VARIABLE KINDNESS

Posthumanist Ethics in the Fiction of George Saunders

Kevin Richard Kaiser

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DIRECTOR DE LA TESI

Dr. Pere Gifra Adroher

DEPARTAMENT D’HUMANITATS

Universitat
Pompeu Fabra
Barcelona

A tots els animals.

En memòria de l'Spencer.

Agraïments

Primer i abans que res, gràcies a la UPF per acceptar-me en el programa de doctorat. També, gràcies al Dr. Pere Gifra per la seva orientació, suggeriments i suport en aquest projecte. El procés d'escriure aquesta tesi hauria estat molt menys viable sense la seva ajuda. Igualment, sense l'ajuda de l'Ángels Bertran, navegar a través dels processos administratius del doctorat hauria estat molt més confús.

En totes les consultes que li he fet, George Saunders, com sempre, ha estat d'allò més generós, malgrat la seva creixent fama.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the fiction of contemporary American author George Saunders in terms of how it presents situations applicable to the chief notions of posthumanist ethics and how these conceptions of ethics concern nonhuman animals, which are prevalent in his writing. Posthumanist ethics can help us understand what is at play in Saunders's fiction. Meanwhile, his fiction can help us understand what is at stake in posthumanist ethics. This interdisciplinary project may be beneficial both to conceiving new notions of ethics that are more inclusive and, more implicitly, to understanding the relevance of Saunders's fiction to the current American sociocultural climate.

Keywords: George Saunders, posthumanism, ethics, fiction, animals.

Resum

Aquesta tesi analitza la ficció de l'escriptor nord-americà contemporani George Saunders, tot centrat-se en com presenta situacions aplicables als principals conceptes de l’ètica posthumanista i en com aquests conceptes ètics afecten els animals no humans, que apareixen amb freqüència en els seus escrits. L'ètica posthumanista pot ajudar-nos a entendre el que està en joc en la ficció de Saunders. Mentrestant, la seva ficció pot ajudar-nos a comprendre el que està en joc en l'ètica posthumanista. Aquest projecte interdisciplinari pot esdevinir beneficiós tant per concebre noves nocions d'ètica més inclusives com, més implícitament, per comprendre la rellevància de la ficció de Saunders dins el context sociocultural nord-americà actual.

Paraules clau: George Saunders, posthumanisme, ètica, ficció, animals.

Preface

I approach the fiction of the award-winning American author George Saunders from the critical stance of posthumanism. This relatively recent theoretical development has taken many different paths, but the one that I am most interested in following is its deconstruction of anthropocentrism and repositioning of ethics to include “the Other.” Specifically, I am concerned how human and nonhuman animal others relate, especially in terms of ethics, and what this means to determinations of ethicality. The fiction of Saunders, which is often characterized as being both satirical and ethical, provides a place in which to explore notions of posthumanist ethics. His stories, novellas, and his novel all include nonhuman animals, either as characters or as details. Frequently, they are met with violence, abuse, and death. While Saunders does not write about nonhuman animals due to any particular agenda, their appearance in his fiction indicates how interactions with them may become ethical moments in quotidian American life. It is my belief that a study of posthumanist ethics through the acclaimed fiction of Saunders will allow for a greater awareness of just what posthumanist ethics is and what is at stake in conceiving new notions of ethics while also providing a critical examination of what is at play in his fiction and how he achieves what critics hail as his satirical yet ethical style.

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INTRODUCTION

Unarguably, George Saunders stands in the vanguard of contemporary American fiction authors. His writing has appeared in magazines ranging from *The New Yorker* to *GQ*. He has received the National Magazine Award for fiction more than any writer except Alice Munro (both have been honored four years). Likewise, he has been the recipient of the PEN/Malamud Award and a MacArthur "genius grant." In 2017, he won The Man Booker Prize for his first novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo* and a year later was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. This is only a sampling of the accolades he has received. For his short yet impressive career, which spans about twenty-five years, Saunders, who currently teaches creative writing at Syracuse University, has been honored more than most authors can ever hope to be in a lifetime. Yet, despite the plaudits, his aim is no different than that of any writer: to keep the reader interested. With four short fiction collections, a chapbook, a children's book, a story-cycle, a separate novella, an e-book, a children's book, an essay collection, a commencement speech, and now a novel—and a few stray or as yet uncollected writings—he has kept his readers wanting more, meanwhile establishing himself as one of the premier American fiction authors alive today.

He is also extremely humble and generous. I met Saunders once at a reading in Dallas, Texas, the state where he was born. While signing copies of *Tenth of December* for my wife and I, he asked if we were also writers. We replied in the affirmative, and while I am not certain what expression my wife was wearing, I could not help but think that I must have looked like a star-struck schoolboy. Of all the book signings I have attended, there are few in which I walked away feeling confident about the impression I made. Whether he remembers the encounter or not, I felt content walking away from Saunders because he made me feel like he cared. He said that he was sure we would meet again; the writing world is small. I felt like I mattered, not just as a writer but as a person. I imagine he makes a lot of people feel this way.

Since then, I have emailed him personally, and not only was I not ignored, he responded thoroughly. One of the characteristics of his writing that has particularly caught my attention is the integrity and honesty of his choices—in terms of language, diction, detail, and subject. The simplicity of his writing style comes across as sincere, while obscuring the complexity of what he is really getting at. Here is part of Saunders's response to a query about ethics in his literature:

> I do, yes, think of stories as ethical objects—but I should first say that my way of thinking about stories is very...functional. I feel that my first goal is to make them compelling in some way for the reader—

> otherwise, nothing happens ethically or aesthetically or politically, because the reader doesn't go on, or does so tepidly. So a story, in my view, should be “ethical” in that I want some sense of outrage or sympathy to rise up in the reader so that *she will continue to be interested*. (HQ, ellipsis and italics original)

It may seem that Saunders, by his own words, only aims to entertain. However, if this is so then why the laurels? What makes his writing different? In this epoch of immersive digital entertainment, why bother to read fiction of an author like Saunders? Each of his stories, I argue, is a universe in itself, one which exists just far enough from our own that we want to explore its terrain and just close enough to our own to leave us feeling something about life in our immediate world.

Reviews of his stories often focus on the blend of high and low art, the use of jargon and idiomatic speech, and his portrayals of working class America. His style is occasionally described as magical realism, but many of his stories could be considered speculative fiction. However, he is not exclusive to any one genre. What is common to his fiction is, as Adam Begley notes in his review of *Pastoralia* for *The Guardian*, “an unsettling amalgam of degraded language and high art: slogans, jargon and the crippling incoherence of daily speech, arranged on the page with meticulous care,” including the “brutal solecisms of the American vernacular,” which are played both for laughs and the “odd shot of beauty, too” (2000, n.p.). In his earlier fiction, the characters are usually working class American citizens. However, in the fiction he began publishing in the twenty-first century, the characters became more varied, including an increasing number of children, nonhuman animals, and even abstract shapes or objects. Saunders’s stories also tend to involve what Kasia Boddy, in *The American Short Story since 1950*, describes as exaggerations “to the point of dystopia some familiar aspect of our late capitalist world before introducing a character who voices, either sincerely or in horror, an alternative vision of enlightened (or at least 'light-craving´) individuality" (2010, 143-144). Many of his characters are striving to do the “right” thing without always knowing for certain what that is.

Drawing on the work of critics such as Layne Neeper, Julian Nalerio, David P. Rando, Todd Cesaratto, Sarah Pogell, Catherine Garnett, Christine Bieber Lake, and of those found in the first collection of criticism, *George Saunders: Critical Essays* (2017), edited by Philip Coleman and Steve Gronert Ellerhoff, a book newly published after I began work on this thesis, the following chapters acknowledge what these critics have discovered in the fiction of Saunders while exploring more rigorously some features of fiction that have not yet receive much attention. Most of the essays have focused on issues of class, work, postmodernism, or language and style, especially as these topics pertain to contemporary American culture. A couple of essays take on ghosts or zombies, which appear in a few Saunders stories and especially in his novel. Surprisingly, few essays are devoted to satire or ethics, despite constant references by critics to Saunders's satirical voice and ethical or moral edge. Finally, only one essay, by David Huebert, begins to explore notions of animality, despite the preponderance of nonhuman animals in Saunders's fiction. None examine the fiction in depth from the particular posthumanist angle that I take up, which is interested in the relations between human and nonhuman animals, and how Saunders's notions of ethics relate to those of philosopher Jacques Derrida and many posthumanist theorists.

My intent in this thesis is to demonstrate how Saunders's writing, in particular his short fiction, can help us in several ways. First, it can assist us in identifying the posthuman world in which we reside and in maintaining awareness of the ethical challenges we may encounter there. Next, it can provide us with a greater understanding of how this world and its ethical challenges function in posthumanist ways. Furthermore, it may allow us to theorize from a different standpoint. His writing might *seem* simple and, therefore, more accessible, but it is in no way vapid and is at once as comprehensible and relatable as it is disorienting. Thus, Saunders's fiction, through an idiosyncratic language (characterized by an unorthodox use of capitals and a truncated syntax, among further rhetorical devices) and the presentation of complex ethical situations, allows us to examine concepts in the form of scenarios that may remain occluded to “straightforward” philosophical theorization. Such concepts give to his fiction, which often converges with “dark” satire, an ethical register that is synonymous with posthumanist ethics, making him an important commentator on contemporary American culture, while also marking his writing as an important resource in the discourse of posthumanist thought.

Saunders’s published fiction is comprised of four collections of short stories, a children’s book, a novella, a Kindle single, and a novel, along with two uncollected stories from the story-cycle *Four Institutional Monologues* (2000),[1] “A Two-Minute Note to the Future” (2014)—published on fast-food chain Chipotle Mexican Grill bags[2]—and the *The New Yorke*r story, “Mothers’ Day” (2016). Additionally, one early story, “A Lack of Order in the Floating Object Room” (1986) remains extant. Along with the fiction, he has also published a collection of essays, *The Braindead Megaphone* (2007), and an earlier chapbook, *A bee stung me, so I killed all the fish (notes from the Homeland 2003–2006)*, from which some of the essays published in *The Braindead Megaphone* first appeared. A number of these essays, for example "Ask the Optimist!" and "Woof!: A Plea of Sorts," read more like fiction. A few of his essays, such as *The New Yorker* exclusive, "Who Are All These Trump Supporters?" (2016), remain uncollected. Additionally, a commencement speech, delivered at Syracuse University, is published as *Congratulations by the way: Some Thoughts on Kindness* (2014). For my purposes in this thesis, I focus on the analysis of Saunders's fiction, using his nonfiction merely to inform my commentaries where necessary, as I progress through the fiction chronologically.

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[1] I address the story-cycle in Chapter 6, in which I analyze one of the two collected stories “93990.”

[2] On its website, Chipotle claims to use “the very best ingredients we can—raised with respect for animals, farmers, and the environment,” a practice that, in Saundersian language, “remains at the core of our commitment to Food With Integrity. And as we've grown, our mission has expanded to ensuring that better food is accessible to everyone” (2018).

Before addressing his fiction, I devote Chapter 1 to Saunders's position in contemporary American literature as a satirical and ethical author, then proceed to Chapter 2, which focuses on notions of posthumanism, as formulated by various theorists, and how these concepts relate to nonhuman animals, the development of posthumanist ethics, and Saunders's fiction. I then move on to cover the fiction, selecting one story from each collection to demonstrate how the stories relate to posthumanist ethics, as well as human and nonhuman animal relationships. Thus, Chapter 3 begins with an analysis of the short story "The 400-Pound CEO" from the first collection, *Civilwarland in Bad Decline* (1996). The story, narrated in the first-person, concerns an obese man who works for a sadistic employer at a raccoon retrieval operation that kills the raccoons it supposedly rescues and sets free. My analysis of this story focuses on how Saunders’s satire of American culture also functions as a critique, as well as on how his fiction, by being “experiential,” helps the presentation of ethics. Furthermore, I examine how humans determine who is ethically “worthy” and how the story complicates questions of what is ethically “right.”

I follow in Chapter 4 with an analysis of the titular novella from the second collection, *Pastoralia* (2000), which concerns the lives of two characters, the passive narrator and his rebellious colleague, both of whom work and live on display in a theme park, confined to a simulacrum of a cave, where they are supposed to behave like stereotypical cavepeople. I begin with an inquiry into what language is, that is, as a system of communication that is frequently touted as being exclusive to humans. I then explore how philosopher Jacques Derrida’s notion of “carnophallogocentrism” pertains to the novella. Finally, I take up the problem of utilitarian ethics espoused by the company in the novella.

Chapter 5 is concerned with Saunders’s children’s story, *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* (2000), and a novella, *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* (2005). Both read somewhat allegorically, despite the differences in their target audiences. The former is about a girl who, tired of removing creatures called “gappers” from goats so that the goats will give milk, decides to learn to fish instead. Her neighbors, who at first refuse to help her, eventually seek her help. My analysis of the book examines how it presents some of the more traditionally humanist tendencies Saunders usually evades in his writing and how, in the story, human livelihood is dependent on the enslavement or killing of nonhuman beings. I follow this brief analysis with another one focusing on a novella about abstract beings called “Hornerites.” When the Inner Hornerites accidentally “invade” Outer Horner, Phil, a rancorous Outer Hornerite who calls the Inner Hornerites a threat, gains support, takes over the presidency, and attempts a genocide of the Inner Hornerites. For my analysis of the novella, I investigate both the published text and the outtakes included on the website, <www.reignofphil.com>, addressing conceptions of who is concerned human and how the language and practice of genocide is related to our conceptions of nonhuman animals as inferior.

I return to the short story collections in Chapter 6, which focuses on the story “93990” from *In Persuasion Nation* (1996). Written as a toxicology report, it is narrated presumably by a scientist who is conducting tests of a drug, the purpose of which remains unstated, on a group of monkeys, each of whom dies or is sacrificed after demonstrating a series of hideous behaviors caused by the effects of the drug—except for monkey 93990, who is immune. I use the opportunity in this chapter to explore the routine sacrifice of nonhuman animals for the sake of human well-being and the role of the biomedical industry, known as Big Pharma, in the United States, as well as the Judeo-Christian influence on notions of life and death. I also dissect how the stories use of passive voice is indicative of that which is often used in biomedical reports, generating the false sense of an impartial observer.

In Chapter 7, I analyze the story “Puppy” from the most recent short story collection, Tenth of December (2013), which features Saunders’s “ventriloquist” technique, a third person narrative style that can render thoughts in first person. The story alternates between the intertwining plotlines of two female characters and their familial concerns. As one woman plans to take home a puppy for her children, the woman offering the free puppy takes pride in how she has devised to keep one of her children safe—he seems to have a cognitive difference and is prone to running across the highway—by tying him to a tree in the backyard. Conflict ensues when the mother who has come to collect the puppy discovers the child tied to the tree. I begin my analysis by first examining Saunders’s literary techniques, which include the use of the aforementioned “ventriloquist” narrator, the “communicating vessels” form that shapes the story, and the use of motif. I then explore how Saunders complicates ethics and notions of animality, followed by a Derridean take on the use of naming, sacrifice, shame, and the “abyssal limit” of the human.

I then devote Chapter 8 to *Fox 8: A Story* (2013), published the same year as *Tenth of December* but which exists separately as a Kindle single. The epistolary story, which takes the form of a single letter, features Saunders's first nonhuman animal narrator, the fox of the title, who learns to speak and write what he calls "Yuman" language. When a mall is developed near the home of his fellow foxes, he and his friend set out to befriend the Yumans. After his friend is killed by Yumans, he discovers his home and his fellow foxes are also gone, leading him to seek out a new family of foxes and to write a letter to Yumans. My analysis starts by covering the story's use of anthropomorphism, Jason Wyckoff's conception of "dominionism," and the privileging of human verbal language. I then move on to explore Fox 8's own brand of ethics.

Finally, in Chapter 9, I conclude with a reading of the novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), which uses a collage technique that allows Saunders to employ a variety of narrative voices to relate President Abraham Lincoln's late night visit to the crypt where the body of his recently deceased son, Willie, is interred, and the effect his presence has on the ghostly inhabitants of the "*bardo*," a Tibetan Buddhist term for a liminal space between lives but, in the novel, a graveyard. Saunders intersperses chapters that include both real and fictional historical sources throughout the main storyline, which is recounted primarily by three of the "postdead" beings whose goal it is to free Willie from being consigned to the *bardo* for eternity. I explore the reception of this novel at this point in Saunders's career and how it relates to and furthers the characteristic features and style found in his short fiction. I end by addressing how Saunders employs nonhuman animals, "posthuman" ghostly entities, and formerly enslaved peoples in a text preoccupied with life, death, and liminality. This final chapter will demonstrate how Saunders's fiction addresses posthuman issues beyond my focus on nonhuman animals.

I also include an exclusive interview with George Saunders in the appendix. His responses to my questions both complement and, on occasion, contradict my readings of his fiction, which I believe provides a more well-rounded understanding of his writings. Above all, it is important to note how he concludes that authorial intention is not really definable. The way I understand this to mean is that during the writing process, whatever happens may not be consciously intended yet may be felt. As Saunders notes in the interview, feeling is another sort of intelligence, which is true, I believe, for both him as a writer and for the readers of his fiction. I believe that what he chooses to write about—or, more precisely, what strikes him as possible and interesting enough to write about—is intentional in a felt sense rather than a logically considered one. It just so happens that what strikes him as possible and intriguing to write about is what critics, such as myself, pick up on in his writing.

As Jeff Turrentine boasts in his review of *Tenth of December* for *The Washington Post*, Saunders's writing helps us to understand "the connections among sexism, racism, post-colonialism, late-stage capitalism and white middle-class anxiety" (2013, n.p.). I add that Saunders also helps us to understand the connections among further issues, whether they be sociocultural, sociopolitical, ecological, and axiological. He does so with an ethical edge. Saunders's writing is "interdisciplinary" in ways that institutions that claim to be are often not. However, before addressing any of the multiple points I have mentioned here, which will unfold in the following chapters, first, a contextualization of Saunders's writing is called for.

1. EMPATHY AND SATIRE: THE FICTION OF GEORGE SAUNDERS

1.1. “The Moral Acculturation of Empathy”: Saunders and Satire

George Saunders follows a practice of American “dark” satire, which perhaps stems in part from the American tradition of free speech upheld in Hustler Magazine v. Falwell (1988).[3] American dark satire, especially contemporary American dark satire, is rarely if ever strictly Horatian, Juvenalian, or Menippean; it is satire as a mode rather than a genre. Many critics are quick to indicate the satire at play in Saunders’s stories. However, few have analyzed in quite the manner Layne Neeper has.

In “‘To Soften the Heart’: George Saunders, Postmodern Satire, and Empathy” (2016), Neeper analyzes how

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[3] The United States Supreme Court case held that ideas and opinions of interest and concern to the public are protected by the First and Fourteenth Amendments from attempts by public figures and officials seeking reparations for emotional anguish caused by the publication of any cartoon, satire, or parody. Southern Baptist pastor, televangelist, and conservative activist Jerry Falwell sought redress for a fake advertisement published in editor and publisher Larry Flynt’s adult magazine, *Hustler*, which claimed Falwell had incestuous relations with his mother. For more information, consult Edward C. Brewer’s *Free Speech on Trial: Communication Perspectives on Landmark Supreme Court Decisions* (2003).

Saunders's satire, as a reimagining of the satiric formula, prods us toward empathy. By staying

> with his post-modernist proclivities, Saunders burlesques the quotidian horrors and degradations visited upon characters in a nearly parallel universe to our own contemporary American life, but without even the faintest possibility of prescriptive remedies, instead supplanting the logos of traditional satire, the reasonableness of implied correction, with the pathos of empathetic recognition, an absurd alternative, but the *only* alternative, given the grotesqueries of Saunders's fictional worlds and hapless characters that inhabit them. That his work may still be categorized as satirical resides in the fact that the fiction *is* transactional—readers should feel moved *to change, to overcome something*—but the sole upshot of Saunders's satire is to lead to the moral acculturation of empathy in readers, so that we are put in "the proper relation to the truth," rather than to the inducement to the righting of personal faults or social ills, the avowed aim of the conventional satirist. (Neeper 286-287, italics original)

This transactional quality has been mentioned by Saunders, especially in interviews, as he insists that empathy comes from a "pact between Saunders and the reader.

One way to reach this empathetic connection is through satire. According to Brian A. Connery and Kirk Combe in their introduction to *Theorizing Satire* (1995), reading satire is more perilous than "general" reading. They assert that this occurs because "satirists specialize in demolition projects. The one thing we know about satire is that it promises to tell us what we do not want to know—what we may, in fact, resist knowing. One is apt to find one's former consciousness uninhabitable when the work of the satirist is done" (Connery and Combe 1). Connery and Combe may go a bit far to claim that satirists specialize in "demolition projects," especially because Saunders's writing is subtler. He does not "tell us" what we do not care to know but insinuates it. His writing, however, does leave the "consciousness," if not altogether uninhabitable, at least altered. Thus, unlike many satirists his aim is to attune us to compassion.

Saunders follows the satiric mode found in Mark Twain, Kurt Vonnegut, and Donald Barthelme and has unsurprisingly written essays concerning all three, included in his collection of essays, *The Braindead Megaphone* (2007). In "The United States of Huck,"[4] originally published as the introduction for a Modern Library paperback edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Saunders dubs Twain "the funniest literary American writer," describing his humor as "energetic and true and pure" (189). *Huck Finn*, as Saunders refers to the novel, addresses politics not by being politically incorrect for the sake of a joke but by showing us the political—and personal—stakes of language taboo from discussion (most notably through Huck's quandary over the "nigger," Jim, and whether to turn him in). Saunders's assessment is that Twain's "book was making [Twain] uncomfortable. His comic novel was doing things a comic novel was not supposed to do" because "his subconscious was urging him do things his conscious mind didn't know could be done, or didn't particularly want done" (USH 191). Saunders's writing uses idiosyncratic language in a manner akin to how Twain uses language in *Huck Finn*: it divulges what is at stake in contemporary American sociopolitical culture. Saunders develops a theory, which he facetiously calls, in typical Saundersian fashion, a "Tentative Narrative Theory" of Twain's "Apparent Narrative Rationales." His theory is that Twain's "tension between various warring parts of Sam Clemens—the radical and the reactionary; the savage satirist and the kindly Humorist; the raw hick and the aspiring genteel Literary Figure—is what makes *Huck Finn* such a rich and formidable book" (USH 191-192).

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[4] Hereafter, I will refer to the essay as "USH."

Those readers who approach Saunders considering his similarities with Twain may find Saunders to be an author of similar tension. He is satirical yet kindly, a "blue collar" literary academic, but he seems more aware of these aspects; his literature entertains not despite its ethical awareness but because of it, even if the goal of writing is not "to be" ethical. Saunders contends that the ethical dilemma at the heart of the book—should Huck turn in Jim or not?—was not always clear to Twain, who

> only dimly and imperfectly understood that his book had a Central Moral Vector. Or rather, he knew, but sometimes forgot. Or rather, he knew, but periodically got interested in other aspects of the book and lost sight of it. Or maybe, and most interestingly: his Central Moral Vector was too hot to handle, and would have required him to simultaneously invent, understand, and complete his book in an entirely new genre, a genre that neither Twain nor the world was quite ready for. (USH 197-198)

In Saunders's fiction, the central ethical dilemmas are generally more clearly pronounced, more in focus than they are in *Huck Finn*, yet Saunders's fiction is heir to this style of dark yet compassionate satire, more so than, for example, the satire found in "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County."

In "Mr. Vonnegut in Sumatra,"[5] an astute essay on *Slaughterhouse-Five, or the Children's Crusade: A Duty Dance with Death* (1969), Saunders describes humor as "what happens when we're told the truth quicker and more directly than we're used to. The comic is the truth stripped of the habitual, the cushioning, the easy consolation" (80). In a sense, Saunders is reminding us of what has become a cliché regarding humor: it is funny because it is true. However, if we believe we laugh despite how we feel, this is not the truth. When we truly understand how we respond to that which unsettles us, we realize that when we laugh at satire we laugh *because* of how we feel; we laugh to release the tension. Dark satire is that which forces us to confront an unfiltered "taboo" that is otherwise too painful to consider, whether it be racism or death. We are tricked, in a sense, into confronting this painful issue. This is the reason why Vonnegut is, as Saunders states bluntly, a "funny" writer (MVS 77).

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[5] Herafter, I will refer to the essay as "MVS."

Saunders's reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five* leads him to eventually realize that its seemingly absurdist elements are necessary, since "our most profound experiences may *require* this artistic uncoupling from the actual" (79, italics original). Becoming "unstuck" in time and being held captive by aliens become necessary elements in leaving the reader altered by the experience of reading *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Regarding the novel, Saunders argues that Vonnegut "wrote as if there were a continuum of consciousness between himself and the Terrible Event" because he never claimed that it had excused him from the expected "obligations of being kind, attempting to understand, behaving decently. On the contrary, Vonnegut seemed to feel that unkindness […] had been the cause of his Terrible Event, and that what he had learned from this experience was […] the importance of preserving kindness in ourselves at all costs” (77). The Terrible Event was Vonnegut’s experience during World War II, when, as a captor of the Nazis, he survived the Allied bombing of Dresden by hiding inside the meat locker of the slaughterhouse where he was imprisoned. The experience seems to shape the ethics of the novel, which Saunders notably picks up on, perhaps because they resonate with his own ethical concerns. When Saunders first read *Slaughterhouse Five*, he was struck by the absence of detail, the lack of realism. Only later did he realize that the goal of Vonnegut’s novel was “to soften the heart, to encourage our capacity for pity and sorrow” (79). This is also what Saunders’s writing essentially does. Both the satire and the absurd encourage our capacity for kindness and compassion.

In the essay “The Perfect Gerbil: Reading Barthelme’s ‘The School’,” Saunders describes the rising action of Barthelme’s story, in which the postmodern writer breaks an established pattern—everything that comes into the school dies—while continuing to escalate the plot. According to Saunders, Barthelme “has gotten tired of being polite” so that “[w]ithout worrying about whether it’s allowed, whether it will be understood, or is logical within the world of the story […] he races off in the direction his logic is taking him […] trying to get the story to answer the questions the thing’s been asking all along; What are we to make of death? How are we to live in a world where death is king?” (182). It is not this break in the pattern that allows Barthelme to deal with an otherwise sensitive subject.

Barthelme is aware of the game: for the sake of the plot, the action must rise. This is achieved by establishing a pattern, yet this pattern cannot go on indefinitely; once the reader catches on, to insist on continuing the pattern makes the reader feel insulted. Barthelme uses humor in a way that makes it seem as if the story is winking and nudging its reader. The pattern of death is funny yet it is doing so in the service of something else, namely, forcing us to confront death. Eventually the narrator tells us of deaths outside the school, but the point when the story really takes a twist is when the students begin asking about where all the dead have gone. Suddenly the story is not just about a bunch of dead plants and animals but about the meaning of life. Then the students ask if the narrator will make love with Helen, a character who until this point in the story went unmentioned. A story about death becomes also a love story. Of course, when the narrator and Helen begin to be intimate there is a knock at the door—like a knock-knock joke—and a gerbil enters the room. Since we know the pattern, we can assume the gerbil will not live a long life. The absurdist moment here helps us to confront life, love, and death in a final single paragraph. This is not postmodern irony for irony’s sake but an emotionally charged moment that challenges us, ethically, to consider what is important to us in life. Life feels as brief as Barthelme’s story demonstrates, and love may be all we have time to share. Like Barthelme’s story, Saunders’s writing is compassionate because of its dark humor; the absurd elements in his—and Barthelme’s, Vonnegut’s, and Twain’s—stories are not so absurd when considered as necessary elements to affect an emotional response from the reader. Yet, while Saunders may be the most prominent living author writing this type of emotionally-charged ethical satire, he is not the only one.

1.2. “America 101:” Peers, Influences, and David Foster Wallace

As easily as Saunders can be compared to his forebears, he can also be compared to certain contemporary American or American-based authors who have achieved prominence on account of their “sincere” writing, achieved either through satire or experimentation with form. Saunders’s writing embodies both. Like Jonathan Franzen and Gary Shteyngart, he is a satirist. Like Jennifer Egan and Junot Díaz, he experiments with form. What sets his work apart is that he creates worlds more than borrows from them. His fiction may reference pop culture but just as often he creates his own cultures. By distancing his stories from a fully recognizable world through the use of his idiolect, the reader becomes deeply aware of the sociocultural and linguistic idiosyncrasies of contemporary American culture. Richard Lee describes these worlds as “close enough in their zeitgeist to our own—the occasional dystopic setting or futuristic context notwithstanding that reviewers’ comments since his first collection routinely acknowledge” Saunders as a satirist, a “consciously ironic voice who plays with notions of the real and the fictive, a writer who easily ironies the writing situation at both macro- and micro-levels: cultural critique at the large scale, consciousness and perception at the narrative scale” (2010, 83). The worldbuilding found in Saunders’s fiction occasionally takes its cues from genre fiction, especially speculative fiction, in a way reminiscent of Jonathan Lethem’s early fiction or of Michael Chabon’s later writing, yet he draws more from experience.

In the second part of an interview with Patrick Dacey published in *BOMB*, Saunders describes his life while reading Hemingway, an author he admired but found impossible to emulate:

> Living in Amarillo, Texas, working as a groundsman at an apartment complex, with strippers for pals […], goofball drunks recently laid off from the nuclear plant accosting me at night when I played in our comical country band, a certain quality of West Texas lunatic-speak I was hearing, full of way off-base dreams and aspirations—I just couldn’t hear that American in Hem-speak. (2017, n.p.)

Saunders's jobs have informed his writing. After graduating from the Colorado School of Mines and working as a geophysicist, he also worked as a doorman, roofer, convenience store clerk, slaughterhouse knuckle puller, and pharmaceutical company report writer.[6] In an interview with Jana Hoops, Saunders describes his work experience as a forming a chapter of his life during which he learned about "America 101" and discovered "what our country—and capitalism—are really like, face-to-face" (Dacey n.p.).

Saunders is a constant reader and has been inspired by many writers, especially short fiction authors. He admires the Russian masters of short stories and novellas: Isaac Babel, Anton Chekhov, and Leo Tolstoy. American authors have also directly influenced his writing. Tobias Wolff, regarded for his short fiction, was his teacher at the MFA program in Creative Writing at Syracuse. Saunders's satire, as I have mentioned, is in the vein of Twain and Vonnegut. However, his style and tone belong to the present. Among North American authors, for example, his style bears similarities to that found especially in Margaret Atwood's dystopian trilogy: *Oryx & Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), *MaddAddam* (2013).[7] Among contemporary American authors, he is praised by Tobias Wolff, Thomas Pynchon, Jay McInerney, and Colson Whitehead. Preeminent among those who have praised him, however, and the writer whose mission is closest to the heart of Saunders's writing, is the late David Foster Wallace.[8] In an article for *The New York Times Magazine*, Joel Lovell reminisces about his years at *Harper's Magazine*, recalling that around the time of the book launch for the novel *Infinite Jest* (1996), Wallace was "standing in the hall in his untied high-tops, saying that George Saunders was the most exciting writer in America" (2013, n.p.). This comment came from the author who would, upon publishing *Infinite Jest*, become the most exciting writer in the United States.

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[6] Indeed, throughout his fiction, we encounter references to slaughterhouses, especially in *Civilwarland in Bad Decline*, while a story from *In Persuasion Nation*, "93990," was directly inspired by his experience writing for a pharmaceutical company.

[7] The three books are also collected as a box set, *The MaddAddam Trilogy* (2014).

In his well-received essay, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction,"[9] originally published in 1993 in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* and collected in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997), Wallace writes that "irony, poker-faced silence, and fear of ridicule are distinctive features of contemporary U.S. culture (of which cutting-edge fiction is a part) that enjoy any significant relation to the television whose weird pretty hand has my generation by the throat" (171). He also contends that his intention is "to argue that irony and ridicule are entertaining and effective, and that at the same time they are agents of great despair and stasis in U.S. culture, and that for aspiring fictionists they pose terrifically vexing problems" (EUP 171). Saunders's *Civilwarland in Bad Decline*, a collection of stories and a novella published a few years after this essay appeared, introduced a writer whose fiction looked both backward and forward at once, while somehow still connecting with the present culture that Wallace describes. Over the next two decades, and increasingly after 9/11, television culture would give way to Internet culture, one in which the American president could win an election by openly attacking Muslims, Mexicans, women—anyone considered the Other—and by being a parody and caricature of himself, meanwhile complaining about the ridicule he receives via Internet media.

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[8] I want to clearly distinguish between Wallace's writing and Wallace the person, as Mary Karr has divulged his abusive and dangerous behavior.

[9] Hereafter, I will refer to the essay as EUP.

Wallace offers two main premises in "E Unibus Pluram," the first point being that "a certain subgenre of pop-conscious postmodern fiction, written mostly by young Americans, has lately arisen and made a real attempt to transfigure a world of and for appearance, mass appeal, and television," which seems positive, except that, as his second point indicates, "televisual culture has evolved to a point where it seems invulnerable to any such transfiguring assault" (171). The same can be said of our current technoculture, although, unlike television, it offers us new ways to read. Saunders's *Fox 8* was originally available only as a Kindle Single. While he still publishes print books, Saunders's work, like that of most contemporary authors, is also readily available in electronic formats: Kindle Editions, online archives, audiobooks—forms which were unavailable or less readily available to David Foster Wallace.

We need not think strictly in terms of the influence of technoculture, however. If contemporary American culture is to be saddled with any modifier, it is more a culture of immediacy. Saunders is regarded for his short stories and novellas; his first novel only appeared after four collections of short fiction. While the American short story has become a praised form, despite the hesitation of publishers to print or promote it, Saunders, without slighting the caliber of his work, may benefit from living in a culture that demands immediacy. His first novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), although ambitious, is not of the grand scale of Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1993), Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), nor Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and although he has stated that he was compelled to write the novel, he has always thought of himself as a short fiction author. Even his essays often tend to read more like short stories than essay. One of them, "Woof!: A Plea of Sorts," is from the point of view of a dog. Saunders's shortest text fits on a paper bag—thanks to its publisher, Chipotle. Is this selling out? Is it irony? Unquestionably, it is at least a way to attain more potential readers.

The writing of both Wallace and Saunders is as much informed by American culture as it is a response and challenge to it. Likewise, it is a response to the postmodern and, for Saunders (albeit not intentionally or consciously), to the posthuman. Wallace explains, in an oft-quoted response from a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, collected in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace* (2012), that "[i]rony and cynicism were just what the U.S. hypocrisy of the fifties and sixties called for," and "what made the early postmodernists great artists" (48). The advantage of using irony, he notes, "is that it splits things apart, gets above them so we can see the flaws and hypocrisies and duplicates (McCaffery 48). For Wallace, however, there is a point when irony no longer fulfills its purpose. The complication, he believes,

> is that once the rules of art are debunked, and once the unpleasant realities the irony diagnoses are revealed and diagnosed, "then" what do we do? Irony's useful for debunking illusions, but most of the illusion-debunking in the U.S. has now been done and redone. (McCaffery 48).

Postmodern irony becomes the goal to the exclusion of sentimentality or ethicality, a criticism that Wallace himself levies, justly or not, on the fiction of Brett Easton Ellis. Wallace, disturbed by the trend, contends that

> [p]ostmodern irony and cynicism become an end in itself, a measure of hip sophistication and literary

> savvy. Few artists dare to try to talk about ways of working toward redeeming what's wrong, because they'll look sentimental and naïve to all the weary ironists. (McCaffery 48)

Instead of liberating literature, a superfluous or unchecked use of irony and cynicism encage it. However, Wallace is not the only author who remedied the emotionless, unethical fiction that he attacked.

