the uncanny. Freud’s repeated return to the same square in an Italian red light district is uncanny not just because of the “unintended recurrence of the same situation, but which differ[s] radically from it in other respects,” but also because the underlying significance of this “repetition of the same thing” eludes his grasp (“The Uncanny” 237). In other words, an experience presents itself as uncanny only as long as its latent meaning is not completely grasped, but is instead only fleetingly gestured toward. It is that which is familiar yet unfamiliar, without the subject knowing why.

In Never Let Me Go, there is one “landmark” that almost precisely mimics the experience of Freud’s ambulatory uncanny: the rhubarb patch that “was out of bounds” to the students at Hailsham (Ishiguro 202), but which becomes a point of perpetual return in Kathy’s narrative after she and her friends have left Hailsham and dispersed. Most significantly, the rhubarb patch serves as the basis for a confrontation between Kathy and Ruth when Kathy alludes to it and Ruth pretends she doesn’t understand the reference. In its first incarnation, Kathy narrates the event as follows:

When she put on her puzzled look, I abandoned whatever point I’d been trying to make and said: “Ruth, there’s no way you’ve forgotten. So don’t give me that.”

Perhaps if I hadn’t pulled her up so sharply—perhaps if I’d just made a joke of it and carried on—she’d have seen how absurd it was and laughed. But because I’d snapped at her, Ruth glared back and said:
“What does it matter anyway? What’s the rhubarb patch got to do with any of this? Just get on with what you were saying.” (Ishiguro 189-90, emphasis mine)

Referenced by Kathy in the context of the new arrivals at the cottages, this first account of the argument seems almost like an afterthought—a mere illustration of the fact that “Ruth kept pretending to forget things about Hailsham” in order to fit in with the other students (Ishiguro 189). But shortly thereafter, Kathy revisits this scene, this time situating it in the aftermath of Ruth’s derisive treatment of Tommy’s drawings, in which she implicates Kathy as well. What’s important here, however, is not just that Kathy brings us back to the rhubarb patch; it’s that it’s fundamentally the same story, told with a few marked differences:

And that was when Ruth looked at me and said: “Why? What was wrong with that?”

*It was just the way she said it*, suddenly so false even an onlooker, if there’d been one, would have seen through it. I sighed with irritation and said:

> “Ruth, don’t give me that. There’s no way you’ve forgotten. You know that route was out of bounds.”

Maybe it was a bit sharp, the way I said it. Anyway, Ruth didn’t back down. She continued pretending to remember nothing, and I got all the more irritated. And that was when she said:

> “What does it matter anyway? What’s the rhubarb patch got to do with anything? Just get on with what you were saying.” (Ishiguro 202, emphasis mine)

The reason Kathy’s second account of the rhubarb-patch argument is so unsettling is not just because it is a repetition of the first, with a difference. It is the fact that this difference isn’t intended to offer up a new perspective on the encounter, but is simply an attempt at re-telling it verbatim. What we experience in the second instance, however, is a re-arranging of the order of the words we were given in the first telling (denoted in the passages above by italics), as well as a different account of how the argument begins; in the first telling, it is Ruth’s “puzzled look” that sets Kathy off, whereas in the second it is the way that Ruth asks what was wrong with cutting through the rhubarb patch.
The question that arises here is, why tell the same story twice, each time with only small differences in word choice and sentence structure? And given that these two accounts of the same event overlap in general, but not in their particulars, where does that leave us? Must we choose one over the other? Must we attempt to reconcile the two and cut our losses? In the end, what is Kathy’s narrative good for if it so conspicuously contradicts itself (never mind the extent to which it is contradicted by the novel’s other characters)?

It is here, I suggest, that understanding the readerly experience as uncanny proves useful. Like the different routes that Freud takes to unwittingly arrive back in the same place, the two passages I’ve cited above add up to more than the sum of their parts. Taken together, they point to something significant without pinpointing the signified; while the rhubarb patch is the landmark that draws attention to itself in Kathy’s narrative, what precisely it signifies for Kathy, over and above her childhood attachments, always remains just out of the reader’s reach. At the same time, it is the individual differences in these renderings of the same scene that produce in the reader a vague sense of the uncanny, of having been here before, but not quite. In each case, however, the signifiers that Kathy employs to gesture toward the buried signified are different. And this matters. This matters because if we don’t know which of the two passages above is the “true” rendering of the event, then the story’s inescapable duality serves to deconstruct the dichotomies we take for granted—primary/secondary, original/unoriginal, authentic/inauthentic—and to undercut the value we attach to the first term of each pair. In shifting our focus from the signified to the signifier, the text asks that we reformulate the reading experience so that we bring to the forefront not our search for the meaning of a text, but rather our experience of reading it. And an uncanny reading experience that resists the substitutability of the signified for the signifier, that insists on the significance of the signifier as such, also has something to offer a world in
which clone lives are designed to be taken and substituted for original, human ones. What it offers is proof that irreducible difference need not be reduced, re-absorbed, or otherwise assimilated: it is there to be attended to. And if this experience in turn unsettles us, even for a moment, then so much the better.

Because within the worlds of *Cloud Atlas* and *Never Let Me Go*, unoriginal life is produced to be disposable life, the work that these novels do to unveil and undercut the logic of disposability necessarily turns on the ways in which they engage the reader on the basis of her self-identity, of her experience of herself as unitary and original. In both texts, we are not just asked to come to terms with the radical other—here, the exploited clones Sonmi and Kathy H—but are asked to come to terms with the radical other by coming to terms with ourselves as radically other. Both novels achieve this by staging recursive reading practices that project us beyond the present moment of narration, into a future moment of narration that unsettles our experience of the narrative we have already consumed—the narrative that at this point is already in the past. In other words, we, as readers, are split, doubled, tripled, whatever the case may be: we are not just the present version of ourselves engaged in the act of reading the narrative before us, but are also the future version of ourselves that we are promised we will become, and also, once we arrive there, a revised version of our past selves, of who we were when we were engaging in the then-present, now-past act of reading.

The workings of the structural uncanny in both texts, whereby the reader is implicated in a kind of self-doubling that brings her back over the same well-trod territory, as Shameem Black likewise insists (799-802), but always with a difference, 

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* 55 Black’s point is similar to mine (see the next footnote), but we arrive at our conclusions in very different ways. I differ from Black in that I arrive at my conclusion not via an interest in “an aesthetic based on cloning” or its relation to the kind of “predatory ‘creativity’” that Hailsham encourages in its students (798). While Black argues that the novel “models its style on the process of cloning” (799), my work is focused on the formal uncanny that shapes the readerly experience; in other words, I’m not interested in the idea of the copy (as we find in cloning), but rather in the readerly experience of repetition with a difference.
suggest that to be unoriginal is not to be in excess, superfluous, disposable. Rather, these novels offer up the paradigm of re-reading in order to call into question the ways in which we dichotomize the categories of “original” and “unoriginal,” attributing value to the former while denying it to the latter. This paradigm models on a formal level what it would mean to do away with the differential value we attach to these terms, to reject the weight we place on primacy and authenticity, and to interrogate the ways in which these terms shape the world we inhabit and our relation to it. That is, if we as readers cannot determine which of our readerly experiences carries more weight—the present, or the future, or the soon-to-be-revised past—if we discover that each of these is both distinct from and inextricably bound up with the others, then we might come to call into question our need to blindly set a premium on whatever came first, solely on the basis of its primacy. If we, as readers, are necessarily constituted as re-readers for whom the act of reading becomes the site of our own splitting, our own doubling, then we are forced to ask ourselves: by what logic can we continue to attribute value to our “original” reading experiences over our secondary, or tertiary, or even infinitely

56 Shameem Black makes a similar point in response to another critic, Emily Apter’s, work: “Abandoning the need for fidelity to the original, in Ishiguro’s world, would mean two paradoxical things. It would free the students from their imperative to serve the biomedical needs of their own originals, thus liberating them from subservience to the category of “human,” while it would also allow them to celebrate openly their own identity as copy, as inhuman” (Black 802). While I align myself with the first part of the paradox she pinpoints, since it is the logical upshot of breaking down the original/unoriginal binary, I diverge from Black’s analysis of the celebratory potentiality of the clones’ self-recognition as copies. As I note earlier in this chapter, the fact that the clones are copies of “real” human beings somewhere out there in England seems to me to be almost inconsequential to their predicament in the novel; what matters is not their status as copy or original, human or inhuman, but rather the fact that they have been a priori produced to be disposable. Rebecca Walkowitz also makes a point that resonates with Black’s valuation of the copy: “Seeing clones as humans is not the point. Instead, we are urged to see humans as clones. That is, we are urged to see that even humans produced through biological reproduction are in some ways copies; and that human culture, full of cassette tapes and television programs and rumors and paperbacks of Daniel Deronda, is also unoriginal. It is by seeing the likeness between human originality and the novel’s unoriginal objects—Kathy H., the cassette, the song, the television program, the narration—that we recognize the large networks of approximation and comparison in which individuality functions” (226). Unlike Walkowitz, however, I am not interested in “the likeness between human originality and the novel’s unoriginal objects” because at the heart of my inquiry is not the distinction (or similarity) between original and unoriginal, but rather, a particular form of reading that undoes the need for distinguishing between these.
“unoriginal” ones? By the same token, if we take this question about the form of the novel and address it to its content, we will find that we are no longer justified in valuating our own, so-called “original” lives at the cost of other, supposedly “unoriginal” ones. This is the first step in seeing the clones as Ishiguro’s novel would want us to—not as doubles of other, more valuable lives somewhere out there, not as substitutable organ banks that cater to the novel’s “real” human population, but rather as signifiers that signify only themselves.

3.5 Disposability and the Return of the Repressed

Through its centermost narrative, *Cloud Atlas* brings us full circle, all the way from Goose’s metaphorical cannibalism in “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing” to the Kona barbarians’ more literal cannibalistic impulses in “Sloosha’s Cossin’ An’ Ev’rythin’ After.” The narrative begins with Zachry, now the last of the Valleysmen, recounting the scene of his father’s killing: “The Kona chief…smilin’ back at his painted bros, got out his blade an’ opened Pa’s throat ear to ear. / Nothin’ so ruby as Pa’s ribbonin’ blood I ever seen. The chief licked Pa’s blood off the steel” (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* 241).

What is significant here, besides the primal bloodlust that is evinced in the act of killing, is the fact that Zachry’s story is not so much the account of a murder as it is that of a hunt. Indeed, there is an eerie symmetry to Zachry’s account of stalking a “lardbird” for dinner only to become sport for the Kona himself: “…the hunter was the hunted. The nearest Kona was runnin’ after me, others was leapin’ on their horses an’ laughin’ with the sport. Now panickin’ wings your foot but it muddies your thinkin’ too, so I rabbited back to Pa” (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* 240; emphasis mine).

At the heart of the novel, in a time and place that is both after civilization (after the fall of the world depicted in Sonmi’s narrative) and before it (before “the two fundamental taboos of totemism,” “[m]urder and incest” have been re-established within the primitive society that remains [Freud, *Totem and Taboo* 143, 143fn2]), human
life has been thrown, forcefully and unsparingly, back into the animal realm out of which it emerged. Here, survival really is the provenance of the fittest, and neither agriculture nor religion saves the Valleysmen from extermination at the hands of the Kona, who become, in the novel’s final narrative, the actualization of the first narrative’s dark mantra: “The weak are meat, the strong do eat” (Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* 503). The narrative, in other words, reads as the triumph of interpersonal predation, as Mitchell’s re-imagining of what “the human” would look like without the censoring-mechanism of “civilization” to keep him in check.

This fall from grace is the second Fall of man, not from heaven to earth, but from the comforts of civilization back “down” to the state of nature; through it, man is assimilated back into the food chain from which he has so long kept himself apart. This, of course, is a straightforward reading of the last narrative of Mitchell’s text: with its degraded English that is the provenance of a dismantled civilization, “Sloosha’s Crossin’” confronts us, on the level of both form and content, with the apocalyptic endpoint of the novel’s—and seemingly, also, our own—trajectory through time. Indeed, because the first four narratives move us through moments that we recognize as constitutive of our own history, Sonmi’s and Zachry’s narratives ask, in their turn, to be understood as windows into our future.

And yet, there is another way to read “Sloosha’s Crossin’,,” this time in relation to the Sonmi story-arc that encloses it. Tugging on the psychoanalytic thread that runs through this chapter, I want to ask: what would it mean to read the novel’s central section not as its own stand-alone narrative, but rather as a dream—and specifically, as a dream dreamed within (and out of) the world depicted in “An Orison of Sonmi~451”? In other words, what would it mean to understand “Sloosha’s Crossin’,,” with its grim devolution into a primal predacity, in relation to the disposability narrative that we traced in Sonmi’s story?
This is not a gratuitous thought-experiment; indeed, it entails a return to this chapter’s opening epigraph from Freud’s *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen’s Gradiva*—namely, to Freud’s conviction that “creative writers are valuable allies and their evidence is to be prized highly, for they are apt to know a whole host of things between heaven and earth of which our philosophy has not yet let us dream” (8). To put it simply: I am asking, if David Mitchell has dreamed up “Sloosha’s Crossin’” out of Sonmi’s “Orison,” just as he’s dreamed up Sonmi’s “Orison” out of “The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish,” and so forth, all the way back to “The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing,” then what is the “whole host of things” that “Sloosha’s Crossin’” brings into focus when it shines its (very bleak) light back onto “An Orison of Sonmi-451”? If, as Freud argues, “Dreams themselves are among the manifestations of … suppressed material” (*Interpretation of Dreams* 608), then how might Zachry’s narrative, interpreted as a dreamscape that emerges out of Sonmi’s story, help us to trace those things that have been suppressed by and within the world Sonmi inhabits? In other words, what does the waking nightmare that is “Sloosha’s Crossin’,” with its dog-eat-dog struggle for survival, suggest about the tidy, seemingly self-contained disposable-life narrative in the novel’s preceding section?

On the most basic level, I propose, Zachry’s narrative shows us that there is a psychic cost to securing the workings of disposability and, more importantly, to safeguarding the narrative logic that keeps it intact. The cost of disposability, the novel seems to suggest, is the roaring return of all that has been repressed in its service. If, in Sonmi’s “Orison,” disposability works by sanitizing our basest passions and reformulating our most ravenous desires in such a way as to bring them in line with “civilization,” then “Sloosha’s Crossin’” throws the floodgates open so that all that has been re-fashioned and re-channeled and re-incorporated into the social structure of Sonmi’s world is now exposed for what it is—pure, unadorned aggression. In other
words, “Sloosha’s Crossin’” gives narrative form to what had to be repressed to produce
the disposability narrative in Sonmi’s “Orison”; this time, however, the screen of
“civilization” is no longer there to render it palatable.

To put it another way: the after-the-fall world of “Sloosha’s Crossin’” can be
understood as our cultural unconscious writ literal—or rather, writ literary. Bringing
psychoanalysis to bear on Mitchell’s novel shows us that disposability is a way of
negating, on a conscious level, the unconscious recognition that at the heart of our own
nature is predation. If we read “Sloosha’s Crossin’” as a portal into the unconscious of
Sonmi’s “Orison,” therefore, we are confronted with the basic fact that the logic of
disposability most of all seeks to suppress: that in nature, all lives are engaged in the
struggle for survival; in this frame, no life is more naturally disposable than any other.
Disposability, then, is a way of constitutively disavowing, on a conscious level, that
which our unconscious cannot deny57: the originary value of the lives that we have
rendered disposable.

Using psychoanalysis to situate Zachry’s narrative alongside Sonmi’s thus allows
us to read the second “Fall” not just as the apocalyptic endpoint of the historical
trajectory that Mitchell paints (and which we, ourselves, also seem to be following), but
also as the psychic toll we must pay to sustain the operations of disposability. What
we’ve repressed will come back to haunt us, the narrative structure of Cloud Atlas insists.
And we can pan out and take this realization a step further as well: if we read not just
“Sloosha’s Crossin’” as emerging out of Sonmi’s “Orison,” but also Cloud Atlas (and
Never Let Me Go, for that matter) as emerging out of our own present-day cultural
landscape, it becomes clear that the texts themselves, for us, the contemporary readers,
are these hauntings, these uncanny returns of the repressed.

57 In his 1925 essay, “Negation,” Freud posits that while “the content of a repressed image or idea
can make its way into consciousness, on condition that it is negated” (235), “in analysis we never
discover a ‘no’ in the unconscious” (239).
In this chapter, I have proposed that *Cloud Atlas* and *Never Let Me Go* are themselves symptoms of the “pathology of cultural communities” (Freud, *Civilization* 91) that is disposability. But if they are manifestations of the disease, they are also, in the vein of Derrida’s *pharmakon*, its cure. In our world, as in Mitchell’s and Ishiguro’s, disposability masquerades as a given; its narrative is pre-scripted, its choreography precise; it does not venture beyond the stage it has set for itself. If it is to be dismantled, therefore, this must be done not from the outside but from within, by revealing that its apparent organic flow is actually, upon closer examination, comprised of the rigid, jerky movements of an automaton set on autopilot; isolating just one of these will do the trick.

In this chapter, I have argued that such an unmasking of disposability is achieved via the eruption of the literary—through moments of narrative rupture, through the slippage between signifier and signified and its concomitant deferral of “meaning,” and through the infinite proliferation of potential interpretation that is the provenance of uncanny narration—within (and out of) the dominant disposability narratives that underwrite both *Cloud Atlas* and *Never Let Me Go*.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, bringing psychoanalysis to bear on Ishiguro’s and Mitchell’s literary entanglements with disposable life sheds light on the internal negotiations that undergird a logic that purports to be static, stable, timeless. Disposability works by positing, a priori, a dividing line between the lives that matter—the ones that are brought under the umbrella of “civilization”—and the lives that may be disposed of in their service. But reframing disposability as a conscious-level manifestation of a repressed predacity helps us understand it as the product of psychic flux, as an ongoing negotiation between our conscious and unconscious, rather than as an unassailable, always-already foregone conclusion. What the novels in this chapter help us see is that the “dividing line” between the lives that matter and the lives that don’t is never actually simply given to us—but that instead, we participate, over and
over again, in drawing it. What both texts offer via their distinctive forms of uncanny narration is the assurance that it is always possible to draw this line differently in its next iteration—with the end goal being, of course, that we might eventually refuse to draw it at all.
4. After Man, Woman: Rewriting the Human in Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam Trilogy

Humanity is a modernist figure; and this humanity has a generic face, a universal shape. Humanity’s face has been the face of man. Feminist humanity must have another shape, other gestures; but, I believe, we must have feminist figures of humanity. They cannot be man or woman; they cannot be the human as historical narrative has staged that generic universal. Feminist figures cannot, finally, have a name; they cannot be native. Feminist humanity must, somehow, both resist representation, resist literal figuration, and still erupt in powerful new tropes, new figures of speech, new turns of historical possibility.

Donna Haraway, “Ecce Homo, Ain’t (Ar’n’t) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape,” p. 86

To come back to my work: I am trying, as I have already indicated, to go back through the masculine imaginary, to interpret the way it has reduced us to silence, to muteness or mimicry, and I am attempting, from that starting-point and at the same time, to (re) discover a possible space for the feminine imaginary.

Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which is Not One, p. 164

In Cloud Atlas, the transition from Sonmi’s revolution-forging “Orison” to the “Ev’rythin’ After” that follows in its wake registers as a radical break that atomizes and restructures life on every level. Save for the presence of Somni as the Valleysmen’s god in the latter narrative, there is little to mark a sense of historical or narrative continuity between the world before the Fall and “everything [that comes] after” it. Indeed, as “Sloosha’s Crossin’ an’ Ev’rythin’ After” opens, the decimation and debasement of human civilization stretches out before us as a fait accompli; Zachry’s account leaves us with little sense of how civilization might come to radically reconstitute itself anew within a landscape in which humankind has been reduced to a dog-eat-dog struggle for survival.

In this chapter, therefore, I turn to Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy to ask precisely this question—namely, that of how humankind might come to reconfigure itself anew after the apocalypse. Atwood’s trilogy, comprised of the novels Oryx and Crake (2003), The Year of the Flood (2009), and MaddAddam (2013), allows us to grapple
with this question in a way that Cloud Atlas cannot. This is to say that within Atwood’s post-apocalyptic landscape, the form of that “everything after” is left as an open question. Writing from within the space that lies between accounts like Sonmi’s “Orison” and “Sloosha’s Crossin’,” from a moment after the Fall but before a new world order has congealed, Atwood asks how we might remake the world at the end of the world—not least of all in order to remind us that the future, our future, is up for grabs.