1.3. "Radical Kindness": A Posthuman Literature of Compassion

Wallace was a key member of a new generation of writers whose writing is described as sincere and ethical while still using irony. In an important essay, "The New Sincerity" (2016), Adam Kelly claims that George Saunders's writing is part of this broader artistic cultural trend known as the New Sincerity. Kelly describes the art associated with this trend as generally being "regarded as a sturdy affirmation of nonironic values" and demonstrating "a renewed taking of responsibility for the meaning of ones' words," as well as offering "a post-postmodern embrace of the 'single-entendre' principles invoked by Wallace" in "E Unibus Pluram" (198). He also suggests that the New Sincerity aesthetic is one shared by many of Wallace's and Saunders's peers, including Michael Chabon, Junot Díaz, Jennifer Egan, Dave Eggers, Dana Spiotta, and Colson Whitehead.

For such New Sincerity writers, Kelly argues that "the guarantee of the writer's sincerity cannot finally lie in representation" (TNS 205). In what reads as a rather Derridean description, this means that "[w]hat happens off the page, outside representation depends upon the invocation and response of another; this other to whom I respond, and whose response I await, is for many New Sincerity writers, the actual reader of their text" (TNS 205). Sincerity is contingent upon the reader. Kelly claims that "in New Sincerity writing, the author and reader really do exist, which is to say they are not simply *implied*" (TNS 206, italics original). Thus, New Sincerity writing must be understood "as a contingent rather than ideal process that recapitulates the struggle for communication differently and anew in each reading" (TNS 206). Saunders's irony is not irony for the sake of irony but for the sake of response. How we, as readers, respond, how we feel "differently and anew in each reading," is the mark of New Sincerity writing.

In an interview for *Salon*, Saunders admits that irony can be a way to honesty. He does not invoke irony to be honest; rather, by being honest, he is also often sarcastic. Like Wallace, he distinguishes between the uses of irony: "I think the irony or the humor that I like is stuff that is exactly what's needed to drive that wedge into the truth, and the stuff that I don't like is the superfluous kind of cleverness" (2014, n.p.). Wallace's worries are alleviated by Saunders, who does not believe that sarcasm and compassion are mutually exclusive. In an interview for *The Missouri Review*, Saunders explains that sarcasm and compassion are “manifestations of the same impulse,“ with compassion being what he calls

> plain sight. If you see something plainly, without attachment to your own preconceptions of it and without any aversion to what you see, that's compassion because you're *minimizing the distinction between subject and object*. Then whatever needs to be done, you can do it quickly and efficiently, to address whatever the suffering. (2001, 56, italics my own)

The sardonic sarcasm of his fiction allows him to “get away with” sentimentalism. Emotion becomes a relief from irony. The characters in his fiction work toward redemption, in a more archaic sense, of buying back freedom—freedom from the sociocultural constraints that impinge upon their sense of ethicality, their desire for what Saunders has called “radical kindness” (2007, “Medium Matters”) and what I call, borrowing from his commencement speech, “variable kindness.”[10]

In the commencement speech, published as *Congratulations, by the way: Some Thoughts on Kindness*, Saunders describes the same ethical attitude present in his fiction. For him, because “kindness is *variable*, we might also reasonably conclude that it is *improvable*" (n.p., italics original).[11] Saunders's ethics is parallel to that proposed by many posthuman writers, including Jacques Derrida, who suggests a hyperethic: ethics beyond ethics. Saunders states a similar idea in a more straightforward manner, describing kindness as an ethics "that expands to include…well, everything" (CBW n.p., ellipsis original). In a 2017 article for *The Guardian*, he asserts that, in terms of his fiction, he achieves a sense of ethicality by attuning himself to his readers, clarifying that we often believe that

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[10] The speech was delivered in 2013 at Syracuse University.

> the empathetic function in fiction is accomplished via the writer's relation to his [or her] characters, but it's also accomplished via the writer's relation to his [or her] reader. You make a rarefied place (rarefied in language, in form; perfected in many inarticulable beauties—the way two scenes abut; a certain formal device that self-escalates; the perfect place at which a chapter cuts off); and then welcome the reader in. (WWRD, n.p.)

The point is not to underestimate the reader and to develop a relationship with the reader.

In several interviews, Saunders further explains the relationship between kindness or compassion and his literature. For example, in the aforementioned 2007 *The Colbert Report* episode, Saunders explains in his first appearance on the show that when prose is “done right” it functions “kind of like empathy training wheels.” Kindness and compassion would become regular points addressed in his three subsequent interviews with Stephen Colbert. Much later, in an interview for the literary website Goodreads, Saunders replies to a query regarding compassion and the subject of his essay for *The New Yorker*, “Who Are All These Trump Supporters?”. I quote here and in the following paragraph almost the full response because it offers a first-person explanation of Saunders’s ethical awareness:

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[11] Hereafter, I will refer to the speech as "CBW."

> Depending on how you define compassion, actions are never beyond compassion. Sometimes we misunderstand [compassion] as being this bland, kowtowing niceness: Somebody hits you in the head with a rock and you say, "Thank you so much for the geology lesson." But compassion in Eastern traditions is much more fierce. It's basically calling someone on their bullshit. At the heart of it there's a clarity that would say, If I could press a button and make that person see his own actions, that would be the best. (*Goodreads* n.p., brackets original,)

By mentioning “Eastern traditions,” Saunders may be alluding to his own Buddhist practice, which resonates with the kind of radical or variable kindness he elsewhere mentions.

Saunders continues, by informing us of his own practice safeguarding himself from indulging in negative emotions. As he describes it,

> I'm just trying to be really watchful in my own heart for any kind of gratuitous negative emotion. I'm [thinking] Jesus was here, Buddha was here, Gandhi was here, Tolstoy was here, Mother Teresa was here, and they all said basically the same thing: *Our capacity for understanding the other is greater than we think*. It's not easy and we're not very good at it habitually, but we can get better at it and it's always beneficial. It's beneficial to you, and it's beneficial to the other. That's what I say—in real life I'm swearing under my breath on the internet. (*Goodreads* n.p., brackets original, italics my own)

Here, Saunders references not only historical religious and philosophical figures but Tolstoy, whom we associate primarily with writing but who also later devoted himself to religion. Saunders also claims a premise aligned with posthumanist ethics: “Our *capacity* for understanding the other is greater than we think.”

This idea is consistent with Derrida’s notion of ethics beyond ethics, which has snaked its way into posthumanist ethics. Saunders does not claim that we *can* understand the Other, but that we have the *capacity* to do so. Despite the apparent simplicity of his language, his concept of ethics is careful not to assume that we can wholly understand the Other. Furthermore, critics of postcolonialism insist that we cannot speak wholly for the Other. This does not mean we should not try to understand the Other or, I argue, that we should refuse to try to speak on behalf of the Other but that to do so is difficult, as Saunders duly notes, and, moreover, dangerous. Indeed, thinking we can understand or speak for the Other can turn against us. I will discuss this in greater detail in the following chapter, but we should know that we must be careful never to assume we *do* know or speak entirely for the Other. Nevertheless, I concur with Saunders's belief: we have a greater capacity to understand the Other than we generally acknowledge. In short, our power to empathize is greater than we think.

Writing in the 21st century, both Wallace and Saunders seem to become increasingly more ethically aware; that is, their writing becomes even more *emotionally*-engaged. Wallace's essay on the Maine Lobster Festival, "Consider the Lobster,"[12] originally published in *Gourmet* (2004) and later included in *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (2005), is a case in point. That his focus is on the pain of a nonhuman being is key. Wallace reports on the suffering of lobsters boiled alive for human gluttony and considers that

> the questions of whether and how different kinds of animals feel pain, and of whether and why it might be

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[12] Hereafter, I will refer to the essay as "CL."

> justifiable to inflict pain on them in order to eat them, turn out to be extremely complex and difficult. And comparative neuroanatomy is only part of the problem. Since pain is a totally subjective mental experience, we do not have direct access to anyone or anything’s pain but our own; and even just the principles by which we can infer that other human beings experience pain and have a legitimate interest in not feeling pain involve hard-core philosophy—metaphysics, epistemology, value theory, ethics. (CL 246)

For Wallace, the greatest consideration “is that the whole animal-cruelty-and-eating issue is not just complex, it’s also uncomfortable” (CL 246). This uncomfortableness presents a range of moral questions.

In “David Foster Wallace and the Ethical Challenge of Posthumanism,” Wilson Kaiser claims that “Wallace uses his own writing to foreground an ethical challenge that does not sit easily within the parameters of postmodernism” (2014, 153). Kaiser’s ruminations on Wallace’s fiction and essays may also be applied to Saunders’s writings. Kaiser argues that “Wallace’s literary worlds, for all their commitment to an ethics, do not assume personal autonomy or an irresoluble answerability to an Other” but “rather are “situated in a concrete engagement with a specific milieu that contains a multiplicity of human and non-human actors” (Kaiser 154). According to Kaiser the ethics found in Wallace’s “literary worlds" are posthuman rather than postmodern. They avoid postulating generalizing claims, focusing instead on "affinities within a network of possibilities" (Kaiser 155); they rarely moralize. The same is true of Saunders's writing.

Comparable to "Consider the Lobster" and indicative of Kaiser's claims, Wallace's opening sentence to the short story "The Depressed Person," included in the short fiction collection, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), begins "[t]he depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain, and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror" (37). Here, it is difficult not to equate Wallace's own struggle with depression with that of the character, but instead of generalizing depression, the protagonist's depression is particular. By the end of the story, her therapist's death has left her questioning her capacity for compassion. Wallace does not moralize but instead presents an ethically complex scenario. As I will evince later, Saunders's writing also functions in this way: presenting ethically complex situations without no decisive moral.

In a different vein, the first chapter of Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) describes the movements and speech of Hal, a tennis prodigy, which are commented on by the administration:

> 'But the *sounds* he made.'
>
> 'Undescribable.'

‘Like an animal.’

‘Subanimalistic noises and sounds.’

‘Nor let’s not forget the *gestures*.’

‘Have you ever gotten *help* for this boy Dr. Tavis?’

‘Like some sort of animal with something in its mouth.’

‘This boy is damaged.’

‘Like a stick of butter being hit with a mallet.’

‘A writhing animal with a knife in its eye.’ (14)

The sounds Hal makes are later compared with those of a drowning goat, his sounds and actions barely mammalian. He is both compared to an animal, in a derogatory sense, *and* considered less than animal (subanimalistic) before being compared with an object (butter). The focus is on the sounds and gestures that are Hal’s (attempts at) language. In his essay, Kaiser conjectures Hal’s transformation “from a superb human specimen, a remarkable athlete and mental prodigy, to something” animalistic to be an instance of “becoming-animal,” as proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (57). Hal’s “pain, travels through neural and physiological networks that are no longer human” (Kaiser 57-58). Saunders’s characters generally do not undergo such transformations, but the relationships between human and nonhuman animals appear with greater frequency, even if only in passing. Furthermore, he alludes to them almost exclusively in terms of violence and death. I explore this relationship in some fashion in each chapter to follow.

1.4. “An Inherently Ethical Activity”: Reading Saunders Critically

Until recently, the critical analysis of Saunders has been rather thin, with only a few academic articles—upon which I will comment later in this chapter—and a series of interviews and book reviews. However, in 2017, the first collection of critical essays on the author was finally published. The scholarly work examines Saunders’s writing from a variety of angles: linguistically, sociopolitically, biopolitically, psychologically, and even theologically. This critical survey marks *George Saunders: Critical Essays* as a landmark collection in Saunders criticism. The collection includes an essay by Adam Kelly, who—following from his earlier essay on New Sincerity—directly addresses Saunders’s fiction in terms of New Sincerity in “Language Between Lyricism and Corporatism: George Saunders’s New Sincerity,” noting Saunders’s “use of first-person narration supports his New Sincerity aesthetic, allowing him to explore the limits of expressive subjectivity, ethical consciousness, and detached spectatorship under neoliberal conditions” (49). Even Saunders’s third-person narration, which I will address in a later chapter, reads like first-person narration.

Most of the information on Saunders is still found in interviews and book reviews, and no monograph on him exists yet. This dissertation then is one of the first sustained analyses of

Saunders's fiction, primarily exploring posthumanist ethics as they relate to nonhuman and human animal relationships in Saunders's texts. As this dissertation is interdisciplinary, I believe it will be useful not only for understanding Saunders's fiction but for understanding different conceptions of posthumanist ethics and how we relate to and with nonhuman animals. I earlier compared David Foster Wallace's writing with that of Saunders. Likewise, John C. Hawkins's Liberty University Master's thesis, *Life Inside the Spectacle: David Foster Wallace, George Saunders, and Storytelling in the Age of Entertainment* (2013), offers an insightful reading of and commentary on Saunders's *In Persuasion Nation* alongside *Infinite Jest*. He argues that both books "confront the problems of isolation and dehumanization created by entertainment-based consumerism" (Hawkins 4) and especially notes Saunders's idiosyncratic language and use of first-person and close third-person narrators.

Like Hawkins, Laura Morris also compares a contemporary author with Saunders in "Beyond Irony: Reconsidering the Post-Postmodernism of George Saunders and Dave Eggers" (2016). She focuses on how the narratives of both authors demonstrate a "recent literary development" that centers "on new possibilities of sincerity in order to transcend postmodernism's use of self-reflexive irony" (Morris 117). Her critical stance is, for all purposes, nearly equivalent to that of Adam Kelly's concept of New Sincerity, except that she draws on the philosophy of Jacques Rancière to make her point. Like Kelly, Hawkins, and Morris, most critics of Saunders examine his writing in terms of recent cultural and social criticisms, often by exploring how language functions in his texts or how ethical situations are presented, yet their approaches are quite varied.

Two studies on class are found in essays by Juliana Nalerio and David P. Rando. Juliana Nalerio's essay "The Patriarch's Balls: Class Consciousness, Violence, and Dystopia in George Saunders's Vision of Contemporary America" offers a critical reading of "The Semplica Girl Diaries," analyzing class anxiety and "the latent violence inherent in America's post-colonial capitalist system," as well as the techniques Saunders uses to expose violence (2015, 90). David P. Rando also considers class in his essay "George Saunders and the Postmodern Working Class," which describes how Saunders's story "Sea Oak" and his fiction in general challenge readers "to reconsider basic questions of class representation" (2012, 437).

Critics have also commented on Saunders's fictional worlds. In a politically charged reading, "Changes in Totalitarianism: Hannah Arendt, Franz Fühmann, and George Saunders," Todd Cesaratto investigates how "the structure and semantics of totalitarian organization have changed" and adapted to "power-sharing" social structures (2011, 74). He compares the totalitarianism found in both the socialist system of Franz Fühmann’s “Der Haufen” and the capitalist, hyperconsumer culture as setting of Saunders’s “My Flamboyant Grandson.” The effects of a hyperconsumer totalitarian technoculture are also examined in Gil Germain’s “‘It’s Not Yours to Do With What You Like!’ A Critical Reading of George Saunders’ Jon” (2014). Germain notes “how Saunders uses language to underscore the general point that there is no strict separation between our inner thoughts and feelings [...] and the world with which we interact” (n.p.). We learn much about the worlds in which Saunders’s characters exist based on how the characters speak about, think about, and interact with their surroundings.

Closely related to the aforementioned studies is Sarah Pogell’s exploration of hyperreality through a Baudrillardian lens in “‘The Verisimilitude Inspector’: George Saunders as the New Baudrillard?” (2011). For her, Jean Baudrillard’s stages of the sign, most significantly simulacrum, are exemplified in the writing of Saunders, especially in his stories set in theme parks. Notably, she compares Baudrillard’s explication of the stages of the sign to the “seeming impenetrability” of Derrida’s notion of *différance* (Pogell 461). Another angle of Saunders’s work is examined in Catherine Garnett’s “The Future in the Pasture: Pastoral Precarity in George Saunders’s ‘Interior Gardens’” (2014). Garnett understands Saunders's writing as “part of a general trend visible across popular culture that considers pastoral as a representational mode newly relevant to our age" (137). Like Pogell, she emphasizes Saunders's use of theme parks as settings, noting that Saunders's writing blurs distinctions: "the *otium/negotium* divide mystifies the interrelatedness of the terms—the operation of work in the appearance of leisure" (Garnett 139). Beyond pastoral, Saunders's writing blurs distinctions in many ways, as should become evident in later chapters.

The critical response to Saunders's writing in terms of socioeconomics, postcolonialism, and postmodernism is not arbitrary. Even if Saunders is not consciously choosing to write stories that are postcolonial or postmodern such readings of his literature are tuning into what is present in his writing, which in turn is tuned into American culture. His settings, characters, language, and subjects are all rooted in this culture. Conspicuously absent, however, are posthuman readings of his fiction. With the number of approaches toward posthumanism currently being developed and practiced, it is surprising that only one critic has examined Saunders's fiction through this lens.

Only Christina Bieber Lake has specifically remarked on the posthuman elements at play in Saunders's writing. In *Prophets of the Posthuman: American Fiction, Biotechnology, and the Ethics of Personhood* (2013), Lake includes a chapter on Saunders and speculative fiction author James Tiptree, Jr.[13] In the preface to the book, she argues that

> [a]lthough there has been a recognized "turn toward the ethical" already […] the continued misrecognition of reading as an inherently ethical activity has impoverished public debate on questions that reach beyond the traditional domains of literary study. By isolating fiction between the two poles of reading professionally and reading for entertainment, fiction's potential contribution to the larger ethical debates is marginalized. (xvi)

In the book, Lake's conception of posthumanism is more concerned with the ethics of biotechnology in a sense that is more appropriately in line with transhumanism. However, I do agree with some of her points, such as the lack of recognition of fiction as a meaningful contributor to ethical discourse.

For Lake, ethical discourse must include careful consideration of narrative. As she notes, one of her primary goals

> is to demonstrate that ethical debates—if they are to be meaningful at all—require deep, nuanced, and ongoing reflection on narrative. Narrative does not visit ethical questions abstractly; it lives them, because it lives in the realm of ethos, of persons as persons engaged with one another. (Lake xvii)

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[13] James Tiptree, Jr. was the usual pen name of Alice Bradley Sheldon.

The idea that literature “lives” ethical questions is related to my claim that literature allows us to “experience” what can only be presented conceptually by philosophy. In this sense, literature can be ethical. Lake later claims that “literary artists maintain a hope that someone in their audience will see things the way they see them. These writers want individuals to reconsider how they see themselves, others, and life itself. George Saunders is just such a writer” (Lake xviii-xix). While I disagree that Saunders or any other writer necessarily *wants* someone to “see things the way they see them,” I do agree that he and many other writers not only want to entertain but to affect us.

In an interview for *The White Review*, Saunders admits that a primary concern “was (and is) not to make trivial work—work that poses too-easy answers to not-critical questions. We’re here, we’re living, loving, but won’t be for long—so I want my stories to somehow urgently acknowledge all of that” (2016, n.p.). Fiction can not only prod us toward difficult answers to critical questions but can also help us to be more compassionate. In *The Missouri Review* interview that I previously referenced, Saunders states that “the order of the day is compassion” and “that fiction has a part to play in urging us, *as a species*, toward compassion” (64, italics my own). Based on his own words, Lake is correct to assume, then, that for Saunders, what makes an interesting story is also one with significant ethical stakes.

Another critical reading that is similarly concerned with affect and empathy, is the aforementioned Layne Neeper's "'To Soften the Heart:' George Saunders, Postmodern Satire, and Empathy" (2016). Neeper goes so far as to claim that "George Saunders's postmodern fiction serves as the exemplar for early twenty-first-century American satire's new attention to affect—to empathy" (282). The essay situates Saunders's satire as non-traditional, in terms of its literary function. Neeper claims of Saunders:

> That his work may still be categorized as satirical resides in the fact that the fiction *is* transactional—readers should feel moved *to change, to overcome something*—but the sole upshot of Saunders's satire is to lead to the moral acculturation of empathy in readers, so that we are put in "the proper relation to the truth," rather than to the inducement to the righting of personal faults or social ills, the avowed aim of the conventional satirist. (287, italics original)

In other words, Saunders's satire calls us to empathize. That we may need to right personal faults or social ills is secondary, or, as Neeper puts it, "[p]athos supersedes correction" (296).

One area of criticism that has generally been avoided by critics is the use of nonhuman animals in his fiction, especially in terms of ethics and posthumanist studies. It is this particular gap I aim to fill with my research and analyses, which I will present in the following chapters. Furthermore, I also intend for this thesis to serve as a monograph on Saunders and his fiction, as no prolonged study yet exists. Before settling in to a study of the fiction, however, it is beneficial to have an understanding of the kind of critical theory I will be drawing from. For this reason, Chapter 2 concentrates less on Saunders, instead focusing on a survey of posthumanism and posthumanist theory, as the concepts being developed in this area are those I wish to contemplate as we proceed to analyze his literature. While the concepts are often difficult to comprehend, due to the careful attention to language and frequent use of neologisms by the theorists, the way these concepts appear in Saunders’s fictions allows for us to analyze how these theories play out in less abstract ways while also providing a richer awareness of just what is happening in the fiction. In this way, both fiction and theory function in a complementary manner. Taking this into consideration, we may proceed to the study of posthumanism.

2. BEYOND HUMANISM: POSTHUMANIST ETHICS

2.1. “A Potential in Our Culture": The Emergence of Posthumanism

As early as 1976, literary theorist and writer Ihab Hassan speculated in a keynote address delivered at the University of Wisconsin that “the human form—including human desire and all its external representations—may be changing radically, and thus must be re-visioned” (1977, 843). He adds that we must “understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism” (Hassan 843). If humanism has not completely come to an end, what we do indeed “helplessly” call posthumanism is on the verge of eclipsing it. Certainly, we are amidst a condition we might call posthuman in which the wide-ranging implications present in Hassan’s prediction are too multiple for any one theorist or field to fully address. Published the following year as “Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?”, this address, which reads more like Greek drama, marked the first appearance of the term “posthumanism” in print. Since then, the term has been used in extensively in a variety of contexts. Hassan claims that although “posthumanism may appear as a dubious neologism, the latest slogan, or simply another image of man’s recurrent self-hate,” it “may also hint at a potential in our culture, hint at a tendency struggling to become more than a trend,” leading him to pose the crucial question: “How, then, shall we understand posthumanism? (843).

Posthumanism and its closest kindred terms (posthuman, posthumanist) along with related terms (transhumanism, antihumanism) have remained, across the past four decades, woolly enough that what is meant by them generally depends on the utterer. Furthermore, posthumanism as a term is not without its problems, especially because it remains leashed to what it proposes to deconstruct. Regardless of my qualms with the term, I bear it in this study as I join the posthumanist discourse begun by critics of posthumanism. More than four decades have passed, but Ihab Hassan’s question stands. This chapter will offer an overview and criticism of posthumanism as it is understood by various critics and how it relates to nonhuman animals, beginning with a survey of some of the main definitions of posthumanism as a philosophical and critical movement before addressing how deconstruction, especially that found in Jacques Derrida’s later essays, relates to posthumanism and what are called “the discourse of species” and “the animal question,” before finally addressing how this pertains to notions of posthumanist ethics, including those suggested by difference theorists, like Derrida, and indistinction theorists. Although this chapter focuses primarily on posthumanist theory, I will provide intermittent acknowledgments as to how it applies to Saunders's fiction.

One of the critics who has described the differences in terminology with which posthumanism is associated or alternated is Francesca Ferrando. In her incisive comparative essay, "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations," she notes that the term "posthuman" has now

> become a key term to cope with an urgency for the integral redefinition of the notion of the human, following the onto-epistemological as well as scientific and bio-technological developments of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The philosophical landscape [...] includes several movements and schools of thought. The label "posthuman" is often evoked in a generic and all-inclusive way, to indicate any of these perspectives, creating methodological and theoretical confusion between experts and non-experts alike. (2013, 26)

The term, in fact, need not be so ambiguous. Ferrando describes it as an "umbrella term" under which are included various offshoots of posthumanism and transhumanism (as well as new materialisms, antihumanism, posthumanities, and metahumanities) (26). What often appears under the guise of posthumanism is more properly labeled transhumanism, which, as its name suggests, is concerned with transcending the human rather than deconstructing humanism.

Ferrando takes care to identify the key differences between posthumanism, in its more proper senses, and transhumanism. She contends that by taking for granted Enlightenment humanist formulations of those qualities considered the privileged domain of the human, transhumanism "runs the risk of techno-reductionism: technology becomes a hierarchical project, based on rational thought, driven towards progression" (Ferrando 28). Transhumanism, to put it telegraphically, intensifies humanism, whereas posthumanism, in re-evaluating the human subject and de-emphasizing its centrality, de-anthropocentrizes those fields associated with humanism, thus opening and freeing humanism from its own constraints. To call the transhuman and posthuman interchangeable denies the de-anthropocentrism at work in posthumanism.

While both projects do preserve an interest in technology, "posthumanism, in its radical onto-existential re-signification of the notion of the human, may offer a more comprehensive approach" than transhumanism, which Ferrando characterizes as "ultra-humanism" (27). In other words, because posthumanism is post-anthropocentric, it may serve as a better measure of understanding the posthuman condition, whether technological or otherwise. Posthumanism understands the role of technology as interdependence between the human and technological worlds not solely as anthropological and paleontological issues but as an ontological matter, leading Ferrando to emphasize Michel Foucault's notion of technologies of the self, which "dismantle the separation self/others through a relational ontology, playing a substantial role in the process of existential revealing, and opening the debate to posthuman ethics and applied philosophy. Posthumanism is a praxis" (29). The human is no longer the sole subject; the Other must also be considered as subject, thereby challenging us to conceive of an ethics that does not start and end with a conception of the human.

Such a challenge is both destabilizing and, according to Stefan Herbrechter, "rapturous." In *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (2013), he provides a preliminary definition of the term. For him, posthumanism is "the cultural malaise or euphoria that is caused by the feeling once you start taking the idea of 'postanthropocentrism' seriously" (Herbrechter 3). By this definition, posthumanism entails a condition, a cultural feeling of profound discomfort and uneasiness or rapture. More precisely, posthumanism is both. Thinking beyond anthropocentrism, when it has existed both implicitly and explicitly as the de facto way of thinking in many fields of study, is culturally and philosophically unsettling. As we no longer accept the human as the core of our studies, we face, and are faced by, a host of subjects. The euphoria is perhaps one with this *unheimlich* facing, in this being faced, by another subject, the Other. We have never quite been able to define what is, precisely, “the human” through the formulations of humanism, neither by addressing “what is the human” nor by addressing, in a more rigorous Heideggerian vein, “how is the human,” in the sense (of the possibility) of its being, which seem the wrong questions to be asking.

We may now ask how beings are interdependent and what this means, but perhaps the most obvious query concerns how to develop posthuman theory without returning to humanism. Even more importantly, we must inquire how posthuman theory can not only be radicalized but actualized. What Herbrechter and his peers are asking is how posthumanism can avoid regressing into an alternative iteration of humanism and whether it can become an active, evolving praxis. Subjectivity is an important matter in this context. Equally important is how these questions, if indeed they are the questions to ask, are formulated. The risk resides in presupposing that what is paramount in posthumanism is, for example, how to restore a Western humanist notion of universalism in terms of subjectivity or how to extend rights to nonhumans based on qualities akin to those found in humans (as opposed to considering how humans are alike or different from nonhuman or human others). This is not to say the human is not important or that every humanist idea must be rejected; the point is that if the human is important to us, what we call the Other should be equally important. How we ask questions is as important as what we ask if we are to evade human exceptionalism.

Like Herbrechter, the cultural critic Rosi Braidotti also underscores the potential ambivalence of the posthuman condition in her monograph, *The Posthuman* (2013). Braidotti cites sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who concedes that the posthuman condition “provokes elation but also anxiety” (2). She also understands the “posthuman” as that which describes our current condition, that is, one which launches “a qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet” (Braidotti 2). In other words, the posthuman condition has required the qualities of our thoughts (or feelings) to change (or be recognized), which has resulted in a shift in the humanist schemas and attitudes that historically have privileged and prioritized the human.

As Braidotti understands it, capital “H” “Humanism” is a “mutation of the Humanistic ideal into a hegemonic cultural model” that by post-World War II was countered by a wave of anti-humanism (13-14). Posthumanism, while not inevitable, was presaged. The challenges to humanism have only recently led us to realize that “Man” is “in fact a historical construct and as such contingent as to values and locations" (Braidotti 24). The posthuman condition means accepting that what we once took as the cultural model, the humanistic ideal, is misplaced on many accounts. This condition interrogates "the very structures of contemporary science, politics and international relations. Discourses and representations of the non-human, the inhuman, the anti-human, the inhumane and the posthuman profligate and overlap in our globalized, technologically mediated societies" (Braidotti 2). These discourses and representations take on different forms for different theorists, but the intention of taking seriously nonhuman beings and not accepting a priori conceptions of the human remains the same.

Before continuing with an assessment of posthumanism, it is worth considering how the posthuman condition plays into Saunders's fiction. Although Saunders does not consciously set out to write posthumanist fiction, his stories do relate to posthumanist concerns, presenting them as part of our everyday affairs. In his early stories, the protagonist is usually an "average Joe," while in his later stories he employs different techniques to present the thoughts and actions of multiple characters coexisting. Frequently, the protagonists are forced to navigate the kinds of globalized societies, mediated by technology, that Braidotti mentions.[14] Although they do not recognize the posthuman qualities of a world whose members, especially those in power, continue to enforce humanist ideologies, they are nevertheless left destabilized by their encounters, which are sometimes posthuman in nature. Unlike some fictional characters Saunders's generally do not undergo epiphanies but do experience acceptance and/or regret. Likewise, ambiguity is not uncommon. Such ambiguity also works in a posthumanist way to allow the ethical register of the stories to remain open. As we shall learn, an actively open ethics—that is, one that does not point toward a specific moral or set of morals—is required by posthumanist ethics and is necessary to navigate a world in which our condition is posthuman and in which we count as our companions nonhuman animals, as well as, in the case of Saunders's fiction, ghosts, mutants, and television characters.[15]

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[14] For example, many of the stories included *In Persuasion Nation* are set in speculative worlds based on media itself. "My Flamboyant Grandson" follows a grandfather who takes his grandson to a Broadway show but

The considerations of Ferrando, Herbrechter, and Braidotti outlined so far, when taken into consideration with the fiction

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runs into trouble for removing his shoe, which holds a device that shows him his Preferences, viz. advertisements, on mini screens. "Brad Carrigan, American" is set in a television sitcom gone awry, in which Brad becomes increasingly more concerned about the problems in the world while everyone else tries to remain ignorantly happy. "In Persuasion Nation" is set in a series of linked commercials in which the characters are forced to repeat their actions. Nonhuman animals figure in all these stories, including the "real" fictional character of Babar the Elephant in the first story, a puppet dog in the second, and a polar bear who is recurrently axed by an "Eskimo" in the third.

[15] It is worth noting that none of his stories, aside from "I CAN SPEAK!™", feature any cyborgs or robots, which are often what comes to mind when the term "posthuman" is mentioned.

of Saunders, present a conception of posthumanism shared by several cultural critics, especially those whose primary focus is on nonhuman animals. We can count alongside the aforementioned theorists Matthew Calarco, Donna Haraway, Kelly Oliver, Cynthia Willett, Cary Wolfe, Jason Wyckoff, and further posthumanist theorists, whether they call themselves such or not, all of whom demonstrate how posthumanist postulations are key to understanding our current condition and necessary to remedy the errors and omissions of humanism. I also add to this list Jacques Derrida, as many of the theorists frequently cite his writings and draw from his ideas. However, since posthumanism is a relatively recent field and, by its very nature, requires freedom and flexibility, many of these theorists use their own terminologies. Just how their concepts relate, then, may not be obvious, but by sampling a variety of approaches, we can gain a better understanding of each theorist's formulations.

To start with, Braidotti postulates that "the common denominator for the posthuman condition is an assumption about the vital, self-organizing and yet non-naturalistic structure of living matter itself. This nature-culture continuum" stands as the shared starting gate of posthumanism (3). As we shall discover, what for Braidotti is a continuum is posited variously depending on the critic. For Haraway, who has famously written manifestos on cyborgs and companion species,[16] living with, or "becoming with" promises a more equitable and peaceful *autre-mondialisation*, or other-globalization (WSM 3). For Oliver, an ethics of difference means not beginning with a predetermined set of differences, dualisms, or binaries. For Wolfe, the discourse of species is a discussion that must remain open if we are to work through theory toward an ethical pluralism. For Wyckoff, avoiding a language of dominionism is key. Neither Haraway, Oliver, Wolfe, nor Wyckoff accept humanism's delimitations any more than they accept or redraft any notion of the human. Like them, Braidotti's senses of the posthuman and postanthropocentric relate her "rejection of the principle of adequation to the doxa, or commonly received normative image of thought" (2013, 104). That "normative image of thought" is the conception of the human we have received from humanism: the human as central being to that which gives name to humanism (and the Humanities). What the posthuman condition demands is that philosophy and ethics no longer take for granted the human as the prime agent, the principle subject, the paramount being.

For Braidotti, this condition is a "predicament" in both the posthuman and postanthropocentric senses, emphasizing "the idea that the activity of thinking needs to be experimental and even transgressive in combining critique with creativity" (104). In short, what Braidotti is proposing is that thinking is action: how we think is as important as what we think about. Thinking in terms of the posthuman means thinking posthumanism in a posthumanist way—critically, emotionally, and viscerally. Thinking must remain an active process—(re)creative, (de)constructive—if we are to avoid delimitations. Unyoking thought from anthropocentricity or any other *doxa*, in Braidotti's sense of the term, means that this very thinking cannot arrive at any definitive end.

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[16] Both are collected in *Manifestly Haraway* (2016).

In the introduction to his influential study, *What is Posthumanism?* (2009),[17] Cary Wolfe asserts that what is intended by the "post-" of posthumanism requires it to be posthumanist. According to Wolfe, posthumanism is not "posthuman at all—in the sense of being 'after' our embodiment has been transcended—but is only posthumanist, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself" (xv). This is not meant to imply that our definition of the human is somehow strictly analog to (bodily) transcendence. For Wolfe, it remains undefined, as he insists in his earlier book, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*, that "the 'human,' we now know, is not now, and never was, itself (2003, 9). His sense of posthumanism confronts the disembodied, autonomous, rational subject that he, like his fellow posthumanist theorists, cites as the sense of the human we have inherited from Renaissance humanism. For him, posthumanist posthumanism differs from both transhumanism and what he calls humanist posthumanism because it makes no attempt to realize the human according to a binary distinction, especially not a human/animal division, that escapes or represses “not just its animal origins in nature, both biological and evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether” (WP xv). Nor does his articulation of posthumanism resort to coercing and constraining humanist ideology into posthumanist terminology. In other words, the human of posthumanism, as animal, is biologically and evolutionarily continuous with the physical world from which it evolves and to which it remains contiguous.

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[17] Hereafter, I will refer to the book as "WP."

Both ontically and ontologically, Western humanism has determined the human by setting it over and against an “Other.” The contemporary conception of the human is a product of a tradition that has sought to hypostatize the human by discriminating “Man” from the Other. We define the (upper-class or bourgeois white male) human in terms of what it is not. For Wolfe, posthumanism’s concern focuses on what “comes both before and after humanism: before in the sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being” in both its biological world and its technological world and “after in the sense that posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks" can no longer be ignored (WP xv). In other words, posthumanism takes seriously the deanthropocentrizing of humanism.