Within the MaddAddam series, Atwood’s pre-Fall world bears no small resemblance to the highly technologized, corpocratic regime that dominates the landscape of Sonmi’s “Orison.” In Atwood’s rendering, this is a world (like ours) in which mankind has already driven itself to the brink of extinction and laid waste to the planet in its wake: this is a world in which the humanist “[f]aith in the unique, self-regulating and intrinsically moral powers of human reason” (Braidotti 13) has long since given way to the nightmarish underbelly of free-market capitalism; here, profit

1 As Atwood sets forth, her speculative fiction derives from her extrapolation of events we have already experienced. In her Acknowledgements to Oryx and Crake, Atwood writes, “Deep background was inadvertently supplied by many magazines and newspapers and non-fiction science writers encountered over the years” (376). In the Acknowledgements to The Year of the Flood, she states, “The Year of the Flood is fiction, but the general tendencies and many of the details in it are alarmingly close to fact” (433). And in her Acknowledgments to MaddAddam, Atwood writes, “Although MaddAddam is a work of fiction, it does not include any technologies or biobeings that do not already exist, are not under construction, or are not possible in theory” (393).

2 Rosi Braidotti offers the following account of humanism: “At the start of it all there is He: the classical ideal of ‘Man’, formulated first by Protagoras as ‘the measure of all things’, later renewed in the Italian Renaissance as a universal model and represented in Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man … An ideal of bodily perfection which, in keeping with the classical dictum mens sana in corpore sano, doubles up as a set of mental, discursive, and spiritual values. Together, they uphold a specific view of what is ‘human’ about humanity. Moreover, they assert with unshakable certainty the almost boundless capacity of humans to pursue their individual and collective perfectibility. That iconic image is the emblem of Humanism as a doctrine that combines the biological, discursive and moral expansion of human capabilities into an idea of teleologically ordained, rational progress.” (13). Braidotti describes the move away from anthropocentrism, which takes “man” as the measure and value of all things, so that it is “always one version or another of the human that falsely occupies the space of the universal that functions to exclude what is considered non-human” (Calarco 10), as follows: “whereas [post-humanism] mobilized primarily the disciplinary field of philosophy, history, cultural studies and the classical Humanities in general, the issue of post-anthropocentrism enlists also science and technology studies, new media and digital culture, environmentalism and earth-sciences, bio-genetics, neuroscience and robotics, evolutionary theory, critical legal theory, primatology, animal rights and science fiction” (Braidotti 57-8).
reigns supreme, and humanity is all the poorer for it. This is a world in which pharmaceutical companies produce devastating diseases that drive patients to pay exorbitant sums for the promise of a cure while the brightest scientific minds of the day tacitly engage in a person-cum-pork brand of cannibalism in the company cafeteria (Atwood, *Oryx* 23-24); it is a world in which democracy has given way to corpocracy as citizenship is usurped by allegiance to various warring corporate “Compounds”; and it is a world in which, in a twist worthy of H. G. Wells, socio-economic disparity has split humankind into a super- and sub-strata, with the privileged upper classes confined to gated and secured Compounds and the urban underclasses left to fend for themselves in the toxic “pleeblands.” Against this backdrop of capitalist enterprise run amuck, the series’ mad-scientist figure Crake has precipitated the end of the world by engineering both a worldwide pandemic designed to eradicate mankind and a new and improved species of human, the Crakers, meant to take its place.

In bringing us to the apocalyptic endpoint of the world that we’ve ushered into being, however, the *MaddAddam* trilogy does more than just confront us with the planetary-scale havoc we have wreaked. It also pushes us to imagine how a world that’s been radically undone by man, that “anthro” of the “Anthropocene” (the geological epoch we currently inhabit, and which bears our name) might come to reconstitute itself anew. To borrow Donna Haraway’s words, the *MaddAddam* trilogy asks: What will it take to “[reset] the stage for possible…futures” (Haraway, “Ecce Homo” 86) so

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3 Researchers who grow spare human organs inside genetically engineered pigs (“pigoons”).

4 There is a sense that there is a biological component to the division between the people of the pleeblands and the Compounds. As Jimmy observes when he ventures into the former: “Asymmetries, deformities: the faces here were a far cry from the regularity of the Compounds. There were even bad teeth. He was gawking” (Atwood, *Oryx* 288).

5 Dipesh Chakrabarty gives an account of the logic that underwrites the designation of “the Anthropocene,” observing that “Now that humans—thanks to our numbers, the burning of fossil fuel, and other related activities—have become a geological agent on the planet, some scientists have proposed that we recognize the beginning of a new geological era, one in which humans act as a main determinant of the environment of the planet. The name they have coined for this new geo-logical age is Anthropocene” (209).
that the posthuman that emerges after the Fall will be a different beast from the human of its past?

While critics like Gerry Canavan have aptly proposed that the series’ Craker storyline might be understood as a tongue-in-cheek lens through which we might begin to imagine possible ways of reformulating our ways of being in the world, with an eye toward averting the kind of apocalyptic future upon which the trilogy opens, in this chapter I take a different tack. Specifically, I argue that if Atwood’s works chronicle the devastation that humanity has wrought, this is not just to offer up an indictment of the human species as a whole. Rather, the MaddAddam novels home in on the explicitly

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Canavan argues that “the Crakers allegorize the radical transformation of both society and subjectivity that will be necessary in order to save the planet … giving us a sideways, funhouse-mirror, only-kidding glimpse at the kinds of revolutionary changes that will be required to make the future better than the present” (152). And indeed, against the background of devastation that mankind has wrought, it is clear that Atwood offers up the Crakers as an over-the-top portrait-in-relief of mankind. Designed by Crake to be the “perfect human being[s]” (Atwood, Year 305), the Crakers are beautiful physical specimens, vegetarian literalists who understand neither Snowman’s appetite for animal flesh nor his flights of fancy into figurative language. They are, in Crake’s eyes, “an improved model” of humanity (Atwood, Year 414):

What had been altered was nothing less than the ancient primate brain. Gone were its destructive features, the features responsible for the world’s current illnesses. For instance, racism…had been eliminated…the Paradise people simply did not register skin color. Hierarchy could not exist among them, because they lacked the neural complexes that would have created it. Since they were neither hunters nor agriculturalists hungry for land, there was no territoriality: the king-of-the-castle hard-wiring that had plagued humanity had, in them, been unwired. They ate nothing but leaves and grass and roots and a berry or two; thus their foods were plentiful and always available. Their sexuality was not a constant torment to them, not a cloud of turbulent hormones: they came into heat at regular intervals, as did most mammals other than man.

In fact, as there would never be anything for these people to inherit, there would be no family trees, no marriages, and no divorces. They were perfectly adjusted to their habitat, so they would never have to create houses or tools or weapons or, for that matter, clothing. They would have no need to invent any harmful symbolisms, such as kingdoms, icons, gods, or money. Best of all, they recycled their own excrement. (Atwood, Oryx 305)

What this inventory makes clear is not just that the Crakers are “better” than the mankind they are intended to replace; more importantly, they lack all the traits that have converged in mankind to bring the human species to the brink of extinction. Indeed, Crake has virtually guaranteed that his “progeny” will never produce anything akin to the Anthropocene: they will never hunt other species to extinction, as humans did in the last ice age; they will not clear or irrigate land for agricultural purposes, as our species began to do some eight thousand years ago; and they will beget neither an Industrial Revolution nor a Global Acceleration of the kind that took hold in the mid-twentieth century and has since continued unabated (Steffen et al.). The Crakers, in other words, don’t have it in them to alter the planet on a global scale, much less to bring about its end, as mankind has done. On the contrary, these naked, herbivorous prototypes of a retooled humanity, whose members have been designed to coexist in harmony with the earth and each other, are uniquely suited, more than humans ever were, to occupy the earth and serve as its guardians.
masculinist logic that subtends mankind’s various forms of striving in the Anthropocene: man’s thirst to accumulate capital, his drive to outdo his fellows, his determination to appropriate for himself the natural resources of the world he inhabits. These modes of striving, in turn, give rise to an ever-widening gap between the lives to which profits accrue and the disposable lives (the ill, the impoverished, the non-human and the not-quite-human7) that may be bled dry (literally and figuratively) in their service.

As the MaddAddam trilogy renders it, the divide between these categories is figured most visibly along gender lines, so that, in a throwback to Atwood’s 1986 dystopian novel The Handmaid’s Tale, it is “woman” who becomes the trilogy’s figure of disposable life par excellence. In what follows, therefore, I argue that for Atwood, undoing the logic and operations of disposability will require that we reconfigure our conception of the human by bringing “an ethics of sexual difference” (to borrow the title of Luce Irigaray’s 1984 work) to bear upon it. This chapter accordingly asks what it means to read that “anthropo” (“man”) at the heart of the “Anthropocene” not just as a marker of species8 (i.e., as “mankind”), but also as a marker of gender (i.e., as “man,” as opposed to “woman”). Taking a cue from Haraway’s declaration that “Humanity’s face has been the face of man” (“Ecce Homo” 86), I show how Atwood’s trilogy, which is about the downfall of mankind, necessarily doubles as a canvas for figuring “woman.” Indeed, the question of “woman” is built into the very structure of the series: if Oryx and Crake is a “Last Man” narrative, with Jimmy the only apparent human survivor (Canavan 140), then Atwood’s second installment, The Year of the Flood, gives us a “last

7 Not least of all, the novels depict a world in which humans have rendered other species disposable. Alongside the plethora of genetically engineered inter-species hybrids that have been designed with human utility in mind (i.e., pet rakunks, guard wolvogs, and organ-growing pigoons), we encounter in Oryx and Crake the computer-game Extinctathon, which is effectively a database of all the planet’s now-extinct species.

8 For Dipesh Chakrabarty, it is the category of “species” that is the “figure of the universal that … arises from a shared sense of [the] catastrophe” of climate change (221, 222). In his essay “The Climate of History,” he has recourse to the concept of species-being to ask how the looming endpoint of the Anthropocene forces us to reformulate our understanding of what it means to be human.
women” narrative that serves as its counterpoint. And if MaddAddam’s task is to bring these two narrative strands together, then the trilogy as a whole insists that any possibility of imagining a post-human future will depend not just on situating humankind as one species among many, but on unsettling mankind’s primacy in relation to womankind as well.

This chapter accordingly locates in Atwood’s trilogy a deconstructive logic that seeks to undo the man/woman binary (in which man is the dominant term, and woman its subordinate counterpart) through the lens of sexual difference. Responding to what Irigaray terms “the sexual indifference that underlies the truth of any science, the logic of every discourse” (This Sex 69, emphasis original), Atwood makes a case for seeing “two sexes whose differences are articulated…in the imaginary and symbolic processes that regulate the workings of a society and culture” (Irigaray, This Sex 69, emphasis original). This she achieves not only by dramatizing the masculine and the feminine through the respective narrative foci of Oryx and Crake and The Year of the Flood, but also by bringing the logic of sexual difference into contact with those operations that produce woman as a figure of disposable life: forms of biopolitical accounting that weigh the value of “the one” against the interests of “the many,” and modes of managing human life that seek to capture and deploy woman’s reproductive function to secure the future of the state or species. Ultimately, if this confrontation between a masculinist (bio)politics and an ethics of sexual difference serves to disrupt the logic and workings of disposability in Atwood’s works, then it also ushers into existence something else in its stead: namely, a form of distinctively feminine writing which, operating through the proliferation of meaning and signification, is poised to “erupt in powerful new tropes, new figures of speech, new turns of historical possibility” within the future that is yet to come (Haraway, “Ecce Homo” 86).
4.1 The Gender of Biopolitics, the (Bio)Politics of Gender

If Oryx and Crake is focalized through the dominant figure of “man,” while The Year of the Flood seeks to recuperate its subordinate term, “woman,” it ought to come as no surprise that it is the latter novel, with its alternating third-person accounts of its two female protagonists, that brings into sharpest focus the problem of a gender-based disposability. As the book opens, Toby, the more world-weary of the novel’s protagonists, recounts her long-ago employment at the fast-food joint SecretBurgers; there, she serves up not just mystery meat to her customers, but also her body to her brutal supervisor, Blanco. Hers is a story of the unpalatable proximity between female bodies and animal flesh, an account of the ways in which women are chewed up, spat out, and then (periodically, if rumors of the “gutted [human] carcasses” run “through the SecretBurger grinders” are to be believed [Atwood, Year 33]) re-incorporated back into the food chain. Toby recalls:

Nor did he [Blanco] give her any time off from her SecretBurgers duties. He demanded her services during her lunch break—the whole half-hour—which meant she got no lunch.

Day by day she was hungrier and more exhausted. She had her own bruises now, like poor Dora’s. Despair was taking her over: she could see where this was going, and it looked like a dark tunnel. She’d be used up soon. (Atwood, Year 40)

In Atwood’s work, the nightmare of disposability is that of being reduced to the use value of one’s body—to a source of labor-power, or sexual gratification, or, in the end, to mere animal flesh. The logical endpoint, of course, is that the female body, no longer allowed the luxury of even bare-bones sustenance (“she got no lunch. / Day by day she was hungrier and more exhausted”), is steadily reduced to mere “stuff,” expendable matter. The horror of disposability is that one’s body is to be “used up” by others, with

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9 Bouson likewise registers the parallels between female bodies and animal flesh, observing that “Year also draws much of its abject horror from its vision of the male ‘carnification’ of the female subject: that is, the reduction of the woman to a fleshy object or to meat or to a rotting corpse” (13).
nothing left of or for oneself. In a world grounded in a masculinist ethos of extraction and accumulation, woman, to borrow Luce Irigaray’s words, is placed “in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) ‘subject’ to reflect himself” (This Sex 30).

The specter of disposability also haunts the novel’s other female protagonist, Ren, even as she initially appears to have had a marginally better luck of the draw. Before the Flood, Ren works as a “dancer” at the upscale sex club Scales and Tails, where she dons skin-tight outfits covered in feathers or scales; here, Ren not only signs off on her own animalization, but even takes solace and pleasure in the act. “I wasn’t only a disposable. I was talent” (Atwood, Year 282), she says, explaining that for the dangerous clients, the club “brought in the temporaries…scooped off the streets because the Painball guys wanted membrane, and after they were finished you’d be judged contaminated until proved otherwise, and Scales didn’t want to spend…money either testing these girls or fixing them up. I never saw them twice” (Atwood, Year 130). As Ren frames it, the horror of being “a disposable” in Atwood’s text is primal, basic: it is the fact of being only a body to be used up and then discarded. Or, as the criminal “Painballers” put it: “A sex toy you can eat” (Atwood, Year 417).

As the novel makes clear, however, Ren’s sense of her own inviolability is woefully misplaced. What she doesn’t realize is that she is secure at the club only because other women are not—and that in the world beyond it, simply inhabiting a female body, whether one is “talent” or not, puts one at risk of being rendered disposable. As Atwood sets it up, therefore, disposability emerges as the novel’s—if not the series’—most pressing ethical problematic. If humankind is to reconstitute itself at

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10 This also becomes evident with Amanda, who is later captured and kept as a sex slave by Blanco and his crew; in this case as well, being disposable means being “used up, worn out,” rendered “[w]orthless” (Atwood, Year 417).
the end of the Anthropocene, *The Year of the Flood* insists, then the remaining survivors will have to decide what place so-called “disposables” will occupy in the brave new world that is to follow.

To this end, the novel’s conclusion brings together its two female storylines as Toby witnesses two men “leading a huge bird on a leash—no, on a rope—a bird with blue-green iridescent plumes like a peagret. But this bird has the head of a woman” (Atwood, *Year* 350). The bird-woman—and here the woman and animal once again converge as figures of disposable life—is Ren, and the novel concludes with this now-reunited duo confronted with the question of what to do about Ren’s friend Amanda, who has likewise been rendered “a disposable” by the Painballers who hold her hostage (Atwood, *Year* 399). At this point, as Atwood delineates it, there are two possible ways forward. The first, propounded by the men who remain, is a paradigm grounded in a biopolitical accounting of the survivors. This is the model that, on the basis of simple calculations, rejects Ren’s appeal on behalf of Amanda: “Zeb says he’s very sorry, but we have to understand that it’s an either/or choice. Amanda’s just one person and Adam One and the Gardeners are many” (Atwood, *Year* 399). In other words, Zeb and his men will set out to reconstruct mankind according to a familiar logic of calculation and accretion—optimization of the lives that “count” over the ones that won’t be counted, the ones that have been deemed disposable. The other way in which humanity might reconstitute itself at the end of the Anthropocene, Atwood suggests, is along “female” lines; in this version, two lone women embark on a suicide mission, defying reason and probability to save a life that has already been marked as disposable. More than an ethics grounded in the “feminist idea of female solidarity” (Bouson 22) or a “comic reworking of [Jimmy’s] tragic masculine perspective” (Watkins 132), this is an

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11 Watkins continues, “The women characters’ refusal to accept the tragic frame, with its attendant loss of agency, is apparent in their determination to support and protect each other
affirmation that if the post-Anthropocene “(post)human” is to resist replicating the “human” of its past, it will have to think carefully—and differently—about how to structure the community of the living of which it forms a part.

On an initial reading, these binary modes of remaking the world seem schematic, even reductive; that they are configured explicitly along gender lines, however, is not an accident. Atwood’s alignment of her male characters with a biopolitical logic and of her female characters with a refusal of it has its roots, I propose, in her best-known work, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). This is a text that asks what it means to occupy a female-gendered body in a modern moment that is deeply invested in bodies—and not just individual bodies, but also collective bodies, the bodies of populations. In depicting a world in which women are subjugated in the service of a totalitarian state that aims to reproduce itself by regimenting sex and optimizing reproduction, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a literary experiment that contemplates the consequences of the differential application of biopower along gender lines. Specifically, in the novel, women are governed on the basis of their biological capacities for reproduction: Handmaids like the protagonist Offred are fertile women tasked with producing offspring for the social elite and are disposed of if they strike out three times; infertile Aunts are responsible for teaching Handmaids their duties and keeping them in line; Jezebels are sterilized and forced to cater to ruling-class men in underground sex clubs; and feminist-types and other “troublemakers” are declared Unwomen and condemned to hard labor in “the colonies,” where they toil to the point of death amidst toxic chemicals and radiation. With each of these groups playing a supporting role in an overarching state system designed and run by men, women in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are exemplary figures of bare
life, brought into the state (or rather, into the service of the state) only to be excluded (as citizens) from it.

On the most basic level, therefore, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a dystopian vision of the misapplication of Foucauldian biopolitics in the context of a misogynistic, fundamentalist Christian regime. At the same time, the novel is more than a tale of biopolitical governance run amok; it is a meditation on the nature of biopolitics as such. In fact, I would go so far as to argue that *The Handmaid’s Tale* might be understood as an allegorical rendering of normative figurations of biopolitics; it is Atwood’s interrogation of the ways in which biopolitical logic, even in its most mundane incarnations, *is always and already inherently masculinist* in form. A quick look at Foucault’s account of the emergence of biopolitics during the eighteenth century suggests as much. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault writes:

> Western man was gradually learning what it meant to be a living species in a living world, to have a body, conditions of existence, probabilities of life, an individual and collective welfare, forces that could be modified, and a space in which they could be distributed in an optimal manner. For the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence; the fact of living was no longer an inaccessible substrate that only emerged from time to time, amid the randomness of death and its fatality; part of it passed into knowledge’s field of control and power’s sphere of intervention. Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body. (142-43)

As Foucault figures it, biopolitics boils down to the fact that “Western man was gradually learning what it meant to be a living species in a living world, to have a *body*”—man, subsuming woman, is here in possession of just one body that is by default male, undifferentiated on the basis of sexual difference. 12 What Atwood insists upon is

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12 This is also not to suggest that Foucault isn’t aware of how women themselves, especially via their relation to reproduction, are bound up within the realm of the biopolitical. As Penelope Deutscher observes: “Michel Foucault suggests that new sites of intensification and problematization occurring toward the end of the eighteenth century included reproduction and
that what we call “man” (i.e., that “Western man” that comes to stand in for the entirety of the human species) cannot be reduced to just one unit, embodied by the male subject; this “one” that counts, this “one” that is counted, Atwood reminds us, is always already two.

More specifically, Atwood draws our attention to the fact that when we speak of power being “applied at the level of life itself,” we partake of (and reproduce) the fantasy that our world is gendered neuter. This is why *The Year of the Flood* confronts us with the male-female dichotomy embodied by Zeb and Toby / Ren at the novel’s conclusion—to remind us that if “the life of the species is,” in fact, “waged on its own political strategies,” then such “strategies” are always already gendered male (Foucault, *History* 143). Biopolitical calculation has always been the way of the “anthropo” at the heart of the “Anthropocene”; even the seemingly neutral terms we take for granted, like “population” and “the human species,” Atwood suggests, are always already operating under the sign of “man,” at the expense of the “woman” who is subsumed by them. Biopolitical reasoning, in other words, is always and already masculinist, always and already a form of writing over woman, even as, or precisely because, she (or rather, her capacity for reproduction) remains the unspoken hinge upon which the entire biopolitical enterprise turns. Atwood’s works, therefore, insist that there is no such

the birth rate in addition to the mortality rate. When he described this specific modality for seizing hold of life, Foucault’s work opened itself up to a possibility that was little developed in his own work: an interrogation of the intersection between an eventual notion of ‘reproductive rights’ and the constitution of reproduction as a biopolitical substance, inflecting state-based and other attempts to suppress abortion and the concurrent resistance to those attempts” (55-56).

Michelle Murphy makes a similar point about the population, arguing that “‘population’ was not just the ground but the effect of biopolitics, a unit carved in particular ways by demographers, economists, and others that could be used to selectively count and parse life. It is important not to enshrine ‘population’ as a merely numerical unit of living-being that biopolitics is necessarily about, and instead to see the ability to designate population as a neutral term—in an era immediately following eugenics—as an effect of the exercise of power. ‘Population’ is one aggregate materialized among many others that unevenly enacts biopolitics” (13-14).

Michelle Murphy observes that “Foucault’s own formulation of biopolitics, which focused on middle-class Europeans, largely foreclosed considerations of colonialism, capitalism, reproduction, or even women” (11). See also the Donna Haraway epigraph on the masculine construction of humanity.
thing as “life itself”—that the latter can always be further reduced on the basis of sexual difference. Failure to acknowledge this difference within normative figurations of biopolitics ends up obscuring the ways in which power operates differentially across gender lines.

It is no accident, therefore, that in a world in which women exist solely for the purpose of reproducing the population, they remain otherwise shrouded, consigned to pass through the world unseen and unheard. This metaphor is concretized in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, wherein women pass through the world literally covered from head to toe; Offred describes a glimpse of herself in the mirror as follows: “If I turn my head so that the white wings framing my face direct my vision towards it, I can see it as I go down the stairs, round, convex, a pier glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairy-tale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood” (Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale* 9). In this sense, *The Handmaid’s Tale* serves to put on display the logic that underlies the biopolitical management of populations: the way in which the move to maximize “life itself” operates by at once consolidating biological categories and suppressing the play of sexual difference. In the text, for instance, we discover that it is not just women’s bodies, thus cloaked and made to look identical, that are stripped of the markers of their singularity. Even the language that is available to them is a priori delimited; as Offred remarks of her encounter with her assigned partner, Ofglen: “‘Blessed be the fruit,’ she says to me, the accepted greeting among us. / ‘May the Lord open,’ I answer, the accepted response” (Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale* 19). The novel’s ethical thrust, then, lies in its capacity to challenge this reduction of difference to the logic of the same: if, within the world of the novel, woman is usurped by man, if she is the shadowy instrument through which he reproduces
himself and the world he inhabits, then the novel strives to both expose this dynamic and offer a corrective to it.

If, in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, women are held hostage on the basis of their biological capacity to add to the state by adding to themselves, then woman’s best recourse, Atwood suggests, might simply be to refuse the imperative to “calculate” altogether. As the novel’s protagonist, Offred (literally “Of-Fred”), recounts of a conversation with her Commander:

> Women can’t add, he once said, jokingly. When I asked him what he meant, he said, For them, one and one and one and one don’t make four. What do they make? I said, expecting five or three. Just one and one and one and one, he said. (Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale* 186)

Initially this reads like an insult, but Offred soon embraces this logic as her own: “What the Commander said is true. One and one and one and one doesn’t equal four. Each one remains unique, there is no way of joining them together. They cannot be exchanged, one for the other. They cannot replace each other” (Atwood, *Handmaid’s Tale* 192). Clearly, when it comes to the mathematical problem at hand, each party registers only one side of the equation. Whereas the Commander can see only the value of the sum, Offred insists upon the unitary value of each of the terms in question. Extrapolated out, the lesson is clear: to stand any chance of resisting their own fungibility in a world in which their value is figured only in relation to the sum-value of the state itself, Atwood’s women must refuse arithmetic and its concomitant operations of equivalence and substitution.

What emerges out of this refusal is an insistence on irreducible difference and with it, a female logic of incommensurability that gestures toward the possibility of constituting community apart from the dominant (male) order. As per this chapter’s

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15 They are unable to “seize the means of reproduction,” to borrow Michelle Murphy’s phrase. In her work, Murphy outlines a range of practices and technologies developed by the women’s health movement in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s as a form of feminist biopolitics grounded in the imperative for women to seize the means of their own reproduction.
second epigraph, this is the possibility that we might “discover a possible space for the feminine imaginary,” one that is wholly independent of “the masculine imaginary” that “has reduced [women] to silence, to muteness or mimicry” (Irigaray, This Sex 164). In the MaddAddam trilogy, it is this possibility that bolsters Toby and Ren as they venture out, against all odds, in search of a woman who has (by all “accounts”) been deemed “a disposable.”

In this reading, the MaddAddam series is in some sense a re-envisioning of The Handmaid’s Tale, scaled up; the question of how we reproduce the life of the state has, in the trilogy, metamorphosed into the question of how we reproduce the life of our species. And if, as Foucault asserts, “modern man” is no longer “a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence,” but rather “an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question,” then what Atwood’s trilogy gestures toward is that the unwieldy question of our continued “existence” boils down to the more concrete problematic of our (bio)“politics” (History 142-43). If we are to rewrite the human at the end of the world, in other words, we must begin by calling into question the ways in which that human calculates and the ends those calculations serve.

Ultimately, what the exchange between Offred and her Commander in The Handmaid’s Tale brings into focus is the relation between the “whole” (in this case, the sum that the Commander arrives at) and its constituent parts (here, the “One and one and one and one” that Offred insists upon). So, as the Commander puts it, 1+1+1+1=4. For Offred, 1+1+1+1=1+1+1+1. What these basic equations make clear is that Offred doesn’t just insist upon the unitary value of each of the terms in question; it’s that she also refuses the concept of “the total,” or “the whole” to which each of these unitary terms might be said to belong. The reason for this, I propose, is simple, mathematically speaking. Once we valuate “1” in relation to some larger sum of which it forms a part, that “1” is diminished by the comparison. In mathematical terms: 1 out of 4=1/4=0.25. In
performing this operation, that “1” with which we began is now reduced to 0.25, which is closer in value to zero—to nothing—than to the 1 it once was. When we approach the problem in mathematical terms, therefore, the greater the sum-total, the less each individual “one” counts in relation to the whole. In other words, the larger the denominator by which that “1” is divided, the closer the value of that “1” comes to 0. In mathematical terms: the limit of 1/x as x approaches infinity is 0. In ethico-political terms: this is how one is made to be disposable.

Thus, if the laws of arithmetic serve as the basis for biopolitical reasoning, they also constitute the terrain upon which disposability takes root. In other words, when calculation is employed to determine the value of the individual in relation to the group, the conditions have already been met for designating that individual as disposable. To return to the biopolitical paradigm offered up by Zeb at the end of The Year of the Flood: “Zeb says he’s very sorry, but we have to understand that it’s an either/or choice. Amanda’s just one person and Adam One and the Gardeners are many” (Atwood, Year 399). The mathematical rendering of this equation goes something like this: Amanda (1) / “Adam One and the Gardeners” (many) = approximately zero. Mathematically, of course, the conclusion is sound. Amanda isn’t worth much when compared to the other humans who might be rescued instead. What Atwood also gestures toward, of course, is that this is the same logic—that of accumulation and accretion, all in the service of “the life of the [human] species” (Foucault, History 143)—that has brought mankind to its current state; and Zeb, in his devotion to the biopolitical, is poised to repeat it.

Toby and Ren’s arrival on the scene, by contrast, marks a refusal of this masculinist imperative to “[bring] life...into the realm of explicit calculations” (Foucault, History 143). Toby and Ren reject Zeb’s conclusion because they refuse the imperative to calculate. If any equation might be offered up to account for their reasoning, it is, simply: Amanda=Amanda, or 1=1. Her value is self-evident, irreducible. What Toby
and Ren’s countervailing course of action suggests, ultimately, is that Amanda’s value is not to be calculated—or rather, that it is incalculable. Rather than give in to the seductions of mathematical calculation, Atwood suggests, we need to turn our attention to the question of who has been doing the calculating, and to what end.

4.2 (De)constructing Disposability

The MaddAddam trilogy calls on us to imagine how the heretofore suppressed feminine might open up new ways of being in the world—perhaps even new ways of making the world—when this is a world that has always been the provenance of the masculine. At the same time, Atwood’s binary paradigms for re-figuring the world at the end of the Anthropocene are not designed to condemn “man” for bringing us to the apocalyptic endpoint of the Anthropocene, any more than they are meant to tout “woman” as the exclusive way forward. At this point, we can’t do away with biopolitics any more than we can do away with men—nor is this something to aspire toward. As Irigaray puts it, “To remember that we must go on living and creating worlds is our task. But it can be accomplished only through the combined efforts of the two halves of the world: the masculine and the feminine” (An Ethics 127). To put this in terms of the series as a whole: if the first two novels of the MaddAddam trilogy seem to dichotomize the operations of biopolitical calculation and incommensurability by mapping them onto a male/female binary, then the last novel puts these two fundamentally irreconcilable paradigms on a collision course with each other to yield a neither man- nor woman-, but decidedly post-human world order.

Ultimately, the end of The Year of the Flood suggests that imagining a fundamentally different kind of future for humanity will require destabilizing the dominant biopolitical order by injecting into it a female ethics of incommensurability. It intimates that a truly post-anthropo, post-Anthropocene future must begin, if not quite

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16 In Oryx and Crake, of course, Crake is a biopolitical master-manager.
with a full-blown Derridean gesture of impossible hospitality, “a welcome without reservations or calculation” ("Principle of Hospitality," 67; emphasis mine), then at the very least, with the willingness to contemplate welcoming those who, by all mathematical calculations, ought summarily to be disposed of.¹⁷

To wit: at the end of The Year of the Flood, after Toby and Ren have saved Amanda and restrained the Painballers, Ren observes, “We’re sitting around the fire—Toby and Amanda and me. And Jimmy. And the two Gold Team Painballers, I have to include them” (Atwood, Year 428; emphasis mine). Through this exclusionary inclusion, we glimpse the tension between a conditional and a limitless hospitality—a tension that keeps the future in abeyance, holding open the possibility (as Bouson, Watkins, and Canavan also suggest) that the humankind that will come after the Anthropocene might configure itself altogether differently from the mankind of its past. As the novel closes, therefore, we are suspended in the moment before we are forced to decide between “us” and “them,” before we undertake the calculation that will distinguish between the lives that matter and the lives that are to be disposed of in their service: “‘I’ll consider that problem,’ says Toby, ‘later. Tonight is a Feast night’” (Atwood, Year 430).

And yet. And yet, if Atwood is to provide a conclusion to her trilogy, this decision can’t be deferred in perpetuity. Indeed, it ought to come as no surprise that as the third and final installment opens, the desire to hold the future in abeyance is thwarted by a future that will not be kept at bay. In this case, the future arrives in the form of the Crakers who, in their childlike simplicity, set the Painballers free, providing the narrative thrust that propels Atwood’s trilogy headlong toward its resolution. This

¹⁷ My Derridean reading of the end of The Year of the Flood resonates with Gerry Canavan’s reading of “The sense of futurity at the heart of Oryx and Crake and The Year of the Flood,” which “lies therefore not in prediction or in program, but in this reopening of possibility: the assertion of the radical break, the strident insistence that things might yet be otherwise—however that might happen, and whatever else we might become along the way” (Canavan 156).
begs the question: if *The Year of the Flood* leaves us dangling, suspended in an ethical no-man’s-land, then what solution does *MaddAddam* offer up instead?

The answer, if one is to be found, lies in *MaddAddam*’s closing reenactment of Toby’s campfire scene, in which the now-recaptured Painballers await their sentence. As the young Craker, Blackbeard, recounts: “The two bad men were put in a room at night….But we did not untie the rope the way we did before….And then they were given soup, with a smelly bone….In the morning there was a Trial” (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 370). This iteration of the scene in which Toby ladles out “bone soup” (Atwood, *Year* 430) and “play[s] the kindly godmother…dividing up the nutrients for all to share” (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 11) is accompanied by a no-frills vote: “They use pebbles: black for death, white for mercy….There’s only one white pebble” (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 369). This time, a decision is made. And it’s a decision reached by the collective, for the collective, rendered through the cold calculations of a hard-and-fast arithmetic.

Following on the heels of *The Year of the Flood*, the implications are clear: if an infinite capacity for welcoming the other is possible only in theory, as long as calculation—and with it, action—is deferred, then such radical openness cannot, *practically speaking*, be made into a system of universal ethics for the posthuman future. At the same time, the ethical potential of Atwood’s new world order lies *precisely* in the fact that neither can biopolitical reasoning account for the white stone, *which defies the logic of self- and species-interest*. At the end of *MaddAddam*, therefore, the dominant biopolitical paradigm is forced to absorb *within itself* the logic of incommensurability. Thus, the mathematical imperative to secure the lives that “count” (here, the remaining human and Craker populations) over and against the ones that don’t (the Painballers who pose a threat to the future of (post)humanity) is *simultaneously and internally unsettled* by a refusal, marked by the white stone, to distinguish between them.
Although the problem seems to be, “Should the Painballers live or die?”, the question each individual must actually answer is, “Am I willing to stake my own life, and even the continued existence of my entire species, for the lives of these others?” The very possibility of responding in the affirmative, which materializes when a single white stone is cast into the mix, marks a refusal of biopolitical accounting within the larger frame of biopolitical accounting that is the vote itself; the white stone thus offers itself up as a constitutive excess to a system that gives the appearance of totality and totalizability.

An optimistic reading of this scene would find hope in the fact that anyone might have cast the anonymous vote for mercy— and thus that any of us might also conceivably exceed, if only for a moment, the totalities (“man,” “woman,” “human”) to which we also, invariably, belong. At the same time, the vote inevitably disappoints. If the fantasy of incommensurability is that every “one” will “count,” not that everyone will be “counted,” then what do we make of the fact that even at the end of the world, Atwood can’t effect a full-scale revolution in our biopolitically grounded modes of thought?

Perhaps the point is that it’s simply impossible, in practical terms, to think “the human” apart from a collective “humankind.” If so, then what Atwood offers up instead is a practicable compromise: instead of demolishing the entire biopolitical edifice, she shows us how to exploit its latent fissures by chiseling away at it, one stone at a time. And when the foundations of biopolitical reasoning are thus destabilized, the assumption that some lives—even the worst kinds of lives—may unproblematically be disposed of in the service of other, more “valuable” ones, is undone as well. If disposability takes root when we a priori foreclose on the possibility that the other might exert an ethical claim upon us (as Zeb does with Amanda), it is dispelled in the moment of reckoning with him, or her, or it. Here, the white stone definitively attests to such a reckoning, so that even if it does not protect against death, it becomes a safeguard.
against disposability. In the end, therefore, not even the disposed-of Painballers are rendered disposable: "‘After the disposal of the two malignant Painballers,’ [Toby] writes” (Atwood, MaddAddam 373). But if Toby frets that “Disposal makes them sound like garbage, as in garbage disposal” (Atwood, MaddAddam 373), then she can rest easy; in Atwood’s end-of-the-world world, not even human “garbage” is disposed of without debate, deliberation, and even, in a strange, “bone-soup” way, care.

This, then, is the posthuman that Atwood offers up. The posthuman is a new way of inhabiting our humanity, rather than a new-and-improved version of the human. Rhino’s declaration, “Who cares what we call [the Painballers] … So long as it’s not people” (Atwood, MaddAddam 367), instantiates a new framework for conceptualizing the (post)human, one in which a species-based anthropocentrism gives way to a form of community-belonging that is reformulated from biological to ethico-social terms. Unbound from ontology, “posthumanhood” becomes the provenance of those who have helped to forge a new community of the living at the end of the Anthropocene—humans, Crakers, and Pigoons18 alike. In this world, not even the latter are any longer disposable: “None of you, or your children, or your children’s children, will ever be a smelly bone in a soup,” Toby assures them. “Or a ham, she added. Or a bacon” (Atwood, MaddAddam 370). And if gender once provided the basis for disposability, it now becomes a defense against it: with a nod to Year’s disposable bird-woman, MaddAddam hints that not even the animaloid, Pigoon she (no longer an “it” now that she has been granted the distinguishing marker of sexual difference [Atwood, MaddAddam 350-51]), will venture into the post-Anthropocene future “a disposable.”

4.3 Writing Feminist Futurity

In the end, there is little utopian bent to Atwood’s trilogy; indeed, with the violent off-stage deaths of Zeb and his men at MaddAddam’s conclusion, the only

18 Highly intelligent pigs, spliced with human cells to grow human organs.
guarantee at the end of the trilogy is contingency. Under such circumstances, remaking
the world at the end of the world is a tricky business. Hope, however, is bound up with
the figure of the woman, who, for better or worse, remains the proverbial engine driver
of futurity.

If The Handmaid’s Tale imagines a world in which Handmaids reproduce the
dominant state structure through their bodies—first, by molding themselves to the roles
assigned them, and then, by giving birth to the progeny of the ruling elite—then
MaddAddam likewise contends with the relation between women’s bodies and the
(re)production of humanity. As in The Handmaid’s Tale, however, this relation is
particularly fraught: in the production of the first generation of human-Craker hybrids,
rape is the dominant reproductive paradigm and the victims’ physiological capacity to
carry their babies to term is untested. Nevertheless, when it comes to the “Beloved
Three Oryx Mothers,” Ren, Amanda, and Swift Fox, the novel is surprisingly optimistic
(Atwood, MaddAddam 386); via the children they have produced, the women seem to
gesture toward the promise of the posthuman future that is yet to come.

As a model for remaking the world, however, the maternal reproductive
imaginary hardly aligns itself with Haraway’s call for new “feminist figures of
humanity” that might one day “erupt in powerful new tropes, new figures of speech,
new turns of historical possibility” (“Ecce Homo” 86). Indeed, the question that haunts
Atwood’s novels, The Handmaid’s Tale as well as the MaddAddam trilogy, is that of how
“an ethics of sexual difference” might enable us to imagine our relation to the future—
and more precisely, to the production of futurity—in different terms from the ones
we’ve been given. What would it mean, in other words, for “woman” to cease to be a
vessel for reproducing “man” and the social order he has instituted? As Irigaray puts it:

What modifications would [the social order] undergo if women left
behind their condition as commodities—subject to being produced,
consumed, valorized, circulated, and so on, by men alone—and took part
in elaborating and carrying out exchanges? Not by reproducing, by
copying, the ‘phallocratic’ models that have the force of law today, but by socializing in a different way the relation to nature, matter, the body, language, and desire. (This Sex 191, emphasis mine)

What would it take for woman to break away from man, to refuse to bend to the “‘phallocratic’ models” that dictate both her place in the world and her “responsibility” for reproducing it—the same “‘phallocratic’ models” that corroborate her disposability? And once she’s broken this mold, what kind of new world order will she usher into being?

In what remains of this chapter, I propose that if Atwood offers up a way in which woman might “[socialize] in a different way [her] relation to nature, matter, the body, language, and desire” so as to forestall her own disposability, then this will be accomplished through writing. In this, Atwood takes a cue not just from Irigaray, but also from Hélène Cixous, who in her classic essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” writes that “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (875). As Cixous puts it, the imperative of écriture feminine is not just that woman write about herself, or about other women. If woman is to “write her self,” this means that she stands to produce herself, that she stands to re-produce “woman”—“woman” unbounded by the old “phallocratic” strictures—through writing. In the end, therefore, even as the question of remaking the world at the end of the world remains inexorably bound up with women’s biological reproduction via the birth of the human-Craker hybrids, Atwood reserves another possibility—a mode of reproducing the world beyond
reproduction—for woman as well. This she leaves to Toby, who gives birth not to a baby, but to a book.