As Wolfe remarks, a deanthropocentrizing move is not a posthumanist means by which to reject humanism entirely but the application to humanism of "the philosophical and theoretical frameworks used by humanism" so as to radicalize and follow through with humanism's commitments (WP xvii). His belief is that posthumanism must continue to work through theory rather than abandon theory. The problem, Wolfe claims, is that "Enlightenment rationality is not […] rational enough" in that it "stops short of applying its own protocols and commitments to itself" (WP xx). To put this another way, the procedures and obligations of humanism are not sufficiently utilized—or ever utilized—to address the very system from which they emerge. Humanism, it seems, does not even take its own demands for rationality seriously. Wolfe contends that what posthumanism does is apply the protocols and commitments it has inherited from humanism to humanism. What we discover in the process is that whatever it is we call "the human," it is not something apart from the other-than-human.

While I agree that humanism has not examined itself according to its own framework, I am not certain that the insinuation that posthumanism should be more rational is how we should think about this predicament. The question is not whether applying the frameworks of humanism to humanism can ever be rational enough—it is about whether it can be radical enough. I do not intend to single out Wolfe here, as I believe his insistence on working through theory as a solution to our posthuman predicament is almost comparable to, for example, Braidotti's insistence on criticism and creativity in active thinking. However, I do think his insistence on rationality and logic can serve as an example of the problems that can be encountered in articulating posthumanist theory. For this reason, Wolfe's insistence on rationality and logic—on what can read, out of context, as a decisively humanist approach to posthumanism—should be addressed, accompanied by an understanding of the body's role in posthumanist theory.

Gender theorists and postcolonial theorists recognize both the importance of what is communicated and how it is communicated. Moreover, they hold accountable a body's communication—or what Judith Butler and others call "performance"—for both its intended and unintended effects. It is worth explaining then that when Wolfe insists, concerning the institution of speciesism, that "posthumanist theory of the subject *has nothing to do with whether you like animals*," his intention is not to slight, for instance, ecofeminist theory in general (AR 7, italics original).[18] His point is that posthumanist theory is not contingent upon whether we like an animal or not, and, therefore, that ethical pluralism cannot be contingent upon species preference, which, by another name, is speciesism. Regardless of the intention, an emphasis on rationality—that Enlightenment rationality is not sufficiently rational—does appear to privilege mind over body, logic as separate from a more bodily responsivity, reinforcing the traditional mind/body binary.

Similarly to posthumanist theory, ecofeminism, according to Mary Phillips, aims to reveal that the cultural hegemony's ideal of masculinity is fostered "through a set of interrelated dualisms, such as mind/body, reason/nature, reason/emotion, masculine/feminine or human/nature" (2016, 59). The danger here is that in calling for an increase in rationality, the traditional cultural associations are carried along with it. As Phillips notes, "[n]on-conformance with the categories determined by the dominant group, including mind over body, reason over emotion, activity over passivity, is therefore to be considered either an inferior copy of the human, or non-human" (60). Emphasizing rationality can, intentionally or unintentionally, reify the same humanist notion of the human—and the compulsion to transcend body—it rejects.

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[18] Here I cite from a different book by Wolfe, *Animal Rites*, from which I will draw more extensively later.

This is not to suggest that rationality or logic—or theory, for that matter—should be rejected. Rationality and emotion should maintain a balance. In this way, we can stay consistent with new (scientific) approaches to understanding mind and body, rationality and emotion. Furthermore, the decentering of the human cannot mean privileging or rejecting mind or body any more than it can mean continuing to conceive them as distinctly separate attributes in opposition. Thus, although Wolfe works beyond dualisms, the unintended potent of his logic, and that of every other posthumanist, must be checked by thinking "outside" the system or field of specialization. Thus, how thinking confronts the topics of posthumanism and how that thinking must evolve is paramount.

Like Braidotti, Wolfe calls for a posthumanist process of thinking. If posthumanism is concerned with "a thematics of the decentering of the human in relation to other evolutionary, ecological, or technological coordinates," it is equally concerned with "how thinking confronts that thematics" and what it must become (WP xvi). Wolfe argues that

> posthumanism can be defined quite specifically as the necessity for any discourse or critical procedure to take account of the constitutive (and constitutively paradoxical) nature of its own distinctions, forms, and procedures—and take account of them in ways that may be distinguished from the reflection and

> introspection associated with the critical subject of humanism. The “post” of posthumanism thus marks the space in which the one using those distinctions and forms is not the one who can reflect on their latencies and blind spots while at the same time deploying them. That can only be done […] by another observer, using a different set of distinctions—and that observer […] need not be human (indeed, […] never was “human”). (WP 122)

If Wolfe’s supposition of the role of the “post” in posthumanism, as applied here to humanism, is necessary in order to reflect on “latencies” and “blind sports” then this approach also applies, similarly, to posthumanism itself.

In their essay, “What’s Wrong with Posthumanism?” (2003), Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus call for a critical posthumanism. The concern is “that posthumanism is in the process not so much of being appraised by theory as going along with it. Theory’s strength has always been its claims on the radical, on ‘thinking otherwise,’ on problematizing that which appears commonsensical” (Herbrechter and Callus n.p,). In other words, discourses on posthumanism should be read critically. Theory should “contrive a ‘metaposthumanism,’ with the meta- understood not in the sense of any of the totalizing impulses theory critiques elsewhere […] but according to a signaling of theory’s disposition to step back […] to cast a sober, evaluative eye over posthumanist orthodoxy" (Herbrechter and Callus n.p.). If posthumanism is to be truly posthumanist, in the senses suggested by Braidotti, Wolfe, Herbrechter, and Callus, posthumanism can never be orthodox. Thinking must remain active.

It is no accident that the phrase "how we think" recurs throughout Wolfe's *What is Posthumanism?*.[19] If thinking is to remain active—if it is to avoid becoming orthodoxy, if it is to eschew *doxa*—then theory and philosophy cannot be harnessed and hidebound; however, this is easier said than done. The emphasis on thinking thus far in this text is even worrisome. Although thinking need not be associated with the (humanist) mind, I prefer the terms sensing and feeling, which I feel are less troublesome by dint of their indistinctiveness. While we may deploy the distinctions, forms, and procedures of the so-called discourse of species—or any other discourse, for that matter—we cannot reflect upon them from within a system. We cannot know what is concealed from us or what we do not understand.

Posthumanism exists precisely because the faults in humanism's procedures cannot be observed by humanism. If humanism were capable of this, it would no longer be humanism. For that, an “outside” observer is necessary. Wolfe’s suggestions that the observer need not be human is indeed the case with the little female cat in Derrida’s “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)” (2013).[20] It is also the reason why Wolfe calls on second-order systems theory as a complement to Derridean philosophy. For my purposes, I will adopt a specific field, literary fiction, to which posthumanist theory can be applied so as to make apparent imagined scenarios of what we might call ethical situations and how a posthumanist ethics might appear or occur—indeed, might confront—us. In other words, rather than simply using theory to understand literature, literature can equally reveal to us more readily what remains dormant in conceptions of posthumanist ethics.

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[19] For example, we may consider the following: "how we think about the human in relation to the animal, about the body and embodiment" (xxii), "how we think about normal human experience and how that experience gets refracted or queried in […] artistic and cultural practice" (xxvi), "how we think about what justice is, and what philosophy itself may be" (xxviii), "how we think about subjectivity" (36).

Placing valuable emphasis on literature, Pramod K. Nayar’s *Posthumanism*, describes critical posthumanism as “the *radical decentring of the human sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple life forms and machines*” (2013, 2, italics original). In Nayar’s text, posthumanism again centers on deanthropocentrism, which leads us to postanthropocentrism. However, his focus is on the role that literature plays in shaping ideas of the human. Since at least the Renaissance, certain literature has mandated and reinforced certain human behaviors, actions, reactions, and interactions. Nayar believes that literature is the field of humanism in which human "nature" might best be revealed and "in which the human is defined, described and debated," while also serving as "the site where we can witness the Other and the different" (32). Literature is an immersive engagement. The very act of reading, Nayar contends, allows for engagement with the Other while questioning both "the nature and the limits of the Self" (32). It also cannot be construed strictly as mental exercise; it is a bodily experience that demands response.

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[20] Hereafter, I will refer to the seminal essay on the “autobiographical animal,” originally delivered as a lecture at the 1997 Cerisy Conference, as “The Animal.” I use the edition published in the 2013 collection of Derrida’s *Critical Inquiry* essays, *Signature Derrida*. Later, I address in greater detail this foundational text in posthumanist theory and in what has come to be called Animal Studies. The text focuses on the problem of anthropocentrism as it pertains to nonhuman animal ontology and slaughter, as well as how this affects relationships between nonhuman and human animals.

By referring to the exercise as both mental and bodily, I do not intend a separation of the terms nor a union that implies a previous separation. Even the compound "mindbody" is not sufficient as a term. Language retains and reinforces conceptions of "mind" and "body" as inherited from a humanist knowledge system that has grounded them as opposites, with the former being privileged, so that it is indicated above and beyond the latter, which is denied a place in discourse other than to occupy a negative space. Mind and body are not, either of them, as such; they are monist. This is vital in regards to thinking as well as reading.

Nayar asserts that reading engages us “in the immersive environment of a text with all its affective and sensuous constituents” (32). Reading is not just intellectual activity in the received sense of the mind as the site of knowing; reading is also visceral, a bodily knowing. In reading of and about the Other, we are also aware of a reading “self” (which is why writing about the Other is so dangerous in terms of how we perceive the Other). Through reading the Other in literature, we can engage with the Other. Nayar suspects, like other posthumanists, that whatever the human is, it is so only because of the Other. Better than continuing to label “the Other” by such a term, at this point it may be more helpful to sense others not as such but as constituents. By this I mean that “others” are participatory members in a community of beings that comprise a whole. For example, humans are comprised of various microorganism, including bacteria, viruses, archaea, protists, and fungi. The human is given by and gives of (other) beings, whether they are, according to Nayar, living organisms or technology.

Before moving on, I think it is important to qualify the above claims, especially to clarify why I prefer “constituents” to the continued use of “the Other.” The path to this conclusion is nonlinear but is not a digression. The literary texts that demonstrate to us what the human is have traditionally revealed privileged, white male, human rationalist—or, to borrow Derrida’s neologism, phallogocentric—constructions of the human. Derrida goes one step further, of course, acknowledging the culturally accepted norm of flesh-eating as an integral feature of how we have thought the human. Because of this, he understands the dominant subject as carnophallogocentric. According to Derrida, who intriguingly includes vegetarians—and assumedly vegans—in the prefix, human "culture rests on a structure of sacrifice. We are all mixed up in an eating of flesh—real or symbolic" (LD n.p.).[21] For Derrida, the assimilation of a text is carnivorous in a symbolic sense, so that a deconstructionist reading of a text calls for "respect for that which cannot be eaten—respect for that in a text which cannot be assimilated" (LD n.p.). Derrida exhibits a clear theoretical standpoint, declaring that his "thoughts on the limits of eating follow in their entirety" the very schema as his "theories on the indeterminate or untranslatable in a text. There is always a remainder that cannot be read, that must remain alien. This residue can never be interrogated as the same, but must be constantly sought out anew, and must continue to be written" (LD n.p.). The carnophallogocentric subject dominant to Western culture has not respected the limits of eating, in this sense. It digests, or attempts to digest, all, including the alien, the Other.

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[21] This quote and the following quotes labeled "LD" are taken from an interview with Anders Birnbaum and Anders Olsson, "An Interview with Jacques Derrida on the Limits of Digestion" (2009).

Like Derrida, feminist, postcolonialist, and posthumanist philosophers have challenged the carnophallogocentric subject and its conception of the Other, which are conceived in dualistic terms: man/woman, colonizer/subaltern native, human/animal. In philosophy and psychology, the Other has been determined as a counterpart to the Self although the Other does not necessarily require another being. However, while I knowingly am generalizing and oversimplifying, both Other and Self often have been restricted to the human. This is problematic if the human has predominantly been assumed to be the subject, especially so if the subject is what Derrida calls carnophallogocentric. Therefore, to avoid unnecessary associations, I will refrain from utilizing “the Other” or even “the other,” except in instances in which I am examining how it has been used historically, in favor of the term “constituents,” which I find more favorable since it does not carry connotations of dualism and grants a sense of agency to those involved, which is as important for nonhuman beings as it is for human beings.

To summarize the human as topic more simply, what passes for discourse on the human has been almost invariably discourse on a *type* of human, not *about* the human, whatever it may be. I will return momentarily to using the standard terminology: literature of and about the Other, if allowing us to engage with the Other, has generally not been written by the Other—or, if it has been written, has not been read or, more precisely, been available to be read. Here, I am not referring to a strict definition of what we typically mean by "read" and "write." I mean them in a more Derridean sense. The text of a nonhuman animal, for example, may appear to us "unreadable." As previously mentioned, this is why writing about the Other is so dangerous: we continually risk a misrepresentation. Furthermore, we lack terms by which to more properly communicate in an unbiased manner.

Because language carries biases—or because we infect language with biases—many posthumanists claim neologisms and radicalized language are necessary. Constituents may be an awkward term, but I believe it more accurately describes what we mean by encounters between the subject and the Other. While use of "the Other" calls attention to alterity, I believe that it still perpetuates the conception of a thing that the Human is above and against if taken out of context. Furthermore, posthumanism, even in its efforts to address the issues neglected by humanism, risks glossing over such matters precisely because conceptions of the human are carnophallogocentrically-b(i)ased—as is the language we have inherited. Again, I am aware of the fact that I am generalizing and oversimplifying; however, the forefathers who have developed so many of our theories and praxis for centuries leave us with the difficult task of unharnessing these theories and praxis from mores. As Donna Haraway remarks:

> I never wanted to be posthuman, or posthumanist, any more than I wanted to be postfeminist. For one thing, urgent work still remains to be done in reference to those who must inhabit the troubled categories of woman and human, properly pluralized, reformulated, and brought into constitutive intersection with other asymmetrical differences. (WSM 17)

Because of the aforementioned dangers, it is important for posthumanism not to remain occluded in isolation. Posthumanism is interdisciplinary, and if it is to remain actively open, it needs "outside" fields—that is, integral fields—and radical sensing by which to check this openness.[22]

One more claim that needs attention—and that follows my above remarks concerning openness—is Nayar's emphasis on living organisms and technology as separate categories. Again, this is why I prefer not to think through the Other but to sense through constituents. I argue that we can and should think of beings in a broader sense and in more equivalent terms. We must accept and appreciate all entities as having life and death; that is, they are all subject to flux. While posthumanist theory focuses on interbeing identity especially in terms of nonhuman animals, as will primarily be the case here, I find it more promising for posthumanist theory if we do not delimit our notion of beings. In the interview "'Eating Well,' or the Calculation of the Subject" (1988),[23] philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy asks Derrida why he limits himself to the animal. Derrida counters: "Nothing should be excluded. I said 'animal' for the sake of convenience and to use a reference that is as classical as it is dogmatic. The difference between 'animal' and 'vegetal' also remains problematic" (EW 269). Some theorists might consider this reaching too far—yet if we are to claim that posthumanism is a field that must remain open, why imply limits beforehand?

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[22] For this reason, it is beneficial to allow literature like Saunders's fiction to inform our conceptions of posthumanism. I consider his stories to be "thought experiments" in ethics—Saunders has referred to them as black boxes that change us when we go through them—because they help us understand how an ethical situation might occur and how we might respond.

What is called species identity at least applies to plants, but many native cultures, being less impoverished in imagination than several of our philosophers, would even include minerals as living entities. We would be better prepared to understand interbeing identity as not being bound strictly to relationships between sets of principal taxonomic units, even if that determining factor is what we consider life. If subjectivity applies to beings we do not generally classify as subjects, it does not follow that we must accept *any* formulation of the human. However, if we are questioning subjectivity, why would we only extend subjectivity to a predetermined group? Why preclude any subject at all? We should not be content to eschew the dog-eared, moth-eaten man/animal binary that somehow sets the human apart from all other species. We should also not accept a realigned dualism, such as an organism/object binary, which, I argue, is untrue both in its ontic and ontological senses. It is not my intention to formulate a metaphysics; metaphysics should remain, quite simply, meta, in many senses of the word. My aim here is to insist on radical openness, in the monistic sense. What I call thinking or sensing occurs "both" bodily and mentally. This is not to deny an *apparent* difference but to assert that body is indeed as much a performer in the active play of thinking as has been historically granted the role of the mind.

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[23] I cite from the version included in *Points…: 1974-1994* (1995).

Because "Western" language—if I may generalize—lacks appropriate theories regarding this topic, I borrow from Buddhism to argue that mind and body are interdependent due to their dependent origination, which appears by conditioned, plural causality. Neither can exist alone. The same is true of our relationships with those constituents that seem to appear as separate objects. For Nayar, critical posthumanism rejects exclusionary formulations in favor of critico-theoretical conceptions that offer "a sense of the human as an instantiation of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages and crossings" with all entities (5). Briefly, interbeing identity is relational and dependent. In this respect, terms like "interspecies" and "relationship," or Haraway's "becoming with," take on a more resilient import when not pre-delimited. Likewise, Nayar insists that "[i]n lieu of traditional humanism's species-identity, treated as self-contained and unique, critical posthumanism focuses on *interspecies* identity" (3, italics original). Although not the thrust of my work here, it is worth emphasizing that the human itself is a superorganism—that is, ninety percent of what each of us considers a self is bacteria and fungi. Our identity truly is interbeing, and a welcome reason why we should think in terms of constituents.

Critical posthumanism's focus on interbeing identity rather than humanism's autonomous, *nonpareil* formulation of the human does not mean that traditional posthumanism and its concerns are somehow cut off from humanism. Recalling Herbrechter, we find an insistence on the need for a posthumanism that is both open "to the radical nature of technocultural change" and "emphasizes a certain continuity with traditions of thought [that] have critically engaged with humanism, and which, in part, have evolved out of the humanist tradition itself" (3). Critical posthumanism is both radical and evolutionary because it calls on us to think in new ways while simultaneously drawing on humanism's contributions, taking them to their more proper conclusions. In a sense, we can apply certain humanist practices to humanism itself and uncover the potentialities that have not been felt through.

My claim concerning humanism may seem contrary to what I have argued thus far. However, while we do not need to accept humanism's formulations, we can accept certain ideas that may be adopted and reformulated to address their shortcomings in their inaugural forms. Herbrechter recognizes the venture of critical posthumanism as the need "to re-evaluate established forms of antihumanist critique, to adapt them to the current, changed conditions, and, where possible, to radicalize them" (3). I understand this as different, at least potentially, from developing posthuman theories that collapse into humanism. As I have suggested, as Wolfe has emphasized, and as Herbrechter reminds us here, critical posthumanism must not lapse into issuing humanist frameworks under the guise of posthumanism—that is, humanist posthumanism—but develop approaches that are posthumanist—and not, for example, transhumanist.

Like Wolfe, Andy Miah proposes a definition of posthumanism that calls attention to the prefix. Miah claims that posthumanism's vital assertion is its profound criticism of human preeminence. For him, "the 'post' of posthumanism need not imply the absence of humanity or moving beyond it," neither biologically nor evolutionarily; rather, he understands the "post" as our point of inception as we endeavor "to understand what has been omitted from an anthropocentric worldview" (2008, 72). A liberal humanist anthropocentric worldview—and those that purport to be deanthropocentric while elevating, in some sense, the human—is a worldview, that may be considered poor in world.

Recalling the difference between posthumanism and transhumanism, posthumanist theory is not about what comes after the human but what comes “after” acknowledging what anthropocentricity in humanism has veiled from us, indeed what is “omitted” from acquiescing to a philosophy that accepts not only the human at the center of its studies, but a historically carnophallogocentric human. What is omitted is plurality: the plurality of beings, naturally, but also the plurality of cultures, genders, sexes, and so forth. Posthumanist theory, if we can call it such, is an active openness—not a passive openness that simply accepts openness in its own right but an openness that continuously (re)opens. For this reason, posthumanism understands the role of the human, if there is one, as not one of strictly becoming, as such, in the sense that we become exclusive of other beings, but, to use Haraway’s phrase once more, becoming with, or what she has described as “companion species living in naturecultures” (CSM 65), what Kelly Oliver has emphasized as “response-ability” (2009), and what I am identifying as constituents in holism.

In becoming with, we have, many would argue, an ethical obligation to fellow beings. To have an ethical obligation to these beings is not a strictly posthumanist formulation. What posthumanist theory would insist on is that if there is an ethical obligation, it is not because the human claims ethics or has the power to dictate ethics. In other words, it is not about extending rights to nonhuman beings; it is not a utilitarian approach to ethics. The attraction of a truly posthumanist posthumanism lies in how it serves as a radical reconceptualization—or deconceptualization—for thinking contemporary ethics in terms of the so-called Other, not in terms for the Other—or, in terms of constituents—as well as the questions it raises concerning sociocultural concerns. While contemporary conceptions of ethics will be explored more fully later, it is important to note that across what Miah demonstrates as a myriad of posthumanisms, from technological to cultural to philosophical, the emphasis remains upon "the preoccupation with Otherness that appears characteristic of posthumanism's history" as the foremost concern "of all leading posthumanist scholars" (81), which has led to a variety of discourses, especially the so-called discourse of species. Whether ethical, political, social, cultural or otherwise, posthumanist concern is spurred by that which—or those who— have been tethered apart from a closed conception of the human.

2.2. "We are Animals": The Discourse of Species

In *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (2003), which I briefly cited earlier, Cary Wolfe analyzes the assumptions of cultural studies and explains how we are to understand the “discourse” of the title. As he elaborates, the discourse of species is “theoretically and methodologically, at the intersection of ‘figure’ and ‘institution,’ the former oriented more toward relatively mobile and ductile systems of language and signification, the latter toward highly specific modes and practices of materialization in the social sphere” (AR 6). The provocative premise of the book calls us to rethink subjectivity, language, and humanism through a range of schemata found throughout cultural studies and its kin. Because “cultural studies situates itself squarely, if only implicitly, on […] a fundamental repression that underlies most ethical and political discourse, taking it for granted that the subject is always already human” (AR 1), it is worth exploring the discourse of species and especially its link with the institution of speciesism.

It is important to note here that Wolfe calls the institution’s influence on the formulation of the subject disproportionately against but not exclusively against nonhuman animals. He is quick to indicate that humans are at stake in “confronting the institution of speciesism and crafting a posthumanist theory of the subject” (AR 7). He quotes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s argument that humanist conceptions of who is or is not human, based on “doctrines of identity of the ethical universal” (AR 7) justified slavery, Christianization, and other such programs. The question of the animal takes on different forms because while it "is embedded within the larger context of posthumanist theory generally, in which the ethical and theoretical problems of nonhuman (and the aforementioned humanist conceptions of human) subjectivities need not be limited to the form of the animal," what we call "the animal" does contain a certain degree of "specificity as the object of both discursive and institutional practices, one that gives it particular power and durability in relation to other discourses of otherness" (AR 6). For this reason, posthumanism engages with the discourse of species especially in terms of nonhuman animals although not exclusively. However, I believe it is necessary to emphasize that it is difficult, if not impossible, to admit it is on their terms. For Wolfe to call the animal the *object* of discursive and institutional practices is indicative of this.

Metaphors and neologisms are necessary if we are to change the terms of the discourse and how we write, speak, and think about the adherent issues. In *Corporal Compassion: Animal Ethics and Philosophy of Body* (2006), Ralph R. Acampora discusses the biases inherent in the vocabulary available to us. He notes that "the current vocabulary […] is problematic because the terms that exist either implicity or explicitly invoke concepts" with "an unwarranted basis" (Acampora 38). As an example, he cites "embodiment," which carries the connotation that beings are "something different from their bodies, something which is inside of the body one calls one's own" (Acampora 38). For this reason, "bodiment" is for him preferable to the more commonly used term because it lacks a prefix denoting any sense of interiority (or exteriority). Whether we describe an ethics based on body, such as that found in Acampora's work, or a related posthumanist ethics, any posthumanist "study must supply the language that facilitates such thought, that opens new pathways for the flow of relevant and appropriate ideas to circulate" (Acampora 38).

If we must supply the language, we must equally attempt to discard, or at least qualify or acknowledge, many of our words, phrases, and thoughts that may impede discourse. For example, the phrase "the discourse of species" is somewhat problematic since the category of "species" has already been challenged. John Dupré notes that he and a growing company of philosophers and biologists "have concluded that there is no universal principle by which organisms of all kinds can be sorted into species" (2002, 4). Dupré explains that the reason for the philosophical conundrum regarding "species derives from the fact that the concept of species is expected to serve two radically different functions. On the one hand it is assumed to be the fundamental level of biological classification, and on the other hand it is supposed to be a key theoretical term in the development of evolutionary theory" (5). The problem is that species categorization or delimitation may be arbitrary and subject to musltiple parameters. Rather than species, we must consider each being individually. Perhaps this notion branches from what Jason Wyckoff calls, as we shall discover, “dominionism.”

In “The Problem of Speaking for Animals” (2015), Wyckoff demonstrates that the animal question, in terms of the discourse of species, is problematic both epistemologically and ethically. Epistemologically, the discourse of species is constructed in a way in which knowledge of or about the animal is often “constructed using concepts that serve to minimize or erase animals’ interests,” whatever those interests may be (Wyckoff 117). Animals are routinely categorized according to binaries, of which the (hu)man/animal binary is the most prevalent.[24] The ethical dimension of the animal question is routinely hindered by an inherited language of dualism and the formulations that have coevolved with it.

Both the conceiving and the efficacy of ethics are hindered by what Wyckoff calls “dominionism,” which he defines as “a human knowledge system that takes animals as its objects” (117). Like Edward Said’s Orientalism, dominionism does not regard animals “as subjects to whom equal moral consideration is due, but as resources and objects of study” (Wyckoff 117). The animal is the colony, the human the imperialist. The human speaks for and as the animal by standing "outside" the animal. Wyckoff parallels Said in this regard. In *Orientalism,* Said explains that the concept "is premised upon exteriority," for it is the Orientalist who speaks, describes, and unveils the secrets of the Orient for a Western audience (1979, 20). Likewise, the "dominionist" compels the animal to speak, always in the voice of the human. The Orientalist remains indifferent toward "the Orient except as the first cause of what he says. What he says and writes, by virtue of the fact that it is said or written, is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside the Orient," both existentially and morally (Said 21). When humans engage in discourse for and about constituents, and especially when arguing for rights, humans produce dominionism in a manner homologous with Orientalism. The human is always engaged in discourse from a position perceived by others of the same species as superior. Is it possible, then, that humans can communicate with and through nonhumans?

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[24] Unfortunately, for the sake of clarity and brevity, I use the terms human and nonhuman animals throughout this thesis, phrases that together suggest a binary.

As Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman plainly phrase at the outset of the Introduction to *Thinking with Animals: New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism*: "We are animals; we think with animals. What could be more natural?" (2005, 1). If we think with animals simply by being humans, can we also think with nonhuman animals? Anthropomorphism is prevalent in our literature yet is generally kept apart from the discourse of species. To think with animals by habituating ourselves to another species—or with any constituent—is intriguing but troublesome. Nevertheless, as Daston and Mitman contend, “humans assume a community of thought and feeling between themselves and a surprisingly wide array of animals; they also recruit animals to symbolize, dramatize, and illuminate aspects of their own experience and fantasies” (2), especially in literature and film—but how is this use of nonhuman animals relevant to posthumanism?

Rather than continuing to pose qualitative questions about anthropomorphism, Daston and Mitman suggest we instead ask about “the how and why of thinking with animals” (2). In other words, instead of arguing whether anthropomorphism is good or bad, they claim that we can and should allow our questioning to remain actively open without engaging in a dualistic debate. Anthropomorphism can be understood then as a practice in which humans enact “the performance of being human by animals and being animal by humans” as well as “the transformative processes that make thinking with animals” or trees or stones or cyborgs “possible” (Daston and Mitman 6). By dissecting anthropomorphism as a term, we can better understand how these performances and processes work. The “anthropos” functions in the sense that by imagining a constituent, we reimagine the human, thereby unveiling much “about notions of the human”; concurrently, the “morphos” functions as the transformative, as “different modes of transformation, of shape-changing across” beings

(Daston and Mitman 6). The apparent chiasm of anthropos with morphos seems promising for ethical probing.

Daston and Mitman also assert that critical anthropomorphism engages ethics because it “sometimes seems dangerously allied to anthropocentrism: humans project their own thoughts and feelings onto other animal species” (4). Furthermore, anthropomorphism is critically relevant to rights issues. They contend that “if humans were correct in their anthropomorphic assumption that, grosso modo, animals thought and felt as humans did,” the justification of animal exploitation, in theory, would no longer be tenable (Daston and Mitman 4-5). However, anthropomorphism, in this sense, is still anthropocentric because it presumes that nonhuman beings are like humans, rather than understanding humans as related to them. Of course, ethics is also relevant to epistemological, ontological, and methodological arguments, especially concerning

> representation and agency. Thinking with animals is not the same as thinking about them. Anthropological, historical, and literary analyses of animals in human culture have revealed much about changing human attitudes toward animals and the changing economic, political, and social relationships of human societies. But in what sense is the animal a participant, an actor in our analyses? (Daston and Mitman 5)

To answer this question, it is worth recalling Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's own oft-cited question: "*can the subaltern speak?*" (1988, 283, italics original). In terms of nonhuman species, I venture to claim that these nonhuman subalterns also speak but not by any human verbal language.

Furthering Spivak, nonhumans are also "the margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center) of the circuit marked out by […] epistemic violence" (283). Even if anthropomorphism intends to speak with nonhumans, it seems it generally, if not always, does so in terms of the human. The very thesis of Daston and Mitman is evidence of how even thinking about how to think with animals can be dominionist, so that the question, as they formulate it, is tellingly articulated: if anthropomorphism truly means thinking with animals then "how might we capture the agency of another being that cannot speak to reveal the transformative effects its actions have, both literally and figuratively, upon humans?" (5). The presumption that the animal cannot speak implies that they might believe the animal is different from the human in that it lacks language.

As Nina Varsava makes clear in "The Problem of Anthropomorphous Animals: Toward a Posthumanist Ethics," anthropomorphism and anthropodenial presuppose "a legitimate definition of the human where there is none," such as one based on granting language exclusively to the human

(2013, 12). She follows Bruno Latour in her consideration of anthropomorphism and denial. Regarding the anthropomorphism of technological subjects—that is, “machines”—Latour wonders how sociologists can believe they “decide the real and final shape (morphos) of humans (anthropos),” as if a real or final static shape could ever exist (2008, 160). The shape of humans is always in flux. Moreover, can we ever be certain that the anthropic characteristics we give to constituents are the sole propriety of the anthropos? For Varsava, anthropodenial produces “the human by extricating from the nonhuman particular capabilities (typically […] language and rational thought) and declaring them exclusively human” (12). Returning to etymology, Latour informs us that “anthropos and morphos together mean either that which has human shape or that which gives shape to humans” (160). The relationship between constituents, in this sense, is reciprocal. Latour emphasizes that any “debates around anthropomorphism arise because we believe that there exist ‘humans’ and ‘nonhumans,’ without realizing that this attribute of roles and action is also a choice” (160).

Wolfe takes up the ethical challenge of the discourse, calling the Other “the infra-human” or “the other-than human [that] resides at the very core of the human itself, not as the untouched, ethical antidote to reason but as part of reason itself” (AR 17). As we encountered earlier, for Wolfe, such a calculation does not mean abandoning theory but following it to its conclusions. For this reason, “the only way to think about the ethical relations with the nonhuman other that supposedly comes ‘before’ the social and the epistemological is precisely through theory itself” (AR 16-17). Whether or not this is the only way, it follows that because humanist theory is not sufficient to criticize humanism itself, posthumanist theory may help us to think about ethical relations of constituents. Posthumanist ethics moves the discourse of species away from the institutions of speciesism and dominionism and confronts what Jacques Derrida calls “the question of the animal.”

2.3. “Who Comes Before and Who is After Whom?”: The Animal Question

How and why has the question of the animal become one of the principal concerns in posthuman studies? In the introduction to *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (2003), Cary Wolfe indicates two decisive factors. The first point to consider is the “reroutings of contemporary theory […] toward an exposure of the human’s own impossibility” and “the new transdisciplinary theoretical paradigms that have poured into the humanities in the past few decades” (Zoontologies xi). Structuralism and post-structuralism challenged the subject. The second point to consider is “the radically changed place of the animal itself in areas outside the humanities," which has left the humanities "struggling to catch up with a radical revaluation of the status of nonhuman animals" (Zoontologies xi). The question of the animal has burrowed into the humanities from territories beyond the very field of the humanities. Wolfe acknowledges that "the place of the animal as the repressed Other of the subject, identity, logos, and the concept reaches back in Western culture at least to the Old Testament (and, in a different register, to the Platonic tradition)" (Zoontologies x).

In *La ética animal: ¿Una cuestión feminista?* (2017), Angélica Velasco Sesma presents a position aligned with Wolfe's historical situating of the animal's place as repressed Other. Sesma emphasizes that

> [l]a posición occidental, en lo que al tema de la relación con los animals se refiere, ha mantenido, casi invariablamente, unos principios incuestionables provenientes de la tradición tanto Judaica como de la Grecia clásica (unidas ambas en el cristianismo), que han relegado a los animals al puesto más bajo de la Creación, otorgando al hombre un poder ilimitado sobre ellos, al tiempo que se le exime de cualquier tipo de carga moral derivada de los actos de crueldad que puede desarollar con los seres no humanos. (33)

Although I argue that nonhuman animals are not at the lowest position of Creation historically—however we take "Creation" to mean, and considering that plants and minerals are not even a part of this hierarchy—they are certainly at a much lower position than humans and especially, as Sesma emphasizes, men. The select men who developed this hierarchy, conceived without women, did so by the authority of their power. This classical Greco-Judeo-Christian position has only recently been called into question. Deconstruction and posthumanist posthumanism challenge the Occidental principles regarding relationships with animals. By doing so, both deconstruction and posthumanist posthumanism directly or indirectly confront the cruelty that men mete out to nonhuman animals, thereby holding man accountable for what are understood now to be moral transgressions rather than rights.

In *Of Jews and Animals*, Andrew Benjamin informs us that the animal question is situated within deconstruction and that there exists "a strong interrelationship between the history of philosophy and the continual positioning and repositioning of the animal within it" (2010, 74). This positioning and repositioning is connected to how the animal has traditionally been created and incorporated within the tradition. Since one of deconstruction's chief concerns is "the history of metaphysics" and that to accept "that history is already to engage with the history of the animal within philosophy," taking up deconstruction as the question, Benjamin believes, means that the question of the animal is already carried within it (74). What he is emphasizing is that "deconstruction is, among other things, the creation of openings for thought—deconstruction's event," while its project "entails the creation of the complex weave in which modes of repetition intersect with forms of invention" (Benjamin 75). Derrida's theories play a vital role in posthumanist studies as well because concepts such as "play" (*jeu*) and "interpretation" are vital to humanism's deconstruction. Thus, Benjamin insists that deconstruction, when performed in the way he describes it, "brings into question the assumed centrality of anthropocentrism" (75).

For Derrida, the question of the animal is paramount in "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)" (2013), in which he denounces the use of the term "the Animal" in general. According to him, "the Animal" is

> a word that men have given themselves the right to give. These humans are found giving it to themselves, this word, but as if they had received it as an inheritance. They have given themselves the word in order to corral a large number of living beings within a single concept: "the Animal," they say. (Animal 414)

However, he marks an intriguing distinction about how philosophers consider the animal and how writers consider it. He holds that there have been "very few other philosophers who don't give in to this prejudice against animals—practically none," whereas "[w]riters are different" ("Derrida on

Animals").[25] I take this to mean that literature, such as fiction, does not give in so readily to the prejudice. What Derrida insinuates, and what he does not explain, is that writers offer a way to sense the animal, or animals, differently.

Until Derrida, few philosophers allowed for the multiplicity, specificity, or agency of animals, in the plural. He suggests, with a troublesome insistence on sight, that the ability to be seen by the animal—in his case, a pussycat—is a topic most philosophers and theorists avoid, taking "no account of the fact that what they call animal could look at them and address them from down there, from a wholly other origin. That category […] is by far the most frequent. It is probably what brings together *all* philosophers and theoreticians *as such* […] Descartes to the present (Animal 394-95, italics original).[26] For Derrida, the question of the animal is also a question of response, which "often has as its stakes the letter, the literality of a word, sometimes what the word *word* means literally"—or the word "animal" or "response" (Animal 389, italics original). He insists on the importance of response-ability. What the "said question of the said animal in its entirety" amounts to is "knowing not whether the animal speaks but whether one can know what *respond* means" (Animal 389, italics original). This also means questioning the subject.

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[25] This quote is taken from unused footage for the 2002 documentary, the eponymously titled *Derrida*.

[26] I try to avoid privileging any single sense throughout this thesis.

The question of "who" is, for Derrida, autobiographical: "I no longer know who I am (following) or who it is I am chasing, who is following me or hunting me. Who comes before and who is after whom?" (Animal 391). This is directly related to response. Derrida further confesses that he does not how to respond to the question of "who I am (following) or after whom I am (following)" (Animal 391). Here, follow means both before and after and is directly related to his questioning of response. He proposes:

> *To follow* and *to be after* will not only be the question and the question of what we call the animal. We shall discover further […] that which begins by wondering what *to respond* means, and whether an animal (but which one?) ever replies in its own name. And by wondering whether one can answer for what "I am (following)" means. (Animal 391, italics original)

Being after the animal means being with or alongside it, pressed together with it. The constituent's being is spatial-temporal: "The animal is there before me, there close to me, there in front of me—I who am (following) after it. And also, therefore, since it is before me, it is behind—I who am (following) after it. It surrounds me" (Animal 392). Because the animal exists before "me," or before Derrida's autobiographical subject, it can sense "me," which, in turn, raises further questions. For Derrida, this means "thinking about what is meant by living, speaking, dying" and the relationship, in Heideggerian language, between being and world, as well as “being and following, being followed or being following,” or being near “what they call the animal” (Animal 392).

Several critics have responded to Derrida’s contentions, including, for one, Lynn Turner, who reminds us that his worrying the question of the animal continues the deconstruction of humanism. Instead of amending Descartes’s conception of the animal, in the singular, as a machine lacking the capacity to respond, Turner argues that “Derrida continues the reversals and displacements of deconstruction. He both patiently questions whether humans *can* respond and alters what response might mean” (2013, 2). Parenthetically, Sarah Wood ponders, “([…] to whom do we imagine this ‘animal question’ being addressed and how? How do I know that I am not writing, now, to the animal that you also are, using resources as I can find to do so, without knowing in advance who you are or what old facilitations I might be following?)”. Like Derrida, Wood asserts that writers, specifically poets, “do not hesitate to address animals” but that “[p]hilosophers and scholars would usually not dare” (18).[27] She follows Derrida in claiming what generally remains unacknowledged in the discourse, namely that philosophers and scholars are hesitant if not outright against engaging with nonhuman animals, while poets and fiction writers regularly do engage with them. Furthermore, as Wood suggests, the animal question is not restricted to discourse on nonhuman animals; the animal of the animal question may very well be human.

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[27] The quotations of both authors, Lynn Turner and Sarah Wood, are taken from *The Animal Question in Deconstruction* (2013), a collection of essays by various authors, edited by Turner. The quote from Turner is taken from her introduction to the collection and those from Sarah Wood from her essay “Swans of Life (External Provocations and Autobiographical Flights That Teach Us How to Read).”

In *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (2008),[28] Matthew Calarco reexamines the tradition of the ontological divide between humans and nonhumans present in Continental philosophy. Calarco leaves open the question of animality and ethical consideration. The question of the animal not only questions the "essentialist accounts of animality" and a priori delimitation of ethics as distinctly human—which we find, for example, in the face of Lévinasian ethics—but also "whether we know how to think about animals *at all*" (Zoographies 5, italics original). Following Derrida, Calarco—like Wolfe—offers a critique of Lévinas's terms of ethical obligation, an analysis which serves to demonstrate the limitations of the imagination of Continental philosophy regarding ethics and how its formulations of ethics are often arbitrary. Logically, Lévinas's "ethical philosophy is, or at least should be, committed to a notion of *universal ethical consideration*" (Zoographies 55, italics original). A truly universal ethical consideration is not delimited a priori. Wolfe asks "whether this Lévinasian sense of the ethical makes it possible to rethink the question of the nonhuman animal" (AR 60). Lévinas's insistence on ethical consideration toward those who have a face does not damage his thesis in and of itself; rather, it is Lévinas's insistence that only humans can have a face, or can be the Other, that negates his very argument for universal ethical consideration.

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[28] Hereafter, I will refer to the book as "Zoographies."

Regarding this ethics of the face, it is now more understandable why Wolfe insists that humanism is not logical enough. As Calarco puts it, Lévinas's argument is that to the human "*the resistance of nonhuman things does not make any ethical impact*" (67, italics original). For Lévinas, humans may be ethically responsible to their fellow humans, but ethical responsibility stops here. Calarco summarizes Lévinas's claim to mean that "nonhuman entities have no presence outside of a human context" and "can never pierce me ethically or interrupt my functioning in such a way as to challenge my persistence in being" (67). The danger here is that throughout history, as Lévinas well knew, humans *have not* been ethically pierced by human others because they were regarded as nonhuman entities.

As I have emphasized, if the discourse of species means taking both human and nonhuman beings seriously, our notions of what counts as language and the ways we think about nonhuman beings, must be taken into account and revitalized. Calarco acknowledges that "science and philosophy (at least partially) [are] limited by their anthropocentric origins, but it is also the case that they are unable to accomplish on their own the revolution in language and thought that is needed" to address the matters of animal being (6). Posthumanism, therefore, requires an interdisciplinary approach because "it is seeking out every available resource to aid in the task of working through the question of the animal" (Zoographies 6). Calarco not only understands the question of the animal and the subjects it broaches as open, but also that it opens "onto a much larger and much richer set of issues that touch more broadly on the limits of the human […] as part of the recent explosion of new social movements aimed at radicalizing left-wing politics in its traditional liberal, humanist form" (6). What the question of the animal challenges, in other words, is not strictly humanist anthropocentric subjectivity as it pertains to animals but humanist anthropocentric subjectivity, or carnophallogcentrism, in its broadest sense.

For Wolfe, the question of the animal is also "part of the larger question of posthumanism" (WP xxii). Kelly Oliver, for one, would agree with this assertion. In *Animal Lessons: How Animals Teach Us to be Human*, Oliver declares that "Western philosophy was developed and practiced by privileged white men who regarded themselves and their own situations and values as universals. The human subject […] was conceived of as free, autonomous, self-sovereign, and rational," a conception "built and fortified by excluding others who were viewed as man's opposite, […] conceived of as determined by natural law to be dependent and irrational" (2009, 26). Such a perspective has been challenged from several quarters in recent years, yet the Cartesian subject remains embedded in discussions, philosophical and otherwise, of the Other.

If the subject is illusory, Oliver wonders why the majority of philosophical discourses on animals still accept the Cartesian subject, asking why

> discussions of animals, and the relationship between man or human and animal, assume the Cartesian subject that has been part and parcel of the history of the denigration of animals and that, in turn, is used to justify the denigration of people figured "like them"[.] For the most part, in philosophical discussions, the ethical, moral, and or political consideration of animals revolves around issues of animal rights and animal equality that assume some notion of interests or capacities linked to the Cartesian subject. (26)

The underlying assumption here is that both nonhumans and a number of humans are still very much objects that may be allowed a semblance of subjectivity, a subjectivity that inevitably derives from a presumably privileged, white male subject.

We need look no further than the current Western cultural climate of fear of Muslims or “Middle Easterners” and in the United States, in addition to Islamophobia, the implementation of both the New Jim Crow laws and anti-Mexican immigration procedures. Oliver indicates that the intimate connection

> between oppressed peoples and animals is not just a contingency of history but a central part of Western conceptions of man, human, and animal. As a result, overcoming the denigration of oppressed peoples and revaluing them on their own terms may require attention to the man/animal opposition as it has operated in the history of Western thought. (26)

Postcolonialism and identity politics are relevant then not only under the umbrella of posthumanism: they are concomitant with the animal question.

As Oliver succinctly states it, “the histories of the suffering of humans at the hands of other humans and the suffering of animals at the hands of humans” are interwoven (45). She cites our shared vulnerability and interdependence, which if taken as marks of ethical and political responsibility means “we are also obligated to consider the (material and conceptual) interdependence of humans and animals” (Oliver 44). The human rights discourse that is shepherded from ethical and political responsibility is also dependent upon the discourse of species. Posthumanism’s critical stance on contemporary animal rights and animal welfare theories, the majority of which conform to the analytic tradition, must be a posthumanist posture; otherwise, we risk carrying out a tradition of “explicit or implicit invocations of an opposition between humans and animals” (Oliver 45). Adhering to this tradition does little to further ethics. Posthumanist ethics, then, seeks to avoid the moral normativity of any axiology that places human interests at its center, which forces nonhuman animals to meet certain anthropocentric requirements in order to be considered subjects, especially in regards to rights and welfare. In this sense, as we shall discover, ethics cannot belong to the human.

2.4. “There Can Be No ‘Science’ of Ethics”: Posthumanist Ethics as (Im)possibility

In *The Moral Fool: A Case for Amorality* (2009), Hans-Georg Moeller questions the appropriateness of a moralist perspective. He identifies that one side-effect “of the humanist narrative of mastery is the belief in moral normativity” (Moeller 38). Morality is contextual; it cannot be divorced from context. He believes moral ideologies “are an integral part of the narratives of rational control and social progress that were developed during and after the Enlightenment. In practice, however, the projects of moral progress often lead to disaster” (38). Since the Enlightenment, we can track these projects from the Reign of Terror to the Red Terror and beyond. Morality and ethics have only begun to be thoroughly challenged and reassessed. A truly posthumanist ethics is not regulated by an anticipatory value system that delimits values and principles in terms of good and evil or right and wrong. Furthermore, and just as controversially, it is not exclusive to the domain of the human. If posthumanist ethics means what posthumanist theory indicates—that anthropocentricity cannot and should not determine, in this instance, ethics—it means ethics is not inherently human.

Controversial philosopher John Gray, who is deeply critical of humanism, claims that ethics originate in “the lives of other animals. The roots of ethics are in the animal virtues. Humans cannot live well without virtues they share with their animal kin” (2002, 110). Although not fully developed, his conviction counters the generally unacknowledged assumption of ethics as a human(ist) discipline. While Gray, for good reason, remains pessimistic about human ability to improve upon ethics, it does not mean we cannot and should not challenge our inherited notions of ethics. As Wolfe notes, humanism dogs “the generalizability and universalism of ethical codes and their prescriptives” (AR, 198). Wolfe follows Derrida, agreeing with a postructuralist theory of ethics rather than, for example, a pragmatist approach. He reminds us that for Derrida, “there can be no ‘science’ of ethics, no ‘calculation’ of the subject whose ethical conduct is determined in a linear way by scientific discoveries about animals (or anything else)”

(190). While the statement may seem to contradict Gray's assertion that we share ethical values with nonhuman animals, the emphasis here is on scientific discoveries about them, not on the values they may hold themselves. That is, ethics is not dependent upon, for example, the cognitive abilities of nonhuman animals. For this reason, Derrida neither normatizes ethics nor believes ethics *can* be normatized.

Intriguingly, Saunders has made similar statements in regards to how ethics appears in his fiction, which in turn is comparable, as he notes, to how it manifests in that of Anton Chekhov. While he sometimes describes ethics in what may seem like more humanist terms, his stance suggests a more posthumanist attitude. For example, in an interview with Milo J. Krmpotic, Saunders admits that in order for a story to function

> no debe conducir a una moraleja universal. Me encanta esa idea chejoviana según la cual el arte no debe solucionar los problemas, sino debes formularlos correctamente. Parafraseándola, el relato no debe ofrecer un mensaje moral sino situarse en una posición de urgencia moral. Y, si se hace bien, puede sugerir que todo camino tiene su coste. (2013, 65).

The sentiment is further comparable to Derrida's conception of ethics because, as François Raffoul explains, if ethics exist—which is always a question for Derrida—it "must be the experience, the undergoing, or enduring of an aporia, of a certain impossible" (2008, 270). According to Raffoul, Derrida appreciates the impossible as "possible, not in the sense that it would become possible, but in a more radical sense in which the impossible, *as impossible*, is possible" (273). For Derrida—and, it seems, for Saunders—ethics is always beyond ethics as hyperethics, or hyperbolic ethics.

Kelly Oliver understands Derrida's ethical intention as one that must "insist on urgency and the necessity for constant vigilance. Its imperatives and responsibilities are hyperbolic because they demand the impossible: that we be hyperaware of the ways in which our actions and decisions fall short of our ideals" (106). A hyperawareness of hyperethics is necessary for posthumanist ethics,[29] a sentiment Wolfe, like so many posthumanists, also expresses. To state this a bit more plainly, what is meant by a hyperawareness of hyperethics is that posthumanist ethics cannot exist unless we change how we act in regards to constituents. The belief, according to Wolfe, is that "the operative theories and procedures we now have for articulating the social and legal relation between ethics and action are inadequate […] for thinking about the ethics of *the question of the human as well as the nonhuman animal*," or the nonhuman (AR, 192, italics original). While we can agree that we must change how we act, the sense of ethics generally proposed is one that remains located in the domain of the human (a point I will address later in this chapter). What Wolfe claims is that we cannot think about ethics using the normative theories and procedures. We need a more radicalized ethics, a hyperethics—a more posthuman*ist* ethics. However, before we can determine what is meant by a truly posthumanist ethics, it is helpful to understand how posthuman ethics are currently conceived.

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[29] Derrida's formulation of hyperbolic ethics is comparable to the more plainspoken insistence by George Saunders on our ability to always be kinder, found in *Congratulations, by the way: Some Thoughts on Kindness*.

According to Calarco, three main approaches to posthuman “animal” ethics exist. identity, difference, and indistinction. In *Thinking Through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction* (2015), he briefly outlines the three approaches, which are not all posthuman*ist*. It is important to note that, overall, these ethical approaches are nonhuman *animal* exclusive—that is, the approaches do not address what I mean by constituents; they do not address beings beyond human and nonhuman animals. However, before I address this further, it is necessary to understand the three dominant approaches to posthuman ethics and how these approaches address nonhuman animals.

Posthuman ethical approaches are not necessarily concomitant with animal rights. Indeed, while many key identity theorists (Peter Singer, Tom Regan, Paola Cavalieri) are associated with animal rights, those who Calarco calls indistinction theorists (Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, Val Plumwood), who are not necessarily associated with animal rights, per se, approach ethics in a way that is neither speciesist nor, ideally, anthropocentric. As Calarco demonstrates:

> Contesting sexism and racism requires us to rethink the whole of our individual and social lives and to make fundamental changes across multiple institutional and economic discourses and practices. The same is true […] with regard to addressing the subjugated status of animals in the dominant culture. (TTA 25)

However, speciesism is less “the point of critical contestation” than is anthropocentrism, which Calarco defines as “a set of relations and systems of power that are in the service of those who are considered by the dominant culture to be fully and properly human” (TTA 25). I further this by emphasizing it is not anthropocentrism in general but an anthropocentrism that historically also takes as its task an urgency to denote what is human, or what is proper to humans.

As Calarco explains, conceptions of what is fully and properly human shift across the ages; likewise, “the way in which the human/nonhuman line is drawn also shifts” (TTA 25). Thus, anthropocentrism has been and still is not necessarily or exclusively speciesist because it has the power to exclude anyone or anything that is not, by whatever definition or delimitation, human. That is, anthropocentrism can exclude by race or by sex as much as it can by species. Regardless of race, sex, species, or any categorization, the problem with identity theory is that it challenges speciesism but does not challenge carnophallogocentrism. Calarco claims that "logocentrism reappears among identity-based philosophers in the process of developing a systematic way of making sense of our obligations to animals" (TTA 22), thereby continuing the logocentric tradition of humanism that, for example, Derrida and feminist theorists have called into question. When reason is privileged over emotion it results in "a continuation of the logocentrism of human-centered and male-centered thinking" (TTA 23). It is a humanist posthuman approach.

Calarco explains that for difference theorists (Jacques Derrida, Cary Wolfe) ethics "starts from the premise that the ultimate origin of ethics resides not with me…but with the Other, with radical difference, or heteronomy" (TTA 32). While difference theory is praiseworthy for its critical approach to humanism, it is not active. For Calarco, what is radical about difference theory is limited to "a parasitic mode of political thinking" about animals in that "it rotates critically around existing, mainstream pro-animal discourses and practices but is unable to generate much that is novel in terms of strategy or policy" (TTA 45). Difference theorists work through theory to criticize humanism; indistinction theorists do not limit themselves to criticism.

Indistinction theorists are not afraid to assert novel approaches. Rather than “refining, multiplying, and complicating” difference, indistinction theorists find it “more effective to set this distinction aside and also set aside the concern with anthropological difference(s)—at least temporarily—in order to develop alternative lines of thought” (TTA 51). While both difference theories and indistinction theories conceive alternative ways of thinking ethics, Calarco asserts that indistinction theorists think more radically. This is because the vital task of indistinction theory “is to create ontologies and ways of thinking that challenge the status quo and that lead to new ways of living” (TTA 57). Indistinction theory is thus more open to experimentation in terms of how we think and feel ethically.

One indistinction theorist playing in this way is Cynthia Willett. In *Interspecies Ethics*, she identifies both the benefits and limits of “poststructuralist approaches of continental ethics” (2014, 40). For her, such approaches manifest “in their compassionate attentiveness to the pathos and suffering of creatures otherwise dismissed as of little or no moral worth, but emphasize not the shared sentience or minimal agency but the radical alterity of these creatures” (Willett 40). Willett’s project unsettles both the continental and the Anglo-American traditions by emphasizing not so much “difference” as “play.” Like Calarco, she finds certain poststructuralist theories of ethics insufficient. For example, she finds Derrida too insistent on passivity, leaving “unexplored the precious, if few, ethical possibilities for agency and communication that are reemerging in part through our science and technology” (Willett 42). In other words, according to Willett, Derrida believes passivity rather than agency is what calls for an ethical response. Instead, she seeks an ethics less grounded in lament. For her, interspecies ethics must “subvert assumptions” concerning any ontological rift between human and nonhuman beings, which can be achieved “by recasting the predominately tragic frame of ethical reflection through a comic twist that features defiance and dissent” (Willett 40), which can radicalize history so that it reveals “a collective ethos outside of any neoliberal master narrative” (Willett 43). Following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, that history would include subalterns, or constituents, who are not necessarily human. Willet affirms that play is a major element in this radically comic ethics that imagines *eros* as passionate, non-egocentric love. A biosocial *eros* can be cultivated by a wild anarcho-ethos. Norms are suspended through play, “providing a dynamic training ground for developing a cooperation-based ethos,” that avoids “the demands of hyperproductive, predatory economies and exhausted, inauthentic lives” (Willett 62). She understands this alternative biosocial ethos as being more in tune with the ethics that any beings would naturally develop, challenging the “survival of the fittest” interpretation of evolution. The *eros* ethics she advocates “operates in part thorough the horizontal ethicality of collective agency and the intersubjective politics of a communal dynamic" (Willett 68).

Like Willett, Ralph R. Acampora offers a radically different take on ethics. In his conception of a bodied bioethic, being is the bodied experience of ethics where ethics is emotional experience before it is cogitated, or as Acampora contends, "emotion is really more rational than we thought—but also, and of equal importance, that it is more valuable (even in its arational aspect) than most moral philosophers" allow (2006, 77). His axiology counters traditional approaches to ethics by insisting that the burden of proof is on disproving an interbeing ethics, not on proving it. We are "already caught up in the experience of being a live body thoroughly involved in a plethora of ecological and social interrelationships with other living bodies" of the carnosphere, affirms Acampora, drawing on a concept developed from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ontology of "the flesh of the world" (5). Rather than extend ethical concern from a delimited axiology logically considered, we are ethically attuned by being "thrown" into the world.

Such "interrelational" experience is also promoted by critics like Braidotti, whom I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Interrelationality, she explains, "implies a new way of combining ethical values with the well-being of an enlarged sense of community" (Braidotti 190). Like Willett, she calls for an ethics that is both active and positive. A sustainable "ethics of experiment with intensities [,,,] for non-unitary subjects rests on an enlarged sense of inter-connection" (190). Rather than conceive a (human) subject as a mode of being of individuation, Braidotti believes in a posthuman nomadic subject as a mode of interrelational being. Originally imagined as a mode of developing critical and feminist subjectivity, nomadism is both "a theoretical option" and "an existential condition" that "translates into a style of thinking and a mode of relation to writing" (Braidotti 22). Nomadic subjectivity remains dynamically in flux, eclipsing negativity, while maintaining a universalism that exists without resorting to "moral and cognitive universalism" (Braidotti 22). In short, subjectivity is interrelational more than individual.

Saunders's fiction frequently demonstrates this interrelation, as it is a key component to the ethics that emerge in his fiction. Whether it is between human and raccoon, human and monkey, human and fox, human and ghost, or human and human, we experience the relationships of several beings who must, by force or by will, interrelate with fellow constituents. It is striking to notice how his style increasingly changes to incorporate new modes of demonstrating this interrelatedness, as his early, strict use of first-person narrative gives way to a "third-person ventriloquist" narrative that incorporates multiple voices. This evolution in style also runs in tandem with the increasing sentimentalism—in the most positive sense—in his stories. He also brings his characters into ever closer contact, from the raccoon that bites the narrator of “The 400-Pound CEO” to the ghostly entities who enter the living bodies of Abraham Lincoln—and his horse—in *Lincoln in the Bardo*. Thus, the fiction remains active, positive, and mutable. Likewise, the potential of posthumanism must be active, positive, and mutable. These are the conditions of the posthumanist subject and the conditions for posthumanist ethics.

In this chapter, we have surveyed posthumanism and how it is understood by a variety of critics, theorists, and philosophers. We have also explored how posthumanist ethics is conceived and what such an ethics means especially in regards to nonhuman animals. Also, we have addressed the benefits of posthumanist theory and considered, briefly, its limitations before concluding that it is helpful to understand that many of the posthuman theories being espoused are still held back because they do not go beyond considering animals, both human and nonhuman. Despite the shortcomings of posthumanism at this stage, it still provides a promising mode of analysis and criticism of both the contemporary sociocultural climate and, more specifically, the contemporary arts, including literature, of which the New Sincerity movement and especially the writing of Saunders can be considered relevant to the reinvigorated interest in our understanding of ethics.

I return now to the point I mentioned I would address at the end of this chapter. The point I am making is that while posthumanist ethics have good cause to engage with nonhuman animals (or with emergent technologies, if that be the case), confining posthumanist ethics in this way is still delimiting. As I understand them, subjectivity and ethics are not the sole domain of the human; they are interrelational, not the property of human beings but freely shared by constituents. What I mean is that while considering ethics in the ways mentioned by both difference and indifference posthumanists, we should let go of ethics. More accurately, we should stop trying to hold onto ethics, which does not exist by and for humans. I do not mean that ethics should cease. Maintaining a notion of ethics as a human(ist) domain only hinders us in our posthuman condition. Ethics is the way of all constituents; if anything, humans labor against ethics. Moral guidelines are invasive to ethics. Ethics, in a sense, means sensing ethics. Ethics is experiential, something felt, not just cognized. This is the kind of radical sensing posthumanism demands. Posthumanism then should not be thought of as the end of humanism but the active opening toward radical possibility.

It is my aim in the remaining chapters of this dissertation to demonstrate how posthumanist ethics occur in Saunders's fiction, as well as how we experience them. I will take on Derrida's claim that writers do not discriminate. Because posthumanism is contemporary and because it has so quickly become rooted in American practice, the choice to analyze the writing of this contemporary American author is as appropriate as it is opportune. His fiction not only entertains but addresses, for example, cultural and sociopolitical concerns, especially in regards to those who are frequently discriminated against, from the plebeian, the obese, and the mentally “challenged” to the female, the immigrant, and the nonhuman animal. While Saunders has never stated that his work is posthumanist, I believe that usually—but not always—we can read certain aspects of it this way. The narrow scope of this project will help us to understand posthumanist ethics in a broader sense, for his writing offers us the opportunity to experience hypothetical ethical situations by which we can feel a sense of ethics that tends toward the posthuman. To use Ihab Hassan’s words, Saunders’ writing is, “helplessly, posthuman.”

3. THE ETHICS OF RACCOONS AND HUMANS: “THE 400-POUND CEO”

3.1. “A Very Clear Moral Valence”: Writing Nonhuman Animals

Frequently in Saunders’s fiction, nonhuman animals are treated violently or killed. On occasion, they are already dead, usually as meat. These nonhuman animals appear, in the earlier stories, as minor characters or as plot devices, while in the later fiction, they begin to appear as protagonists. Regardless of their role, the violence toward “the Other” that appears so frequently in Saunders’s narratives, including humans, is an ongoing theme in his fiction and will be a point of discussion in this chapter and those that follow. By examining how his human characters interact with, think about, or feel about nonhuman animals we will discover how the ethical stakes frequently relate to issues relevant as much to humans as to nonhumans.

In a private email, Saunders informed me his initial interest as a writer is to make the stories captivating enough that a reader will remain engaged. In his own words, what happens otherwise is that

> nothing happens ethically or aesthetically or politically, because the reader doesn't go on, or does so

> tepidly. So a story, in my view, should be "ethical" in that I want some sense of outrage or sympathy to rise up in the reader so that *she will continue to be interested.* To say it another way, I want to engage human connection between character and reader (and between writer and reader). I think one reason that animals get into my stories so often is that an animal, abused or mistreated, has a very clear moral valence—there is no way to claim that the animal "deserved" it and even claims of utility (as I think would be made re "93990" feel inadequate, when one is observing the actual suffering). (NS, italics original)

It is important for us to understand that Saunders does not set out to write about animals. He does not have an agenda he feels he must fulfill. Most of his stories involving animals were written before becoming vegetarian,[30] an autobiographical detail I shall return to soon.

In his interview with Janet Hoops, he admits that characters, for him, "construct the 'argument' of the story. So whether that character is a person or a ghost or a talking fox, it exists as a way for the writer" to develop the argument made by the story (n.p.). However, he also confides that by including kids or nonhuman animals in peril, the moral position is obvious, allowing us to move on to the "why" of the story and ask "[w]hat set of values are invoked when someone does evil to someone blameless; how are the blameless defended, and so on. Seen this way, a story with an animal or kid suffering in it is sort of an ‘end-condition’ thought experiment, isolating evil (or cruelty) so we can look at it in a more simple framework” (NS). If the framework is simpler, the ethical complexity of the story is certainly not, as we shall later discover. What is interesting to note now is that for Saunders nonhuman animals are as blameless as children and that harming either is cruel. I am not certain the majority of the American (and Western) population would agree that nonhuman animals are blameless; moreover, I doubt that many consider the question of whether they can or cannot be blamed at all. However, by making apparent our cruelty to nonhuman animals, the reader may feel a sense of outrage or sympathy.

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[30] Although Saunders is no longer a strict vegetarian, I think it is helpful to note his pre- and post-vegetarianism in terms of awareness.

As I mentioned, Saunders’s vegetarianism is an ethically-motivated dietary change that seems augured by his fiction. In his email, he reveals that he was unable to

> reconcile the conditions under which the animals were killed w[ith] my own lazy enjoyment. And all is well—I've found it very easy and it's made me happier. I had the experience, prior to that, of driving home from taking our beloved dog in for surgery, and while full of so much worry and love about her, accidentally running over a small animal and its baby as they wandered into the road. And it shook me and made me

> so sad. And then I had to stop for lunch and was eating a chicken sandwich and thought, "Huh?" (NS)

Saunders underscores an important factor to consider when reading his fiction. When crafting a story, he does not sit down and decide to insert an animal into the plot to promote vegetarianism, to stop animal testing, or to promote animal rights, yet all these issues appear in his writing. Furthermore, these issues appear because his writing happens to be about American life, which, I believe, demonstrates how embedded these issues are in American culture.

In Saunders's first collection of short fiction of five short stories and a novella, *Civilwarland in Bad Decline* (1997),[31] the plots of both "The 400-Pound CEO" and "Downtrodden Mary's Failed Campaign of Terror" are propelled by nonhuman animal killings. The collection was a successful debut, being listed as a *New York Times* Notable Book of 1996 and a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award. Each one of the stories had been previously published, including his first of many to be found in the pages of *The New Yorker*, "Offloading for Mrs. Schwartz." Three stories, including "The 400-Pound CEO," were either first published or reprinted in the equally estimable *Harper's*, a magazine with which Saunders still publishes.

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[31] The first hardcover edition was published by Random House in 1996. I use the more common 1997 Riverhead trade paperback edition. In 2016, a new edition with an introduction by Joshua Ferris was also published.

In this chapter, I will limit my analysis to "The 400-Pound CEO,"[32] in which a man kills first a raccoon and then a human. Due to the story's longer length and its greater cast of characters, I feel the story offers a way to examine several features common to Saunders's fiction, including those of "Downtrodden Mary's Failed Campaign of Terror," in a more sustained analysis. However, I will briefly summarize the complementary story here, which also has an animal killing, that is followed by a failed suicide. The story concerns an elderly woman, Mary, working as a custodian in a museum, who encounters both sexism and ageism. She routinely sabotages her boss in a passive aggressive way by poisoning each one of his so-called "see-through" cows—cows with a Plexiglass window installed in the flank—for which her boss has taken scientific credit.[33] When her boss discovers what she has done, she is forced to leave the museum. She then walks down to the pier and steps off the edge, only to be rescued by a group of Navy men.

Along with the two I have mentioned, the stories in this collection are written in the first-person. All are set, at least in part, in workplaces, with three set in amusement parks, a common setting in Saunders's fiction. It is also worth noting that among the remaining stories in the collection, occasional references to slaughterhouses also occur (Saunders once worked in a slaughterhouse). What unites them all is how they are deeply rooted in American culture, whether it be in a more speculative manner or a more realistic one.

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[32] The story is one of two in the collection to have received the National Magazine Award for Fiction, "The 400-Pound CEO" in 1994 and "Bounty" in 1996, both of which were first published in *Harper's*.

[33] The see-through cows are likely inspired by cannulated, or fistulated, cows. These cows are subjected to surgery in order to be fitted with a device called a cannula that allows scientists access to the rumen, part of the digestive tract, for research and analysis purposes.

3.2. "Welcome to America": Satire, Ethics, and American Culture

As I mentioned, the focus of this chapter will be on "The 400-Pound CEO,"[34] a story that introduces many of the thematic elements, such as violence toward our constituents, that appear across Saunders's fiction. The hefty protagonist of this story, who will only briefly serve as CEO, works for a company called "Humane Raccoon Alternatives." This is Saunders's first touch of irony because from the first sentence of the story, we learn: "At noon another load of raccoons comes in and Claude takes them out back of the office and executes them with a tire iron" (CEO 45). The company's name is then mentioned mid-paragraph before we learn that, Tim, the company's real CEO, "purposely backed over a frat boy and got ten-to-twelve for manslaughter" (CEO 45). The story establishes a precedent for brutality and compassionlessness from this opening paragraph so that when Jeffrey later kills Tim and briefly becomes the kind of caring CEO for whom he would have preferred working, it seems somehow justified—but is it? Before addressing this question further, we must explore Saunders's story. However, first it is helpful to understand how his fiction works and how it is related to American culture.

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[34] Hereafter, I will refer to the story as "CEO." Because Saunders's story collections are all titled for stories found in the collections, I will abbreviate the names of stories in citations, rather than the collections themselves, so as to avoid confusion. I have done and will do the same with his essays.

Saunders's fiction, as will become apparent, generally avoids moralizing, offering instead complex ethical dilemmas. The stories are not just entertaining but experiential. It is this important point I wish to assert first because if we are to understand how his fiction works and why it works, it is necessary to savvy the experiential component. This element is also what aligns his fiction with posthumanist ethics. The reader must experience the nonhuman, or any constituent, either through confrontation or becoming. When we confront nonhuman animals in Saunders's fiction, we usually encounter them through a human character. Since we tend to sympathize with the human protagonists, their reactions to violence and killing of nonhuman animals are taken on by us as readers. This is what gives Saunders's fiction its ethical edge, but it is important to note that any sense of ethics is experiential.

Saunders does not sermonize, nor do the stories, in general, read as allegories, fables, or parables. While his writing shares a concern for injustice, his approach is different than that of George Orwell, who of course also happened to use nonhuman animals in his writing, most notably in *Animal Farm* (1945). Instead, Saunders's fiction allows an ethical thread to unravel as we experience the story as readers. There are no foregone conclusions about how to react in an ethical way or even what the ethically "right" thing to do is. It may seem that this would make his writing unethical; however, because his characters so often struggle to for kinship, acceptance, and kindness, their crises over how to achieve this and their uncritical considerations of how they are living and what they are accepting allow us, as readers, to feel sympathy for them even while we laugh at them. In a sense, we laugh at them because they are so much like us, even when exaggerated. Therefore, if we read a story like "The 400-Pound CEO" simply as a revenge tale, we miss an opportunity to question how we think about and feel with ethics.

As I have asserted, Saunders and his writing broadcast an ethics that bears similarities to the ethics expounded by the posthumanists named in Chapter 2. Saunders's fiction is ethically more complex than at first it may appear. The colloquial language is laced with the kind of jargon heard in workaday environments. This is also what makes it so unsettling to read Saunders; the tone of the stories is often so casual, so banal that the violence stands out. However, if we really relate to the experiences of the characters in Saunders's fiction, it is not because their lives are radically different than our own, even if the stories do contain what seem like absurd or fantastic elements. Many people, both in the United States and abroad, perform work they dislike for people or organizations they dislike. What seems distinctly American about Saunders's fiction, and what is essential for any foreign reader to understand about his fiction, is how his authorial voice, his idiolect, closely resembles common American ways of speaking is influenced by work culture and media, especially advertising. Although Saunders seems to exaggerate the predominance of this manner of speaking, he is more accurately exaggerating certain aspects of the culture—if he is exaggerating at all—from which it is derived.

For this reason, the nuances of Saunders's stories may be lost on a reader unfamiliar with American culture. For example, the frequency and insidiousness of American profiteering—through media such as advertising, television news, and other avenues—is greater than what we tend to find in many European countries. The American worker, who is a common figure in many of his stories, is different than the worker in, for example, Spain or Germany. I do not intend to generalize, but a Spanish reader unfamiliar with American culture might wonder why the characters are so anxious and attached to their jobs while detached from their families, whereas a German reader might read the stories as lampoons of American culture without registering the emotional component. This does not mean that foreign audiences cannot relate to his stories; however, to understand all the nuances, an awareness of American culture is beneficial.