Loosely speaking, Toby’s Book is a version of the story that we, Atwood’s audience, have been reading all along. An account of the apocalypse and its aftermath, it is at once a sacred text for the Crakers, a collection of fables for the human survivors, and a historical document for the human-Craker hybrids that are still to come. It is, as Toby tells the inquisitive young Craker, Blackbeard, “The story of you, and me, and the Pigoons, and everyone” (Atwood, MaddAddam 374). As Blackbeard tells his people in the novel’s last section, aptly titled “Book”:

Now this is the Book that Toby made when she lived among us…. And in the Book she put the Words of Crake, and of Oryx as well, and of how together they made us, and made also this safe and beautiful World for us to live in. And in the Book too are the Words of Zeb, and of his brother, Adam; and the Words of Zeb Ate A Bear; and how he became our Defender against the bad men who did cruel and hurtful things; and the Words of Zeb’s Helpers, Pilar and Rhino and Katrina WooWoo and March the Snake, and of all the MaddAddamites; and the Words of Snowman-the-Jimmy, who was there in the beginning, when Crake made us, and who led our people out of the Egg to this better place…. (Atwood, MaddAddam 385)

The “Book” that Toby has left behind, in other words, is the oversimplified, bare-bones, Craker-friendly chronicle of the story that the trilogy renders for us, Atwood’s real-world readers, in much more nuanced terms. It is, however, something else as well: within the paradigm that Toby has instantiated, the Book is a mechanism for (re)producing the world at the end of the Anthropocene; it is a way of remaking the world beyond the realm of biological reproduction.

So how does Toby’s “Book” make the world, and what kind of world—or more precisely, what kind of end-of-the-world world—does it produce? What the trilogy suggests is that it is not the text as such that makes the world, but rather the act of

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19 Toby has been left infertile by a botched egg-extraction operation in her youth.
producing the text—the act of writing—that brings the possibility of new worlds into being. Ultimately, if the post-apocalypse future is to be populated by human-Craker hybrids, then, as Toby has set it in motion, the world they will inherit is to be bound up with the Book, which stands to regenerate itself alongside (post)humanity in a one-to-one relation. As Blackbeard tells it, Toby has decreed “that the paper must not get wet, or the Words would melt away and would be heard no longer…. And that another Book should be made, with the same writing as the first one. And each time a person came into knowledge of the writing, and the paper, and the pen, and the ink, and the reading, that one also was to make the same Book, with the same writing in it. So it would always be there for us to read” (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 386). In other words, the (biological) reproduction of those who are yet to come is to be bound up with the rewriting of the story that has already been told. Indeed, Atwood gives us the sense that in the new world order that emerges at the conclusion of *MaddAddam*, biological reproduction, which has up to this point served to reproduce an existing (masculine) world order that sanctions a biopolitically grounded logic of disposability, now operates in the service of reproducing the story that Toby has left behind.\(^{20}\) In its refusal to “privileg[e]…the maternal” over the textual (Irigaray, *This Sex* 30), *MaddAddam* comes down on the side of the new, the novel, the literary.

If it is the task of writing to carve out “a possible space for the feminine imaginary” (Irigaray, *This Sex* 164), then it ought to come as no surprise that in the *MaddAddam* trilogy, writing is increasingly the dominion of woman. While it dawns on Jimmy early on in *Oryx and Crake* that “he could keep a diary” (Atwood, *Oryx* 40), he immediately abandons the thought: “he’ll have no future reader, because the Crakers

\(^{20}\) Watkins makes a broad point about contemporary women writers that resonates with my argument: “The narrative/historical contortions or conundrums generated by the apocalyptic narrative are precisely what interest contemporary women writers, but in their work the treatment of apocalyptic time and narrative is gendered in that it engages specifically with the ‘reproductive’ possibilities of the maternal imaginary and the practice of rewriting [for example, sequels]” (133).
can’t read. Any reader he can possibly imagine is in the past” (Atwood, *Oryx* 41). As Atwood figures it, the act of writing presumes a future reader; without writing, there is no future to speak of. Thus, while Jimmy’s rejection of writing in *Oryx and Crake* marks his foreclosure upon the very possibility of a future, *The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam* evince a different kind of faith in woman’s ability to write herself into the future that is yet to come. “What kind of story—what kind of history will be of any use at all, to people she can’t know will exist, in the future she can’t foresee?” Toby wonders as she sets pen to paper in *MaddAddam* (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 203). As it turns out, the question is a red herring: what Atwood insists upon is that there is no single story that we can use to write ourselves into the future that awaits; that future will materialize not as a linear narrative, but rather as a multiplicity of possible narratives and narrative possibilities that may or may not be actualized. When it comes to rewriting the human at the end of the age of “man,” the *MaddAddam* trilogy calls for multiple stories and a plurality of voices to tell them.

As Atwood figures it, rewriting the human requires that we make room for the kind of “multiplicity of female desire and female language” that is nowhere present in the last-man narrative of *Oryx and Crake* (Irigaray, *This Sex* 30). When it comes to ushering into existence a post-“anthropo” future grounded in a recognition of sexual difference, “the issue,” as Irigaray observes, “is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the subject or the object, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal” (*This Sex* 78). As the series progresses, therefore, Jimmy’s “univocal” masculinist perspective in *Oryx and Crake* gives way to the dual-form feminine storytelling of *The Year of the Flood*, and then to the multivocality of

21 Other voices also enter into the novel as Toby and Ren’s narratives are punctuated by choral hymns from “The God’s Gardeners Oral Hymnbook”; these have been given musical form by
*MaddAddam*, which deals in multiple versions of the same stories—oral histories for the Crakers, journal entries for Toby, and the whole narrative, inclusive of what the other versions leave out, for us, the novel’s readers.

“There’s the story, then there’s the real story, then there’s the story of how the story came to be told,” Toby muses in *MaddAddam*. “Then there’s what you leave out of the story. Which is part of the story, too” (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 56). Each version of “the story”—whether it’s 1) the story Toby tells the Crakers, 2) the story that Toby cannot tell the Crakers, but which she tells us, 3) the story of how Toby comes to narrate the story she tells the Crakers, or 4) the story that accounts for the gap between the story Toby tells the Crakers and the story she tells us—is “true” in its own way. What Atwood makes clear is that there is no one “true” story; instead, these variations on “the story,” set alongside and against each other, give rise to the multitudinous forms of meaning-making that become possible when we give up on the idea that writing mediates some form of “truth” out there, in the “real world” that exists beyond the page. As Derrida reminds us, our belief in the existence of a “world out there” that can be represented through writing is the product of writing itself—of the proliferation of signs that “produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception” (*Of Grammatology* 157). And if, within the world of *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy believes that the purpose of writing is to engage the world as it is, to “Set down his impressions” or “make lists” in the vein of earlier castaways (Atwood, *Oryx* 40, 41), then in *MaddAddam*, Toby and Blackbeard use writing to give narrative form not to the world as it is, but to the world as it might yet become. Writing matters, in other words, because writing shapes matter.

Orville Stoeber and are available for purchase and listening online at [http://yearoftheflood.com/how-the-music-came-to-be/](http://yearoftheflood.com/how-the-music-came-to-be/)

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22 As Derrida observes in *Of Grammatology*, “Representation in the abyss of presence is not an accident of presence; the desire of presence is, on the contrary, born from the abyss (the indefinite multiplication) of representation, from the representation of representation, etc.” (163).
Toby’s Book accordingly marks the site of both the novel’s and the series’ resistance to the univocality of masculinist discourse that has up to this point delimited the nature and scope of writing itself. As Cixous puts it, “Nearly the entire history of writing is confounded with the history of reason, of which it is at once the effect, the support, and one of the privileged alibis. It has been one with the phallocentric tradition” (“Laugh of the Medusa” 879). The Book that Toby leaves behind, by contrast, does not abide by the dictates of a phallocratic reason. The writing that remains at the end of the world holds itself to different standards, aligning itself with Luce Irigaray’s proposition in This Sex Which Is Not One:

It is surely not a matter of interpreting the operation of discourse while remaining within the same type of utterance as the one that guarantees discursive coherence.….For to speak of or about woman may always boil down to, or be understood as, a recuperation of the feminine within a logic that maintains it in repression, censorship, nonrecognition. … They should not put it, then, in the form ‘What is woman?’ but rather, repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject, they should signify that with respect to this logic a disruptive excess is possible on the feminine side. (78)

If Irigaray calls for a new way of figuring the feminine, for a mode of rendering “woman” beyond the bounds of a discourse that has always been by default gendered masculine, then Atwood shows us how we might move beyond a “logic that maintains [the feminine] in repression, censorship, nonrecognition.” In the end, it is the aptly chosen “Story of Toby” chapter, with which both the novel and the trilogy conclude, that sets the stage for a feminine “disruptive excess” as the post-apocalypse future unfolds.

MaddAddam ends on a choose-your-own-adventure kind of note, offering a multi-narrative account of Toby’s departure from the world. Speaking to the Crakers, Blackbeard observes,

Where she went I cannot write in this Book, because I do not know. Some say that she died by herself, and was eaten by vultures. The Pig Ones say that. Others say she was taken away by Oryx, and is now flying in the
forest, at night, in the form of an Owl. Others said that she went to join Pilar, and that her Spirit is in the elderberry bush.

Yet others say that she went to find Zeb, and that he is in the form of a Bear, and that she too is in the form of a Bear, and is with him today. That is the best answer, because it is the happiest; and I have written it down. I have written down the other answers too. But I made them in smaller writing.

...This is the end of the Story of Toby. I have written it in this Book. And I have put my name here—Blackbeard—the way Toby first showed me when I was a child. It says I was the one who set down these words.

(Atwood, *MaddAddam* 390)

Through its rendering of Toby's possible endings, the Book (and the trilogy, more broadly speaking) brings something else into being as well: a new model of writing, one that reformulates our understanding of how we write and to what end. Namely, in this account, Blackbeard (seemingly unwittingly) severs the tie that, within the “phallocratic” tradition that Cixous has traced, binds the “history of writing...to the history of reason” (“Laugh of the Medusa” 879). If Blackbeard begins from the rigid, masculinist premise that he “cannot write” that which he “[does] not know,” then what follows (in the space of half a page) turns this rationale on its head: we find that Blackbeard proceeds to write down precisely *that which he does not know and cannot verify*. By refusing to reduce Toby’s disappearance to a blank on the page, to a gap in an otherwise coherent and cohesive narrative, as the dictates of a linear, masculinist reason would demand, Blackbeard refuses to replicate the well-trodden model of “the feminine...as lack, deficiency, or...negative image of the subject.” Instead, “the Story of Toby,” with its four possible endings all set down in writing, becomes emblematic of the kind of “disruptive excess” (to a univocal discourse) that is the provenance of the feminine imaginary.

Thus, if Blackbeard has written “the end of the Story of Toby...in [the] Book” (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 390), this is an “end” that can be understood neither in the singular nor as an endpoint. The end of Toby’s story, on the contrary, exists in the plural and serves as the marker of a new beginning. Rather than abiding by the old
“phallocratic” model that frames writing as a function of knowing, Blackbeard ushers in a new world order in which writing is associated not with reason, but rather with joy, desire, and excess. That is, of the four possible versions of Toby’s story, Blackbeard begins by writing down “the best answer”; this he settles upon not on the basis of probabilities (once again, a mathematical, masculinist conceit), but rather because “it is the happiest” (Atwood, MaddAddam 390). When he writes down “the other answers,” he renders “them in smaller writing” not because they are less likely to be correct, but because they are less likely to bring pleasure to his audience. In the final page of the MaddAddam trilogy, therefore, Blackbeard casts aside the old discourse in favor of a new form of writing that operates as a mode of affirmation, a way of welcoming the unknown; it is a way of laying claim to a feminine discourse that, for as long as the “history of writing” has been coterminous with “the history of reason,” has been suppressed or denied. If Cixous posits that “What is forbidden [in writing] is unfortunately the best and that is joy” (“Birds, Women and Writing” 172), then Atwood shows us how writing—a distinctively feminine writing—might enable us to lay claim to the kind of “joy” that exists only beyond the frame of dominant discourse. In this way, sexual difference becomes generative difference as it opens itself up to the never-ending play of the literary in Atwood’s works.

4.4 The Literal and the Literary

If, as per this chapter’s opening epigraph, “Feminist humanity must…resist representation, resist literal figuration,” then its potential to “erupt in powerful new tropes, new figures of speech, new turns of historical possibility” will necessarily depend on the workings of the literary in the MaddAddam trilogy (Haraway, “Ecce Homo” 86; emphasis mine). And if new models of a “[f]eminist humanity” do emerge at the end of the Anthropocene, it is no accident that they arrive at the end of the series: the trilogy is structured as a progression away from a masculinist form of literal
representation, as exemplified by Crake’s restrictive approach to language in designing the Crakers (who remain Jimmy’s only living human interlocutors) in *Oryx and Crake*, toward a feminine form of literary figuration that manifests itself in the plurality of female voices in *The Year of the Flood* and in the dizzying kaleidoscope of storytelling that comprises *MaddAddam*. As with Atwood’s rendering of masculinist biopolitical calculation and a feminine ethics of incommensurability, we find that in the trilogy, the literal and the literary are split up schematically along gender lines.

If, on the level of plot, *Oryx and Crake* is unambiguously a “last man” narrative, then on a formal level, the novel follows suit. Tasked with shepherding the Crakers to safety, Jimmy finds himself bound, on the level of language, by the literalist limitations that Crake has imposed upon his “Children.” Their logic becomes manifest to the reader as Jimmy recalls a long-ago exchange with Crake:

> “Can they speak?” [Jimmy] asked.
> “Of course they can speak,” said Crake. “When they have something they want to say.”
> “Do they make jokes?”
> “Not as such,” said Crake. “For jokes you need a certain edge, a little malice. It took a lot of trial and error and we’re still testing, but I think we’ve managed to do away with jokes.” (Atwood, *Oryx* 306)

The form of textuality that Crake ushers into is thus one that is stripped bare of everything but its utility; form has collapsed into function as language is reduced to a mere conduit for transmitting information. In the world that Crake has begot, the Crakers are confined to speaking only intentionally, “When they have something they want to say”; meanwhile, the impulses toward digression, associative thought, and linguistic play that have always been the provenance of the literary (and, not coincidentally, the terrain for joke-making) have been preemptively stamped out. Whatever literary play persists in the text of *Oryx and Crake* remains alive only in Jimmy’s memory, the nostalgic token of an irrecoverable past.
In the novel’s present moment, therefore, the literalist Crakers draw Jimmy into a world devoid of figurative language, a world in which every word stands to be mapped out onto its real-world “physical equivalent” (Atwood, *Oryx* 7). This is a world in which “Snowman,” the name Jimmy has given himself, means nothing to the Crakers because in the wake of global warming, there is no longer an external referent to attach it to. “Snowman” thus becomes a moniker that the Crakers register as “just two syllables. They don’t know what a snowman is, they’ve never seen snow” (Atwood, *Oryx* 7). Never mind that Jimmy’s adopted name is actually the “Abominable Snowman”—that allusive qualifier has no place in the desolate landscape of *Oryx and Crake* (Atwood, *Oryx* 7). The underlying significance of Jimmy’s chosen persona, the fact of its “existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape, stealthy, elusive, known only through rumours and through its backward-pointing footprints,” is wholly lost to the world he now inhabits (Atwood, *Oryx* 7-8). Instead, after the apocalypse, the name becomes “his own secret hair shirt,” the private cross he must bear for his unwitting complicity in Crake’s plan to annihilate mankind (Atwood, *Oryx* 8).

In a way, Jimmy’s punishment fits his crime. Having made a living penning corporate advertisements (including ones for Crake), Jimmy’s literary talents are not just rendered obsolete now that he inhabits a world in which language has no purpose beyond the strictly referential; as with the name that becomes his “secret hair shirt,” they return to haunt him. And if literary play and linguistic fabrication once provided Jimmy with a brief respite from the profound meaninglessness of his work (“Once in a while he’d make up a word—*tensicity, fibracionous, pheromonimal*—but he never once got caught out…He came to understand why serial killers sent helpful clues to the police” [Atwood, *Oryx* 248-49]), then even such transitory pleasures are denied him after the apocalypse. In a stroke of tragicomic genius, the novel paints a portrait of a language that is so profoundly impoverished that it leaves Jimmy in the undignified position of
not even being able to tell the Crakers to “piss off” because “Piss isn’t something they’d find insulting” (Atwood, *Oryx 9*).

Meanwhile, what reads as a tragic lament in *Oryx and Crake* is repurposed for its comic potential in *MaddAddam*. In Toby’s—and here, I propose, also Atwood’s—able hands, the Crakers’ absurd brand of literalism tips over into a form of humor that is nowhere present in *Oryx and Crake*. As Toby is forced to assume the responsibility—initially Jimmy’s unwelcome burden—of delivering the Crakers their nightly stories, the tension between the literal and the literary in Atwood’s end-of-the-world world confronts us head-on. This time, however, Toby dexterously turns it to comic effect as she explains to Zeb the rules by which she is bound in her capacity as storyteller: “They think piss is a good thing. Like *fuck*—they think there’s an invisible entity called Fuck. A helper of Crake’s in time of need. And of Jimmy’s, because they heard him saying *Oh fuck*” (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 163). In painting this absurdist portrait of what it means to take figurative language and flatten it out to its literal import, Toby resuscitates (for her audience and for the reader) the form of “the joke” that Crake sought to write out of existence by replacing humankind with the Crakers. To put it another way: *MaddAddam*’s comedy serves to secure more than the reader’s entertainment. The novel has recourse to literary play to produce a kind of affect—joyous and affirming and uproariously funny even unto the end of the world—that is inaccessible to the one-dimensional, masculine-dominated discourse of *Oryx and Crake*.

Ultimately, it is the space between the literal and the figurative that gives rise to literary play (and through it, to nuance, and humor, and all the rest) in Atwood’s works. The significance of the latter for forging a post-Anthropocene future becomes manifest in the passage in which Blackbeard chronicles Toby’s four possible fates. There, he observes:

> The three Beloved Oryx Mothers cried very much when Toby went away. We cried as well, and purred over them, and after a while they felt better.
And Ren said, Tomorrow is another day, and we said we did not understand what that meant, and Amanda said, Never mind because it was not important. And Lotis Blue said it was a thing of hope. Then Swift Fox told us she was pregnant again and soon there would be another baby. And the fourfathers were Abraham Lincoln and Napoleon and Picasso and me, Blackbeard; and I am very happy to have been chosen for that mating. And Swift Fox said that if it was a girl baby it would be named Toby. And that is a thing of hope. (Atwood, MaddAddam 390; emphasis mine)

This passage offers up two “thing[s] of hope” at the end of the MaddAddam series. The first is the expression, “Tomorrow is another day,” which asks to be understood in figurative, as opposed to literal, terms. Its meaning lies in the possibility that tomorrow might bring with it something new, something different; this is a tomorrow that has the potential to exceed the expectations we’ve formed on the basis of today’s experience.

Meanwhile, the second “thing of hope” in the passage above takes literal form in the body of the future girl-child who (if and when she does arrive) will be given Toby’s name. The birth of a new Toby is a literal act, one that is readily comprehensible to the Crakers because it has a physical manifestation in the material world. By standing in for both the arrival of a new child and the promise that “tomorrow” holds, the phrase “a thing of hope” thus comes to bridge the gap between the literal and the figurative, between language that directly references the world “out there” and language that engages in its own modes of meaning-making. What this passage suggests, therefore, is that hope for the future is bound up with the capacity of language to accommodate both the figurative and the literal, to mingle word and flesh, meaning and embodiment upon the ever-shifting terrain of “the literary.”

If in the four imagined endpoints to the story of Toby that Blackbeard offers up, we saw species difference whittled away as flesh and spirits commingled across species lines (i.e., either Toby “was eaten by vultures,” or she assumed “the form of an Owl,” or “she went to join Pilar…in the elderberry bush,” or she joined Zeb and assumed “the form of a Bear” [Atwood, MaddAddam 390]), then in this scene, the augured birth of
Toby-the-girl-child serves to reassert the significance of sexual difference for the future that is yet to come. In imagining “the end of the Story of Toby” through the lens of the new Toby’s birth, the trilogy turns sexual difference into the originary difference upon which all other forms of difference (including species difference) depend. In the post-apocalypse relation between (post)humanity’s sexual reproduction and the Book’s textual replication, in other words, sexual difference becomes the necessary condition for literary play—which in turn begets new, feminine forms of discourse that disrupt the univocal discourse that has long been the provenance of that “anthropo” of the Anthropocene. In other words, if (as happens with Jimmy in *Oryx and Crake*) the impossibility of writing comes to stand in for the impossibility of imagining oneself into the future, then in *MaddAddam*, feminine writing brings into focus the prospect of new beginnings disentangled from an “anthropo”—centered past. This is to say that if, after the age of “man,” we might find a way to usher in something closer to an age of “woman,” this will depend on the latter’s capacity to put herself into writing. “She must write her self,” Cixous observes, “because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history…” (“Laugh of the Medusa” 880). And indeed, within the world order that our Toby has instantiated, man is no longer the default subject; writing is now become the provenance of the children of sexual difference—if initially woman, then ultimately the posthuman human-Craker hybrids, male and female alike, who will come to take the place of that Anthropocene-era “man.”

23 This logic is one we find in Derrida’s *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, articulated in Derrida’s attunement to the fact that the cat that sees him naked is not just a cat—it is a female cat, a “pussycat.” Sexual difference is here marked as a further, deeper differentiation that lies at the heart of species difference: “Nor does the cat that looks at me naked, she and no other, the one I am talking about here, belong, although we are getting warmer, to Baudelaire’s family of cats, or Rilke’s, or Buber’s. Literally, at least, these poets’ and philosophers’ cats don’t speak. ‘My’ pussycat (but a pussycat never belongs) is not even the one who speaks in *Alice in Wonderland*” (7).
Ultimately, therefore, if *MaddAddam* does gesture toward “a thing of hope” at the end of the world (Atwood, *MaddAddam* 390), it does so through writing, which presupposes a tomorrow that will bring with it those who will read the words written today. In contemplating what will come after the human, however, Atwood doesn’t just settle on the human-Craker hybrids; she settles on us as well. We, here and now, are the future readers that Toby longs for, the human-posthuman who is being rewritten at the end of the Anthropocene. If these works lead us to the precipice, this is to show us that it is yet in our power to decide who or what we will become.

In the final accounting, what the *MaddAddam* series insists upon is that we understand sexual difference as the primary, originary site of differentiation that is overwritten by the logic of disposability—even as, paradoxically, it is the (biological) hinge upon which the production of (all) life (but disposable life in particular) depends. If the disposable woman is thus the figure through which man both seeks to reproduce himself and to assert his own value (not just in relation to woman, but also in relation to other species and to our planet), then Atwood offers up a feminine imaginary, carved out through a form of multivocal writing, as a tool for deconstructing this logic. And if, within the masculine biopolitical realm, woman is valuable because she reproduces the population, then in the end-of-the-world world that Atwood instantiates, woman is valuable because she (re)produces the stories that help us make sense of our past and prepare us to confront the future.

The promise of *écriture feminine* thus lies in the fact that the iterations ahead of us are always in excess of those we’ve foreseen and enumerated. To put it another way: Atwood’s rendering of the literary takes the form of n+1. It is this openness to the +1, whether as a literary iteration, another way of telling a story, or as a singular life that calls upon us over and above a greater whole (n), that constitutes Atwood’s solution for rewriting the human beyond the frame of “man.” In the end, the series asks that we
turn to sexual difference for its generative possibilities—for its capacity to open up new modes of making the world, rather than re-producing the one we’ve been given.
5. The Afterlife of Disposable Life in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People* and Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*

An old woman hobbles forward out of the crowd, it’s Gargi, whose back is almost as bent as mine. “Mr. Lawyer, 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?”

So the buffalo asks what she is saying and a jarnalis standing nearby says, “I don’t know how to translate it.”

Then Gargi says that if the Kampani has any honour it must stand trial, and it should pay just and proper compensation for all the wrongs it has done.

“What’s she saying now?” the lawyer asks.

“Sir,” says the jarnalis, “she is asking for money.”

The buffalo reaches in his red-lined coat, gets out his wallet. “Buy yourself something nice,” he says. Old Gargi’s standing there with five hundred rupees in her hand.

Indra Sinha, *Animal’s People*, p. 306-07

A re-imagining of the 1984 Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, Indra Sinha’s 2007 novel *Animal’s People* is set in the aftermath of an industrial disaster in the fictional Indian city of Khaupfur. Narrated two decades after the fact from the vantage point of a nineteen-year-old boy who calls himself Animal, the novel explores the ways in which the toxic gas leak that killed thousands on “that night” continues to ravage the lives of the survivors and the generations that have followed. Through Animal, whose spine has been so deformed that he now walks on all fours, the novel depicts a first-world capitalism which, within its global dealings, has re-drawn the human/animal boundary within humanity itself, rendering Animal and his people sub-human. As Rob Nixon aptly encapsulates it in his work *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, “*Animal’s People* stages a simultaneous inquiry into the border zone between human and animal and the economic boundaries between rich and poor, the ever-deepening,

1 Pablo Mukherjee explains that the toxic gas leak from the Union Carbide pesticide factory in Bhopal killed “[b]etween five and ten thousand people…immediately, with a further sixty thousand sustaining injuries and a significant number succumbing to these over the next days, months, and years” (216). The event “affected an estimated two hundred thousand people out of the nine hundred who lived in this rapidly expanding central Indian city”; meanwhile, “[t]he horrific damage to animal and plant lives remains largely uncharted” (Mukherjee 216).
dehumanizing chasm that divides those who can act with impunity and those who have no choice but to inhabit intimately, over the long term, the physical and environmental fallout of actions undertaken by distant, shadowy economic overlords” (52-53).

The epigraph with which this chapter opens serves as a microcosm of this dynamic. In demanding justice and compensation from the transnational corporation that has wreaked human and environmental devastation upon Khaupfur, the old woman, Gargi, cannot even make herself understood by the company bosses, who inhabit both a world and a language upon which she has no claim. The failure of translation in this passage (i.e., the journalist’s equivocation, “I don’t know how to translate it”) underscores the grotesque chasm that separates so-called first-world and third-world lives: Gargi seeks compensation but is given pocket change; she demands justice but is treated as a common beggar instead. Most of all, this scene gestures toward the ways in which transnational capital’s attempts to (at best) negotiate monetary settlements (or, at worst, eschew responsibility altogether) for the lives it has destroyed marks those developing-world lives as a priori disposable. “You were making poisons to kill insects, but you killed us instead,” Gargi says. “I would like to ask, was there ever much difference, to you?” The answer that Animal’s People gives to this question, of course, is no. Within the landscape of the novel, and with Animal as the prime exemplar, postcolonial human life is stripped of its value by the capital-accumulating operations of foreign corporations. A byproduct of the reigning “neoliberal order” (Nixon 46), Animal embodies the “animalization” of human life in

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Nixon expands on this notion, observing that “[Sinha’s] novel gives focus to three of the defining characteristics of the contemporary neoliberal order: first, the widening chasm—within and between nations—that separates the megarich from the destitute; second, the attendant burden of unsustainable ecological degradation that impacts the health and livelihood of the poor most directly; and third, the way powerful transnational corporations exploit under cover of a free market ideology the lopsided universe of deregulation, whereby laws and loopholes are selectively applied in a marketplace a lot freer for some societies and classes than for others” (46).
Khaufpur; as Sinha frames it, it is on this register that the denizens of Khaufpur are to be understood as “Animal’s people.”

On the surface, therefore, Animal’s People reads as the culmination of my dissertation’s examination of disposable life: here, disposability has definitively crossed the human-animal divide in order to take the human—specifically, the postcolonial subject—squarely as its object. And in numerous ways, this novel poses the same kinds of questions as the other novels I’ve examined thus far. Like Coetzee’s Disgrace, Animal’s People asks what it means to operate within the realm of a lost cause; also like Coetzee’s novel, it undertakes to search for some kind of reprieve, some form of grace, within a world marred by histories of violence and domination. Like Never Let Me Go and Cloud Atlas, it raises ethical questions about the exploitation of some lives—namely, those lives that are set apart on the basis of their perceived class-, race-, or species-difference—in the service of others. And like Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy, it asks how the act of telling a story—how narrative production itself—might bring into being new kinds of futures that harness the potential of a radical break with the past.

Most importantly, as with all the novels I’ve treated thus far, Animal’s People concerns itself with a kind of violence that is so routine and mundane that it doesn’t register as violence. And this is not just the kind of “slow violence” that exerts itself through environmental degradation, as Rob Nixon so convincingly argues; it is a kind of violence that doesn’t announce itself as violence, a kind of normalized violence (here perpetuated by the unequal power relations that govern our contemporary neoliberal order) that gradually becomes the new status quo. As the novel’s activist-hero figure, Zafar, tells Animal:

“What do you suppose Kampani-wallahs look like? Blood-dripping teeth, red eyes, claws?”

Animal asks, “Why give our whole lives to a lost cause?” (Sinha 286).

More on “grace” in Animal’s People to follow in the “Human, Animal, Rights-Bearing Subject” section.
Well, I’ve never thought about this, of course I’ve no idea. “They look ordinary,” says he. “You know why? Because they are ordinary. They are not especially evil or cruel, most of them, this is what makes them so terrifying. They don’t even realise the harm they are doing” (Sinha 195).

Animal’s People, as Rob Nixon also notes, concerns itself far less with the “spectacular” violence of the event itself the industrial accident that killed thousands in a single night—than with the ordinary violence that characterizes everyday life in the event’s aftermath. Most importantly for my purposes here, Sinha’s novel is concerned with the logic that allows those responsible to stand by complacently while the effects of the disaster—polluted water and poisoned breast milk and permanently scarred lungs—become part and parcel of the victims’ everyday lives. This logic, which is not in and of itself “especially evil or cruel,” but whose effects are both especially evil and especially cruel, is the logic of disposability. It is a self-authorizing logic that dictates, as “the buffalo” does to Zafar, that one’s ethical responsibility for the other is not unconditional, but is instead conditioned by the nature of the abyss that exists between them: “When you get to my age and you have two Italian greyhounds and you’ve read as many books as I have, and have as many friends among lawyers and judges, and have won as many cases, you don’t have to spend time justifying yourself” (Sinha 307).

What Animal’s People strives to do, in the same vein as the other novels I have considered, is to throw a wrench into the workings of disposability; via the form his story takes, Animal attempts to push back against the consumption of “third-world” lives by their “first-world” counterparts. Critics have given various accounts of the ways in which Sinha’s novel seeks to do this. Liam O’Loughlin, in reading Animal’s

5 In contrast to “spectacular” figurations of violence, Nixon offers up “a slow violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (2).
People as a “critique of the NGO narrative’s Eurocentric parameters” (103) offers up “[n]egotiated solidarity” (111), “based on reciprocal exchange between aid worker and the so-called ‘distant suffering’ other” (103) as a counter-force to the operations of neocolonial power by which Animal and his people are exploited. Heather Snell finds the novel’s mode of resistance in Animal’s narratorial efforts to “provoke a consciousness in his readers of the politics that frame reading in any given moment” (7), so that “the seemingly impermeable gap between text and reader might in itself become a bridge to increased awareness about the politics of interpreting culturally different books” (13). Pablo Mukherjee argues that “The poison kills and maims, but it paradoxically enables its victims to leave behind their monadic selves and reach for a collective consciousness…. What Sinha models for us, in effect, through Animal and his friends, is the emergence of a politics of transpersonality and collectivity in response to the toxic degradation of a postcolonial environment” (227-28). Rob Nixon, finally, locates the novel’s narrative power in “Sinha’s single-handed invention of the environmental picaresque,” remarking that “By creatively adapting picaresque conventions to our age, Sinha probes the underbelly of neoliberal globalization from the vantage point of an indigent social outcast” (46).

My reading of Animal’s People, by contrast, is of necessity double-pronged. On the one hand, in what follows, I locate the novel’s attempts at resistance in the vicissitudes of Animal’s voice; here, literary mediation—the imperfect translation of the Hindi tapes that record Animal’s story, along with their slips and breaks and impenetrable colloquialisms⁶—offers itself up as a way of deferring access to those disposable, developing-world lives that global capital seeks to capture. On the other

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⁶ Animal’s account of the mechanics of his narrative is as follows: “I’ve just rewound the tape like Chunaram did that time, heard my own voice. Sounds so queer. Do I speak that rough-tongue way? You don’t answer. I keep forgetting you do not hear me. The things I say, by the time they reach you they’ll have been changed out of Hindi, made into Inglis et francais pourquoi pas pareille quelques autres langues? For you they’re just words written on a page” (Sinha 21).
hand—and this is where I diverge from much of the critical literature on this text—I argue that on a formal level, the novel ultimately fails to deliver on the promise that it makes on its thematic register. In other words, I propose that even if Animal’s People strives to be a work that asks us to read in new and unexpected ways that disrupt the dichotomies of human/animal and self/other that serve as alibis for disposability, the novel nevertheless leaves intact the narrative parameters that make the logic and operations of disposability possible to begin with. This is why, I propose, as the novel closes we are left not with hope for the future, but rather with the specter of revolution descending upon us: “Eyes, I’m done,” Animal says. “Khuda hafez. Go Well. Remember me. All things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us” (Sinha 366).

5.1 A Chronicle of Narrative Potential Foreclosed

“Don’t worry,” Animal observes at the novel’s inception. “Everything will get explained in due course. I’m not clever like you. I can’t make fancy rissoles of each word. Blue kingfishers won’t suddenly fly out of my mouth. If you want my story, you’ll have to put up with how I tell it” (Sinha 2). What Animal insists upon above all else, his claim to authority, is that he tell “his story and nothing else,” in “his words only” (Sinha 9). No matter if some of these words are foreign to the reader, either because they’re rendered in Hindi (a glossary, albeit an obtrusively incomplete one, is appended at the novel’s conclusion for ease of translation), or in French (which comes with no accompanying glossary, but which can often be deciphered on the basis of contextual information), or in disorienting Indian-English colloquialisms (e.g., “jamisponding,” which we eventually learn, at once with the American interloper Elli Barber, stands for “James Bonding,” or “spying”). Animal’s aim, the text makes clear, is not to cater to the reader. With a narrative designed to keep his audience at arm’s
length, the act of giving voice to his story constitutes, for Animal, a form of resistance. The question is: resistance to what?

On the most basic level, Animal stages his narrative as a form of resistance to the West’s fetishization of the suffering that is the legacy of the disaster in Khaufpur and others like it. Addressing the journalist who has left him a tape machine with which to record his story, Animal observes, “You were like all the others, come to suck our stories from us, so strangers in far off countries can marvel there’s so much pain in the world. Like vultures are you jernaliss. Somewhere a bad thing happens, tears like rain in the wind, and look, here you come, drawn by the smell of blood” (Sinha 5). As Animal has heretofore experienced it, the Western appetite for tales of third-world suffering operates as a form of emotional scavenging: first-world readers derive spiritual sustenance—by way of exercising their sympathy safely, from a distance—from the misfortunes of third-world others. For such readers, this dynamic requires keeping the “far off” other sufficiently far away to ensure that he comes into focus as an object of sympathy rather than as a subject in his own right; the emphasis must remain on the reader’s experience of his own sympathy, rather than on the other who suffers at a distance. In this way, Animal posits, people like him become conduits for Western readers to derive (or manufacture) emotional sustenance from the (empty) workings of their self-serving sympathetic imaginations.

Finally, and more insultingly, this first-world consumption of third-world lives is abetted by narrative strategies that seek to contain the other’s otherness by inscribing

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7 This is the logic that marks the category of “poverty porn” more broadly speaking. Andrew Mahlstedt describes its operations as follows: “Like sexual pornography, poverty porn capitalizes on the power of distance. Sexual pornography is so alluring because it’s not about real engagement, because it arouses from a safe distance, without the messy entanglements of emotion that encountering another human necessarily entails. The viewer holds absolute power—he or she can choose the ethnicity, age, gender, and physique of their ‘partner,’ and alter these choices daily. Pornography, whether of sex or poverty, is essentially egocentric, for the viewer holds absolute power in the imagined encounter. The engagement is about consumption, about getting off and getting back to one’s own life” (69).
him within an easily recognizable, preexisting narrative frame. “You have turned us Khaufpuris into storytellers, but always of the same story,” Animal concludes. “Ous raat, cette nuit, that night, always that fucking night” (Sinha 5). Striving to take the story back out of the mouths of the journalist-vultures who seek to bend it to their own purposes, Animal offers up his Hindi-language, tape-recorded account as a counter-narrative, as the true story that “has been locked up in [him],” the story that, having been so long suppressed by the West’s other, formulaic renderings, is now finally “struggling to be free” (Sinha 12).

It is tempting to read Animal’s narrative, so marked by its unflinching vulgarity, crude humor, and disdain for politesse (“I’m tired of talking, tape’s nearly gone, mouth’s dry, I should make chai, plus it’s past time for my shit” [Sinha 20]), as a form of resistance to the confluence of forces—the ever-widening gap between the world’s rich and poor, the commodification of third-world suffering for first-world consumption, the transnational corporation’s refusal to accept responsibility for its actions—that conspire to render him and his people disposable. In giving us a different story (or in giving us the story differently), the novel gestures toward literature’s potential to think the world otherwise and anew. And yet, I argue that this is not a novel that succeeds in actualizing this potential. Throughout, Animal’s People remains bound up within a set of tropes that fail to address the problems posed by the category of disposable life. To put

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8 Of Animal’s voice, Nixon observes the following:
“Animal, speaking his life story into the Jarnalis’s tape recorder, is all charismatic voice: his street-level testimony does not start from the generalized hungers of the wretched of the earth, but from the devouring hunger in an individual belly. If the novel gradually enfolds a wider community—Animal’s people—it does so by maintaining at its emotional center Animal, the cracked voiced soloist, who breaks through the gilded imperial veneer of neoliberalism to announce himself in his disreputable vernacular. His is the antivoice to the new, ornate, chivalric discourse of neoliberal ‘free trade’ and ‘development.’

Through Animal’s immersed voice, Sinha is able to return to questions that have powered the picaresque from its beginnings. What does it mean to be reduced to living in subhuman, bestial conditions? What chasms divide and what ties bind the wealthy and the destitute, the human and the animal? What does it mean, in the fused imperial language of temporal and spatial dismissal, to be written off as ‘backward?’” (66-67)
it simply: if the novel’s modus operandi is resistance, then it inevitably remains bound up with, and dependent upon, that which it resists. In other words, if Animal’s goal is to tell his story in such a way as to impede the reader’s attempts to “capture” those lives that the operations of global capital have rendered disposable, then the narrative itself reproduces (albeit in relief) the power differential that makes such forms of “capture” possible to begin with.⁹

The novel’s narrative frame sheds light upon this dynamic. The story that Animal tells is predicated upon the distinction he draws between “eyes” and “Eyes”—between the swarm of (presumably first-world) eyes that seek to consume his story and the single pair of eyes, affectionately termed Eyes, who will listen if he only “speak[s] from [his] heart” (Sinha 12). The first version, “eyes” are the devouring eyes of the Western reader, for whom both Animal and his story are curiosities to be consumed:

I am saying this into darkness that is filled with eyes. Whichever way I look eyes are showing up. They’re floating round in the air, these fucking eyes, turning this way and that they’re, looking for things to see. I don’t want them to see me, I’m lying on the floor, which is of dry dust, the tape mashin is by my head.

... See, it’s like this, as the words pop out of my mouth they rise up in the dark, the eyes in a flash are onto them, the words start out kind of misty, like breath on a cold day, as they lift they change colours and shapes, they become pictures of things and of people. What I say becomes a picture and the eyes settle on it like flies. (Sinha 12-13)

These eyes, aggressive eyes that are “waiting for something to happen” and “looking for things to see” (Sinha 12), are indiscriminate in their hunger. In this formulation, the eyes are the vultures and Animal is carrion; they are the hunters, and he, “lying on the floor” and hiding, is the hunted. With the swarm of eyes as his audience, in other words, the story Animal is poised to produce is one that would be all detritus and excrement—a

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⁹ Heather Snell locates this kind of capture in Animal’s vocabulary, which she sees as playing into the journalist’s desire for an “authentic” story from the subaltern perspective: “Even as Animal’s bawdy language manifests a desire on his part to resist co-optation, it actually functions, at least potentially, to accommodate demands for the raw, gritty accounts of reality India supposedly has to offer” (9). While I agree with Snell’s point, I locate this dynamic of capture and resistance in the narrative frame of the novel as a whole.
waste product (in keeping with the ones produced by all those other vulture-journalists) for “the eyes [to] settle on...like flies.” This is not the kind of story, of course, that Animal consents to produce; what he needs in order to tell the story he wants to tell is a one-to-one relation with an imagined interlocutor.