One of Saunders's best-known essays, "The Braindead Megaphone,"[35] may help us to understand the critique of American culture implicit in his stories, as some of the statements he makes are more metaphorical than what appears in his fiction. In the essay, Saunders describes a party in which someone he refers to as "Megaphone Guy" appears, someone who is "not the smartest person at the party, or the most experienced, or the most articulate" (TBM, 2). Megaphone Guy is a dominant person whose speech, projected through a megaphone, drowns out the voices of his fellow partygoers, leaving his rhetoric as "the central rhetoric because of its unavoidability" (TBM 3). However, Megaphone Guy is not just one person. With a viral tendency, he is an agenda-driven "*composite of the hundreds of voices we hear each day that come to us from people we don't know, via high-tech sources*," which try to frighten and isolate us, always "dedicated to the idea that, outside the sphere of our immediate experience, the world works in a different, more hostile, less knowable manner (TBM 11, italics original). In this sense, Megaphone Guy is a boisterous, powerful manifestion of the posthuman condition.

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[35] Written in the immediate years following 9/11, with George W. Bush in office and American troops in Afghanistan, the essay is still relevant today.

Saunders goes on to describe a best-case scenario and worst-case scenario for a voice like this. If we imagine a someone sitting in a room and someone shouting about the conditions in the house next door, the information we tend to receive is in the form of the worst-case scenario. That is, Americans, especially in the age of the internet, tend to receive information not "in the form of prose written and revised over a long period of time, in the interest of finding the truth, by a disinterested person with real-world experience in the subject area" nor in a form that is "as long, dense, nuanced and complex as is necessary to portray the complexity of the situation" but "in the form of prose written by a person with little or no firsthand experience in the subject area, who hasn't had much time to revise what he's written, working within narrow time constraints, in the service of an agenda that may be subtly or overtly distorting his ability to tell the truth," with the primary goal being "to entertain and that, if he fails in this, he's gone" (TBM 5). In short, it is the prose of a new *Weltanschauung* dominated by "post-truth" politics and fake news.

Why do people remain unaware of this? As Saunders explains, the person being informed (or the average American, for that matter) is too preoccupied and too distracted to evaluate what is being "shouted." The problem is not whether politics have become "post-truth" or "post-fact" but that so many citizens accept this unquestionably. It explains why, in the 2016 U.S. elections, the most qualified presidential candidate in American history, based on political record, lost to someone with an overbearing presence and no experience. It also explains why, despite (or because of) the United States being an ethnically diverse country, women and minorities, whether human or not, tend to get shouted down and ignored. Prejudice and fear of the Other remain very much in place—but a vast number of Americans have realized the need to express their opinions more openly and assert that freedom and rights are not based on who we exclude. In Saunders's essay, the person doing the shouting about the house next door proposes to invade the house next door; to update this scenario, the shouter now proposes obstructing anyone who comes knocking from the house next door—by constructing both a metaphorical *and* a real wall between houses. Saunders ends this section of the essay with a quip that dates it but is just as applicable now: "Welcome to America, circa 2003" (TBM 5). Welcome to America, circa 2018.

If we are to proceed ethically, we need to consider all the nuances and complexities of ethics. Moreover, we need to ask what we mean when we mean ethics and question what it means to act ethically. Also, we need to understand that ethics is as much about experiencing as it is about acting or performing; such action in the name of ethics should not proceed from a carefully delimited, preconceived notion of ethics. We are not, in a Kantian sense, duty-bound to ethics because we consider ourselves rational beings. We are not, in a utilitarian sense, quantitatively-bound to ethics, working to bring the greatest benefit to the greatest number. We are not even phronesis-bound, neither in the Aristotelian sense nor the Heideggerian sense, as this would exclude those with less experience in ethical situations from acting ethically; although previous experience can be beneficial, it cannot be the measure of ethics. Ethics is possible only because it is impossible, in a Derridean sense—or, as Saunders puts it in *Congratulations, by the way*, "what we really want, in our hearts, is to be less selfish, more aware of what's actually happening in the present moment, more open, and more loving" (n.p.). Where should we draw the line, and for which beings? Conceptions of ethics have generally, if not always, been born of "Man's" measure. Our constituents are left to appeal to ethics, if allowed any territory at all. It is key that Saunders notes our lack of attention in the present moment; how can we be more open and loving if we are not aware of the present moment? Our lack of awareness, our lack of presence, allows "Megaphone Guy" to influence how we think and behave. We want to be "good" and do what is "right," but is it ethical?

Often the actions performed by characters in Saunders's fiction are ethically questionable, but who is to be held accountable? The question may not seem relevant to posthumanist ethics, but it is a question from which to begin to overturn any assumptions about to whom ethics may or may not pertain. Saunders never points the finger, but his writing seems to suggest that the individual is as accountable as any organization. In his essay, Saunders asks, "Who runs the media? Who *is* the media? The best and brightest among us" (TBM, 14). Then why do they accept the kind of profiteering work they do? Saunders suspects that "[t]hey take the jobs they take […] without much consideration of the politics of their employer" (TBM 14-15). What makes it difficult for the individual to break free from constraints that impinge upon kindness is a culture that allows "Megaphone Guy" to flourish.

3.3. "A Very Beautiful, Exaggerated Experience": Experiential Fiction

In "The 400-Pound CEO," Jeffrey is not so much bullied because of his weight but because his demeanor is passive. Passivity, we should note, is a trait that the patriarchal society has often associated with women and is therefore seen as a sign of weakness. While passivity is, of course, not an exclusively negative trait, it manifests as indifference in how Jeffrey treats his work, about which he expresses no ethical qualms. It might seem that most people would hesitate being complicit in sacrificing raccoons with a tire iron, but Jeffrey does not, likely because someone else performs the task. He helps with the burials but not until halfway into the story does he kill. Until then he never expresses any thoughts, let alone any feelings, about the raccoon killings.

Moreover, Jeffrey perpetuates a lie in which he takes pride and in which he perhaps wants to believe. In first-person narrative, Jeffrey informs us "how overjoyed the raccoons were when we set them free. Sometimes I'll throw in something about spontaneous mating beneath the box elders. No one writes a better misleading letter than me" (CEO 46). Although it is humorous to think that writing a misleading letter is something to brag about, it is also humorous not because it is ridiculous but because it combines both the commonplace and the strange. It is no stretch of the imagination to think that a person is intentionally misleading an audience; it just usually is not about killing raccoons.

If we ask of fiction whether it is also about deliberately misleading an audience, we can find an explanation Saunders provides during an interview for the recently canceled eponymous show, *Charlie Rose*.[36] When asked if truth can be presented through fiction, Saunders responds by clarifying that “fiction is not necessarily trying to show you life” but instead is “trying to put you through a very beautiful, exaggerated experience that’s not life at all. You know, I imagine it’s sort of like a black box. You go in there, something happens, it’s not random, and you come out of it sort of alive,” like the sensation felt after riding a rollercoaster, since “[a]fter a rollercoaster, you’re not really inclined to discuss it” (28 May 2014). Perhaps this is the reason why so little Saunders criticism exists. His fiction is experiential: we can only discuss it after the thrill of the experience has worn off. The question then is not so much about whether fiction is misleading because it is not true but about how we experience it and how it changes us. Fiction does not mislead us from discovering ourselves. Like being on a rollercoaster, reading Saunders’s fiction—or any great fiction, for that matter—can frighten us while making us laugh. We feel something without being certain what it is. It keeps us re-reading. It changes us in ways of which we are unaware. By analyzing the fiction, we can understand how an exaggerated experience, such as that found in “The 400-Pound CEO,” is relevant to us.

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[36] In 2017, after eight women accused Charlie Rose of sexual misconduct, distribution of his show was suspended and his contracts were terminated.

Returning to Jeffrey, we read that he extends his misinformation to phone inquiries: “I’m reassuring and joyful. I laugh until tears run down my face at the stories I make up regarding the wacky things their raccoon did upon gaining its freedom” (CEO 46). Interestingly, the character refers to the raccoon as belonging to the client: “their raccoon.” I will return to this point. First, we should note that Jeffrey’s skill at manipulating customers runs contrary to his self-image: “I weigh four hundred. I don’t like it but it’s beyond my control” (CEP 46). When his coworker, Freeda, agrees to go on a date with him, he is surprised and excited. After the date, however, he learns that it was a bet. He returns to the office. Because the story is told in the present tense, we get a sense of how Jeffrey feels at this moment without that feeling being overshadowed by what comes later. Saunders’s frequent use of simple sentences in the story also helps us to understand and feel with the narrator: “I take the ribbing. I take the abuse. Someone’s snipped my head out of the office photo and mounted it on a bride’s body” (CEO 52). Recall that Jeffrey has not actually killed a raccoon. Despite Jeffrey’s depression, he refuses to give up on life. It is at this point when he kills a raccoon—and when the protagonist’s relationship with the raccoons, as well as our own relationship with them and our response to the story, begins to become more complicated.

Again, because the story is told in the present tense, we experience along with Jeffrey the shock of the following scene:

> Mr. Carlisle says thanks for letting them sleep at night sans guilt. I tell him that’s my job. Just then the raccoon’s huge mate bolts out of the woods and tears

> into my calf. I struggle to my car and kick the mate repeatedly against my wheelwell until it dies with my leg in its mouth. The Carlisles stand aghast in the carport. I stand aghast in the driveway, sick at heart. I’ve trapped my share of raccoons and helped Claude with more burials than I care to remember, but I’ve never actually killed anything before. (CEO 53-54)

Until this moment, Jeffrey, like us, seems to have taken for granted that killing raccoons is somehow commonplace. Furthermore, he knows that the company practices something that runs counter to what he, as a company spokesperson, preaches. In the emergency room, Jeffrey dreams: “I doze off on a bench post-treatment and dream of a den of pathetic baby raccoons in V-neck sweaters yelping for food” (CEO 54). Jeffrey is not the only one confronted with his indifference to killing; we, as readers, are confronted with our own indifference. We know that humans and nonhumans are slaughtered daily yet remain complicit. However, the real problem is not that we are complicit but that we are indifferent. It is only when confronted with the raccoon in a *physical* way that Jeffrey makes what could be called a kind of ethical choice at all. Whether he acted rightly or wrongly is less the point than that in the moment of the ethical experience, he was forced to engage with the raccoon directly and make a choice. His decision seems to leave him remorseful, which is expressed in part by his words and in part by his dream.

Jeffrey is not just upset but “sick at heart,” which emphasizes both the physical and emotional experience of the ethical moment. His dream of anthropomorphic baby raccoons can be read as an expression of sympathy; by dreaming of raccoons dressed in V-neck sweaters, they are more human and therefore, for better or worse, more relatable, both to his character and to us as readers, which marks them worthy of sympathy. In American culture especially, this is one of the few ways that we—both Jeffrey and us as readers—are granted access to feelings of sympathy for nonhuman animals; however, in American cartoons, these anthropomorphic animals are rarely allowed to be truly wild, which the raccoons in Saunders’s story *seem* to be: wild. More accurately they occupy a liminal space, neither wild nor tame.

The raccoons in the story consistently occupy space shared with humans. We associate this attribute with tameness but not to the extent of domestication. Because the animals are not domesticated, they are considered wild. Because their wildness is not invited, they are pests. Because to advertise that they are killed would be “inhumane,” the company for which Jeffrey works—“Humane Raccoon Alternatives”—attracts clients who, likely more out of a need to assuage any sense of guilt rather than out of concern for the raccoons, agree to the solution to the “problem” via the transfer of the raccoons to a place in which human and raccoon will not have to negotiate a shared territory. Nonhuman animals, it seems, are worth engaging with only as long as they remain anthropomorphic. The raccoons in Saunders's story, aside from the baby raccoons in human clothing, are treated with indifference.

3.4. "A Substantive Difference": Who is "the Other"?

The physical confrontation with the raccoon links Jeffrey—who, as a 400-pound human, is regarded, despite American culture's political correctness, as an Other, or as "animalistic"—with the raccoon, a "pest." Jeffrey's boss, the bullying Tim, directs our attention toward this link with his comment that "the raccoon must've had a sad last couple of minutes once it realized it had given up its life for the privilege of gnawing on a shank of pure fat" (CEO 54). Jeffrey's response is intriguing because for the first time in the story, he tells us how this makes him feel: "That hurts" (CEO 54). We then learn some new information about the boss, Tim. Jeffrey wonders why he continues "to expect decent treatment from someone who's installed a torture chamber in the corporate basement" (CEO 54). If it is not already clear from Tim's verbal abuse of Jeffrey, Tim is a sadist; later, Freeda will emerge from the room with Tim, bruised and in love. Instead of ending the story with Jeffrey making some realization about his work and himself after the raccoon killing, the action of the story continues to rise by pursuing Jeffrey's feelings in response to the statements and actions of Tim. Jeffrey's passivity turns toward acts of passive aggression and, finally, active aggression. The ethics of the story become more complex.

When a presumed animal rights activist, described as a "pale girl in a sari" (CEO 55), begins investigating the raccoon burials, Jeffrey relates Tim's insinuating remark, made while "baby-oiling his trademark blackjack," that

> the next time she shows up he may have to teach her a lesson about jeopardizing our meal ticket. He says animal rights are all well and good but there's a substantive difference between a cute bunny or cat and a disgusting raccoon that thrives on carrion and trash and creates significant sanitation problems with its inquisitiveness. (CEO 56)

What is shocking about his words is how they seem to conflate the pale girl in the sari and the raccoons as both being "pests" worthy of extermination. While it may seem a minor point in the story, by wearing a sari, the pale girl is dressed in a way which we might associate with Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, but in what way? The implication is that she is not "Oriental;" instead, she is described as pale, suggesting she is not the type of person we tend to think of as wearing a sari (viz. she is white). This is not to suggest that the pale girl is “appropriating” culture; however, this could be the perception.

I bring up Orientalism because, as Jason Wyckoff notes in “The Problem of Speaking for Animals,” it is considered to be “a knowledge system in which socially contingent and normatively loaded binaries are deployed in such a way as to reinforce and naturalize power differentials, with those in a position of dominance having knowledge of those in a position of subordination” (120). As we have learned, a dominionist knowledge system functions similarly. Knowing “animals is to dominate them, just as ‘knowledge’ of the formerly colonized is domination of them, since this knowledge is expressed in a lexicon in which the power differential is pervasive” (Wyckoff 121). Although Wyckoff restricts dominionism to nonhuman animals, we can understand it in a broader sense. To have dominion over nonhuman beings is to have sovereignty and control over them, no matter how we classify them. We should respect both senses of dominionism—the narrower nonhuman animal-orientation and the broader, though not homogenizing constituent-orientation—as we proceed. As we shall discover, there is a complicated dominionism at work in Saunders’s story that includes both nonhumans and humans.

Returning to the concept of pests—and how to treat them—insinuated by the characters in the story and related to the raccoons, the girl, and the protagonist, it is best to begin with an understanding of the traditional notion of pests and how this functions in dominionism. Wyckoff argues that “humans, in what they can say about nonhuman animals, are largely confined to a conceptual framework that is speciesist, dominionist and anthropocentric. Humans define themselves in opposition to animals through the use of dubious binaries” (120). One such binary is the distinction between domesticated and wild, which “erases completely a third category of animals, ‘liminal animals’, who live among human beings but whose breeding and feeding are not directly and fully controlled by humans” (Wyckoff 123).

Recall that Tim contrasts cute animals and raccoons, claiming that the latter are disgusting because they eat carrion and trash, which makes them unsanitary. Recall also that this distinction arrives after his threat to teach the pale girl in a sari “a lesson.” Later, Jeffrey will refer to the girl as the “animal rights girl” (CEO 58). The problem for Tim is that both the animal rights girl and the raccoon are too inquisitive. Tim’s language is dominionist both in regards to the raccoons and in the broader sense as it applies to the girl. His words accurately demonstrate how dominionist knowledge systems frame our conceptions of humans and nonhumans alike. Although Tim does not use the word, the implication is that raccoons—and pale girls in saris who are animal rights activists—are pests. The raccoon is “disgusting.” To thrive “on carrion and trash" carries negative connotations because most humans, we tend to believe, do not thrive on these.

Thriving—or surviving—on trash, however, is precisely how some humans *do* live. What dominionist language regards as trash is, for those who eat it, what we tend to call food. Apart from those humans who have little to no choice in the matter, one such group that chooses to eat in this way is freegans, a portmanteau of "free" and "vegan." Lauren Corman's essay, "Getting Their Hands Dirty: Raccoons, Freegans, and Urban 'Trash'" (2011), explains how both freegans and raccoons counter societal strictures. These scavengers

> pick their way through Western society, valuing what others deem valueless. Waste transforms into food, affluence transforms into excess, and 'necessary purchases' transform into choices. The presence of raccoons and freegans uncomfortably reveals ideas such as civility, urban progress and economic inevitability as interrelated constructions, rather than natural realities. Historically-informed prejudice is marshalled to stymie raccoons' and freegans' disruptive force, while the negation of one group is leveraged in the disavowal of the other. (Corman 32)

Liminal beings like raccoons—and rats and pigeons—thrive on human "waste." Humans who also thrive on human waste may have as much or more in common with liminal beings as they do with fellow humans—indeed, in the case of freegans, may be considered liminal beings. Although Tim is one of the most obviously villainous characters in Saunders's fiction, his words express opinions and assumptions shared by many humans.

Tim's claims regarding the difference between cute animals and pests is then contested. The story has linked animal rights, animal hypocrisy (speciesism), and "the Other," but now Tim strikes out any sense of care for any being by evincing the underlying goal, which is profiteering. Any ethical sense at all is dictated by the demands of profit. Thus, Saunders's story offers a critique of American culture by demonstrating, in a very focused way, how capitalism can determine ethics. Freegans share a similar—although in praxis, more radicalized—ethical philosophy. Related to Saunders's concern regarding media profiteering, freegans are also "dismayed by the social and ecological costs of an economic model where profit is valued over the environment and human and animal rights" (freegan.info, n.p.).[37] In a roundabout way, Saunders's story does concern itself with animal rights by also presenting an ethics determined by profiteering.

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[37] More information on freeganism in America can be found in Alex V. Barnard's *Freegans: Diving into the Wealth of Food Waste in America* (2016).

3.5. “Eliminating a Piece of Filth”: What is Ethically “Right”?

In typical Saundersian fashion, the issue of profiteering appears in a satirical—although at this point in the story, not ironical—manner. By now we’ve come to expect such comments as part of Tim’s character, which we read in the dialogue between Claude, who is Jeffrey’s coworker, and Tim:

> “Oh, get off it,” Claude says, affection for Tim shining from his dull eyes. “You’d eliminate your own mother if there was a buck in it for you.”
>
> “Undeniably,” Tim says. “Especially if she knocked over a client trash can or turned rabid.” (56)

Had Saunders’s not added the sentence after Tim says that he’d undeniably “eliminate” his own mother—“eliminate” being a euphemism for “kill”—if he could profit by it, the scene would lack the humor that keeps us reading instead of simply being repulsed. However, as I have mentioned, the line that demonstrates that we are dealing with sarcasm here is only sarcastic because, as readers, we interpret the sentence within the context of the narrative with a different understanding of Tim’s character than he has of himself.

Our conception of Tim has been closely aligned with Jeffrey’s angle. After Jeffrey kills the raccoon, we realize that his narrative role and his character is more suspect and complex than we imagined, yet what separates him from Tim is that Jeffrey is shocked by and haunted from killing the raccoon, an act that was not premeditated, whereas Tim, as we learned from the first paragraph of the story, has committed manslaughter. Jeffrey does not comment on Tim's utterance that he'd especially kill his own mother "if she knocked over a client trash can or turned rabid" (CEO 56). Tim is not joking but speaking the truth; for readers, the impression is humorous if we imagine his mother in this way, yet we are aware that he means what he says. It is disconcerting; we laugh not because we are unsettled. What is also at stake is how we understand human behavior. A human who knocks over a "client" trash can or becomes rabid is a pest to be exterminated. A freegan, who may be vilified in a similar way, may be understood as a pest worth exterminating. If a profit can be made from killing, it is, in Tim's mind, justifiable; for him, it is not a question of ethics. What does this mean for us in terms of how we justify everything from factory farms to war? Is it ever an ethical question, or is it justifiable because it is profitable for those with dominion?

The general assumption is that ethics is a human domain and, moreover, is reducible to morals. The ethics I am discussing, that is, a posthumanist ethics, that is present in Saunders's fiction, is one that is not reducible. It is as much a raccoon ethics, for instance, as it is a human ethics. The ethical experience is not a one-way, dead-end street.

Raccoons are not an ethical object to which we should consider extending rights but a participant in ethical experience. Too frequently we begin rights discourse with an anthropocentric assumption that rights somehow belong to the domain of the human, the rational being, and that other beings must prove they are rational. Even if we start with Jeremy Bentham, who asked if animals can suffer, we end up determining criteria for suffering. Recalling David Foster Wallace’s essay on the Maine Lobster Festival, discussed in Chapter 1, the standard argument goes that the lobsters have no nervous system and so cannot feel pain and suffer. Wallace, however, acknowledges that pain is a subjective experience that requires philosophical approaches just to make inferences about suffering. Wallace mentions some of the problems with Bentham’s approach, which still leaves it to humans to determine what constitutes suffering. It is better if we begin by asking why constituents do *not* have rights rather than if they *should*. For now, we will allow this question to settle in as we finish the analysis of “The 400-Pound CEO.”

When the animal rights girl returns to film the burial pit one evening, Tim pursues her with the blackjack. Jeffrey follows him out and notices that the girl is “struggling up the slope with […] her camcorder on her head like some kind of Kenyan water jug” (CEO 58). Again, the story references a non-white culture in relation to the girl; instead of Orientalism, it’s Africanism. Again, this reference is juxtaposed with an ambiguous reference to the girl's actual culture group. We know that she is pale, which means she is likely but not assuredly white. Jeffrey then notes that he can "see in the moonlight the affluent white soles of her fleeing boat-type shoes" (CEO 58). Race and culture and animal rights are now further complicated by a reference to class. Whether intentional on Saunders's part or not, this is precisely the kind of complexity that appears in the midst of the seeming simplicity of a Saunders's story. Then Jeffrey kills Tim by "hugging" him:

> I hug hard. I tell him to drop the jack and to my surprise he does. Do I then release him? To my shame, no. So much sick rage is stored up in me. I never knew. And out it comes in one mondo squeeze, and something breaks, and he goes limp, and I lay him gently down in the dirt. (CEO 58)

He tries to revive Tim by CPR, begs him to rise and beat him, and dances crazily with grief. Do we sympathize with Jeffrey? We most probably do. Do we continue to sympathize with him when he decides against turning himself in for murder? Perhaps we begin to doubt his integrity.

Saunders continues to raise the stakes by allowing the protagonist to engage in actions we usually do not condone. He has been the bullied underdog for whom we root throughout the story, but now his actions are ethically questionable. Although his motivations are not profit-driven, they are selfish. The character we normally identify as a good guy now seems less good than we expected. Thus, Saunders further entangles us in an ethical quandary. Jeffrey asks himself:

> What do I gain by turning myself in? Did I or did I not save an innocent girl's life? Was he or was he not a cruel monster? What's done is done. My peace of mind is gone forever. Why spend the remainder of my life in jail for the crime of eliminating a piece of filth? (59)

Jeffrey's revelation, on the heels of his reference to Tim in a way not dissimilar to how Tim referred to the raccoons, is that he does not care "about lofty ideals. It's me I love. It's me I want to protect" (CEO 59). Does he really believe this, even after he has saved the life of the animal rights activist? The supreme irony here is that he buries Tim in the raccoon burial pit and forges a letter from Tim explaining that he is "going to Mexico to clarify his relationship with God via silent mediation in a rugged desert setting" (CEO 59). In the letter, he has Tim refer to himself as a "swine," equating Tim in a negative sense with a pig. As Jeffrey did after killing the raccoon, he falls asleep and dreams. In the dream, Tim is

> wearing a white robe in a Mexican cantina. A mangy dog sits on his lap explaining the rules of the dead. No weeping. No pushing the other dead. Don't bore everyone with tales of great you were. Tim smiles sweetly and rubs the dog behind the ears. He sees me

> and says no hard feelings and thanks for speeding him on to the realm of bliss. (CEO 60)

This dream is in sharp contrast to the one after the raccoon-killing. No sense of remorse is suggested; on the contrary, Tim is glad to have been killed. Tim becomes the more sympathetic character in this dream. His character is completely at odds with his formerly living counterpart. In the dream, Tim is showing compassion toward a dog, the second dog in the story, the first being one mentioned by Jeffrey, “named Woodsprite who was crushed by a backhoe” (CEO 48). The mangy dog in the dream—not God, not an angel, not a human—is the one who relates the rules of the dead. The dog understands how to behave in the afterlife, informing the human how to behave.

Jeffrey appoints himself CEO through his forged letter so that it appears Tim has chosen him as his successor. However, when he presents the letter to his coworkers, he feigns incredulity. Neither Claude nor Freeda believe him, but “Blamphin, that toady, pipes up” and says that they should “give Jeffrey a chance, inasmuch as Tim was a good manager but a kind of a mean guy” (CEO 61). Through a vote, Jeffrey assumes leadership. Instead of usurping control of the company, he offers a democratic choice. Jeffrey appears in many respects to be a more benevolent boss. To celebrate, he orders “prime rib and a trio of mustachioed violinists,” while Claude “demands to know whatever happened to the profit motive" (CEO 61). The story presents us with an alternative to the profit-driven motive, yet it is one that still calls for "prime rib" for enjoyment. Jeffrey also refers to Blamphin as a "toady," a shortening of "toadeater." In modern usage, the word carries a negative connotation: "toady" is synonymous with "sycophant." According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it once literally referred to a person "who eats toads; *orig.* the attendant of a charlatan, employed to eat or pretend to eat toads (held to be poisonous) to enable his master to exhibit his skill in expelling poison."

Neither of these actions—ordering prime rib and referring to Blamphin as a toady—are hypocritical "as such," but they do demonstrate Jeffrey's lack of awareness about the connections between killing nonhumans animals, using them as dysphemisms, and being considered a human "Other." What does seem hypocritical is that after killing Tim and the raccoon Jeffrey informs his now underlings that they will no longer kill raccoons but relocate them "as we've always claimed to be doing" (CEO 62)—but is this hypocrisy or a turn toward compassion? Is a more compassionate work approach only possible now that Tim is dead? If Jeffrey's approach *is* more compassionate, why order prime rib and refer to Blamphin as a toady? The dissonance we may begin to feel occurs because Saunders holds off from giving us an ending in which Jeffrey escapes or is punished, instead allowing the story to follow Jeffrey as he tries to create the kind of life he idealizes, which is only possible because he has killed.

Jeffrey goes on to list all the changes that will be made at work. He begins with what seem achievable goals, such as the company will be employee-owned, food and beverages will be available, insurance will be free, and day care will be made available at the workplace. To a certain extent, Jeffrey is calling for nothing less than socialist reform, but his list becomes increasingly unbelievable:

> Muzak will give way to personal stereos in each cubicle. We will support righteous charities, take troubled children under our collective wing, enjoys afternoons off when the sun is high and the air sweet with the smell of mown grass, treat one another as family, send one another fond regards on a newly installed electronic mail system, and, when one of us finally has to die, we will have the consolation of knowing that, aided by corporate largesse, our departed colleague has known his or her full measure of power, love, and beauty, and arm in arm we will all march to the graveyard, singing sad hymns. (CEO 62)

Ironically, it is after Jeffrey describes how the dead will be treated, that the police are brought in, led by Claude.

Claude, informs the company employees that he has discovered Tim’s corpse, to which Freeda comments, “‘This disgusting pig killed my beautiful boy'" (CEO 62). Again, a nonhuman animal—one generally considered fat and dirty—is used to refer to someone in a derogatory manner, but now it is aimed at Jeffrey, while Tim is infantilized. In court, Jeffrey pleads guilty while the "animal rights girl comes out of the woodwork and corroborates my story" (CEO 63). The judge "empathizes completely. He says he had a weight problem himself when he was a lad" (CEO 63), as if it is how much Jeffrey weighs, not the bullying, that led Jeffrey to kill Tim. Instead of life without parole, Jeffrey receives fifty years.

While incarcerated, Jeffrey contemplates that the God many of us believe in "is merely a subGod" who will be chastised by the real God and realize what a mistake has been made (CEO 64). The story does not conclude with Jeffrey's ruminations on God, however; it ends with a reference to Jeffrey's mother and a nonhuman animal. God will grant Jeffrey a new birth: "And I will emerge again from between the legs of my mother, a slighter and more beautiful baby, destined for a different life, in which I am masterful, sleek as a deer, a winner" (CEO 64). Had Jeffrey not, as he believes, been marked as an Other by his heftiness, of which his passivity is a symptom and this passivity is regarded as a weakness, his life would have turned out for the better. Do we sympathize with Jeffrey once more? We most probably do. Do we also question his analysis? If he resembled a deer instead of a hippo, as is insinuated earlier in the story when

Jeffrey's "colleagues leave hippo refrigerator magnets" on his chair (CEO 47), how would his ethical choices have been different? Would he have been presented with the same ethical experiences? Would he ever have entered the line of work he was in? Saunders's closing paragraphs lead us to an awareness that somehow all the issues raised in the story are related; for his story to conclude with any kind of moral point would detract from the ethical experience of the story.

If we remain unaware of how we feel at its conclusion it is not because the story lacks a conclusion but because it does not end by tying up every loose end. It closes in ambiguity, and it is up to each reader to decide how it means in all its ethical complexity. The effect of the story is one that we are left feeling after reading most of Saunders's fiction, including the novella, "Pastoralia," which I will analyze in Chapter 4. Now that we have an understanding of how Saunders may craft a narrative and how his stories function to engender a posthumanist ethics, I turn my focus in the next chapter to exploring further posthumanist topics, such as language and carnophallogocentrism, before analyzing the problematic utilitarian ethics presented in the novella that Saunders seems to include as a means to guide the story toward a different conception of ethics.

4. LANGUAGE, MEAT, AND POWER: “PASTORALIA”

4.1. “Some Guttural Sounds and Some Motions”: What is Language?

Like Saunders’s first collection of short fiction, his second, *Pastoralia* (2001),[38] includes a novella and five short stories and was again a *New York Times* Notable Book, this time for 2001. In this collection, nonhuman animals are conspicuously absent as living beings and are referenced almost exclusively in terms of industrialization and consumption, especially in the titular novella, “Pastoralia.”[39] Like the stories in his first collection, most in his second are in first-person. In his review for *The Guardian*, Adam Begley describes them, as well as those of Saunders’s previous collection, as “bitterly funny stories” that “succeed in squeezing meaning and emotional resonance out of absurd, post-real predicaments. His satirical jabs are sharp and scary, but also unexpectedly touching” (n.p.). As Begley notes, the narrator of the novella refuses to denounce his colleague because he considers her a friend.

The novella concerns Janet and the narrator who live and work—there is hardly a distinction—as cavepeople in a simulated cave at what is presumably an amusement park but which also resembles a modern zoo. The amusement park is never named, but we can infer that it may be the Pastoralia of the title. In "'Pastoralia' as Human Zoo" (2017), David Huebert implicitly compares the protagonists of the novella to native peoples. He describes "[t]he performers of Pastoralia" as having "been compelled to sacrifice their traditional relation to animals and the land in order to conform to the strictures of a hegemonic bureaucracy" (Huebert 108). The irony is that Pastoralia, far from evoking the pastoral, is a place of meaningless labor regulated by strict bureaucratic guidelines.

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[38] As with *Civilwarland in Bad Decline*, I use the paperback edition, published in 2001.

[39] Hereafter, I will refer to the novella as “P.” The novella was also both adapted into a play and staged by Yehuda Duenyas.

According to Catherine Garnett, many of Saunders's stories are set in locations that "are pastoral in the sense that they offer simulated escapes into simpler places and times" (139). These stories are often populated by "de-skilled, desperate employees in faltering pastoral simulations" like the cave of *Pastoralia*, which Garnett calls "a living diorama" (139). We glean information about these settings primarily through character actions. The narrator is described by Garnett as "a model employee because he stays in character even in the absence of park Guests. This level of obedience not only requires the constant effort of being 'on'—it also bespeaks a deeper level of self-deception that likewise belongs to affective labor," or immaterial labor, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call it (cited in Garnett, 144). The narrator's obedience is apparent from the opening page: the company maxim is “Thinking Positive/Saying Positive,” and ironically it is his adherence to this maxim that gets him in trouble with Management (P 1). If the complexity of Saunders’s writing is not apparent on the surface this is because it can be taken for simplicity due to his revision process. Garnett notes “the ruthlessness with which he edits, condenses, and reduces his work to a structurally sound minimum,” which allows him to problematize the relation of literary simplicity to hierarchies of social class and education” (151). It also allows him to problematize human/nonhuman relationships, race, and gender, among a variety of factors.

What the reader is offered is not a fully fleshed-out world but one that we realize the characters inhabit so deeply that they are unaware of how, when they reference it, the reader encounters it. We only gradually become aware of the world of the characters based on what the narrator reveals, how it is revealed, and when it is revealed. In narratives like “Pastoralia,” the setting is only gradually revealed. We are not immediately aware the setting is a simulacrum in which the characters must follow an imperative that stresses verisimilitude. As Sarah Pogell summarizes, “the park’s relation to historical fact is almost nil” (463) and in “a world of half-truths and lies, verisimilitude offers not the appearance of reality but the appearance of a simulated reality, at least twice removed from its source” (464). The park is no longer popular; visitors are rare. Their job is to perform as cavepeople. Speaking English is forbidden in the cave, but neither the workers nor those in command express anything more than primitive notions of how such “primitives” would live and behave. Furthermore, verisimilitude can hardly be achieved when the environment is fabricated and the food supply is delivered. With the distinction between life and work unnoticed by the protagonist, he worries that one morning he will “go to the Big Slot and find it goatless” (P 2). The “Big Slot” is a source of major anxiety for the narrator, as it is the place where the characters receive their food supply each morning. Indeed, the narrator’s fear plays out almost immediately, which serves as the catalyst for the first dialogue exchange in the novella. This dialogue is important to understanding many of the layers at play in the text. Before we read the dialogue, however, it is helpful to know the world of the characters so that we understand why the dialogue is important and what is at stake.

The novella is split into numbered sections, with the problem that sets up the dialogue occurring within the opening lines of the second section. The scene establishes a couple recurring features of a story that relies heavily on repetition, including the aforementioned anxiety about the Big Slot, along with the delivery of notes from someone in a greater position of power. These features, along with certain characteristics of the language, help us to understand the setting of the novella. The narrator informs us:

> This morning I go to the Big Slot and find it goatless. Instead of a goat there's a note:
>
> *Hold on, hold on,* it says. *The goat's coming, for crissake. Don't get all snooty.*
>
> The problem is, what am I supposed to do during the time when I'm supposed to be skinning the goat with the flint? (P 2, italics original)

Here, Saunders uses capitalization, concern, and colloquialisms to build a world. By capitalizing the "Big Slot," we recognize it as important to the characters and as something related to work. Saunders frequently uses capitalization in a manner comparable to how corporations make proper nouns of common nouns they deem important. By doing so, Saunders helps us to recognize how ridiculous some of our concerns can be.