Conceived of as a counterpart to “eyes,” “Eyes” accordingly becomes the narrative device that makes Animal’s story possible. In contrast to the horde of eyes who devour, Eyes is (in an oxymoronic vein) the singular auditor who listens.10 If the eyes ambush Animal from the moment he opens his mouth to speak, then Eyes hangs back, materializing at Animal’s bidding:

In this crowd of eyes I am trying to recognize yours. I’ve been waiting for you to appear, to know you from all the others, this is how the Kakadu Jarnalis in his letter said it would be. He said, “Animal, you must imagine that you are talking to just one person. Slowly that person will come to seem real to you. Imagine them to be a friend. You must trust them and open your heart to them, that person will not judge you badly whatever you say.”

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. So now listen. (Sinha 13-14)

Eyes, in other words, is Animal’s ideal reader—the reader who will welcome Animal as a friend and treat him with unconditional compassion as he unravels the story he has to tell. “Eyes, are you with me still?” Animal asks as he guides the reader through the wreckage of the factory in which he makes his home. “Here we can climb, up the ladders and up, to where the death wind blew. At the top of the highest stair, a single black pipe continues into the sky. You can rest your hand on it, it’s wider than the rest” (Sinha 31). In contrast to the devouring “eyes,” Eyes is Animal’s fellow journeyman, at

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10 Jennifer Rickel homes in on the ways in which the text “mix[es] the metaphors of seeing and hearing” (91), which she reads as a critique of the reader’s position with respect to the text: “As this metaphor of listening eyes mixes two different sensory experiences, the novel alerts the reader to the shallowness of his or her sensory experience as a reader-witness. By destabilizing the authority of sensory descriptions, the text reminds the reader that such simulations do not enable the reader to experience, and in turn heal, the suffering described” (97-8). I do not take this mixing of sensory metaphors to signify a critique of the reader’s relationship to Animal’s narrative.
once companion and tutee as he navigates the (literal and figurative) terrain that comprises his story.

Critics tend to disagree on the place that “Eyes” occupies within Animal’s People, and this, in turn, has implications for critical readings of the novel as a whole. Perhaps most notably, Andrew Mahlstedt collapses “Eyes” into “eyes,” allowing the distinction that Animal draws between these two constructs to drop out of his analysis of Sinha’s work entirely: “Framing Animal’s narratee as a seeing entity—‘Eyes’—is ironic: the vast majority of real readers of Animal’s People would never actually see someone like Animal, his people, or the toxic environment in which they live. These are the eyes of the globally mobile…who float far above the lived experience of poverty in the global south, and yet who constitute the domestic and international readers of Animal’s narrative” (63-64). Meanwhile, in an article on community resilience and cosmopolitanism in a set of “challenge-response novels” that includes Animal’s People (Murphy 148), Patrick D. Murphy observes in a similar vein that “we are given the ability via the act of reading not only to be ‘Eyes’ who see the exotic, as Animal derisively calls his listeners, but also to be ‘Ears’ and through that to become ‘Hearts’” (160). Murphy misses out on the fact that in Animal’s rendering, “Eyes” is not the figure that exoticizes the third-world other; that figure is, instead, the swarm of “eyes” to which “Eyes” (who is by no means treated derisively by Animal) stands in opposition. Finally, Liam O’Loughlin likewise fuses “Eyes” with “eyes,” arguing that “Animal continues by taking explicit control of the spectacle-obsessed vision as he makes a direct address to the reader-as-masses, whom he dubs, collectively, ‘Eyes’: ‘I am talking to the eyes that are reading these words’” (108). In this interpretation of “Eyes” as “the reader-as-masses,” O’Loughlin not only fails to register Animal’s rendering of “Eyes” as that solitary “one person” who will respond to the singularity of Animal’s tale, but he also subsumes “Eyes” into the “eyes” who “settle on [Animal’s story] like flies”: “As ‘Eyes’, ...
Animal’s imagined reader is one (still) obsessed with the visual spectacle, yet also limited in vision, with access to only a partial range of sight. The eyes are like carrion eaters, in the way they move from image to image: ‘what I say becomes a picture and the eyes settle on it like flies’” (O’Loughlin 108).

If the first camp of critics a priori does away with the distinction between “Eyes” and “eyes,” then the second camp reads it along the lines that I have already laid out: it distinguishes the unitary, congenial figure of Eyes from the devouring multitude of eyes, locating the novel’s resistance to first-world consumption of third-world disaster narratives in the figure of the former, who comes to embody the potential for a non-exploitative form of relationality between disaster victims like Animal and those far-off, better-off people who read his story. For instance, in an article that looks at Animal’s *People* through the lens of crime fiction, Anthony Carrigan observes: “Referring to his imagined western audience throughout the narrative as ‘Eyes’, Animal converts the scopic drive…associated with detective fiction—what he initially describes as his readers’ ‘acid’ curiosity (7) – into a form of ‘eye-witnessing’ that undermines the voyeuristic consumption of ‘third world’ disaster associated with charity discourse…or ‘disaster pornography’” (167). In Carrigan’s reading, therefore, “Eyes” not only differs from “eyes”; by taking on the role of “eye-[witness]” to Animal’s experience, the former becomes a way of actively resisting the forms of exploitation (e.g., as evident in poverty porn and “charity discourse”) perpetuated by the latter. Finally, in her essay on *Animal’s People*, Jennifer Rickel offers a spot-on rendering of the Eyes/eyes dynamic as it is figured within Animal’s narrative logic, observing that

One way in which Animal attempts to realign the power dynamic between himself and his readership is to identify and address his reader as an individual rather than as “[t]housands” (7) of eyes “like flies” (13), devouring his story as decaying matter…. Animal imagines the interaction between narrator and reader anew, attempting to circumvent preconceived ideas and hegemonic discursive structures that render the narrator-reader relationship unequal. He confronts and names the individual reader according to this person’s basic relationship to the text as a set of eyes. Asserting himself as the narrator whose job it is to talk
and assigning his reader the job of listening, he positions himself as the expert and instructs the individual, whose eyes register his words, to listen rather than devour. (97)

Like Carrigan, Rickel takes “Eyes” as a figure that embodies the narrative potential of Sinha’s novel: it becomes Animal’s way to break out of the “hegemonic discursive structures that render the narrator-reader relationship”—not to mention the third-world victim / first-world consumer relationship—“unequal.” Eyes, in other words, becomes the placeholder for the ideal reader who, instead of consuming Animal’s narrative, is transformed through the process of reading it.

This stark divide between these two ways of interpreting the relation between eyes and Eyes in Sinha’s text points to the slipperiness of Animal’s narrative project. It would seem that the first camp of critics fails to register the fact that, at least within the terms that Animal has established for his story, “eyes” and “Eyes” are different constructs that behave in different ways in order to produce different results. By contrast, the second camp takes Animal’s insistence on the fundamental irreconcilability of “eyes” and “Eyes” at face value; in so doing, these critics give credence to Animal’s faith in Eyes’s capacity to catalyze the change that Animal wishes to see in the world around him. This critical framing of Eyes as a cherished confidante (“Eyes, here’s what I’m thinking, and this I’m speaking to the mashin, I’ve told to no one but you” [Sinha 366]) who will listen to Animal’s story instead of devouring it presumes that 1) Eyes is the listening figure that makes it possible for Animal to decide on an ending to his story (that is, whether or not to undergo the operation that will allow him to stand upright)11 and 2) Eyes will manifest itself as the kind of reader who stands outside the exploitative dynamics that characterize the relation between the global north and south, rich and

11 At the end of the novel, Animal explains, “Long have I sat with this paper [detailing that Animal’s operation is booked] under the old tamarind tree that was Ma’s parlour. Thought and thought I’ve, asked aloud for advice, my voices had none to offer, but began their crazy hissing, khekhe fishguts noises. It’s then I’ve remembered the tape mashin in the wall. I will tell this story, I thought, and that way I’ll find out what the end should be. I’ll know what to do” (Sinha 365).
poor, the world’s comfortably situated leisure readers and those whose stories they consume.

What this critical perspective fails to account for, however, is that there exists no necessary relation between #1 and #2 above. In other words, the fact that Animal does ultimately reach a conclusion through the process of telling his tale to the listener he has conjured up (#1) does not prove that the experience of reading Animal’s People has necessarily turned us into the kinds of readers that Animal envisions for his new world order (#2). My point is that we ought resist the temptation to conflate Sinha’s text and Animal’s narrative, to treat them as if they are one and the same. This is another way of saying that even as Animal’s condition of possibility for telling his story lies in conjuring up an ideal reader who will listen to it, this is not a guarantee that the narrative that Sinha has produced ultimately brings this kind of reader into being.

And it is here that I want to turn back to that first critical camp for a moment in order to propose that there is indeed a logic behind its propensity to collapse “Eyes” back into the swarm of “eyes” from which it emerges. Simply stated: while Animal conceives of the terms “eyes” and “Eyes” as diametrically opposed, within the frame of the novel as a whole, the two actually bear an iterative relation to each other. The swarm of “eyes” are the readers who have recourse to sympathy as an alibi for consuming the lives of others; though “Eyes” strives to stand for something more, it remains, at its core, the figure of the sympathetic reader par excellence. This is the reader who, if Animal-as-narrator has done his job right, will feel Animal’s suffering as if it is his own: “When I started speaking, when I heard dead Aliya’s voice calling, it was like she and the others who are no more came back to be with me. My dear ones, heroes of my heart. Eyes, I can’t tell you how I miss them, until I die this wound will never heal” (Sinha 365). In other words: even if on the register of Animal’s narrative, Eyes gestures toward the possibility of “imagin[ing] the interaction between narrator and
reader anew” (Rickel 97), on the register of Sinha’s novel-as-text, Eyes is still the reader who has recourse to the sympathetic imagination to inhabit the lives of the novel’s subjects.¹²

Thus, even if the ascendance of Eyes within Animal’s narrative brings about the demise of the swarm of eyes (“The thousand eyes have begun to fade, they are melting away or else somehow merging into just one pair of eyes, which are yours,” Animal remarks [Sinha 20]), this does not mean that this dynamic is replicated upon the overarching literary terrain of Sinha’s text. Insofar as “Eyes” is coterminous with the reader of Animal’s People, this figure is simply another (although a kinder and more compassionate) iteration of its vulture-reader (“eyes”). In the end, “Eyes” stands in for the kind of reader who approaches the work before him through the sympathetic imagination. Even in its best possible permutations, however (as outlined in my introductory and second chapters), the ethical thrust of this kind of reading remains intensely self-interested: in it, the other exists as a circuit through which the self stands to be shored up or re-entrenched.

5.2 Human, Animal, Rights-Bearing Subject

If “Eyes” marks a repetition of the same (“eyes”) rather than the production of difference within Animal’s People, then it also points to a larger set of forces at play within Sinha’s work: namely, the disjoint between the reader’s experience of Sinha’s novel-as-text and of Animal’s narrative within it. In what follows, I consider the degree to which the former delivers on the promise embodied by the latter, arguing that even as the figure of Animal presents a staunch critique of “humanism’s universalizing

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¹² What’s more, Animal himself facilitates this dynamic by placing Eyes into the position of a trusted friend and companion: “Well, Eyes, I guess you want to know what happened next, but while I’ve been chatting with you the sun has risen, it’s dropped down through the hole in the roof, making the floating dust catch fire” (Sinha 20).
platitudes” (Taylor 186), the novel as a whole fails to take us beyond the category of “the human” that is humanism’s touchstone.

On the surface, Animal’s People delivers a damning indictment of human rights discourse, which, as Animal declares, rings hollow within the decimated landscape that he and his people inhabit. Speaking to the journalist who has equipped him to tell his story, Animal insists, “You will bleat like all the rest. You’ll talk rights, law, justice. Those words sound the same in my mouth as in yours but they don’t mean the same…” (Sinha 3).\textsuperscript{13} The narrative thrust of the novel, then, seems to lie in its effort to bridge the gap between the theoretical construct of “justice” that circulates as a global human-rights ideal and its practical, on-the-ground implementation in the wake of events like Khaufpur and Bhopal. Zafar, the novel’s activist-martyr figure, traces this disjoint to the national, cultural, and economic divisions that separate people from each other: “For the past eighteen years these Amrikan defendants have not shown up in this court,” he declares (Sinha 52). “They sit in Amrika claiming this court has no jurisdiction over them, yet nothing can be achieved without them being here, thus these proceedings drag on and on, for the people of this city justice continues to be delayed and denied” (Sinha 52). Zafar’s righteous, if pathos-ridden demands for justice, however, place the novel in a double bind. In appealing to a notion of universal justice that, in its real-world implementation, is anything but universal, Sinha’s text “cosign[s],” as Joseph Slaughter argues in his study of the postcolonial human-rights novel in Human Rights, Inc., “the ideal of the egalitarian imaginary” even as it “expos[es] the disparities and paradoxes that emerge when that ideal is practiced in specific institutions and social relations” (28).

Animal is such a compelling figure, meanwhile, because he confronts this failure of human justice not by clamoring for it, as Zafar does, but rather by opting out of the

\textsuperscript{13} O’Loughlin argues, in a similar vein, that “Sinha’s performance of the subaltern voice thus stages a critique of both the pitying humanitarian gaze and the forms of narrative that arise from that gaze” (108).
category of “the human” altogether. Although Animal’s name is initially an insult that the other orphans inflict upon him (Sinha 15-16), by the time he sets out to record his story, both the name and the identity that he derives from it have become Animal’s pre-emptive retort to a world that denies him his humanity (“I am Animal fierce and free / in all the world is none like me” [Sinha 366, original emphasis]). Presented with the choice between being a misshapen human and sui generis Animal, the decision is easy: “Zafar and Farouq have this in common, I should cease thinking of myself as an animal and become human again,” Animal explains. “Well, maybe if I’m cured, otherwise I’ll never do it and here’s why, if I agree to be a human being, I’ll also have to agree that I’m wrong-shaped and abnormal. But let me be a quatre pattes animal, four-footed and free, then I am whole, my own proper shape, just a different kind of animal from say Jara, or a cow, or a camel” (Sinha 208). The freedom that Animal discovers in his condition, in other words, derives not only from his extra-human mobility, which allows him to “run and hop and carry kids on [his] back,” to “climb hard trees” and “[go] up mountains, [roam] in jungles” (Sinha 366); it lies in his refusal to be measured in relation to the norms that define the figure of “the human.”¹⁴ By refusing to be subsumed within this frame, Animal lays claim to the singularity of his own being and experience; thus empowered, Animal is equipped, among other things, to brush off snide questions about his place within the animal kingdom by declaring simply, “I’m the only one there is of this type” (Sinha 208).

Through Animal, therefore, Sinha asks us to grapple with what we have come to see as normative figurations of the human. As Mukherjee observes, for instance, in the novel’s canny, four-legged human narrator who takes in the world from the same perspective as his dog Jara, we are accordingly confronted with a conglomeration of

¹⁴ Animal’s sidekick Farouq locates in this logic a desire to eschew responsibility. “You pretend to be an animal so you can escape the responsibility of being human…No joke, yaar. You run wild, do crazy things and get away with it because you’re always whining, I’m an animal, I’m an animal” (Sinha 209).
“exaggerated human and nonhuman qualities” that defy easy categorization (227).

What’s more, taken as the embodiment of a multitude of such contradictory qualities, the character of Animal seems to gesture toward the “deconstruct[ion] [of] the binary between ‘human’ and ‘inhuman’ that defines the ‘universal’ subject of human rights” (Rickel 101), bringing into focus the possibility that we might move beyond categorical thinking altogether. And yet, despite the radical potential embodied in the figure of Animal, the novel as a whole fails to push us beyond frame of the human.

This is to say that if, in Animal’s People, we hope to uncover a posthumanist mode of figuring the postcolonial subject, we set ourselves up to be inevitably disappointed. This is because even as the character of Animal raises questions about the human who is reduced to the level of the animal, the novel is invested neither in interrogating the ethical and political primacy of the human subject nor in grappling with the construct of “the animal” as such. (Nor, to the extent that Sinha concerns himself with environmental devastation, is this a concern about the environment as such; what matters is its effect upon the novel’s human characters. As the woman who expels her breast milk so her child will not be poisoned tells Elli: “Our wells are full of poison. It’s in the soil, water, in our blood, it’s in our milk. Everything here is poisoned. If you stay here long enough, you will be too” [Sinha 108].) Even the novel’s captivating opening lines are an act of misdirection: “I used to be human once. So I’m told. I don’t remember it myself, but people who knew me when I was small say I walked on two feet just like a human being” (Sinha 1).

In setting up the human/animal dichotomy as the novel’s apparent central problematic, Sinha sends his audience on something of a wild-goose chase; in the end, I argue, what we take to be the novel’s posthumanist imaginary ends up overshadowing the other ethico-political registers on which Animal’s

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15 Rickel argues that it is Animal’s “posthumanist perspective” that enables him “to denaturalize humanist assumptions and apply a critical lens to the human rights discourse that frames the corporate violence in Khaofurt” (98).
People operates, foremost among these the novel’s less sensational (but far more compelling) disability narrative.

If we shift our focus from the question of the human/animal divide to the novel’s treatment of disability, it becomes evident that there is a transgressive quality to Animal’s People—it just takes a different form from the one we’ve assumed. Here, I want to propose that on the most basic level, Animal’s People challenges us because it goes against novelistic norms in which, as Lennard J. Davis sets forth, “disability…is rarely centrally represented. It is unusual for a main character to be a person with disabilities, although minor characters…can be deformed in ways that arouse pity” (13). Animal, of course, is neither minor nor pitiful, and Sinha’s work flouts novelistic conventions that would render him so. If, as Davis argues (echoing claims made by Slaughter about the Bildungsroman form), “the very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character whose normativity encourages us to identify with him or her” (Davis 13), then Sinha’s novel is distinguished by its deviation from the norm: in the text’s central character, we encounter the disabled postcolonial subject who would be abjected as the “abnormal” “Other” within a normative novelistic narrative frame (Davis 13).16

In Animal’s People, however, Animal’s physical and mental17 disabilities are not only embodied, rendered with poignant physical immediacy through no-nonsense accounts like “Lift my head I’m staring into someone’s crotch” (Sinha 2) and nonsense articulations like “Ssspsss, haaarrr, khekhekhe, mmms, this is how the voices are, often I’ll babble aloud the things they tell me” (Sinha 11). It also shows up for the reader on a

16 Davis writes, “This normativity [of the central character and the normative body] in narrative will by definition create the abnormal, the Other, the disabled, the native, the colonized subject, and so on” (13).
17 Animal explains to the reader that he hears voices.
linguistic level, as a form of what Ato Quayson calls “aesthetic nervousness,” in relation to the bawdy articulations and alien rhetorical rhythms that comprise Animal’s story. By way of example: “I wake with head’s singing,” Animal observes at the beginning of his tenth tape. “Still dark it’s but can’t sleep. I get up, step outside. Outrageous things are going on in my skull. The morning’s curled like a leaf, wind tastes like a bee’s banana” (Sinha 133). In the space of three lines, personal pronouns and subjects have gone missing (“my head’s singing”; “I can’t sleep”), subjects and verbs have been misplaced (“It’s still dark), and seemingly disjointed metaphors leave us scratching our heads in confusion (what’s “a bee’s banana”?). My point here, though, is not to pathologize the novel’s deviation from the forms of standard American or British English that circulate globally. On the contrary, I want to suggest that the novel’s linguistic form, its inventive, irrepressible rendition of Hindi English, needs to be understood in parallel with Animal as an inventive, irrepressible character who is marked but not constrained by his differences.

If Animal’s narrative voice (like Animal’s spine) is bent out of the shape we are used to, then the novel as a whole gestures toward the fact that such deviation need not be read as deformation. Like Animal, who learns to use his four-footed physique to his advantage to gain access to a world that is beyond the reach of his two-footed counterparts, the novel’s distinctive style deploys its aberrant vulgarity to open up a new world of narrative possibilities for its readers. Among these, for instance, is Animal’s unpalatable animal’s eye-view, which presents itself in largely olfactory terms: “Whole nother world it’s, below the waist. Believe me, I know which one hasn’t washed his balls, I can smell pissy gussets and shitty backsides whose faint stenches don’t carry to your nose, farts smell extra bad” (Sinha 2). The convergence of Animal’s disability

18 Here I reference the title of Quayson’s essay. Aesthetic nervousness is a form of readerly affect; as Quayson explains it, “…in works where disability plays a prominent role, the reader’s perspective is also affected by the short-circuiting of the dominant protocols governing the text—a short-circuit triggered by the representation of disability” (254).
narrative with the text’s linguistic inventiveness puts into play a form of functional difference that challenges us, the novel’s readers, to navigate unfamiliar (physical and literary) terrain. In so doing, the novel sheds light on the unspoken expectations that we bring to bear on our encounters with literary texts, bringing us face-to-face with “the unmarked regularities of the normate” (Quayson 255)—be it the normative body, the normative language, or the normative novelistic form.

Insofar as Animal’s People is read as a disability narrative, its central ethico-political problematic turns upon one question: ought we to embrace our differences so that we may thrive as the distinctive beings that we are, or should we strive to bring ourselves as much as possible in line with the model of the normative able-bodied rights-bearing human subject? On the surface, of course, Animal’s insistence that he is the only animal of his kind gestures toward the need to embrace our differences without reference to the figure of normative humanity. This logic seems to be confirmed at the novel’s conclusion, when Animal decides against the operation that will allow him to stand upright: “See, Eyes, I reckon that if I have this operation, I will be upright, true, but to walk I will need the help of sticks. I might have a wheelchair, but how far will that get me in the gullis of Khaufpur? … Is life so bad? If I’m an upright human, I would be one of millions, not even a healthy one at that. Stay four-foot, I’m the one and only Animal” (Sinha 366). And indeed, when Animal is presented with choosing between his current disability (his present “animal” state) and a more normative form of embodiment that would bring with its own kind of disability (diminished mobility), the choice seems clear: he will embrace the imperfect being that he is, because the fantasy of normative humanity is just that—a construct in relation to which all of us are prone, in one way or another, to come up short. Laying claim to animality, then, becomes Animal’s way of absenting himself from the normative frame of “the human,” with respect to which he can only be marked as deficient and disabled.
And yet, I want to propose that in the final accounting, Animal’s story isn’t really a radical rejection of normative humanity at all. While on the surface, the novel might be read as the story of a disabled young man who comes to embrace his irreducible difference, it is my contention that the novel ultimately reconfigures the desire for normativity from physical to metaphysical terms. This is to say that if at the end of the novel, Animal embraces his body as it is, he is only able to do so because he has already been welcomed into the human fold. “Animal, my brother, you are a human being. A full and true human being,” Zafar tells him after Animal has been found, on the verge of death, in the depths of the jungle (Sinha 364). In other words, in what is essentially a coming-of-age tale, a postcolonial Bildungsroman that “narrates the normative story of how the natural and the individual might become civil and social” (Slaughter 26), Animal reaches the end of his story only to discover that humanity was his for the having all along. There is no need for Animal to walk upright—in the final accounting, all that is required of him (in something of a humanist cliché) is that he embrace his human individuality, which, in this case, happens to manifest itself in animal form.

If the novel has set itself the task of imagining new ways of configuring the world in the wake of the kind of violence that has rendered life in Khaufpur disposable, then it hasn’t found a way to resist the conservative appeal of the normative human subject. Even Animal, singular, liminal being that he is, cannot hold himself apart from it; in the end, this is the specter that haunts, and ultimately overtakes, the radical potential embodied by Animal and his narrative voice. Thus, even if, in his insistence that he is a suis generis animal (“I am Animal fierce and free / in all the world is none like me” [Sinha 366, emphasis original]), Animal has found a way to disavow the disability that he believes sets him apart from the rest of mankind, he has not found a way to relinquish his desire for the human—he has simply displaced it.
All along, and despite his protestations to contrary, Animal has yearned for the brotherhood of mankind, imagining that it will allow him to escape the sexual exile and social marginalization that characterize his present condition: “To be trapped in an animal body is hell, if you dream of being human” (Sinha 210), he says, and goes on to rail against Zafar for “tak[ing] the only girl who treats me like normal, which by god I am” (Sinha 231). As the novel closes, therefore, we find that the choice that will mark him as human—the decision to refuse the operation and embrace his individual difference—will allow to make another choice that will corroborate his humanity. In the novel’s last page, Animal tells the reader about his plans to rescue his childhood friend from the brothel in which she labors: “In a tin inside the scorpion wall is more than ten thousand rupees. Eyes, it was for my operation, but now that cash, plus a little persuasion from Farouq’s friends, will go to buy Anjali free and she will come to live with me” (Sinha 366). But if Animal’s determination to buy Anjali out of prostitution signals a capacity for sympathetic identification with the suffering other that is the hallmark of “the human,” then the fact that this capacity is the provenance of Eyes (and in its perverted form, eyes) ought to give us pause. In particular, the self-aggrandizing undertones of Animal’s generosity become evident if we recall that earlier in the novel, Animal has settled upon sex as the act that will constitute him as properly human: “Why shouldn’t I be wanted, even loved?…It’s why even in his sickness I hate Zafar, he could have any woman, but he’ll take the only girl [Nisha] who treats me like normal, which by god I am, one day I’ll prove it by plunging this thing of mine into a living woman” (Sinha 231). Now, at the novel’s conclusion, we find this dream poised to come true as Animal, ready to purchase Anjali out of slavery, stands to affirm his humanity on a sexual register. To put it another way: on a narrative level, Anjali is to serve as the alibi for Animal’s final ascendance to the status of full and “normal” human being.
It is perhaps ungenerous to observe that Animal has bought Anjali and the future services she will render him. After all, the scene that the novel closes upon suggests that, in “com[ing] to live with [Animal],” Anjali will assume the role of Animal’s partner and friend. Nevertheless, it is not unfair to note that insofar as Animal’s People takes up the question of “woman,” it comes nowhere near engaging in the kind of search for “feminist figures of humanity” that we encountered in Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy. On the contrary, when it comes to the relation between the sexes and the reproduction of futurity within Sinha’s text, we are confronted with a regressive sexual politics that signals a re-entrenchment of woman as a vessel for biological reproduction. In what is perhaps the novel’s most sustained meditation on the nature of grace within a world underwritten by seemingly unremitting disgrace, Animal explores, via Anjali, the reproductive organs of the female body:

> When I spied on Elli and Nisha all I saw really were dark shadows, never did I get a good look. Now at last I’m seeing from close up, just a few inches, in all its detail, this mysterious thing, this alluring grace of which I have dreamed, for which I’ve lusted, over which I’ve disgraced myself and behaved like an idiot.

> Dark it’s, the outer parts look like the swelled lips of a large cowrie, within it’s more like a canna lily…. What is this thing? It feels wrong to call it a thing, from nowhere the word grace jumps into my head.

> ...I try to imagine the womb and realise that it’s an empty space, which means there’s nothingness at the very source of creation. No wonder by some this grace is worshipped with incense and flowers and prayers. I said it was the most powerful thing in all the world, I was wrong, it’s more powerful than all the world for it contains the whole world plus heaven and hell beside, in its depths is the whole of the past plus all that will be. I’m thinking of le pouvoir et la gloire that Ma Franci’s always talking about, the power of this grace makes nuclear bombs look like firecrackers, the glory is that it makes its home between the thighs of this child whose thighs are bruised by the hips of drunken men, not one of whom, I’m willing to bet, has ever understood what he is defiling. (Sinha 244, emphasis mine)

On the one hand, of course, Animal’s framing of the vagina as grace marks it as a gift from above (“Grace,” def. I.e.). In this rendering, grace lies in the power to remake the world through the force of biological reproduction—and is to be found in the body of
the woman, who serves as its vessel. On the other hand, however, in Animal’s fixation on the vagina-as-grace, we are confronted with the logic of the “masculine imaginary” that directs its fetishizing male gaze toward the foreign female body as a means of unveiling and pinning down the “mysteries” it purports to contain. Not even Animal’s reverence for “the glory” that “makes its home between the thighs of this child” or his indignation at the violence to which Anjali is subjected rescues this scene from its dominant masculinist logic—a logic that lends a sinister ring to Animal’s closing declaration that he will “go to buy Anjali free and she will come to live with [him].”

And this, at its core, is the frustration that Sinha’s work inspires in its reader: over and over again, and in a variety of different guises, the novel leaves us not with the production of radical difference, but rather with the disappointing repetition of the same. The potential opened up by Animal’s People—the promise it holds for offering a way out of the logic of disposability so that we might begin to remake the world anew—is repeatedly and unceremoniously shut down by the novel’s regressive return to the discourse of man (in opposition to woman), the human (in opposition to the animal), and the normative subject of human rights, who remains the text’s (unsatisfying) ethical touchstone. As critics like Elizabeth Anker and Joseph Slaughter have pointed out, the problem with human rights is that it frames its subject—the human, who is presumed to be in possession of “dignity and personality” (Slaughter 76)—in relief, via an exclusion of those who don’t fit its parameters. “‘Human rights are literally the rights one has simply because one is a human being,’ both common sense and the international

19 Joseph Slaughter’s account of the contradictory impulses that underwrite the postcolonial Bildungsroman is particularly apt here, as it captures the workings of Animal’s People almost precisely: “As the dominant literary technology of human rights incorporation, the Bildungsroman can both articulate narrative claims for inclusion in the normative rights regime and criticize those norms and their inegalitarian implementation by demonstrating the discrepancy between their universalist rhetoric and reality” (28).
20 For instance, in Fictions of Dignity, Elizabeth Anker observes, “Yet Coetzee also alerts us to the exclusions that this ‘foundational fiction’ of human dignity smuggles in, particularly how an alleged lack of dignity has warranted the mistreatment of and denial of rights protections to animals” (3-4).
legal scholar Jack Donnelly tells us,” Slaughter observes (76). To put it another way: human rights logic serves to re-inscribe the human/non-human dichotomy that lies at the heart of our production of disposability. This, in turn, means that disposable life is the inassimilable excess that is abjected by the production of the rights-bearing subject. And if human rights reasoning is thus (unintentionally but inevitably) complicit in the production of disposable life, then what Animal’s People points to, albeit in relief, is the impossibility of mounting a challenge to disposability on the terrain of human rights.

This finally brings us back to the conceptual thread of animalization that runs through Sinha’s text. As the epigraph to this chapter makes clear, the novel is concerned with the figure of the human who is animalized (or, as Gargi frames it, in the vein of Kafka’s The Metamorphosis, with the human who is reduced to an insect). Animalization, and with it the whole conceit of “Animal’s People” (through which Animal is a representative embodiment of the animalization of the Khaufpuri people), marks the point at which the book reaches the limits of its own logic. In other words, if Animal’s People can’t move us beyond the workings of disposability, this is because the conceptual scaffolding of “animalization” as such is never called into question. In Sinha’s novel, and more broadly as well, animalization is understood to be destructive because it reduces the human to the level of the animal; however, within this schema, the level on which the animal itself is situated is never called into question. What “animalization” accordingly leaves uninterrogated is the logic that underwrites both the “animalization” of humans and the bad treatment of animals; it is our casual acceptance of the latter that allows disposability in both the human and animal realms to take root.

In a broader sense, therefore, “animalization” is the shorthand to which, throughout this dissertation, I have offered up “disposability” as a more nuanced and careful alternative. Rather than homing in on the figure of the human who is somehow animalized, the framework of disposability makes it possible to think 1) about the
animal as the legitimate subject of violence, and 2) about violence perpetrated against
the abjected human in terms other than “animalization.” Animal’s People does not,
however, operate on this register. Even if the novel seems to venture forth in new and
unexpected directions, it ultimately finds its way back to the conservative figure of the
human subject that has served as its baseline for ethical consideration throughout. To
put it another way: what is most noteworthy about the figure of Animal is the fact that,
despite his animal-like qualities and his incessant protestations to the contrary, he
remains irreducibly human; the novel’s narrative thrust lies in the question of how he
will come to be recognized as such.

To mark the disjoint between the novel’s ambitions and their abortive execution,
therefore, I return to its ominous closing lines: “All things pass, but the poor remain. We
are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us” (Sinha 366). I want
to propose that the text’s final gesture of apocalyptic foreboding must be understood as
the novel’s last-ditch effort to point to something beyond the scope of what it has
managed to achieve. If Animal’s People has not successfully undone the logic of
disposability that is the source of the tragedy of Khaufpur and Bhopal, then at the very
least, it can impress upon its reader the urgency of this struggle. In the absence of a
truly universal system of rights-based justice, and devoid of a paradigm with which to
replace it, the only possibility that remains, the novel seems to suggest, is revolution.

5.3 The Case of Anil’s Ghost

And yet, even if Animal’s People fails to deconstruct the logic and operations of
disposability, it nevertheless produces in its readers the desire for something more. In
fact, our collective readerly wish for the novel to live up to the (posthuman) potential
embodied in the figure of Animal shows up in a wide array of generous critical readings
of Sinha’s text. Roman Bartosch, for instance, proposes that “Animal’s People offers
fictional means of such [posthumanist] forms of rethinking which require the unsettling
of dichotomies of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ and about human and animal” (10). Jennifer Rickel argues that “Because he does not fit within the rigid categories of a humanist framework, [Animal] attempts to tell his story and establish a relationship with the reader from a posthumanist vantage point that he develops over the course of the narrative” (98). And Jesse Oak Taylor finds in Animal’s People an opportunity to think through “the dynamics of community empowerment” (179) in the context of “the science and practice of global health” (178); in particular, Taylor argues that “In staging the capacity for voice to transform a narrative from weakness to power, Animal’s People not only models the process of empowerment but also hints at the work performed by fiction, specifically its role in re-framing and reconstituting the possible” (178).

What interests me here, therefore, is our collective investment, as critics in particular and as readers more generally, in the novel’s potential to help us “re-fram[e] and reconstitut[e] the possible” (Taylor 178). This is another way of saying that Animal’s People is a text that operates as something of a literary Rorschach test: what we read into it says as much about us as it does about the book itself. What matters, in other words, is less what the book actually accomplishes and more what we will it to do. And if the novel doesn’t give us everything we hope for, this is because what it produces first and foremost is our desire for its exceptionality—it makes us want to believe that literature has the power to change our world, that it might be more and do more than it seems.

The reason we want so much out of Animal’s People, I want to suggest, lies in its complicated relation to our own history and in its imbrication with the world that all of us inhabit. It is not just the novel’s re-imagining of the world’s worst-ever industrial disaster that I am thinking about here—it is its situatedness within a contemporary moment that is marked by “the current emergence…of the human rights model as the global dominant…in the wake of the dissolution of imperial formations and global economic restructuring” (Spivak, “Righting Wrongs” 530). Sinha’s novel, in other
words, is a literary contemplation of the limitations of the human rights model in our contemporary moment; as such, it is also, more broadly speaking, what Debjani Ganguly refers to as a “narrative and affective [imprint] powerfully attuned to our precarious times” (146). With respect to how I situate Sinha’s novel within a wider cultural landscape, therefore, I take a cue from Ganguly’s framing of the post-Cold War world novel:

In their preoccupation with multiple civil wars across the globe, the problem of religious fundamentalism, the ravages of extreme capitalist pursuits, the shared feeling of vulnerability and the everyday human dimensions of incessant global insecurity, these novels could well be seen as constituting deep time repositories of traumatic traces of post-1989 lifeworlds; as narratives that preserve for history a radical transformation of sensibilities, an expansion of the moral imagination, due to instant and incessant electronic exposure to distant suffering. (146, emphasis mine)

For Ganguly, the post-1989 world novel both registers the tremendous violence that marks our present moment and mediates our ethical relation to it. What defines this subset of the novel genre is its capacity “to express a new kind of humanitarian ethic, a new ‘internationalism’ built on a shared dread of human capacity for evil coupled with a deep awareness of the ambiguities of sharing grief across large expanses of devastated humanscapes” (Ganguly 149). Considered within the frame of the dissertation, however, Animal’s People pushes back against this faith in the “internationalis[t]” “expansion of the moral imagination” in order to ask: What is the good of a “new kind of humanitarian ethic” that is born, once again, out of an always already self-reflexive sympathy—even if we’ve “expanded [the] infrastructure of sympathy” this time around (Ganguly 151)? How, in other words, do we confront the logic of disposability through a fundamentally “humanitarian ethic,” when disposable life is itself a waste product of the production of the rights-bearing human subject?

If Sinha’s novel raises these questions, I want to now turn to a novel that will help us answer them. To conclude this chapter, therefore, I take up Michael Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost (2000), which speaks to the question of what the contemporary human
rights novel stands to do about the problem of disposability. Set in the midst of the civil war in Sri Lanka, *Anil’s Ghost* is a fragmentary narrative whose title character, a forensic anthropologist trained in England and the United States, returns to her homeland to investigate a slew of political “disappearances” believed to have been orchestrated by the government. Sarath, Anil’s government-appointed archaeologist counterpart, sets the scene: “A couple of years ago people just started disappearing. Or bodies kept being found burned beyond recognition. There’s no hope of affixing blame. And no one can tell who the victims are” (Ondaatje 17). It is no accident, of course, that there are no active subjects in Sarath’s accounting of the situation; if the civil war has made human life disposable, this is because those who have disposed of “the disappeared” are in a position to cover their tracks. The effect is equal parts ghostly and ghastly: in the wake of these disappearances, all that remains are scraps and snippets—“The colour of a shirt,” “The sarong’s pattern,” “The hour of disappearance”—to mark the lives that have been taken (Ondaatje 41).

When Anil arrives on the scene as a United Nations human rights investigator, therefore, she stands in for the promise of the human rights model—for the hope that shining a light on wrongs will turn out to be the first step in setting things right. Specifically, in her capacity as a forensic scientist, Anil is tasked with piecing together narratives out of “The disposal of bodies by fire,” “The disposal of bodies in rivers or the sea,” and “The hiding and then reburial of corpses” (Ondaatje 43). Confronted with the afterlife of disposable life, in other words, Anil’s job is to bridge the gap between the bodies of the dead and the stories of their lives. More precisely, the novel turns on Anil’s investigation into the identity of a body she and Sarath have dubbed Sailor. Discovered inside “a government-protected archaeological preserve” (Ondaatje 50), Sailor’s body, Anil determines, has been burned and moved to cover up evidence of
what is in all likelihood a political murder. Anil’s quest to unearth Sailor’s identity, and through it, to point the way to his killers, is at the heart of the novel’s narrative project.

But if Anil pushes forward with unshakeable faith in the human rights enterprise, conceiving of her life’s work as an extension of the old adage, “The truth shall set you free,” then the novel as a whole calls this regime into question (Ondaatje 102). This is to say that on the terrain that Anil has entered into, nothing is so clear-cut; “the truth” is nothing short of a liability in a world in which life itself depends on one’s capacity to make ethical compromises and political calculations. This is the thrust of Sarath’s locally situated perspective, wherein the value of “truth” stands to be gauged by the effects it produces: “Sarath knew that for [Anil] the journey was in getting to the truth. But what would the truth bring them into? It was a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol…. There were dangers in handing truth to an unsafe city around you” (Ondaatje 156-57).

At the heart of Anil’s search for the truth about Sailor is an ethico-political calculus that locates the possibility of justice in the synecdochic relation between the one and the many—in this case, in the relation between Sailor and all the others who have been disappeared. Anil reflects:

And in any case, if they did identify him, if they did discover the details of his murder, what then? He was a victim among thousands. What would this change?

She remembered Clyde Snow, her teacher in Oklahoma, speaking about human rights work in Kurdistan: One village can speak for many villages. One victim can speak for many victims. She and Sarath both knew that in all the turbulent history of the island’s civil wars, in all the token police investigations, not one murder charge had been made during the troubles. But this could be a clear case against the government.

However, without identifying Sailor, they had no victim yet. (Ondaatje 176)

The potential that Anil’s reasoning gestures toward is that human rights efforts might bring with them hope for recuperation and recovery—if not a recovery of the lives that have been lost, then at the very least, a recuperation of the value they were stripped of in
being rendered disposable. This is Anil’s fantasy, of course—that Sailor’s value lies not just in himself, but also in his potential to stand in as the “representative of all those lost voices” (Ondaatje 56). On a narrative level, however, these calculations don’t add up. At the novel’s conclusion, we learn that Sarath has been killed as retribution for facilitating Anil’s escape with Sailor’s body. In the end, if Sarath’s sacrifice ultimately enables Anil to make her human-rights case against the Sri Lankan government, she will have to do so with the knowledge that this victory has come at a cost. The central question that the novel leaves suspended, therefore, is this: is Anil’s recovery of Sailor’s body worth the price of Sarath’s life?