The protagonist then uses what seems a neologism in his world: goatless. To be goatless does not mean to be without a goat; it means to be without a goat carcass that can be skinned, roasted, and eaten. To be goatless means to be without a primary food source. The note he receives in its place emphasizes a knowledge of the role of the Big Slot and of the concern of its being goatless. Whoever has written the note is in power; the writer of the note is the one who keeps the food the narrator and Janet need. The colloquialisms in the note, however, demonstrate a lack of business communication etiquette. By being goatless, the narrator is both unable to fulfill his work duties and, in a sense, to live. This is indicative of American work culture: life is work and work is life. Without a job, access to necessities, such as food, is presumably limited (freegans, of course, can have access to food without the necessity of a job, but at the risk of being stigmatized). Considering these factors, the importance of the dialogue exchange between Janet and the narrator, which I present in the next paragraph, becomes clear.

Upon concluding that he cannot feign illness for an hour to make up for the time he would be otherwise skinning the goat (time is compartmentalized for the characters in the cave), the narrator notes that

> Janet comes in from her Separate Area and her eyebrows go up.
>
> “No freaking goat?” she says.
>
> I make some guttural sounds and some motions meaning: Big rain come down, and boom, make goats run, goats now away, away in high hills, and as my fear was great, I did not follow.
>
> Janet scratches under her armpit and makes a sound like a monkey, then lights a cigarette.
>
> “What a bunch of shit,” she says. “Why you insist, I’ll never know. Who’s here? Do you see anyone here but us?”
>
> I gesture to her to put out the cigarette and make the fire. She gestures to me to kiss her butt. (3)

The conversation continues until Janet asks the narrator to check the “Little Slot,” which is also empty. They resort to eating “Reserve Crackers.” What is most striking about this conversation is how the characters communicate. Janet speaks English, but the narrator speaks in sounds, sounds that when uttered by nonhuman animals we generally assume are just a form of primitive communication, lacking in complex meaning; ergo, it is not language. Likewise, we assume this lack complex meaning—or any meaning at all—of the narrator’s movements. Indeed, he speaks in a way that we normally do not consider, in nonhuman animals, to be language.

In her Baudrillardian reading of the novella, Pogell is aware that these sounds and gestures are a form of language. She acknowledges that we

> might immediately dismiss his canned dialogue and hand motions as quintessential corporate speak, predetermined and condescending to peoples, like Native Americans, whose language mirrors their harmony with—not exploitation of—the natural world. Although Saunders mocks society’s conflation of primitive man with Native Americans and its retro fascination with Native American language—or, more accurately, its broken English translations—the narrator’s exclamations actually communicate openly with Janet (who is privy to his coded discourse),

> without trying to control her, exclamations contradistinct from corporate rhetoric that distorts reality in order to control its audience. Moreover, the narrator's descriptions and use of metaphor create a greater sense of space and freedom beyond the cave. (469)

We recognize the narrator's ability to communicate efficiently because Janet understands and responds by mocking him with stereotypical monkey armpit scratching and sounds. What is important to notice is that she does understand him. It is not obvious after the first exchange, but when he gestures for her to put out the cigarette and make the fire, she also responds by gesturing, sarcastically, for him to kiss her ass. How is all this being conveyed? The gestures are not American Sign Language. The characters have developed a system of communication, but is it language? The guttural sounds and movements are comparable to how we think of nonhuman animals communicating, but we routinely deny their ways of communication the name "language."

We encounter another instance of effective nonverbal language later in the novella. The entire conversation between Janet and the narrator is conducted in what are called, by the narrator, sounds. These sounds are also described in terms of nonhuman vocalizations: barking. However, according to the narrator and in hedged terms, the barking has meaning. One morning, after their breakfast of

Reserve Crackers and pictograph “work,” which means tracing pre-drawn pictographs, Janet and the narrator converse without using English but with complete understanding of what the barking means. The narrator notes that Janet

> goes to the doorway and starts barking out sounds meant to indicate that a very impressive herd of feeding things is thundering past etc. etc., which of course it is not, the feeding things, being robotic, are right where they always are, across the river. When she barks I grab my spear and come racing up and join her in barking at the imaginary feeding things. (P 25)

Notably, this conversation—which regards the hunting of “things” that are, themselves, feeding—takes place after Janet and the narrator’s meal of Reserve Crackers, the food they must resort to eating when they are left goatless.

In a third conversation, the topic once more returns to the robotic feeding things, which are most likely meant to be bison (leaving us to wonder if the goat meat they are provided is meant to simulate bison meat). The conversation occurs in Janet’s Separate Area. Presumably, English should be allowable in the Separate Areas, but the narrator communicates only by body language:

> I step in and mime to her that I dreamed of a herd that covered the plain like the grass of the earth, they were

> as numerous grasshoppers and yet the meat of their humps resembled each a tiny mountain etc. etc. (P 36)

Here he refers to the movements as miming. The narrator never understands the alternative communication he and Janet use as language, yet his descriptions of what is conveyed indicate not only that they do have language but that he, at least, can convey similes. An observer might not recognize the sounds and motions as language but this does not mean they are not language. Why then should we accept constituents as beings without language? Traditionally, philosophy has allowed nonhuman animals language, but in recent decades, traditional notions of language, such as its importance as what separates from Man from beast, have been undermined.

As Kelly Oliver demonstrates in *Animal Lessons*, philosophers such as Johann Gottfried Herder are quick to dismiss language in nonhuman animals, if they allow it all: “Even if animals have some form of ‘language,’ theirs is different in kind, not in degree, from man’s. Man’s reason and language are not higher forms of animal reason or animal speech, but altogether different forms of reason and language” (80). While the argument seems promising, Herder explicitly states that this difference in kind still means humans are above animals, not because human language is greater than animal language but because humans can reflect. If a human behaves in any way like an animal, it is no longer human; this is a dubious definition, but philosophy is rife with formulations like Herder's.

For Heidegger, the *Umwelt* of the animal is poorer than that of the human. Derrida traces and critiques this tradition of delimiting the human over and against the animal, claiming that "[m]en would be first and foremost those living creatures who have given themselves the word that enables them to speak of the animal with a single voice and to designate it as the single being that remains without a response, without a word with which to respond" (The Animal 414). Derrida here insists that "men" are those who give themselves the ability to speak of the animal in the singular, the Animal, and who name it as a singular being that—being without language, being alogos—cannot respond. What we encounter is, as Derrida calls it, phallogocentricism; later, we will investigate how Derrida extends this term to include meat-eating.

Cary Wolfe maintains that Derrida's deconstruction of language demonstrates that language is, to put it simply, ahuman. He notes that "Derrida's theorization of language in terms of the inhuman trace […] seems in many ways closer to more sophisticated contemporary notions of *communication* as an essentially ahuman dynamic" (AR 79, italics original). As Wolfe might put it, how we think about language depends on our definition of language, but by presuming that only humans have language, we need no definition of language.

The argument seems to amount to a fallacious reasoning that because only human beings have language, they have language. We buy into “the fantasy that human language is sovereign in its mastery of the multiplicity and contingency of the world—the fantasy […] that there is such a thing as non(self)deconstructible observation” (AR 89). Supposed ontological gaps between human and nonhuman beings are more representative of a human deficiency at being able to recognize the forms of communication and community of nonhuman beings. Moreover, as Wolfe remarks, “language does not answer the question, What’s the difference between human and animal? Rather, it keeps that question alive and open” (AR 47).

What is also intriguing about language in the novella is that the narrator translates for us his gesticulations and movements. He translates these into terms that he believes, and what is stereotypically believed, to be a primitive way of communicating: “Big rain come down, and boom, make goats run, goats now away, away in high hills, and as my fear was great, I did not follow” (P 3.). The translation by the narrator follows a trope often associated with primitives, foreigners, or “inferiors.” By omitting articles and using improper tense, the sense of what is being conveyed is intelligible but is grammatically “simplistic.” We encounter this kind of linguistic expression in a variety of media, including Hollywood Westerns and comics. The irony is that the characters in the novella often converse in ways in their primary language that may be grammatically correct but less capably convey meaning. Notably, those in positions of power are never physically present, instead communicating with employees via notes.

Later in the novella, the narrator discovers a goat in the Big Slot and a rabbit in the Little Slot. Along with these items is a note that begins: "*Please accept this extra food as a token of what our esteem is like*" (P 15, italics original). In contrast to the earlier note, the tone of this one is more formal and sincere. However, the content of the note contrasts with its tone. It continues, insisting:

> *Please know that each one of you is very special to us, and are never forgotten about. Please know that if each one of you could be kept, you would be, if that would benefit everyone. But it wouldn't, or we would do it, wouldn't we, we would keep every one of you. But as we meld into our sleeker new organization, what an excellent opportunity to adjust our Staff Mix. And so, although in this time of scarcity and challenge, some must perhaps go, the upside of this is, some must stay, and perhaps it will be you. Let us hope it* will *be you, each and every one of you, but no, as stated previously, it won't, that is impossible.* (P 15-16, italics original)

The note continues its vague contradictory statements: "*We will remove each of you once. If that many times! Some of you will be removed never, the better ones of you*" (P 16, italics original). What we read in the note is, of course, considered language, written language. It is jargon-filled and poorly communicates meaning through contradictions that intend to obscure rather than elucidate. The narrator's gestures and movements are far more direct and effective at conveying meaning, including specific details and reasoning.

Saunders specifies that it is not language that is forbidden in the cave but English. In the opening paragraphs, the narrator informs us that "Janet's speaking English" and that "[s]he thinks I'm a goody-goody and that her speaking English makes me uncomfortable. And she's right. It does. Because we've got it good" (P 1). Why does the narrator specify that they are not supposed to speak English? This would suggest that the guttural sounds and motions are a different language. To perform their job, the characters are discouraged from speaking English and encouraged to simulate "savagism." They are oblivious to any "primitive" language and so resort to creating their own. Ironically, the attempt to simulate primitive life both reinforces stereotypes and forces Janet and the narrator to evolve with language. If language is ahuman, in a poststructuralist and posthumanist way, it does not belong to the domain of Man.

Derrida asserts that all philosophers, from Aristotle to Lacan, repeat the same idea. They all claim that

> the animal is without language. Or more precisely unable to respond, to respond with a response that could be precisely and rigorously distinguished from a reaction, the animal without the right and power to "respond" and hence without many other things that would be the property of man. (The Animal 414)

What Derrida makes apparent is that because philosophers exclude nonhuman animals from the "right" to language, or the ability to respond rather than react, they are not allowed the "right" to anything else that is considered the property of, or proper to, Man, including rights and agency. Derrida continues, asserting that

> [m]en would be first and foremost those living creatures who have given themselves the word that enables them to speak of the animal with a single voice and to designate it as the single being that remains without a response, without a word with which to respond. (The Animal 414)

If dominionism is a contextual knowledge system, what is deemed meaningful in the world is that which is named. What we deem language has as much to do with how language is (used) as what we think it is. While the characters in Saunders's novella may not be who we generally consider animals, they belong to a liminal space. The novella unsettles traditional notions of civilized/uncivilized, primitive/modern, natural/artificial, human/animal, etc. Another such binary is the distinction of verbal and written language, the two forms humans generally accept as representative of language.

In the cave, “primitive” written language appears in the form of pictographs. While these may be intended to demonstrate a certain linguistic sophistication, they are, quite literally, traces. In his essay “*La Différance*” (translated as “Differance”), Derrida writes: “The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself” (1973, 156). The narrator first describes his pictographs as work but quickly counters this by admitting that what he is doing is going through the motions of writing: “I work on the pictographs. I mean I kneel while pretending to paint them by dipping my crude dry brush into the splotches of hard colorful plastic meant to look like paint made from squashed berries” (P 16). The pictographs convey no meaning for him because he cannot read them. His pretense at painting is contrary to the action of Janet earlier in the novella. Janet “traces a few of our pictographs with a wettened finger, as if awestruck at their splendid beauty and so on” (P 6). The narrator is more dismissive of the pictographs and the possibility that they can mean than Janet is in this scene. He likens her actions to being awestruck but does not entertain the possibility of her actually being awestruck.

The supposedly primitive writing system here conveys no meaning, but how can symbols simulate symbols? Is this writing system based on a “real” writing system or has it been invented? Is writing always a simulation? Can writing ever simulate writing? If the latter, then the pictographs here are signifiers of signifiers, which are always unstable, according to Derrida. There is no one to one correlation of signifier to signified. What the narrator remains unaware of is how the notes he receives also lack meaning and his own lack of language allows him only a partial comprehension of his world. He works and lives in a world in which the knowledge system—which is “*verboten*,” to use the narrator’s term—must be supplemented by the sounds and motions by which he communicates, more effectively it seems, with Janet. Because Janet disregards the law of the caveworld by speaking English, she is cast out for her transgression. Primitivism, as simulation, is privileged over our usual preference of what we consider to be civilized. The idea that language is a human invention is very much a part of this figment of civilization.

In *Of Grammatology*, originally published in 1976,[40] Derrida writes that what is called “language could have been in its origin and in its end only a moment, an essential but determined mode, a phenomenon, an aspect, a species of writing” that gets “mixed up with the history that has associated technics and logocentric metaphysics for nearly three millennia” (2016, 8). Man, the rational being, defines language and names the Animal as well as himself. Man, as a male, deigns himself the rational being through rationalization based on exclusion. This is also bound up not only with the Animal but with the killing of it.

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[40] I use the 2016 edition of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s translation of Derrida’s text here.

In “‘Eating Well,’” his interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida modifies his neologism, “phallogocentrism,” with the prefix “carno-.” The prefix links the killing and eating of nonhuman animals with the virility of the male and with the privileging of rationalism, three determinants for being considered a subject:

> The conjunction of “who” and “sacrifice” not only recalls the concept of the subject as phallogocentric structure, at least according to its dominant *schema*: one day I hope to demonstrate this *schema* implies carnivorous virility. I would want to explain *carno-phallogocentrism*, even if this comes down to a sort of […] hetero-tautology as a priori synthesis, which […] suffices to take seriously the idealizing interiorization of the phallus and the necessity of its passage through the mouth. (EW 113, italics original)

The first English translation of Derrida’s interview (1991) became available not long after the publication of Carol J. Adams’s *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian*

Critical Theory (1990).[41] Adams's books explores how meat-eating, patriarchy, and language are interwoven. Derrida's claim is thus supported by Adams's theory, to which I will return.

4.2. "My Steak and My Shoes": Carnophallogocentrism

Many of Derrida's points are present in the scenarios of Saunders's stories. Derrida recognizes that we may have objections to his claims because "there are ethical, juridical, and political subjects (recognized only quite recently as you well know), full (or almost full) citizens, and in rights, only recently and precisely at the moment when the concept of the subject is submitted to deconstruction. Is this fortuitous?" (EW 114). He indicates that ethical, juridical, and political subjects, citizenship, and rights are recognized as multiple concomitantly with deconstruction of the concept of the subject. What he calls a "schema"

> installs the virile figure at the determinative center of the subject. Authority and autonomy (for even if autonomy is subject to the law, this subjugation is freedom) are through this schema, attributed to the man (*homo* and *vir*) rather than to the woman rather than to the animal. And of course to the adult rather than to the child. (EW 114, italics original)

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[41] I use the 2015 edition of Adams's text here.

The anthropocentric subject is less centered on the human than it is a type of human: the virile male human. It is the virile man who has authority and autonomy. Neither the woman nor the animal nor the child are subjects, unless they are determined to be by the virile man.

In the *Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol J. Adams also makes this point, reminding us that “virile” comes from “*vir*,” the Latin word for “man,” which leads her to conclude: “Meat eating measures individual and societal virility” (4). For Derrida, “the subject does not want just to master and possess nature actively. In our cultures, he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh” (EW 114). As Adams notes, the subject must eat nonhuman animal flesh, for human cannibalism was branded as uncivilized, savage, and barbaric by the *conquistadores*, whose use of the term “cannibal” was in fact derived from their “mispronunciation of the name of the people the Caribbean” (9). Thus, “cannibal” became a label that, when attributed to any indigenous population, meant that “their defeat and enslavement at the hands of civilized, Christian whites became justifiable” (Adams 10). The charge of cannibalism meant that these populations could be found guilty of savagery, which served as justification for colonization. Cannibalism was a demonstration of “their utterly savage ways, for they supposedly did to humans what Europeans only did to animals” (Adams 10). Derrida’s own ideas of cannibalism are more symbolic.

In an interview published in the online journal *e-flux* (2009),[42] Derrida reminds us that philosophy generally only understands human beings as being ethically responsible—and here we must note the "response" in "responsibile"—to and for human beings and explains. Moreover, he believes that it is taken for granted, specifically by Heidegger and Lévinas but in Occidental culture in general, that

> [t]he biblical commandment "Thou shalt not kill" applies to humans, but leaves out animals. Our culture rests on a structure of sacrifice. We are all mixed up in an eating of flesh—real or symbolic. In the past, I have spoken about the West's phallic "logocentrism." Now I would like to broaden this with the prefix carno- (flesh): "carnophallogocentrism." We are all—vegetarians as well—carnivores in the symbolic sense. (LD n.p.)

Sacrifice, real or symbolic, occurs in various forms in Saunders's fiction as characters routinely sacrifice well-being for fantasies of well-being imposed by sociocultural forces—but many of the stories contain more flesh-oriented notions of sacrifice: nonhuman animals are "sacrificed," a euphemism for "killed," for meat (such as in "Pastoralia") and for science ("93990"), while women sacrifice their bodies for lawn ornamentation ("The Semplica Girl Diaries").

Derrida's theory of flesh is tied to ingestion, but Maurice Merleau-Ponty offers a different but equally relevant concept of flesh to posthumanism. In *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*, Merleau-Ponty claims that “[t]he flesh of the body makes us understand the flesh of the world. We have found the correlate in sensible Nature (statistical, macrophenomenal): it is the sensing body” (2003). Here “sensible Nature” must be understood as perceivable rather than practical. Merleau-Ponty’s concept, according to Ralph R. Acampora, “is the consanguinity of organism on the level of ecosystem and even biosphere” (37). Flesh here refers to our fleshed bodiment (Acampora eschews *em*bodiment) and the flesh of the world, in a more metaphoric sense. The world-flesh “is a world of holistic carnality that immerses (surrounds and permeates) the individual’s lived body” (Acampora 37). Acampora describes Merleau-Ponty’s (eco)phenomenology based on world-flesh as what “constitutes a thoughtscape and lifeworld broad enough to conceptually and experientially incorporate intercarnal phenomena that traverse species” (37). This has axiological implications in a somatic sense. For Acampora, “the prizing of flesh as food occurs not simply in the register of nutritonal values. What we eat and how we eat reflects what we value and how we value” (58).

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[42] The interview with Anders Birnbaum and Anders Olsson is published as "An Interview with Derrida on the Limits of Digestion." (LD)

As we shall discover, animal-killing and meat-eating and the subjugation of women as “barbaric” acts are mentioned in a crucial early dialogue in Saunders’s novella, which enacts a dialogue spoken by a man and “his wife.” To fully understand the implications of this dialogue, it is vital to understand that the primary speaker, not the narrator but a “guy,” is the carnophallogocentric subject. The narrator informs us, as if recounting an ancient tale: “Once, back in the days when people still poked their heads in, this guy poked his head in” (P 6). It is unclear precisely how this “poking in” of the head takes place, but we know that it allows “Guests” to gaze into the cave. The narrator relates a lengthy dialogue, which, notably, is dominated by “this guy.” The man says:

> “I pity you guys. And also, and yet, I thank you guys, who were my precursors, right? Is that the spirit? Is that your point? You weren’t ignorant on purpose? You were doing the best you could? Just like I am? Probably someday some guy representing me will be in there, and some punk who I’m precursor of will be hooting at me, asking why my shoes were made out of dead cows and so forth? Because in that future time, wearing dead skin on your feet, no, they won’t do that. That will seem to them like barbarity, just like you dragging that broad around by her hair seems to us like barbarity, although to me, not that much, after living with my wife fifteen years. Ha ha! Have a good one!” (P 6-7)

The narrator never drags Janet by her hair. This is a preconception held by the man. What is ironic here is that the man claims to be doing the best he can do yet is aware that wearing clothing made from the skin “of dead cows and so forth” could be “barbaric.” He is capable of imagining this scenario and therefore does seem “ignorant on purpose.” He then demonstrates this ignorance by assuming that the narrator would drag around Janet, whom he calls a “broad,” by the hair, which is more of a cartoon concept of cavepeople.

In a case of commercial imitating art, when asked in a 2013 interview for *The Baltimore Sun* if the novella served as the inspiration for a series of Geico insurance “so easy, a caveman could do it” commercials that placed a stereotypical caveman in modern day scenarios, Saunders replies:

> Yes, there was a radio interview in which they 'fessed up. The guy who was working on the Geico ad campaign in 2003 was reading my second book at the time. The title story, "Pastoralia," is about a professional caveman who works in a theme park. (n.p.)

The commercials place cavemen in modern day scenarios in which they take offense to stereotypes and assumptions about cavepeople. If these cavemen were to somehow enter the park of Saunders’s novella, where the cavepeople portrayers work, they would likely take equal offense to how they are presented and how they are discussed by Guests. Of course, what both the park and the commercials fail to consider is that cavepeople, as a generic species, never existed. They are a product of conflating certain hominids, such as Neanderthals and European early modern humans (colloquially known as Cro-Magnon), into a single species without taking into account that, although some hominids did and do live in caves, the majority of early hominids were likely nomadic or semi-nomadic and constructed semi-permanent dwellings. If they were so-called "hunter-gatherers," it is unlikely they survived by merely roasting goats, even if these goats were wild.

In "Pastoralia," when the wife pokes her head in, she comments on the smell, which she refers to as a "stink." Her husband responds informs her that it is the smell of the roasting goat. He explains:

> "Everything wasn't all prettied up. When you ate meat, it was like you were eating actual meat, the flesh of a dead animal, an animal that maybe had been licking your hand just a few hours before."
>
> "I would never do that," said the wife.
>
> "You do it now, bozo!" said the man. "You just pay someone to do the dirty work. The slaughtering? The skinning?" (P 7)

This conversation is heard, not seen, by Janet and the narrator. Neither the man's head nor the woman's head are in "the place where the heads poke in" (P 7). Huebert states that "the visitor's vision of primordial meat-eating involves a remarkable image of interspecies *eros*: the animal being eaten could have been demonstrating affection for its killer shortly before its death" (112, italics original). This is in sharp contrast to the way the narrator and most humans consume nonhuman animal meat, which is without any contact whatsoever with the living being that has been slaughtered. Huebert also claims that this conversation demonstrates that for the man the relation between the human body to that of the goat "is *the* prominent catalyst of curiosity in the display he is watching. Animals comprise his primary index of human morality, and he evokes a sense that the loss of a genuine connection between human carnivore and devoured animal corresponds to a loss of part of what it means to be human, or at least to eat meat humanely" (Huebert 112-113, italics original). While this may be true, his tone is snide.

If the man is evoking a sense of loss, he is doing so by asserting knowledge claims intended to demonstrate this power, including his remarks in the continued dialogue, as heard by the narrator.

> "Ever heard of a slaughterhouse?" the husband said. "Ha ha! Gotcha! What do you think goes on in there? Some guy you never met kills and flays a cow with what you might term big old cow eyes, so you can have your shoes and I can have my steak and my shoes!"
>
> "That's different," she said. "Those animals were raised for slaughter. That's what they were made for. Plus I cook them in an oven, I don't squat there in my underwear with smelly smoke blowing all over me." (7)

This conversation may leave us with the impression that the woman is simply ignorant, but we should note the power difference at work here. The man establishes dominance by demonstrating his knowledge. He knows how animals are killed and prepared to be eaten. When his wife says she would never eat the meat of an animal that had recently been alive, he calls her a “bozo,” a term that is not inherently sexist but definitely insulting. We must remember that he has already suggested that dragging a woman around by the hair is not barbaric, insinuating that he might want to do this to his wife. After calling her a bozo, he describes what happens in a slaughterhouse and what she, as a woman, receives from this, and what he, as a man, receives. The person who kills and flays the cow is someone they have never met. The act of killing is performed not by themselves but by someone hidden.

The man then describes the cow of the conversation as having “what you might term big old cow eyes,” a metaphor that he applies to its literal source. To describe a human as having “cow eyes” is considered a compliment; the eyes are large and beautiful, perhaps with prominent eyelashes, and hint at docility. If this description seems to describe idealized feminine characteristics, it is not unintentional. To use the term “cow” feminizes an animal we generally consider to be a food item, a commodity, an animal “raised for slaughter,” as the woman indicates. The presumption is that the animal being killed is female although both males and females are killed in slaughterhouses for our eating pleasure.

Fowler's Dictionary of Modern English Usage (2015) states that, etymologically, "cow" likely arrives in Modern English from the Old Norse: "To *cow* (probably from Old Norse *kúga* 'oppress') someone is to intimidate them into doing something you wish them to do" (192, italics original). "Bull," in contrast, likely arrives from a Proto-Indo-European term meaning "to blow, inflate, swell," a word also related to the Ancient Greek "*φαλλός*"—in Modern English, we render this as "phallus" (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). The etymology is fitting if we consider that only adult male "intact"—a euphemism for "uncastrated"—cattle are bulls. "Cattle" is gender neutral but refers to property, arriving from the "Anglo-French *catel* 'property' (Old North French *catel*, Old French *chattel*), from Medieval Latin *capitale* 'property, stock,' noun use of neuter of Latin adjective *capitalis* 'principal, chief'" (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). Indeed, the etymology of this "livestock" animal, is inextricably interwoven with ownership—or enslavement—and money. Gender bias and power hierarchies are hidden in the linguistic roots of these words.

André Joly addresses these points in "Toward a Theory of Gender in Modern English" (1975). He informs us "that in English […] the dichotomy between animate and inanimate reflects the opposition *power/no power*. Power being considered as the characteristic of human animation, non-human animates are basically treated like inanimates" (Joly 256, italics original). English further differentiates animates, categorizing them under one of "*two degrees of power*," which are diagramed as "*major power* (masculine)" and "*minor power* (feminine)" (Joly 257, italics original). Women are generally attributed less power than men in the English language, while "animals occupy a middle position in the system, halfway between animates and inanimates" (Joly 266). When a nonhuman animal is referred to as an "it," the pronoun "signifies basically that the animal is excluded from the human sphere and that no personal relationship of any kind is established with the speaker" (Joly 267). When a nonhuman animal is referred to as a "she," the pronoun "is expressly used to refer to an *animal regarded as a minor power*" (Joly 271, italics original). When a nonhuman animal is regarded as a minor power, "it is regarded as potential prey, a power that has to be destroyed—for sport or food—, hence a dominated power" (Joly 271). A feminized animal is generally subordinate to the speaker.

Linguistically, a hierarchical power structure is expressed, but this knowledge system is so ingrained in Modern English that we generally remain oblivious to it. Cows are referred to by the name of the females of the species; we do not refer to the cows and bulls collectively as "bulls" in the way that we refer to all human beings, regardless of gender as "men." This implies that they are a minor power and a prey animal subordinate to humans. If cows are not outright inanimates—and therefore closer to being considered objects or nonsubjects, although they sometimes considered such as “its”—they are generally closer to being objects than women, who are still closer to being objects, by being minor powers, than men. As Adams explains: “‘She’ represents not only a ‘minor power,’ but a vanquished power, a soon-to-be-killed powerless animal. Male animals become symbolically female, representing the violated victim of male violence” (54).

As noted, the man in the novella’s conversation attributes a metaphor to its literal source, but “big old cow eyes” need not necessarily be feminine; however, because the nonhuman animal in this metaphor is referenced with a word that we do not consciously recognize as feminine and because this being is an animal, the knowledge system that contextualizes this phrase gives us to presume the metaphor’s meaning without any need to question the meaning. The meaning is suggested by a host of presumptions about women and nonhuman animals and their status in a patriarchal system. When we attribute the metaphor to its source, we can reconsider what would it mean for a cow to have big old cow eyes if they are precisely that: big old cow eyes. What is striking about the metaphor is that the phrase includes its referent: the cow. Often animals and women, as victims of violence, and men, as perpetrators of violence, are absent referents in daily language. Adams indicates three types of absent references, which can be literal—"through meat eating they are literally absent because they are dead"—or definitional—"when we eat animals we change the way we talk about them"—or metaphorical—"[a]nimals become metaphors for describing people's experiences" (21). A cow is an absent referent when it is referred to as "steak," as the cow is called here, but the man informs the woman that the cow is killed so they can have their shoes and he can have his steak. It would be an absent referent in the conversation were its big old cow eyes an actual metaphor, but here the referent is present not only in the language but as the being from whom the metaphor was taken from and to whom that metaphor is now being "returned." However, in the most literal sense, the cow is—and most nonhuman animals are—an absent referent because it is excluded from the conversation. The man is speaking about a theoretical cow not a living cow. The cow is fenced off from the discourse.

Now that we understand the power system expressed in the language and how nonhuman animals can become absent referents, we can turn our attention once more to the major power communicator in the conversation: the man. He is the one who communicates the information to the minor power, the "bozo," the woman. Moreover, he communicates information about slaughterhouses after suggesting that to future generations, wearing the skin of dead animals will be considered barbaric. The entire hierarchy is represented in the scene here. The major power male human discusses slaughterhouse killing methods to the minor power female human in a way that is meant to disparage her while inside the cave two cavepeople—who might be considered "subhuman"—dwell. From inside the cave, the caveman listens as the cavewoman performs her "duty," the cooking of a dead nonhuman animal. The male caveperson is not equal to the major power here but is not below the female human. The cavepeople are displayed like zoo animals. Notably, no one comes to poke a head in again—the conversation here is in flashback—until later in the story, meaning that this supposed simulacrum, this representation, is represented to no one.

The major power also makes a point of distinguishing that when a cow is slaughtered it is "so you can have your shoes and I can have my steak and my shoes" (P 7). The man refers to the shoes and the steak with pronouns that denote ownership, as if these were our needs for which the cow must be slaughtered—and this is precisely how the woman does think of certain animals. The man also distinguishes his needs from the woman's needs. Why does he need the steak and not the woman? Adams informs us that "gender inequality is built into the species inequality that meat eating proclaims, because for most cultures obtaining meat was performed by men. Meat was a valuable economic commodity; those who controlled this commodity achieved power" (P 13). How does the man in Saunders's novella hold the power in this scene if he has not obtained meat? Adams knows that "the male role of hunter and distributor of meat has been transposed to the male role of eater of meat" but that "men" and "meat," lexicographically, hold narrower definitions in Modern English: "Meat no longer means all foods; the word *man* […] no longer includes *women*" (P 15, italics original). Meat can represent the chief part of something, while vegetables represent passivity and inactivity. For a man to eschew meat and be a vegetarian or vegan "means a man is effeminate" (P 17).[43] To maintain status and virility, the man must have his steak. Adams informs us that "the male prerogative to eat meat is an external, observable activity implicitly reflecting a recurring fact: meat is a symbol of male dominance" (P 11). Vegetarianism and veganism are challenges to patriarchy. Adams addresses this quite simply: "To remove meat is to threaten the structure of the larger patriarchal culture" (P 16).

The woman in the novella differentiates animals eaten by cavepeople from animals eaten by civilized people. Animals eaten by civilized humans are "raised for slaughter" and cooked in an oven instead of over a fire. She again draws attention to the smell, the smell of cooking flesh, insisting she does not allow the "smelly smoke" to blow on her while she squats before the fire in her “underwear,” her term for Janet’s clothing. At no point does the woman demand that she also must have her steak or eat any meat at all. While her own meat eating may be implied by her insistence that the animals she cooks were raised for slaughter, the emphasis is on her cooking them, not ingesting. According to the man, they are slaughtered so she can have her shoes and so that he can have his steak and shoes. According to the man, animals are slaughtered so that his wife can wear their skin; they are slaughtered for fashion. For the man, they serve two purposes: eating and class status.

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[43] Adams is referring to men in a primarily Western, capitalist context.

What is ignored in the novella’s conversation is that the specific nonhuman animal flesh being cooked over the fire by Janet is a goat and, moreover, was also slaughtered before being delivered in the Big Slot so that the narrator and Janet can eat it. Later, when the goat is not delivered regularly, the narrator is prompted to remark at one point that he is so hungry he “could kill for some goat” (P 35). Eventually, the goat is replaced with a plastic goat. Huebert notes that “[t]he task of making the prosthetic goat appear real simply makes explicit what has been implicit all along: the absolute lack of reality in this performance” (113). Furthermore, how can the roasting of a plastic goat maintain the supposed simulacrum if the plastic melts? Huebert also asserts that “this crucial moment in the narrative’s development takes place at the site of the animal body. In the beginning of the narrative, the goat is a deeply compromised image of the natural world. But by this point there is no goat at all" (113). We realize that power is held by those who control the supply of goat: "*In terms of austerity,* it says. *No goat today. In terms of verisimilitude, mount this fake goat and tend as if real. Mount well above fire to avoid burning. In event of melting, squelch fire. In event of burning, leave area, burning plastic may release harmful fumes*" (P 49, italics original). The language here, which lacks standard American business etiquette, excludes pronouns, articles, and adverbs. The brevity of the phrases, intended as commands, signal who is in power. The referent is absent. Of the six lines, only one is a proper sentence. What or how they, the narrator and Janet, are supposed to eat otherwise is unmentioned. Goat meat is more commonly eaten in African, Asian, and Central and South American nations, continents with a higher number of "developing" nations; it is less commonly eaten in Europe and even less so in English-speaking North America, although in recent years, goat flesh has become a trendy meat in the United States.

For the narrator and Janet, the goat is a staple food although the narrator communicates, through his own language of sounds and gestures, that he hunts members of what he only knows as the "herd of robotic something-or-others, bent over the blue green grass, feeding I guess" (P 11). These robots are located elsewhere in the park, away from the cave. The people in power, who remain absent and communicate by note, seem to believe that providing a goat for roasting simulates the food eaten by cavepeople. While other workers "are required to catch wild hares in snares" or "wear pioneer garb while cutting the heads off chickens," the narrator only needs to "haul the dead goat out of the Big Slot and skin it with a sharp flint. Janet just has to make the fire" (P 1-2). The verisimilitude demanded by the park's superiors is defeated by this act alone. When the goat is finally withheld, the narrator and Janet resort to eating "Reserve Crackers;" they become, by default, vegetarians.

4.3. "The Maximum Good for the Overall Organism": Ethical Loyalty

Why do they not leave the cave to demand the goat or to find food elsewhere? They are afraid of losing their jobs because Janet's mother is sick and her son is in jail, while the narrator's child has an undiagnosed disease. However, the job *is* life and includes eating and sleeping in the assigned space. The only instances when the narrator leaves the cave is when he removes from the cave the "Human Refuse bags and the trash bags and the bag from the bottom of the sleek metal where Janet puts her used feminine items" (P 9) for disposal, a task for which she earns an additional sixty dollars a month; somehow, this waste removal is more civilized than going "out in the woods," as Janet informs the couple who stick their heads in (P 9). For educating the couple by informing them in English where humans defecated in the past and now, she is later punished. Although she is the only one willing to educate the public, she is punished for breaking the verisimilitude. Although the narrator is displeased with her behavior, which frequently violates the rules of the cave dictated by a certain Greg Nordstrom and generally unknown entities, he does strive not to betray her, he eventually caves in and sends in a negative Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form, the sole occasion he deviates from his standard set of responses.