*Anil’s Ghost*, of course, doesn’t explicitly answer this question any more than it explicitly declares whether Sailor really can speak for all the other victims of political violence. As the novel closes, Anil leaves, Sarath is killed, and we have no evidence, one way or another, of the effects that Anil’s report will have wrought. We do not even any longer know who the “ghost” of the novel’s title is—is it Sailor or Sarath? What we, the readers, are left with in the place of any definitive reckoning is the incomprehensibility of loss and a sense of the impossibility (as Anil posits early in the novel) of “ever giv[ing] meaning to [human violence]” (Ondaatje 55). But if the novel refuses to give us the kind of meaning we might have hoped for—a way of “making sense” of the lost lives that have, within the dominant political order, been rendered disposable—this is not to say that it sends us away empty-handed. I want to suggest that it is in something like the final communion between Gamini, Sarath’s younger body, and Sarath’s lifeless body, that we most nearly approach the ethical thrust of Ondaatje’s work:

There were things he [Gamini] could do. He didn’t know. There were things he could do perhaps. He could see the acid burns, the twisted leg.

21 Joseph Slaughter interprets this logic as follows: “Anil hopes to reinscribe Sailor into the social text—to reincorporate him as an instance of a particular groups vulnerability and personality; thus, she seeks to repersonify, rehistoricize, and reanimate the dead by giving Sailor back a name, a face, and a voice—in short, a juridical personality—that can speak for itself, testify to the crimes against it, and implicate the government in his torture and execution” (190).
He unlocked the cupboard that held bandages, splints, disinfectant. He began washing the body’s dark-brown markings with scrub lotion. He could heal his brother, set the left leg, deal with every wound as if he were alive, as if treating the hundred small traumas would eventually bring him back into his life. (Ondaatje 287)

What Ondaatje makes clear here is that there is no logic to the experience of deep and abyssal loss—and that what remains in the wake of the collapse of moral calculations and abstract ideals is love. No matter if this love makes us believe in possibilities (e.g., reviving the dead by dressing their wounds) we know to be impossible. This is the starting point for a different kind of ethical imaginary, a different way of engaging with the disposed-of (and the would-be disposable) other. There is no utilitarian thrust to this enterprise: the imperative lies not in recuperating so-called “unhistorical lives” for history (Ondaatje 55), as Anil attempts to do with Sailor, but rather in a form of tenderness that exceeds both narrative logic and critical attempts at meaning-making.

22 In a somewhat similar vein, Hilde Staels remarks of this scene that Gamini “finally opens his heart and expresses his love for his murdered brother….The emphasis on affectivity and a loving encounter with otherness, however brief, is central to Ondaatje’s ethical stance” (988).

23 The term “unhistorical lives” comes from a scene early in the novel, when Anil reflects the ways in which certain kinds of lives come to be marked as historically significant, while others are not:

“In her work Anil turned bodies into representatives of race and age and place, though for her the tenderest of all discoveries was the finding, some years earlier, of the tracks at Laetoli—almost four-million-year-old footsteps of a pig, a hyena, a rhinoceros and a bird, this strange ensemble identified by a twentieth-century tracker. Four unrelated creatures that had walked hurriedly over a wet layer of volcanic ash. To get away from what? Historically more significant were other tracks in the vicinity, of a hominid assumed to be approximately five feet tall (one could tell by the pivoting heel impressions). But it was that quartet of animals walking from Laetoli four million years ago that she liked to think about.

The most precisely recorded moments of history lay adjacent to the extreme actions of nature or civilization. She knew that. Pompeii. Laetoli. Hiroshima. Vesuvius (whose fumes had asphyxiated poor Pliny while he recorded its ‘tumultuous behavior’). Tectonic slips and brutal human violence provided random time-capsules of unhistorical lives. A dog in Pompeii. A gardener’s shadow in Hiroshima” (Ondaatje 55).

24 Other critics perceive the novel to operate on a variety of different registers. David Babcock, for instance, argues that “Ondaatje’s novel is about the dialectical phase shifts that professional intimacies create within human rights discourse. Such intimacy is constructed in and through disciplinary and institutional structures, and the UN’s presence can offer opportunities for new and jarring intimacies to develop, and these intimacies are in fact more crucial to the UN’s mission than some specious commitment to the ideals of liberal humanist ideology” (63). Milena Marinkova argues that “Ondaatje’s novel carries out an act of witnessing, which maps the violent encounter between the public and the intimate and which testifies to the irreparable corporeal inscriptions of this encounter, without adjudicating through a final verdict or offering a lasting cure. With his sustained interest in the tactile, Ondaatje foregrounds proximity as a non-
If Animal’s People taught us to desire the novel’s exceptionality, then Anil’s Ghost gives this desire literary form. In posing the question of how the human rights novel might help us to deconstruct the logic and operations of disposability, Ondaatje’s work responds with a form of engagement with the disposed-of other that is grounded in the possibility of love for the human who is (as all of us, marked by our finitude, are) always already lost. As a mode of ethical engagement that resists the capture of the other, this paradigm runs counter to the synecdochic operations of Anil’s human-rights logic, which dictates that “To give [Sailor] a name would name the rest” (Ondaatje 56). In light of this abyssal gap between Ondaatje’s and Anil’s narrative projects, therefore, it ought to come as little surprise that Anil’s discovery of Sailor’s name ultimately constitutes a narrative anticlimax: “Sarath and Anil had identified Sailor at the third plumbago village. He was Ruwan Kumara and he had been a toddy tapper” (Ondaatje 269). The fulcrum upon which the novel turns, by contrast, precedes the discovery of Sailor’s identity: it lies in the scene of the reconstruction of his head.

When Anil and Sarath hire a local artist, Ananda, to use Sailor’s skull to reconstruct his head, they do so with a particular goal in mind: they will use Ananda’s reconstruction to identify Sailor, then use that information to determine his time of appropriative approach to the other that reasserts their opaque unknowability and unsettles the assumed supremacy of ocular centrism” (109). Margaret Scanlan proposes that Ondaatje’s “distinctive achievement in Anil’s Ghost is to create a narrative structure that replicates the experience of terror. Written in even more tightly condensed fragments than his earlier books, the novel asks the reader to engage in an act of reconstruction, piecing together stories and psychologies as the Sri Lankan artist, Ananda, will piece together the ruined Buddha” (302). Hilde Staels argues that an “important ethical dimension of Anil’s Ghost can be seen by reading Anil’s and the other characters’ personal and traumatic histories of loss and love in the light of contemporary psychoanalytic theory” (977), arguing specifically that “poetic discourse in Anil’s Ghost disrupts the rules of ‘normal’ communicative discourse and gives expression to the Other within the self” (978). Finally, Aarthi Vadde proposes that “Ondaatje’s archival method expresses the conditions of incompleteness and unknowing that the war induced, and in doing so it uses Sailor as a Foucauldian ‘legend’ to open up larger philosophical questions about the limits of responsible representation in the name of either national recovery or global justice…. Anil’s Ghost does not develop an archive that will set the historical record straight by supplying the ‘right’ information; rather, it uses a variety of traces, documents, and artifacts to wed collective memory to the destabilization of identity categories” (268).
death and the circumstances surrounding his abduction (Ondaatje 269). What becomes evident as the reconstruction proceeds, however, is that this is not an act that can be deployed for the purpose Anil has intended. When Anil learns that Ananda’s wife is among the disappeared, it becomes clear “that no one would recognize the face” (Ondaatje 188), that it is “in no way a portrait of Sailor but show[s] a calm Ananda had known in his wife, a peacefulness he wanted for any victim” (Ondaatje 187). What the novel insists upon is that the reconstruction of Sailor’s head is too intimate an undertaking for the political project Anil has in mind. For that, we learn, the imprints of Sailor’s embodied experience will suffice: “She knew it was not the head that would give the skeleton a name but his markers of occupation. So she and Sarath would go now to the villages in the region where there were plumbago-graphite mines” (Ondaatje 205).

So, what is the purpose of the reconstruction of Sailor’s face if, when it comes down to it, the project has no use-value to Anil and it isn’t even Sailor’s face that Ananda reconstructs at all? The significance, it turns out, lies less in the final product than in the process that leads to it. Anil describes the latter:

In the afternoons when Ananda could go no further with the skull’s reconstruction, he took it all apart, breaking up the clay. Strangely. It seemed a waste of time to her. But early the next morning he would know the precise thickness and texture to return to and could re-create the previous day’s work in twenty minutes. Then he thought and composed the face a further step. It was as if he needed the warm-up of the past work to rush over so he could move with more confidence into the uncertainty that lay ahead. Thus there was nothing to see if she entered his room when he was not working. After just ten days, the room was more like a nest—rags and padding, mud and clay, colours daubed everywhere… (Ondaatje 171)

If the process of re-making the face is for Ananda not just a job he has been contracted to do, but also an expression of his love for his lost wife (in the vein of the love that Gamini expresses in cleansing Sarath’s brutalized body), then this scene helps us unpack the form that such love takes in Ondaatje’s work. As Ananda embodies it, this love is not a static emotion or a generalized affect—it is a practice of interpretation, an iterative process
of coming into a layered knowledge of the other while resisting the temptation to pin him down. (Hence, Ananda’s daily rebuilding of the head, wherein each iteration brings him closer to his subject, enabling him to “move with more confidence into the uncertainty that lay ahead.”) It is a process out of which one does not emerge unchanged (“After just ten days, the room was more like a nest”), a process that brings with it heretofore unimagined possibilities for connection. We discover, for instance:

“Sailor’s head, Ananda’s version of him, was already in the village, and it was there that an unknown, unwished-for drummer had attached himself to it, begun playing beside it.... The drumming would stop only when there was a name provided for the head. But that night it didn’t stop” (Ondaatje 205). Ananda’s love for the face (of Sailor, of his wife, of the war’s other victims) is thus a love that has the power to give rise to other instantiations of engagement, attachment, and care. This expansion of love-as-interpretive-practice,²⁵ which also manifests itself in the figure of the drummer who takes the ethical demand posed by the face and sets it to music, constitutes the ethical imaginary that Anil’s Ghost brings into being. This is not the model of the “One victim [who] can speak for many victims” (Ondaatje 176). It is a gesture of faith in art’s capacity to bring us into relation with profound loss, not so that we may speak for it, but so that we may learn to sit with and alongside it.

To conclude, I would like to offer up the act of reading—and specifically, the act of reading the contemporary novel that takes on disposability—as an analog to Ananda’s reconstruction of Sailor’s head. That is, I want to propose that we understand reading as a practice of interpretation that brings love to bear on our encounter with the

²⁵ Milena Marinkova’s reading of Ananda’s relation to Sailor’s face bears a slight resemblance to mine, although she does not read the encounter as a kind of interpretive practice; she observes, “Ananda’s creative approach of moulding depersonalized pain is deprived of the vociferous tumult of revolutionary discourse; it transcends the binary model of majority vs. minority and enacts instead the micropolitical position of affectionate relationality.... Sailor’s reinvented face does more than simply help identify the victim of a murder and thus provide evidence to incriminate the government; its kneaded-in placidity becomes a material witness to unacknowledged torture and a personal witness to the grief of the mourners-never-to-be” (121).
disposable other. If novels like *Anil’s Ghost* afford us the opportunity to approach the scene of violence asymptotically, to come ever closer to it without ever actually touching down upon it, then they also ask something of us in return: they ask us to become Anandas in our own right. This is to say that in our capacity as readers, we are all allotted the privilege and the responsibility of fleshing out the contours of disposable life so that the face of the Other may emerge from it.

No matter if, in the end, our efforts come off as rough-hewn and imperfect; we are all amateur artificers upon the terrain of disposability. Nevertheless, in this capacity, we might take a cue from the scene of Ananda’s reconstruction of the desecrated Buddha statue at the novel’s conclusion. There, we find that it is the imprint of past violence, the imperfect suturing of old wounds, that orients us toward the promise of the future that is yet to come: “Still, all the work he had done in organizing the rebuilding of the statue was for this. The face. Its one hundred chips and splinters of stone brought together, merged, with the shadow of bamboo lying across its cheek…. Now sunlight hit the seams of its face, as if it were sewn roughly together. He wouldn’t hide that” (Ondaatje 303-04). And if we are ever to rebuild our world out of the rubble left behind by the violence of disposability, then, the novel insists, neither should we.

This, in the end, is the ethical imperative of the literary: it asks us not just to build the world otherwise and anew, but also to understand how it came to be shattered in the first place. In the case of the reconstructed Buddha, the story behind its destruction speaks volumes:

The thieves pried the stomach open with metal rods but found no treasure, and so they left. Still, this was broken stone. It was not human life. This was for once not a political act or an act perpetrated by one belief against another. The men were trying to find a solution for hunger or a way to get out of their disintegrating lives…. These were fields where Buddhism and its values met the harsh political events of the twentieth century. (Ondaatje 300).
The violence that turns the Buddha to rubble, in other words, does not begin and end with the dynamite that the three thieves set alight. As rendered by Ondaatje, the explosion and disembowelment of the statue stands in stark contrast to the routine, everyday violence that has produced these “disintegrating” human lives as disposable upon the terrain of civil-war era Sri Lanka. More importantly, in pitting stone life against human life only to linger upon the former, the novel’s conclusion poses the question: why is it the Buddha’s fractured face, rather than the individual faces of these three hungry men, that becomes the site of the novel’s final meditation on the ethical encounter with the disposable other?

Here, I want to suggest that in Ananda’s reconstruction of both Sailor’s and the Buddha’s faces, *Anil’s Ghost* presents us with a new ethical paradigm: the (Levinasian) face that is not a (physical, human) face, as such. The novel, I propose, effects a rupture between a Levinasian notion of “the face” as the site of the ethical encounter with the Other and the flesh-and-blood “face” that serves as the site of social and political recognition26 for the individual who bears it. If the problem with disposable life is precisely that it is a form of life that is excluded from dominant social, political, and economic frameworks, then, instead of pushing for recognition by and within those frames, Ondaatje takes a different route: he reimagines the ethical encounter with the disposable other as a practice of artistic interpretation. As we found in Ananda’s layered reconstruction of Sailor’s head, and now in the act of reconstituting the Buddha’s face from its exploded parts, creation is interpretation, interpretation creation. And this, after all, has been the promise of the literary all along: that the possibilities of interpretation that the literary opens up for its readers constitute, at one and the same time, opportunities for creating the world anew.

26 For a critique of “recognition” as a social and political construct in the contemporary moment, see Pheng Cheah, “The Biopolitics of Recognition: Making Female Subjects of Globalization.”
Coda

By way of concluding this dissertation, I turn to “At the Gate,” the eighth and final lesson of J. M. Coetzee’s generically indeterminate novel-cum-lectures Elizabeth Costello. In this piece, Elizabeth Costello stands before a gate on a hot afternoon in a dusty, nondescript town, and asks the man who guards it if she can pass through. He tells her, “First, you must make a statement” (Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello 193). The conversation proceeds:

“Before I can pass through I must make a statement,” she repeats. “A statement of what?”
“Belief. What you believe.”
“Belief. Is that all? Not a statement of faith? What if I do not believe? What if I am not a believer?”
The man shrugs. For the first time he looks directly at her. “We all believe. We are not cattle. For each of us there is something we believe. Write it down, what you believe. Put it in a statement.”
(Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello 194)

There are two reasons I turn to this passage to offer a reflection on the dissertation as a whole. The first is the guard’s passing reference to those things that are commonly assumed to set us humans apart from other animals. His take on it is: “We all believe. We are not cattle. For each of us there is something we believe.” Needless to say, while my project is deeply invested in the ways in which we frame, in political, ethical, and literary terms, the question of what separates human from nonhuman life, it has little interest in offering up a definitive answer to this question, as the guard so readily does. What this project on disposable life is interested in is not the way in which we might definitively distinguish human from nonhuman life, but rather in the ways in which the desire to draw these distinctions, and the distinctions we end up drawing, serve as alibis for the forms of violence that are casually inflicted upon the nonhuman and upon those who get marked as less than human. This is another way of saying that this project is interested in the forms of thinking that produce certain kinds of lives as disposable. It is interested in the stories that sanction the logic and operations of disposability—so,
stories like the guard’s—and it is interested in the ways in which literature, and specifically the contemporary novel, pushes back against such stories in order to disrupt them.

This brings me to the second reason for concluding this dissertation through Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*. And this is because, in devising *Elizabeth Costello*’s “At the Gate” as a response to or a re-imagining of Kafka’s parable “Before the Law” (located in *The Trial*), Coetzee deploys a practice of citation that might be understood as the paradigmatic example of what my dissertation terms “the literary.” In this case, Coetzee’s citationality multiplies the layers of meaning that stand to be drawn from the text before us. Once Kafka enters into the picture, it is no longer just Elizabeth Costello who is standing at the gate, but it is also the man who asks to gain entry to the law who stands alongside, and before her, and behind her. The possibilities for interpretation proliferate in the face of the kind of literary play that intertextuality both begets and demands.

What my dissertation insists upon is that such forms of literary play are deeply, profoundly significant—that they’re not just interesting, or clever, or decorative, but foundational. What this project argues is that literary play has the power to bring into being new worlds, different kinds of worlds from the ones we have grown accustomed to navigating and inhabiting. To put this in terms of the thematic thread of disposable life that runs through my project: the novels that I read in this dissertation show us how we might 1) expose and disrupt the logic and operations of disposability, and 2) conceive of new possibilities for world-making in its stead. Here I quote Hamlet:

> There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (Shakespeare, *Ham.* 1.5.168-169)

The literary, as this project understands it, is a way of accessing those things “in heaven and earth” that are beyond the reach of our philosophy—and beyond the reach of politics, and beyond the reach of what we call “common sense,” and beyond the reach of
forms of calculation that determine how different kinds of lives are to be valuated and ordered in relation to each other. The literary is the ethical thrust of this project.

Going forward, there are three clusters of questions and issues that this project will address. The first is the status of the category of “disposable life” that serves as the touchstone of my thinking in this dissertation. That is, this project will seek to account for why a normative understanding of human and nonhuman animal life (as opposed to the lives of microbes, for instance, or the life of the natural environment) becomes the subject of disposability in my work. (This, after all, is how the humanist logic that I try so hard to get away from sneaks back into this project.) So, if my impulse has been to critique the valuation of life that opens the door to disposability, then the revised version will have to turn its critical gaze back onto its own thinking in order to tease out the ways in which the project, by focusing on certain understandings of disposability over others, might inadvertently be replicating some of the very gestures it sets out to critique.

The second question to address is that of how we historicize the category of disposable life and what we take the origins of disposability to be. If disposability is operating on an unprecedented scale in our present-day rendering of animal life into animal flesh, does this mean that the first stop in constructing any genealogy of “disposable life” is necessarily (not just coincidentally) the figure of the animal? Can we understand the mechanized mass slaughter of animal life as the historical starting point for the production of disposable life? The project will argue that modern technologies of killing, as exemplified by the modern factory farm and slaughterhouse, demand new ways of conceptualizing violence and its normalization in our contemporary moment.

Finally, this project will make a case for understanding today’s mass production and differential distribution of disposable life in relation to the logic and operations of global capital. In my dissertation, “disposable life” is a category that brings together
animal studies, feminist theory, and postcolonial studies in relation to the abjected figure that each of these discourses seeks to recuperate: the animal, the woman, and the subaltern. What the revised project will insist upon is that in a contemporary moment that is marked by a global circulation of capital that indiscriminately captures different kinds of lives across race, gender, economic, and even species divides, it is no longer sufficient to treat each of these figures individually, through the separate critical discourses that have traditionally taken them up (e.g., animal studies, feminist theory, and postcolonial theory). This project’s contribution to critical theory will be to propose that given the nature, scope, and reach of the violence that marks our present moment, these identity-based categories must be brought into conversation with each other via the thread of disposability that runs through them all. In the end, the project will make a case for the necessity of thinking “disposable life” as a new category of cultural critique that is better suited to grappling with the vicissitudes of our contemporary moment.
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Biography

Calina Ciobanu was born in 1985 in Brasov, Romania, where she lived until the age of eight; thereafter, she grew up in Southern California. She earned an A.B. from Harvard University in English and American Literature and Language (2007) and an M.Phil. in English from the University of Cambridge (2008). She completed her doctorate in English at Duke University in 2015. She has published two articles that appear, in a revised form, in this dissertation: “Coetzee’s Posthumanist Ethics” and “Rewriting the Human at the End of the Anthropocene in Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam Trilogy.” During her time at Duke, she has been the recipient of a James B. Duke Fellowship, a Katherine Goodman Stern Dissertation Fellowship, and a Women’s Studies Dissertation Fellowship.