At this point, readers must ask themselves what motivates the narrator to refrain from betraying Janet for so long. The narrator offers an intriguing tale about his father's work. Presumably, the father worked in a slaughterhouse. The narrator informs us, after Janet gets drunk in the cave, that

> Dad worked at Kenner Beef. Loins would drop from this belt and he'd cut through this purple tendon and use a sort of vise to squeeze some blood into a graduated beaker for testing, then wrap the loin in a sling and swing it down to Finishing. (P 44)

With the final word, we note that the capitalized jargon is not so different from that found in the amusement park. What is "Finishing?" The narrator knows but any explanation is withheld from us; the word is a euphemism for some task to which we are not privy.

Intriguingly, the narrator's information about his father's work is the framework for a story about the camaraderie of his father and, as the narrator refers to him, his "partner," Fred Lank. This coworker, who "had a metal plate in his skull," would occasionally go "into these funks where he'd forget to cut the purple tendon and fail to squeeze out the blood and instead of placing the loin in the sling would just sort of drop the loin down on Finishing" (P 44). When this occurred, the narrator's father would cover for Lank "by doing double loins," sometimes for several days (P 45). When the narrator's father died, Lank sent the mother a check "for a thousand dollars, with a note: *Please keep*, it said. *The man did so much for me*" (P 46). In a similar manner to how information is communicated in the amusement park, Lank relays information through a note. The intention of the note here is different: it is included with a check and is meant to demonstrate thanks (Janet will also communicate by note with the narrator, while the narrator communicates with his wife only via fax).

The narrator offers this tale to pose an ethical dilemma. The father and Lank's apparent camaraderie was a product of two men working in a factory designed to produce a product (flesh), but this camaraderie is founded on slaughter. Although the narrator knows he is obligated to report Janet, he rhetorically asks, "what am I supposed to do, rat out a friend with a dying mom on the day she finds out her screwed-up son is even more screwed up than she originally thought?” (P 34). However, the threat of his losing his job for not reporting her proves too great a threat when he imagines, after an altercation between Janet and a family, his son, Nelson, “bravely taking all his medications” (P 58). The narrator makes an ethical choice to forsake Janet in favor of his son. While this seems an obvious choice, it also means that he forsakes Janet in favor of conforming to company policy, thereby allowing the hierarchy to remain intact.

For the company, this means the narrator has chosen utilitarianism, which, as I mentioned in a previous chapter, is a risky form of applied ethics. In a note from Greg Nordstrom, who functions as the face of the company in the novella, the narrator is assured that he is guiltless: “*I think that you are you and she is she. You guys are not the same entity. You are distinct. Is her kid your kid? Is your kid her kid? No, her kid is her and your kid is your kid. Have you guilt? About what you have done? Please do not*” (P 59, italics original). The narrator is thus informed that he has no ethical obligation to an entity—here, Janet—who is not the same. Why the insistence that the narrator and Janet are not the same entity but distinct? Nordstrom then compares the narrator and Janet to tree branches. He continues: “*While it’s true that a branch sometimes needs to be hacked off and come floating down, so what, that is only one branch, it does not kill the tree, and sometimes one branch must die so that the others may live*”

(P 59, italics original). The problem with this language is not that the narrator and Janet are compared to tree branches but that Janet must "be hacked off," an expression that carries negative and even violent connotations.

Usually women are compared to nonhuman animals with language that performs violence both to women and nonhuman animals. Here the violence is both against a specific woman, who is also an older woman, and a part of a plant. Strangely, Nordstrom presumably refers to only the amusement park employees as a tree; that is, he refers to them collectively as a plant in a positive sense, even after he has insisted that the narrator and Janet are not the same entity. Who then is performing the hacking? Who decides which branches "live" and which "die?" These questions are worth asking when utilitarianism is suggested as a reasonable ethical practice. According to Nordstrom's metaphoric utilitarianism, the "branch that must die so that others may live" is not actually dead, despite appearance, "*because you are falsely looking at this through the lens of an individual limb or branch, when in fact you should be thinking in terms of the lens of what is the maximum good for the overall organism, our tree. When we chop one branch, we all become stronger!*" (P 59-60, italics original) The utilitarian approach demanded here is rationalization presented as logic. By doing violence to one part of the tree, the tree becomes stronger. The implication is that becoming stronger by losing one branch that only appears dead is good because more will benefit—but Janet is not a branch which is part of a single organism nor does it follow that hacking off a limb is beneficial for a tree.

Eventually, Janet is replaced by Linda, a woman who takes the work even more seriously than the narrator. Linda is introduced as the narrator's new "Partner," the same term the narrator used for his Dad's coworker, Lank. A note from Nordstrom indicates that he "*want[s] us now, post-Janet, to really strive for some very strict verisimilitude*" (P 64, italics original). Indeed, Linda practices what I call "hyper-verisimilitude." Nordstrom writes that she has a permanent brow

> *sort of installed. Like once every six months she goes in for a touch-up where they spray it from a can to harden it. You can give it a little goose with your thumb, it feels like real skin. But don't try it, as I said, she is very serious, she only let me try it because I am who I am, in the interview, but if you try it, my guess is? She will write you up. Or flatten you! Because it is not authentic that one caveperson would goose another caveperson in the brow with his thumb in the cave.* (P 64)

In the cave, "[s]he squats and pretends to be catching and eating small bugs," grunting as she does (P 65). The attempt at verisimilitude becomes a caricature of itself, one which is dangerous because the participant loses any point of reference outside the simulacrum. The narrator admits that he suspects Linda does catch and eat a real bug or two. The amount of time spent performing this activity is absurd to the narrator. He does not believe that so many insects could fill a cave. While he realizes the ludicrousness in this regard, he is compelled to participate. Furthermore, he does not seem to realize that cavepeople squatting, catching, and eating bugs all day is not actually indicative of the real life of a caveperson, or at least those hominids who cavepeople are meant to represent.

Although Linda's immersion in her role as caveperson could allow her to experience life in the way of a non-homo sapiens, her actions are based on a notion of cavepeople arrived at from a disregard, not attunement, to a non-homo sapiens being. Is this a display of how to achieve what the character of Nordstrom called "the maximum good for the overall organism?" Linda's performance, if it can be called such, is no longer work as life or life as work but strictly life. The narrator, worried about his son, performs alongside Linda but again admits, in the final words of the novella, words which have been repeated throughout the text: "No one pokes their head in" (P 66). Ethical concern is disallowed in this scenario because to demonstrate ethical concern for our constituents is delimited beforehand by the rules of, in this case, Nordstrom and the unseen authorities of the amusement park—but does it really matter when in the end life has become simulacra?

As we have discovered, meat-eating, virility, and language form a trinity that serves as a centralizing power schema in Western, capitalist culture, which is dominated by a utilitarian ethics that can be easily twisted to fit anyone's notion of what is morally acceptable in terms of the common good. Here, the ethics is satirized, but in the following chapter, Saunders actually seems to promote a similar ethics in the children's book *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip*. It is the first of two books published between his second and third short story collections, and my analysis of both forms the following chapter. Unlike the first two stories I have analyzed, the children's book features a girl as the protagonist. Nevertheless, it is his most humanist text, and the moral lesson it appears to serve is one based on the exploitation and killing of nonhuman animals. However, he follows the children's book with a stand-alone novella, *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*, which is his first to feature nonhuman beings. While the beings are nonhuman by description, they nevertheless behave in very human ways.

5. DETERMINING WHO LIVES AND WHO DIES: *THE VERY PERSISTENT GAPPERS OF FRIP* AND *THE BRIEF AND FRIGHTENING REIGN OF PHIL*

5.1. “Except of Course the Fish”: Anthropocentrism and the Lives of Fish

Between his second and third short story collections, published respectively in 2000 and 2006, George Saunders published a children’s book, *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* (2000),[44] and a stand-alone novella, *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* (2005). Both are illustrated, the former by Lane Smith[45] and the latter by Ben Gibson. The children’s book is an anomaly in his collection, not so much because it is intended for a younger audience, but because it reads more like a fable: a moral is heavily implied. Although the book does not leave us with the expected moral, as Kasia Boddy notes in “‘A Job to Do’: George Saunders on, and at, Work” (2017), it nevertheless does leave us with one. Boddy summarizes the plot employing the bare elements of fable:

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[44] Hereafter, I will refer to the children’s book as “TVPGF.” Also, it is worth noting that a musical version exists with book and lyrics by Doug Cooney and music by David O.

[45] Lane Smith has won numerous awards for his illustrated books, several also written by him, several with Jon Scieszka, and some with other writers, including Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss). He has won the Caldecott Honor twice. On four occasions, his books have been *New York Times* Best Illustrated Books. In 2014, he received the Society of Illustrators Lifetime Achievement Award. Further information can be found at his website: www.lanesmithbooks.com.

"With her mother dead, her father grieving, and persistent 'gappers' attacking her goats, a young girl called Capable struggles to make ends meet" (AJD 9). Thus, the tale employs key elements common to children's literature, beginning with the dead and absent parents[46] and continuing with the recurring problem that can be solved by the child alone. Of course, there is a bit more to it than what Boddy gives us.

The dedication page of *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* gives us a clue about for whom Saunders intended the book, as it is dedicated "*to* Alena and Caitlin, both very Capable" (n.p., italics original). Alena and Caitlin are his daughters (and are not motherless). Capable is a resident of Frip. As Saunders describes it, "Frip was three leaning shacks by the sea. Frip was three tiny goat-yards" (TVPGF 6). Quite significantly, Frip is also a place where community bonds are soon put to the test.[47] It is up to the children to remove creatures called gappers from the goats, to whom they attach.

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[46] Some examples of books with orphaned protagonists include Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), Roald Dahl's *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (1999-2006), and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007). The tradition goes back to fairy tales, such as Cinderella. For representations of orphans in American literature, consult Diana Loercher Pazicky's *Cultural Orphans in America* (1998), Joe Sutliff Sanders's *Disciplining Girls: Understanding the Origins of the Classic Orphan Girl Story* (2011), and Maria H. Troy, Elizabeth Kella, and Helena Wählstrom's *Making Home: Orphanhood, Kinship and Cultural Memory in Contemporary American Novels* (2014).

[47] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the uncommon verb "to frip" means "to quarrel" or "to bicker."

Then the gappers are returned to the sea. They repeat this task eight times a day. Capable is the protagonist of the story, and her name recalls certain Nathaniel Hawthorne allegorical characters, such as Faith in the short story “Young Goodman Brown.” Living in the shacks nearest the sea, she soon suffers from being the only child forced to do this when a “less stupid” gapper realizes her shack is closest. Capable, who learns to fish, sells off her goats and teaches her neighbors the same skill, ultimately helping the community to become self-reliant. She thus exemplifies the proverb “give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime,” which has been attributed to various historical figures, including Maimonides, Lao Tzu, and Confucius, and is sometimes mistaken for a biblical quote.

The gappers are perhaps the most posthuman element in Saunders’s otherwise humanist modern fable. Saunders describes the gappers as being like burrs but “the size of a baseball, bright orange, with multiple eyes like the eyes on a potato” (TVPGF 2). They love goats and shriek with pleasure as they attach themselves to the goats of Frip, making it impossible for the goats to give milk, which makes it impossible for people to make a living selling goat milk, such as occurs in Frip. Capable, the young female protagonist, recognizes the problem of a life committed to continually brushing the numerous gappers off the goats in order to make a living and seeks, first, help and then, when her neighbors refuse, an alternative livelihood. According to Boddy, Capable's neighbors, "the Romos and the Ronsens," refuse her due to their "very different views, rooted in the doctrine of 'rational selfishness' espoused by the hero of Saunders's adolescence, Ayn Rand" (AJD 9).[48] The neighbors belong to a typical Saunders's character type, the foil who espouses the stubborn belief in the "self-made man," a belief which the character Sid Ronsen updates by encouraging Capable to work smarter rather than harder; however, for him, working smarter means being "more efficient than is physically possible" (TVPGF 45). Like Derrida, this character also argues for a hyperbolic but in a Puritan vein: instead of a hyperbolic ethic, it is hyperbolic efficiency that is required. Rather than stop his argument at the point when he insists on a hyperbolic efficiency, he delimits and negates his argument by arguing this efficiency be more efficient than physically possible. Instead, Capable does work "smarter" by selling off the goats and learning to fish.

While her neighbors squabble and spend all their money moving their houses—and goats—as far as possible from the sea, Capable leaves the trap of capitalism by eating what she catches, becoming, in the process, a self-sufficient citizen. She then refuses to share with her neighbors because they refused to help her earlier. Boddy notes that “[t]he story could have ended there—as an updated version of the Russian folktale about the little red hen who gets no help from the other farmyard animals and there declines to share her harvest with them” (AJD 9), but the real moral, according to the critic, lies in Capable’s inviting her neighbors for dinner and teaching them to fish. By doing so, we learn that working together—viz. helping our fellow humans—is better for everyone than selfishness. Saunders, who Boddy notes is a recovered Objectivist, leaves us with a rather anthropocentric moral—and therefore a similar moral, albeit in the sense of a “species”—nonetheless. If he eschews Randian rational egoism, his text suggests that the interest of human happiness outweighs any interests fish may have, including any such interest in the preservation of life.

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[48] Ayn Rand (1905-1982) was a Russian-born, American philosopher known for her philosophical system, Objectivism, which promoted rational and ethical egoism while rejecting altruism. She is also known for her two best-selling novels, *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957).

What I am more interested in unpacking, however, is Boddy’s final remark on the plot, which I find intriguing especially since she does make a point of stating this: “Only the fish lose out” (AJD 10). The tone of the statement is rather matter-of-fact. It seems to imply that Saunders’s moral is acceptable because most of the characters “win.” Furthermore, it implies that winning is the objective. Capable and her neighbors all work together, the goats no longer suffer the gappers—albeit, there is no mention of whether the goats like being milked or not—and the gappers, now goatless, turn their affections to fences. Boddy’s statement also seems to be related to Saunders’s own mention of the fish in the text: “generally, on most days, everyone was happier. Except of course the fish. And the gappers” (TVPGF 77). Except the gappers do go on to find happiness by “madly loving fences” (TVPGF 80). The reader, in short, becomes aware that “only the fish lose out,” but what, precisely, does that entail?

Many dominionist notions are caught up in Boddy’s statement. First, it demonstrates how negligible the lives of fish are to humans if they “lose out”—the object of loss being absent—rather than “lose their lives.” Second, Boddy’s comment—and Saunders’s text—demonstrate how negligible fish are to humans if their losing out is contingent upon our happiness and togetherness. What it means in terms of Saunders’s story is that the characters do not mind the killing of fish if it brings them nourishment and enjoyment. However, since Saunders’s book does read like a fable—Capable’s character even bringing it close to allegory—and since the book is supposedly intended for children, it suggests that not only does Saunders’s story limit kindness to those who seem the same type of being—viz. human—but also suggests the author believes this as well. In her essay, Boddy actually labels Saunders’s stories “moral fables” (AJD 8), and while I would otherwise generally disagree with that statement, here it seems hardly a stretch. What the characters who refused to help Capable before learn in the end, which is also part of the lesson they impart to us, is that humans should work together. They do so by asking Capable to teach them to fish. We do not need to worry about whether or not the fish—or the goats or even the worms, used as bait—have feelings. While the goats, fish, a cat, a dog, and the gappers all appear in the story, it is only the humans and Saunders's invented beings whom are allowed to be agents of their own "capability." The goats, who have been enslaved for human use, are eventually sold to another town, Fritch, without any real consideration for what might be a happy life for them, although we later learn that they are "in Fritch, fat and happy" (TVPGF 79), the happy seeming like pure speculation.[49] Capable turns her gapper-sack, which she used to carry the living gappers back to the sea, into a fish-sack, which she now uses to carry dead fish from the sea. While she does catch her own food, instead of buying it, she and her neighbors have only shifted from one means of dependency on nonhuman animals to another. As an aside, I wonder if Saunders, since becoming vegetarian, would still include fishing as the means toward betterment if he wrote the story now.[50]

I also question whether it truly is only the fish who lose out or not. The residents of Frip base their entire livelihood on the exploitation of nonhuman animals. A fable with a moral that challenges this type of economic livelihood would be far more interesting, I argue, than what Saunders offers. If, as I have mentioned, altruism could transcend species, the fable would tend more toward posthumanist ideas rather than rehash the familiar humanist notion that humans helping humans is the ultimate show of kindness.

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[49] The invented place name of "Fritch," which is lexically unrelated to any English word in the Oxford English Dictionary, may be regarded here as a nearly homophonous twist on the word "fridge," thus ironically suggesting the storage of meat.

[50] Saunders answers this question in the interview that concludes this thesis.

5.2. "Less Stupid": The Problem of Size Mattering

What I also find troubling in the book is that the gappers are characterized as stupid. While they are granted more agency in the text than the goats, they are pointedly described as "not smart, but then again they are not all equally stupid" (TVPGF 11). Even the "most stupid" of the human characters, Robert and Gilbert, two unruly boys who live next door to Capable, are still of at least equal intelligence. Robert is "only slightly brighter than a gapper," whereas Gilbert is "exactly as bright as a gapper" (TVPGF 18). The latter description does not follow what has already been related in the story, since gappers are earlier described as not all equally stupid. It is unclear if his intelligence is being compared to a normal gapper or the most intelligent gapper.

Apparently, the smartest gapper is the aforementioned less stupid gapper, "who had a lump on one side of its skull that was actually its somewhat larger-than average brain sort of sticking out" (TVPGF 11). The larger brain size corresponds with its increased intelligence. If their stupidity is an attempt at humor, it falls flat—perhaps not for children—in the context of the story because the gappers are already nonhuman and most likely would be categorized as animals, since they have multiple eyes and a mouth. This nonhuman status means we are more likely to think of them as dumb or at least less intelligent than humans. The emphasis on the larger-brained gapper being the smarter one is problematic on two accounts. First, it equates brain size with intelligence, a dubious correlation. Second, the gapper is referred to as a "he." Human males have larger brains than women. Saunders may be writing for children, but even if we take the human female protagonist into account, we are left with a subplot in which the larger-brained gapper is male and is more intelligent because of his brain size. What are we to make of this?

This gapper becomes the de facto leader, and Saunders, I imagine for the sake of pacing, does not include a paragraph of the gapper convincing his fellow gappers to all go to Capable's yard, which is closest to the sea, but does include, near the end, a paragraph on democracy-in-action, which is especially disturbing given Saunders's usually careful and critical takes on U.S. culture. The gappers take a vote on whether they should love fences, as the smarter gapper suggests, and while a few dissent, "the gappers still very much admired and trusted that less-stupid gapper, and voted to begin madly loving fences" (TVPGF 80). Saunders may intend this to be humorous, but again, the humor falls flat. Is this Saunders introducing American democracy to children? Is it sarcasm and irony? Are we meant to believe that the less stupid gapper in the story is a benevolent president? I would have imagined that Saunders would have been more careful with this subject. At least there is no electoral college and the gapper votes count directly, which implicitly poses a challenge to American democracy.

While Saunders's book intends to teach children and its adult readers how to be kind, while also demonstrating how kindness does not mean perfection, I find it difficult to agree with the book's presentation of morality, especially when compared to his adult fiction. The humanist tendencies in his writings, which are usually presented in ways that at least tend toward more careful renderings of ethics, become all the more glaring in an assessment of his only foray into children's writing.

5.3. “Take for Example a Duck”: Humanity as a Human Trait

Saunders’s novella, *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*,[51] which comes close to reading like an allegory of American diplomacy in the Bush II era, may deal with humanist concepts but does so with what seems a more posthumanist presentation. In an interview conducted by fellow author Roy Kesey and published on the literary blog *Maud Newton*, Saunders in response to Kesey’s query if it’s a political fable, admitted that the novella, “started out as a kids’ book, but then suddenly became about genocide” (n.p.). Its beginnings as a children’s book, with some elements of speculative fiction, may explain why it comes across like an allegory or fable. The novella even shares a direct link to its predecessor, as the seed of the book was planted when, as Saunders informs Kesey,

> Lane Smith, who illustrated a previous book (*The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip*) suggested I try to write a story where all the characters were abstract shapes. So I tried that. At some point—I can’t exactly remember when—this line came out about there being a country that was so small, only one of its citizens could live there at a time. And this raised certain questions. (n.p.)

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[51] Hereafter, I will refer to the novella as “*TBFRP*.”

For example, how should we treat non-citizens? The question is as pertinent in the United states now as it was then, if not more so, as the current president, Donald Trump, insists on curbing immigration and sending non-citizens back to where they came from, no matter how long they have lived in the country. Either history changes very little or Saunders delivered a prescient warning.

He has pursued such political issues on several occasions. For example, in an essay for Amazon.com, “Why I Wrote *Phil*,” Saunders, who does not call the novella a fable but refers to writing in a fabulist mode, admits that “the story came to be about the human tendency to continuously divide the world into dualities, and, soon after, cast one’s lot in with one side of the duality and begin energetically trying to eliminate the other” (n.p.). The particular duality in this story is that of Inner and Outer Horner, two separate nations, or, more precisely, how they are perceived by certain members of one nation. Saunders also adds that “[w]hen writing in this fabulist mode, I try to avoid a specific referent and instead rotate various referents in and out, hoping to locate some seed commonality; in this case, some Greatest Common Denominator for tyrants” (WIWP n.p.). Whether or not the novella is a fable and whether or not it is possible to arrive at the Greatest Common Denominator for tyrants I leave in question, but it is worth noting that Saunders does specify that it is about the *human* tendency toward dualities. On a similar note, in the same essay, he does claim the following:

> There was a clash of tones (Bullwinklesque) and content (slaughter) that intrigued me for some reason, and also called to mind our current cultural moment, when public language—reduced, dumbed-down, slogan-drenched, cliché-ridden—seems created to under-describe horror and suffering, and bureaucratize massacre. (WIWP n.p.)

The historical context in which this novella was produced does matter as it was written in the wake of what Americans now simply call “9/11,” at the height of the so-called War on Terror, during the reign of the 43rd U.S. president, George Bush. To be precise, it was published the year before his reelection.

As if the published novella were not enough, Saunders, who is already generous when discussing his fiction, actually has a website, <www.reignofphil.com>, dedicated to the book, where it is described as a “deeply strange yet strangely familiar fable of power and impotence, justice and injustice—an *Animal Farm* for our times” (The Book, n.p.). The site hosts various materials related to the novella. What is most useful about this site, however, is that Saunders included a section dedicated to outtakes from the novella, and it is chiefly one of these outtakes that I prefer to analyze, along with parts of the novella itself.

Before doing so, it is helpful to understand the premise, as the characters are never called human—at least not in the published text. This is the first Saunders text to forego humans as main characters; however, the characters still behave, in many ways, like humans. The website offers the following preface-like paragraph:

> Welcome to Inner Horner, a nation so small it can only accommodate one citizen at a time. The other six citizens must wait their turns in the Short-Term Residency Zone of the surrounding country of Outer Horner. It's a long-standing arrangement between the fantastical, not-exactly-human citizens of the two countries. But when Inner Horner suddenly shrinks, forcing three-quarters of the citizens then in residence over the border into Outer Horner territory, the Outer Hornerites declare an Invasion In Progress—having fallen under the spell of the power-hungry and demagogic Phil. (The Book, n.p.)

The Inner Hornerites are soon at the mercy of Phil, who eventually takes over Outer Horner. As Barrett Hathcock describes the plot in his review of the novella for *The Quarterly Conversation*, Phil "imposes taxes on the squatters, which of course they can't pay. As the Inner Hornerites get more desperate, the Outer Hornerites become more ruthless in extracting it" (n.p.), especially under the guidance of Phil, who forms a militia, persuades a pair of strong thugs to serve as his “Special Friends,” and cons the President out of his “Presidential Cravat.” The media then begins proclaiming Phil’s actions via megaphone, a sort of gag with serious intentions that Saunders seems to have borrowed from his own conception of the media as “Megaphone Guy” from his essay, “The Braindead Megaphone.”

Despite the name, Phil is not human. As Hathcock observes, “None of the characters are human” (n.p.). Like both the Inner and Outer Hornerites, Phil is what Saunders describes in “Why I Wrote *Phil*,” as “beings I thought of as Conglomerates, composed of flesh and machine parts and vegetative portions” (n.p.). Phil has a brain, but it is held in place by a bolt “on a tremendous sliding rack” (TBFRP 9). Frequently, the bolt falls out and his brain slides off the racks and falls to the ground. Both Inner and Outer Hornerites are described with similar details. One Inner Hornerite, Cal, “resembled a gigantic belt buckle with a blue dot affixed to it, as if a gigantic belt buckle with a blue dot affixed to it had been stapled to a tuna fish can” (TBFRP 7), while one of Phil’s fellow Outer Hornerites, Leon, has a see-through stomach and spadelike tail. These beings are neither robots nor cyborgs but more like assemblages of parts; nevertheless, despite their posthuman qualities, they seem to serve as human stand-ins.

While humans are never mentioned in the published novella, they are in “Outtake #4: Having Eliminated Inner Horner, Phil

Introduces the Loyalty Suspenders" from the website.[52] Upon demonstrating their loyalty to Phil by tightening their Loyalty Suspenders, the Outer Hornerites are treated to a speech concerning what is human, which, according to Phil, is a status restricted to Outer Hornerites. Anything good is inherently an Outer Hornerite trait. When Inner Hornerites demonstrate any quality that seems good, it is "an Inner Hornerite manifesting Outer Horner traits" (Outtake #4). Phil presupposes the superiority—and humanity—of Outer Hornerites and develops a sort of moral chain of being from them that leaves Inner Hornerites as sub-Outer Horner.

Phil goes on to use the example of a nonhuman animal to demonstrate how Inner Hornerites might seem human but are merely mimicking Outer Hornerite behaviors in a sort of mechanistic way:

> Take for example a duck. If a duck appears sad, as ducks sometimes do, for example if their leg is crushed by a truck, as I once saw as a boy, a truck or a bike, which perhaps I was riding, I don't really recall, and as far as being on purpose, are you saying I would crush the leg of a duck on purpose with my bike? Who said that? Who believes that? Raise your hand who believes that? (Outtake #4)

At this point, Phil is met with "a great uncomfortable silence," but why is it an uncomfortable silence? Is it because Phil has suggested that ducks sometimes appear sad? Most people would argue that ducks do not show emotion, but Phil is actually suggesting ducks can display emotion. Furthermore, he is obviously concerned about how his fellow Outer Hornerites will judge him if they believe he purposely crushed the leg of a duck. Moreover, he is the one who mentions this personal incident, which apparently haunts him.

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[52] All quotations from Outtake #4 can be accessed at <www.reignofphil.com>.

Phil continues the speech but his tone becomes more defensive and tinged with anger as his story about an unspecified boy is revealed to be his own experience.

> "Well, I did not crush that duck with my bike on purpose!" said Phil. "He darted out in front of me as I was riding through that barn! But as far as that duck? That duck that looked so sad, when crushed by that bike, when looking at its crushed leg, as if about to cry? Was he human? Just because he was doing a human thing did that make him a human person? No, probably he had seen some sad guy and was copying that sad guy's face. So likewise, when an Inner Hornerite acted human, like for example when they exhibited pain behaviours when we unfortunately had to disassemble them for tax purposes, such as weeping, or when one of them yelled at us, as if in righteous rage, when we were collecting taxes via one of their relatives or friends, what we were seeing was merely an Inner Hornerite manifesting an Outer Horner

> trait, copying us vis-a-vis that crushed duck, they having so often observed our humanity from across the border. (Outtake #4)

Phil argues that Inner Hornerites, like ducks, may exhibit behaviors that resemble pain but are really mimicked expressions of Outer Hornerite feelings. Like Descartes, he cannot allow for nonhuman—or non-Outer Hornerite—beings any emotive response, implicitly relegating them to objecthood. Although Phil seems correct to argue that a duck doing human things does not necessarily make the duck a human, he does not take into account that a human doing a duck thing does not mean a human is a duck either. After all, how do we know when we are doing a human thing and not a duck thing? Do we know a duck never feels sadness? Where do we draw the line between how a human emotion manifests and how a nonhuman emotion manifests?

Phil grants or denies acceptance into the domain of the human based on his standards for humanity, such as the ability to experience pain. As Cary Wolfe reminds us, “the discourse and practice of speciesism in the name of liberal humanism have historically been turned on other *humans* as well” (AR 37, italics original). Phil’s use of “humanity” is striking here, since he grants Outer Hornerites ownership of it as a trait, meaning that when Inner Hornerites act human, they are merely acting like Outer Hornerites. Although I have commented that the Hornerites are not human, in this outtake

Phil clearly equates humanity and the human with what is good and ascribes it to Outer Hornerites only, which is precisely how humans use the term: humanity means benevolence because humans are inherently good (to wit: not beasts, which are bad). Humanity is also used to circumscribe who gets to be human. The Inner Hornerites are like barbarian invaders to the Outer Hornerites. Barbarians are not human because they are *βάρβαρος* (barbarous, viz. foreign) neither Greek nor Latin-speaking. They are uncivilized and irrational brutes. They are subhuman, lacking the humanity that Outer Hornerites possess by virtue of being Outer Hornerites.

What is also intriguing is how Phil equates emotion with humanity. His inability to grant a duck emotions is not far off from how we tend to think of many nonhuman animals, who we often deny emotions if we even acknowledge the possibility of them at all. Most nonhuman animals supposedly do not have the kind of consciousness that “higher” beings have, which is always measured by humans, who, of course, use human consciousness as the measure. Inner Hornerites do not feel pain but exhibit “pain behaviors,” behaviors which they copy from Outer Hornerites.

5.4. “When Someone Goes Genocidal”: Genocide, Politics, and Nonhuman Animals

Since Saunders’s novella does not include the outtake, the text lacks a more direct dimension of how our animalization of fellow humans—Hornerites, in this case—is a means of subjugation that proceeds from an unquestioned assumption of who is human. This kind of assumption has allowed and does allow slavery and genocide to occur. On the website, in his introduction to the outtakes, Saunders admits:

> Once I realized the story was basically: Egomaniacal Guy Decides to Eliminate Smaller Weaker Neighboring Nation, then it was a question of having him do this a little quicker than is comfortable. For that reason, a lot of these scenes—which I liked, and enjoyed writing, and informed my idea of the world—had to go, because they, in the context of the book, slowed things down, made a story that I hoped would feel catastrophic and a little scary, feel leisurely. (Outtakes)

Although Saunders claims that the outtake—or at least the portion of that outtake—that I have analyzed did not work in the context of the novella, its content can help us to understand how and why a despot—or one whose narcissism allows him to see himself in this manner—can deny the “humanity” of those whom he deems his enemies.

Phil's character is based on certain historical incidents or figures associated with genocide. As Saunders explains in the interview with Roy Kesey, while writing the novella:

> I had in mind, at various times, Rwanda, Bosnia, Hitler (especially the way he took over power in Germany), and then bits and pieces from the post-9/11 world—Phil has a touch of Bin Laden about him, but also some Abu Ghraib, and he's got this tendency to inefficient language that Orwell talked about being the sure sign of a despot. Basically he became kind of a lab test for the question: What does it look like when someone goes genocidal—by which I mean, when they negate the humanity of their opposition, so as to more easily kill them—and how do they defend it to themselves? (n.p.)

One of the recurring impetuses of genocide is the rhetoric of metaphorically referring to fellow humans as nonhumans.[53] In Rwanda, the Tutsi were often called *inyenzi*, or cockroach, on RTLM radio broadcasts. In Bosnia, Bosniaks were thrown into an animal rendering plant or transported by cattle cars. Hitler and his regime equated Jews with vermin. Americans have gone further. In Abu Ghraib, prisoners were intimidated by dogs, leashed like dogs, or made to stand cuffed and chained in awkward positions while naked. Often, they were beaten. We know by the extensive number of photos that have been leaked that the guards enjoyed their photo ops with these prisoners. It is not too far-fetched to believe that an American president could make a speech calling in a certain way, for example, for the genocide of Islamic people and a sizeable portion of the American population would agree to this. Of course, Americans have their own history of genocide against native populations, which is often glossed over in favor of invoking the previous century's most infamous holocaust.

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[53] Some useful studies on how genocides occur are Adam Jones's *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction* (2017), Dale C. Tatum's *Genocide at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century: Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo and Darfur* (2010), and the essays in *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective* (2003), edited by Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan.

Why the Shoah was so horrific to us was because it served as the first instance of genocide carried out as an industrialized process. Saunders's contemporary, J. M. Coetzee, argues in an opinion piece, "Exposing the beast: factory farming must be called to the slaughterhouse," published in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, that in modern history, it served as a warning concerning our "regarding and treating fellow beings as mere units of any kind" (n.p.). This warning can be traced to the link between the industrialization of the stockyard and The Final Solution. Coetzee reminds us that "in the 20th century, a group of powerful and bloody-minded men in Germany hit on the idea of adapting the methods of the industrial stockyard, as pioneered and perfected in Chicago, to the slaughter—or what they preferred to call the processing—of human beings" (n.p.). For him, the problem goes beyond treating humans like cattle.

Industrialization has allowed humans to treat beings, both human and nonhuman, as production units.

Coetzee does not analogize the Shoah to factory farming but does expose its relationship, noting that although we found it “a terrible crime to treat human beings like cattle,” we should have instead cried out that it was “a terrible crime to treat human beings like units in an industrial process. And that cry should have had a postscript: what a terrible crime—come to think of it, a crime against nature—to treat any living being like a unit in an industrial process” (n.p.). The Inner Hornerites are packed into the Short-Term Residency Zone, a space that seems somehow between a concentration camp at worst and a relocation camp at best, but tending more toward what we might find at a factory farm. In this space, at the border of Outer Horner and the hole that once was Inner Horner, the entire population of Inner Horner is “heaped up in a tremendous teetering pile of grimaces and side-paddles and Thrumton Specialty Valves and cowlicks and rear ends and receding hairlines, a pile that began in the hole that was formerly Inner Horner and rose some thirty feet in the air” (TBFRP 35). Factory farms routinely crowd as many “units” into as small a space as possible.

We may also connect the scene of the Inner Hornerites in the Short-Term Residency Zone with one which occurs later in the Presidential Palace. Before Phil takes power from the absent-minded President, we are treated to a description of the palace as

> a gleaming gold-domed building with a vast high-ceilinged Entry Hall, decorated with paintings of various types of animals the President liked to eat, served on plates, although in the painting the animals were still alive and had all their fur on and looked a little panicked. (TBFRP 71)

The paintings of living animals, who seem panicked because of an awareness that they will be eaten, is a contrast from how the fish perform in Saunders's children's book. Whereas in the previous text they were the solution to a problem, in the novella their treatment, at least as rendered in paintings, suggests they are part of a problem that relates to our treatment of beings we generally consider to be of the same species. It is not difficult to imagine how the plight of these living "units," who "copy" our expressions of fear, is like that of the Inner Hornerites, who not destined for plates, seemed destined for death nevertheless. In this sense, the Inner Hornerites are animalized.

In both the outtake and in the novella, animalization and suffering are related. In the previously mentioned scene of piled-up Inner Hornerites, rising up out the hole that was once their nation and now leaves them "leaning precariously out over Outer Horner" (TBFRP 35). From the description and based on the context, it is not difficult to imagine a mass grave. However, the Inner Hornerites are alive. Two Outer Hornerites cannot help from commenting on the situation:

> "My God, look at those people," said Melvin.
>
> "So uncouth," said Larry.
>
> "Animals," said Melvin. "How do they live with themselves?" (TBFRP 35)

Here, Larry and Melvin verbally animalize the Inner Hornerites. Later, Phil broods on his hatred of the Inner Hornerites, comparing them to slugs: "Those stupid Inner Hornerites! How he hated them! Wasn't it just like them to sit like inert slugs on borrowed land, then suddenly erupt into inexplicable pointless violence!" (TBFRP 43). Later still, the Inner Hornerites' clothing will be confiscated. Carol, one of the Inner Hornerites, will attempt to find solace in the notion that "nakedness is completely natural," a sentiment Cal echoes by declaring that "our naked bodies are nothing to be ashamed of" (56). However, Cal qualifies this by asserting that he would prefer not to have anyone look at his wife. Their repeated assertions demonstrate that they are indeed ashamed.

Like Inner Hornerites, many humans tend to be ashamed of the naked body. According to Derrida, what we are ashamed of when we are naked is the sense of being naked as beasts—but as Derrida contends, certain philosophers implicitly believe that nonhuman animals, "not having knowledge of their nudity, in short without consciousness of good and evil," cannot be naked (The Animal 384). Nonhuman animals are not aware of their nakedness and, not being aware of this, are not ashamed of being naked. Derrida lays bare the oxymoron more telegraphically: "The animal, therefore is not naked because it is naked" (The Animal 385). This means we can add clothing to the list of what is proper to the human. Because "clothing derives from technics," Derrida claims it would be necessary "to think shame and technicity together, as the same 'subject'" (The Animal 385). To be able to be naked is to be able to be ashamed, and the ability to exist in this way seems to make us human. However, Derrida continues by asking what shame is

> if one can be modest only by remaining immodest, and vice versa. Man could never become naked again because he has the sense of nakedness, that is to say of modesty or shame. The animal would be *in* nonnudity because it is nude, and man *in* nudity to the extent that he is no longer nude. There we encounter a difference, a time or *contretemps* between two *nudities without nudity*. (The Animal 385, italics original).

Derrida delivers the significance of this paradox by inquiring into an autobiographical encounter.

The meeting that provokes Derrida's self-questioning is one in which a female cat gazes—or seems to gaze—at Derrida in the nude. He asks:

> Before the cat that looks at me naked, would I be ashamed *like* an animal that no longer has the sense of nudity? Or on the contrary, *like* a man who retains the sense of his nudity? Who am I therefore? Who is it that I am (following)? Whom should this be asked of if not of the other? And perhaps of the cat itself? (The Animal, 385, italics original)

Derrida wonders whether we are ashamed like animals without a sense of nudity or like man who possesses a sense of nudity. In other words, does nakedness make us more animal or more human—or is there a distinction? For Saunders's Outer Hornerites, an implied distinction does exist. They have already called the Inner Hornerites animals, and by confiscating their clothing, they are enforcing this distinction. By forcing someone to be naked, by taking away their clothing, the Inner Hornerites are taking away what is "proper" to humans—or, in this case, Inner Hornerites. It is a way to dehumanize them, to "de-Hornerize" them. Because we devalue nonhuman animals, we can devalue our fellow humans by making them seem more animal—at least what we think is more animal. Without the binary distinction of human and animal, with man always being superior, this subjugation would not work.

The Outer Hornerites continue their punishment of the Inner Hornerites, eventually disassembling Cal for attacking Phil. This disassembling is akin to dismemberment. Leon, an Outer

Hornerite, is ordered by Phil to “incarcerate” Cal’s various parts throughout Outer Horner “in the interest of national security” (TBFRP 64). Leon transports Cal’s parts in a wheelbarrow, incarcerating the “tuna fish can in Far South Distant Outer Horner” before incarcerating the “belt buckle in Far East Distant Outer Horner, a lush verdant zone where cows’ heads grew out of the earth shouting sarcastic things at anyone who passed, which, though lush and verdant, was unpopulated because the cows’ sarcasm was so withering” (TBFRP 64). The disassembling and incarceration of Cal’s parts occurs halfway through the novella. It seems hardly coincidental that the cow head should be a part of this pivotal moment. Although a cow head growing from the earth shouting sarcastic phrases so withering that no one will live there seems a humorous piece of surrealism on the part of Saunders, the context renders it more disturbing. It is not difficult to associate it with such matters as slaughter, burial, and even guilt. If Coetzee’s remarks on industrialized farming and the Holocaust could both appear at once in a text, Saunders’s scene, however abstract, might perform that role. The only problem is that since this scene is not protracted, the connection may be lost on readers. However, as the following chapter will demonstrate, in his next book, *In Persuasion Nation*, nonhuman beings will appear more than ever in his stories and in one, “93990,” for the first time, as a main character.

6. BIG PHARMA AND THE CHRIST-MONKEY: “93990”

6.1. “The Christ-Monkey”: Nonhuman Animal Sacrifice for Human Well-Being

One of Saunders’s most disturbing stories is “93990.” Written as a toxicology report, it relies on passive voice to describe a toxicology test on twenty male crab-eating, or long-tailed, macaques (*macaca fascicularis*)—or, as they are referred to most commonly in laboratories and in the story, cynomolgus monkeys. The mundane language of the report clashes with the actual experiences of the monkeys, whose agonizing deaths are reported in a manner so clinical it is difficult for a reader *not* to feel sympathy for the monkeys.

Before its inclusion in *In Persuasion Nation* (2006), the story was originally published as one of *Four Institutional Monologues* in the fourth volume of *McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern* (2000).[54] In his essay “Hanging by a Thread in the Homeland: The *Four Institutional Monologues* of George Saunders” (2017), Richard E. Lee notes that the monologues form a story-cycle or sequence, of which “93990” is the final story. The first story in the sequence, “Exhortation,” was later included in *Tenth of December*, leaving only the two middle stories as yet uncollected. “93990” is preceded chronologically by the following: “Exhortation,” written as a memo beseeching workers to be more productive lest they too become the “shelves” they must clean;” “A Design Proposal,” written as a social science research response to a request for proposals concerning crowd movement and control toward the euphemistically named “Preferable Destination;” and “A Friendly Reminder,” written as a missive from members of one division of a slaughterhouse to those of another division. The style of these stories is similar to the bureaucratic notes found in “Pastoralia.” For Lee, the story-cycle provides a means to understand “the arc” of Saunders’s fiction through its emphasis on four features: “a central absence,” a habitual “false consciousness” regarding work and its effects, a conceptual realm “between real and potential experience,” and a tendency “to confront the deep and dysfunctional malaise” of “the American psyche” (79-80).

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[54] The American non-profit publishing house, McSweeney’s Publishing, was founded by author Dave Eggers in 1998.

As Lee has dealt with these stories as a whole already in his incisive essay, I focus my attention on “93990,” which, stylistically is also similar to some of the stories that accompany it in *In Persuasion Nation*, namely “I CAN SPEAK!™” and “My Amendment,” while its subject matter is complementary to “The Red Bow,” parts of the title story, and the opening of “CommComm,” which are also included in the collection. Overall, the stories are rife with nonhuman animal killings in terms of paranoia, institutionalization, commercialization, and bureaucracy. Nonhuman animals, whether “real” or as characters in various media, appear more frequently here—at least half the book—than in any other collection: “My Flamboyant Grandson,” “The Red Bow,” “93990,” “Brad Carrigan, American,” “In Persuasion Nation,” and the opening of “CommComm” all involve nonhuman animals in some form. Most of the stories in the collection were previously published in *The New Yorker*, and several of them received awards or were collected in year-end “best of” editions. The collection as a whole was a finalist for the 2006 Story Prize.

Most of the stories wander into less conventional settings and take on less conventional forms, which made for divided reviews. For example, *Publisher’s Weekly* praised the two most conventional stories, while *Salon* called them the weakest. With no novella, the collection features a dozen stories in all, twice as many as are found in either of the first two collections. Another difference is that the book is split into four sections of three, four, three, and two stories, respectively. Each section is led by a quote from a fictional text and author, *Taskbook for the New Nation*, by Bernard “Ed” Alton. These quotes help to unify the text and complement the content. The diction of the passages also bears a resemblance to the kind of language being used by the then concurrent White House administration, as President George W. Bush and his cabinet, were promoting the still relatively recent “War on Terror” five years after 9/11.[55] The quote that precedes “93990,” the first story of section “iii,” includes a sentence claiming that “our enemies” have placed among us individuals who “are, if we examine them closely: outcasts, chronic complainers, individuals incapable of thriving within a perfectly viable truly generous system, a system vastly superior to all other known ways of organizing effort and providing value” (107). This fear of the Other had become more apparent in America, and it gives an added dimension to “93990,” which, as part of the monologues, was originally published before 9/11.

“93990” is based on an actual report written by Saunders while working for a pharmaceutical company for which he summarized reports for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Indeed, it is closer to realism than most of the stories in the collection. In Saunders’s words, the real study

> was only a little more terrible. All I did was turn up the volume a bit, to make the contour of the story more discernible to a reader who wouldn’t have the experience (as I did) of having read hundreds of other, more quotidian, reports. The remarkable thing about the real-life monkey (as is the case in the story) is that they couldn't kill him. He lived through the highest dosage—and then they did him in (as, I think, they had

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[55] This campaign is still being waged in 2018.

> to, legally). I carried that report around for a few years, always thinking of him as "the Christ-monkey." (HQ)

"The Christ-monkey" inspired the titular protagonist of "93990." We routinely use nonhuman animals like 93990 in biomedical research with the idea that doing so will improve human well-being. In *Brute Science: Dilemmas of Animal Experimentation*, Hugh LaFollette and Niall Shanks conclude that humans have benefitted from the use of nonhuman animals in biomedical research, "albeit indirectly, and might continue to do so. The evidence likewise suggests that biomedical research using animals has been less valuable than most of us have been led to believe; indeed, less valuable than many biomedical researchers themselves believe" (1997, 262). Whether the case scenario presented by Saunders is of any value to its researchers or not, we never learn, but what is recognizable very early in the text is that the drug is deadly. Thus, the continued testing, if it does not already seem so, reveals itself as increasingly cruel and pointless.

Before exploring biomedical research further or proceeding to Saunders's story, I propose that it is necessary to ask a question, the answers for which are generally taken for granted when it comes to ethical debates about biomedical research on nonhuman animals. If we ask why we should test animals, the response is that it is less ethically problematic than testing on humans (although we have and still do test on humans, both as willing and unwilling subjects). What is presupposed is that biomedical testing is a necessity. We ask: *why* is it necessary to experiment on living beings? The reasons we propose—which are familiar enough that I do not believe we need to rehash them all here—can be boiled down to rationalizations. One of the most common rationalizations is, of course, that by conducting biomedical experiments on living beings, we can advance scientific knowledge and develop biomedicines that will prolong life, alleviate pain, and cure diseases. To put it telegraphically, we believe that by experimenting on and "sacrificing" nonhuman animals, we will improve human well-being. Nonhuman life is more expendable than human life. Why? It is nonhuman. The argument is fallacious. What we are really arguing is that because we fear death, pain, and disease, we are determined, consciously or unconsciously, to assuage this fear at any cost.

In *The Denial of Death* (1973), Ernest Becker insists that every society is a religion. A society, he claims, is a "codified hero system" and "thus is a 'religion' whether it thinks so or not" (Becker 7). Science and consumerism are religions, in this sense. Becker argues that fear of death—"terror" of death, as he puts it—is universal and inherent in both human and nonhuman animals. His argument follows those from both biological and evolutionary science: "Animals in order to survive have had to be protected by fear-responses, in relation not only to other animals but to nature itself" (Becker 17). Notably, he does not assert the human as some being hierarchically above or apart from the animal. This is crucial. According to him, the human death-terror is only exaggerated by the human infant's prolonged situation of exposure and helplessness, which has led us to become "a hyperanxious animal who constantly invents reasons for anxiety even when there are none" (Becker 17). In other words, many—if not all—of our anxieties are due to a fear of death, whether we are conscious of this or not. Generally, we are not, but that latent fear is enough to drive us to seek immortality through what Becker and others have called "the *causa-sui* project." For Becker, society determines "how people are to transcend death; it will tolerate the *causa-sui* project only if it fits into the standard social project" (46, italics original). When it does not, societies and cultures and dominions clash. In other words, our immortality projects lead to conflicts.

In the United States, so-called terrorist acts are responded to with demands for vengeance, sometimes masked as preventive measures, such as banning the people of certain nations from entering the country. Similar practices have occurred off and on throughout the course of American history. Since the turn of the 20th century, human death—but not nonhuman death—has been an inextricable part of the entertainment industry. In our current century, we routinely encounter human death in series and films. Despite death being ubiquitous in entertainment media, death is generally not discussed publicly except euphemistically or dysphemistically (here, I am referring to death discussion primarily as a quotidian occurrence, not in cases of, for example, school shootings, although these too are becoming quotidian in the U.S.). People do not die but “pass on.” We inform relatives and friends of the “departed” that we are sorry for the “loss.” The language here implies that death is temporary: cannot a departed person return and someone’s loss be recovered? When death is mentioned in news media, it is reported in a sober, clinical fashion, the language used for reporting awkwardly unmatched by emotive response. As Molly Maxfield, et. al., reveal that “many people report that they do not fear death,” yet “research suggests that younger adults’ self-reported fear of death is not predictive of response to MS [mortality salience, viz. death] inductions in terror management studies” (2010, 2). We may not claim to be afraid of death, but when we are confronted with situations that remind us of our mortality, we respond with terror.

One way to gain a sense of control over our anxiety and fear is by investing in medicine, especially commercialized medicine. This is especially true in the United States, which, throughout its history, has not had a system of socialized medicine. Although Americans spend more on medicine than most countries, they report a worse health status. Thus, the fear of death in America is a profitable enterprise for biomedical companies. John Abramson, M.D. reports on the United States health system, in which corporate research dominates: “Rigging medical studies, misrepresenting research results published in even the most influential medical journals, and withholding the findings of whole studies that don’t come out in a sponsor’s favor have all become the accepted norm in commercially sponsored medical research” (2004, xiii). Biomedical corporations are complicit in these acts. Their influence extends to “disempowered regulatory agencies, commercially sponsored medical education, brilliant advertising, expensive public relations campaigns and manipulation of free media coverage” (Abramson xiii). Medical authorities and the medical industry are frequently tied by financial relationships, which means that dubious medical claims, supposedly made in the name of science, sustain a climate in which profit-driven, commercialized medicine can and does flourish.

In our current paradigm, orthodox medicine—or as Roberta Bivins refers to it, “biomedicine”—seems “both powerful and long-established. It is apparently a monolithic system, holding a monopoly supported by a potent combination of laws, regulations, state and commercial interests, cultural beliefs and popular expectations” (2007, 4). Furthermore, according to Bivins, biomedicine presents itself as the ultimate authority on the human body. She asserts that

> [b]iomedicine claims unique, exclusive, and absolute knowledge about the body in sickness and health, knowledge that is universally valid and ostensibly independent of cultural or social constraints or meaning. As a society, we accept these claims largely because we believe that biomedical knowledge is based on rigorous and objective scientific investigation of the natural world. (Bivins 4)

Biomedicine, as we know it today, is a recent development, and there exists insufficient proof that many of the drugs marketed to Americans work any better than, for example, herbal remedies or acupuncture. Many cause greater harm. I do not mean that all biomedicine is inferior to, for instance, Traditional Chinese Medicine, only that in the United States (and much of the Occidental and “developed” world), biomedicine has become the norm. Since the issue of biomedical testing on nonhuman animals is relevant to Saunders’s story, both the fictional one and the one that inspired it, we should understand more about biomedical testing in the United States, which is regulated according to the Animal Welfare Act. Although this act, signed into law in 1966, is beneficial in certain ways, what we find is evidence that claims to a more liberal ethics are at odds with how biomedical testing is practiced.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the same department that regulates meat and feminized protein, also holds the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service division. This branch is responsible for maintaining and enforcing the Animal Welfare Act, a congressional act that claims that both “animals and activities which are regulated […] are either interstate or foreign commerce or substantially affect such commerce or the free flow thereof, and that regulation of animals and activities […] is necessary to prevent and eliminate burdens upon such commerce and to effectively regulate such commerce” (2017, § 2131). Leaving the regulating purpose of this legislation aside, what is immediately notable here is the emphasis on animals as commerce, not as beings. The term “animals” is, of course, used in the standard way here to differentiate from humans but is specifically meant to designate those beings intended for use in research, in exhibition, or as pets. The Animal Welfare Act goes on to claim that its threefold aim is:

> (1) to insure that animals intended for use in research facilities or for exhibition purposes or for use as pets are provided humane care and treatment;
> (2) to insure the humane treatment of animals during transportation in commerce; and
> (3) to protect the owners of animals from the theft of their animals by preventing the sale or use of animals which have been stolen. (§ 2131)

A critique of the language and syntax here is helpful to understand what exactly is expressed. However, I first propose a question: for whom is this act intended?

Superficially, the act is intended for nonhuman animals, but it is primarily concerned with protecting the rights of humans, specifically their right to exploit nonhuman animals. It works from the assumption that nonhuman animals are "intended for use" or "for exhibition." It also presumes that animals will be transported as "commerce." Furthermore, it protects "owners" rather than, for example, guardians or friends or family. What the language insinuates is that animals are property, not persons. They are used like objects. What "humane care and treatment" might be remains suspect. In a commentary for the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, Franklin D. McMillan explains that "the Animal Welfare Act (AWA), which sets minimum standards for the care and treatment of laboratory animals, requires the use of anesthetics and analgesics for all pain resulting from experimental procedures. This standard mandates treatment of a single type of suffering; the AWA designates no other specific type of suffering to be alleviated" (2003, 183). What this means is that if a nonhuman animal undergoes a certain procedure, the pain that may result from this procedure may go untreated.

Conducting research on nonhuman animals, including performing vivisection, is considered excusable if we think of these beings as "objects" that lack any awareness of death or as "casualties," to use a war euphemism, necessary to sacrifice for the improvement of our own lives or even the lives of pets. What a posthumanist ethics cannot accept is that any logical argument exists that can make the claim that sacrifice of nonhuman lives for human lives is not only excusable but justified. This is an axiological issue. To make this claim is to assume that human life is inherently more valuable than the life of a nonhuman being. It is fear-based rationalization that no doubt becomes difficult when we are considering the lives of our families and friends, as Saunders well knows. While working for the biomedical research company, one of his daughters,

> was born after a harrowing pregnancy—my wife went into labor at four months and would have lost the baby if not for a drug (the name of which I've forgotten—a contraction-suppressant that had, of course, been vetted and found safe by the FDA), i.e., the existence of this precious kid who was lighting up our life had been enabled by the big pharm monster I would otherwise have been decrying. (HQ)

In other words, the Christ monkey died so that a baby might live. The animal dies so we may eat of its flesh. The animal dies so that we shall not have to suffer. The animal is just an animal; man has dominion over animals.

To follow this line of argument, I find it worth considering the following scenario: the Christ monkey dies so that humans may live—but for Him? Like many who call themselves followers in a kindred simian Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, many humans live for the Christ monkey by remaining in ignorance about what He dies for and how He asks humans to live for Him. Many so-called followers are far from willing to give up what we regard as a comfortable life, certainly not for 93990 Christ and rarely for Jesus Christ. The narrative we find asserted in contemporary American biomedical practices follows that which is derived from classical humanist and Judeo-Christian praxis and theory. The narrative is constructed thus: Man is valuable because he is rational, made in the image of God, or both. He maintains this value because he can reason and because he can fashion nature—both his nature and Nature—as the (rational) subject. Even those theologists who emphasize the role of the human as steward hold a concept that sustains the dominant strain of dominionism rather than truly challenges it. To consider that a nonhuman animal like the Christ monkey might be at least messiah-like if not an actual messiah is a concept rarely, if ever, put forth. The fact remains that nonhuman animals are "sacrificed"—or "martyred"—for the sake of humans, which is as true in Saunders's case as it is for the majority of us.

While it may read otherwise, it has not been my intention to take Saunders to task for wanting his child to live. Most of us have been in a situation in which we chose medicine or treatment that has been tested on nonhuman animals, whether we considered this possibility or not. Even if Saunders and his wife were aware that the drug administered to her was tested on nonhuman animals, would they forsake the life of their child for a drug that had already been tested and marketed? I doubt that most of us, by that point, would refuse. I am not criticizing Saunders personally. I only want to make it evident that biomedical testing is fear-based. We are all responsible for fostering a culture that allows biomedical testing to torture and kill nonhuman animals for the sake of our well-being, no matter how well they are supposedly treated or how rigorously a case for nonhuman experimentation is vetted. Ironically, the same drug administered to Saunders's wife that saved his child's life was later banned from the market for causing heart attacks in women. The fear of death, pain, and illness that furthers biomedical testing designed to alleviate this unholy alliance—testing that causes death, pain, and illness in our constituents—may also lead to the aggravation of pain and disease in ourselves or, in some cases, lead to death.

6.2. "Scientifically Defensible": The Problem of the So-Called Impartial Observer

One discipline of biomedicine is toxicology. Toxicology studies force nonhuman animals to ingest or be injected with potentially toxic substances. The result for the test subjects may be death. If the test subjects "pass" the test, the drug can be marketed. Often these test subjects are nonhuman simians. Because of their deaths, we may continue to live with the aid of biomedical “advancements.” I realize that this is an oversimplification of a more complex system and issue, but we can and do perform tests on nonhuman animals and can and do market drugs conceived from this research. In “93990” this drug is called “Borazadine.” For what it is intended is never made clear. The story is presumably narrated by a scientist or lab technician. What first becomes apparent is the use of passive voice. Indeed, the opening paragraph of “93990” reads:

> A ten-day acute toxicity study *was conducted* using twenty male cynomolgus monkeys ranging in weight from 25 to 40 kg. These animals *were divided* into four groups of five monkeys each. Each of the four groups received a daily intravenous dose of Borazadine, delivered at a concentration of either 100, 250, 500, or 10,000 mg/kg/day. (110, italics my own)

Conducted by whom? Divided by whom? Although the active voice is becoming more common in science writing, the writing that has appeared throughout the past century has been dominated by passive voice constructions, proposedly because this demonstrates objectivity and non-bias. Of course, this is untrue. What it does instead is obscure the subject, the agent, who, in performing the experiment, is already biased in that “it”—to use the kind of terminology we might find in a report of this nature—is clearly in favor of a different bias but one which still taints the experiment. This bias is the acceptance that biomedical experimentation on nonhuman animals is already sometimes a necessity.

In Saunders's story, as in many toxicity reports, the presence of the scientists conducting the experimenting is only implied by the text. To me such obscuration reads not so much as an attempt at objectivity but rather as an attempt for all the humans involved to distance themselves from any relationship with the macaques. As we noted in the opening paragraph of "93990," the story includes a preponderance of passive-voiced constructions from which the subject is absent: "were sacrificed," "was seen," "were observed," and "was adjudged" (109-112). Only later in the story do we learn that "a handler attempted to enter the cage to retrieve the poking stick" (93990 116). Nowhere else in the report is it written who performs these passive voice verb constructions. We may only assume that scientists are the agents.

Furthermore, the majority of these verbs suggest a kind of voyeurism. Even when an agent does appear, such as 93990, he is called an "it" and is described in terms of what can be witnessed by the scientists. In what reads like a mistake in the text, he is called "he" only once: "By 1200 hrs of Day 5, the diminutive male 93990 still exhibited no symptoms. *He* was observed to be sitting in the SE corner of the enclosure, staring fixedly at the cage door" (93990 114, italics my own). More commonly, we read that 93990

> still showed no symptoms. Even though this animal was the smallest in weight within the highest-dose group, *it* showed no symptoms. *It* showed no vomiting, disinterest, self-scratching, anxiety or aggression. Also no hair loss was observed. Although no hair bundles were present (because no hair loss occurred), this animal was not seen to “play” with inanimate objects present in the enclosure, such as its food bowl or stool or bits of rope, etc.” (93990 111).

All of his actions are described as observable behaviors rather than actions performed by 93990. For example, he “showed no symptoms,” “no hair loss was observed,” and he “was not seen to ‘play.’” Furthermore, “play” is placed in scare quotes, as if playing would somehow grant him more agency.

The macaques are further “dehumanized” by the use of numbers in place of proper names, a practice which we know at least from the Shoah, during which certain humans were forced by their fellow humans to adopt—and be branded with—numbers in place of proper names. Likewise, the monkeys in Saunders’s story do not have proper nouns for names. Instead, they are numbered: 93990, of course, but also 93445, 93557, 93001, 93458, and so on, which helps to “dehumanize” them, or disguise their agency and subjecthood. Frequently, they are referred to as “animal(s)” or “it.” Ironically, humans have been called “animals” throughout history as if this were an insult. In the second paragraph of

“93990” alone, we read that the effects of the high-dose group resulted

> in death within 20 mins of dosing for all but one of the five *animals*. *Animals 93445 and 93557*, pre-death exhibited vomiting and disorientation. *These two animals* almost immediately entered a catatonic state and were sacrificed moribund. *Animals 93001 and 93458* exhibited vomiting, anxiety, disorientation, and digging at their abdomens. *These animals* also quickly entered a catatonic state and were sacrificed moribund. (93990 109-110, italics my own)

If we were to replace the word “animals” with “persons,” the effect would be altogether different simply because we generally would never allow such testing on humans to occur. The macaques in this report are not “just” animals but are also sexless and featureless. We are only informed of the sex and one characteristic of one macaque, 93990, who is described as a “diminutive male.” On three separate instances, he is called this, as if to suggest that his unusually small stature coupled with his male sex is somehow related to his immunity to Borazadine’s effects. If these features are related, they apparently remain inexplicable to the narrator.

The narrator and “its” colleagues, to whom the narrator refers, remain unnamed. In a real toxicity report, we likely have access to these names, but in a story, the only means by which we might have access to names are if the author intends for us to know them. Because Saunders does not reveal any names and because he allows the scientists to remain anonymous entities, he actually increases the focus on 93990. When coupled with the use of passive voice, the lack of gender-based pronouns, and the use of numbers might seem as if they would distance us, it is by Saunders's control of this distancing effect through the narrator that we are drawn deeper into the plight of 93990 and his fellow macaques.

Saunders thus provides us with an example of what a toxicity study is like for the subjects of the study. His story may be fictional, but at its core, what he makes apparent to us is true. Recall that Saunders called the real report "only a little more terrible." Whereas a normal toxicity report can read as a dry summary, he uses the distance to present us a situation that, for a reader, becomes increasingly harrowing. The scenario actively works on the reader such that if we find it difficult to stomach here then it becomes questionable how we can allow it to occur in real scientific studies. Although it is never stated in the story, I believe it is safe to assume that the test has been approved by the proper committees. No matter how absurd the scenario seems, it retains a sense of realism. While Saunders's stories occasionally tend toward magical realism or speculative fiction, this is not one of them. On the contrary, it is a quotidian report with an extraordinary monkey.

By escalating the physical and psychological effects of the drug on the monkeys, while maintaining the narrative voice asserted from the introduction, the effect becomes such that the impartiality of the observer seems increasingly less impartial and more sadistic. The narrator informs us that by Day 3, two monkeys "were exhibiting extreme writhing punctuated with attempted biting and pinching of their fellows, often with shrieking. Some hair loss, ranging from slight to extreme was observed, as was some 'playing' with the resulting hair bundles" (93990 110). Saunders continues to escalate the horror while relying, as he often does, on repetition to demonstrate a certain familiarity with routine and a lack of awareness on the part of the narrator. Already by the end of Day 3, "all animals in the two lowest-dose groups (250 and 100 mg/kg/day) were observed to be in some form of distress. Some of these had lapsed into a catatonic state, some refused to take food, many had runny, brightly colored stools, some eating their stool while intermittently shrieking" (93990 112). Recalling Saunders's analysis of Barthelme's short story, "School," in which we know that everything that enters the classroom will die, the rising action of the story continues to escalate by continuously returning to what, by now, is the expected: the monkeys will be dosed and will die apparently agonizing, protracted deaths while 93990 remains healthy.

Thus, the escalation continues. If we are hoping for any kind of reprieve from the gruesome details Saunders has yet to spare us from, we are not in luck. By noon of Day 5, only two monkeys remain, 93990 and 93555. They are both dosed again on Day 6 (they are dosed daily unless considered moribund, i.e. at the brink of death). After the dosing,

> the last remaining low-dose animal (93555), the animal that earlier had attacked and ingested its own tooth, then sat for quite some time writhing in its own stool listlessly, succumbed, after an episode that included, in addition to many of the aforementioned symptoms, tearing at its own eyes and flesh, and finally, quiet heavy breathing while squatting. This animal, following a limited episode of eyes rolling back in its head, entered the moribund state, succumbed, and was necropsied. Cause of death was seen to be renal failure. (93990 115)

In a real toxicity report, the “episodes” presented here would likely not be written in such an explicit and detailed manner; however, that does not mean that the kind of horror that appears in the story does not occur in the lab.

Somehow, notwithstanding the realism of his descriptions, Saunders still manages to find humor in the situation. The narrator and the narrator’s colleagues, through their attempts at impartiality, begin to react in a way that is darkly comical even as it is distressing. They seem incapable of doing anything *except* observing. Indeed, they hardly seem capable of thinking beyond the experiment. Even after witnessing no effects on 93990, they are still incapable of considering that 93990 might be attempting to communicate with them rather than experiencing effects of the drug. On Day 6, the narrator reports that 93990

> seemed to implore. This imploring was judged to be, possibly, a mild hallucinogenic effect. This imploring resulted in involuntary laughter on the part of the handlers, which resulted in the animal discontinuing the imploring behavior and retreating to the NW corner where it sat for quite some time with its back to the handlers. It was decided that, in the future, handlers would refrain from laughing at the imploring, so as to be able to obtain a more objective idea of the duration of the (unimpeded) imploring. (93990 115)

If it is not clear by now, the protagonist of the story is not the narrator but 93990. The scientists are the antagonists. 93990, by turning his back on the handlers, shuns them. We might sense a kind of dramatic irony here. As readers, we know that 93990 is trying to communicate with them, but the scientists are oblivious. The imploring, for them, is behavioral, not communicative. Although it is one of the few instances in the story in which the scientists respond to a macaque, their response demonstrates a lack of awareness about the significance of the gesture. In this sense, we encounter the scientists in a way we often reserve for nonhuman animal response to human communication: lack of comprehension. Furthermore, we might expect the scientists to decide not to laugh so as to judge *why* 93990 is imploring them—although for the reader it is by now obvious why he would. Instead, they decide not to laugh, should the behavior occur again, so as to be *more* objective, a decision which seems laughable in itself. By trying to remain objective, they appear less intelligent than 93990, both mentally and emotionally.

Saunders's sarcasm is on display when we read how the scientists deal with the loss of a poking stick on Day 9. That the loss of this stick takes up a good portion of a paragraph demonstrates its importance as event in the report. Again, 93990

> was observed to stare at the door of the cage and occasionally at the other, now empty, enclosures. Also the rope-climbing did not decrease. A brief episode of imploring was observed. No laughter on the part of the handlers occurred, and the unimpeded imploring was seen to continue for approximately 130 seconds. When, post-imploring, the stick was inserted to attempt a poke, the stick was yanked away by 93990. When a handler attempted to enter the cage to retrieve the poking stick, the handler was poked. Following this incident, the conclusion was reached to attempt no further retrievals of the poking stick, but rather to obtain a back-up poking stick from Supply. As Supply

> did not at this time have a back-up poking stick, it was decided to attempt no further poking until the first poking stick could be retrieved. (93990 116)

Now the response of the scientists seems foolish. Instead of gesturing in return, they attempt to poke 93990, who immediately disarms them and uses the weapon to defend himself and give the handler a taste of his (or her or whoever's) own medicine, as the expression goes.

93990 is now capable of mocking authority because he holds a tool that grants him the kind of power usually reserved only for the scientists. Indeed, in *Interspecies Ethics*, Cynthia Willett notes how some nonhuman "animals can be tricksters and mockers of authority" (51). 93990's actions prove him to be capable of rebellion and protest against oppression. His prank, which is also a defensive measure, allows him to create, momentarily, "a site for self-assertion and a freedom that cannot be controlled by laboratory norms" in which he performs "a 'minirevolution' aimed against those who may not get that they are the butt of a joke" (Willett 51). The scientists in the story do not realize they are now being mocked. While their initial decision to poke 93990 rather than attempt communication remains unexplained, the loss of the stick is so distressing for the scientists that they attempt "to obtain a back-up poking stick from Supply." It is then reported that there will be no further attempts to poke 93990 until the stick can be fetched. The decision not to attempt further pokes seems like a desperate attempt on the part of the scientists to control a situation of which they have lost control. Why otherwise assert that they will not try to poke 93990 when it is impossible for them to do so anyway?

While these events further the plot of the story, Saunders's use of repetition also achieves this. Saunders uses repetition in several stories, including one which I have analyzed already, *Pastoralia*. In the novella, the protagonist routinely marks the Daily Partner Performance Evaluation Form with a standard set of responses. He frequently remarks, concerning the cave, that "no one pokes their head in." When circumstances change but the repeated statements do not, the reader notices these repetitions as they begin to take on significance. In "93990," as we have learned, the report frequently includes passive-voice verbs relating to observation; however, the story includes more obvious repetitions. The deaths of the macaques are routinely reported in one of two formulations: "cause of death was seen to be renal failure" or "renal failure was seen to be the cause of death" (93990 110-112 and 115). When we first learn this, we have no reason to expect this to be the cause of death. After all the macaques but 93990 have died, we not only expect this but may wonder why the test is being continued when it will obviously lead to renal failure. The language hides what is the real cause of death: the toxic drug administered by the scientists. All the macaques are sacrificed moribund or determined to have “succumbed,” at which point they are “removed from the enclosure and necropsied” (93990 111-113). Meanwhile, we wonder what will happen to 93990, since he shows no symptoms. Our sympathy lies with him, the sole survivor. We have come to care about an animal we normally would not even consider, one of many animals whose lives, as we have learned from the story, are “sacrificed” daily, supposedly for our well-being. 93990, of course, will also be one of these. He cannot escape his fate.

On Day 10, which was to be the final day of the study, “the decision was reached to increase the dosage to 100,000 mg/kg/day, a dosage 10 times greater than that which had proved almost immediately lethal to every other animal in the highest-dose group. This was adjudged to be scientifically defensible” (93990 116-117). Not only is he not “pardoned” from the experiment, not only is the dose increased—he is given a dose *ten times* that of an already known lethal dose; furthermore, this is determined to be “scientifically defensible.” What this phrase means is never explained. The statement that has been repeated so often in the text appears once more after we are informed that 93990 “appeared to be normal, healthy, unaffected, and thriving” (93990 117). At the first hour of Day 11, he “was tranquilized via dart, removed from the enclosure, sacrificed, and necropsied” (93990 117). Saunders plays with our expectations. Although we should not be caught off-guard by the statement, after reading so often in the affirmative that renal damage was the cause of death, we instead read that “[n]o evidence of renal damage was observed. No negative effects of any kind were observed. A net weight gain of 3 kg since the beginning of the study was observed” (93990 117). Whatever may have been the cause of 93990’s immunity is not even researched. Instead, he is killed so that what is already obvious may be observed—as if observation is the objective.

Saunders provokes us to consider ethical treatment of nonhuman animals in this story by causing “some sense of outrage or sympathy to rise up in the reader” (NS). By the end of the story, we are sympathetic to 93990’s plight and outraged not only at how he is treated but at the lack of awareness on the part of the scientists to what is so obvious to us: that he and his fellow macaques suffer, that indeed they are tortured. This kind of suffering is not reserved exclusively for humans nor for apes nor monkeys. The story works more effectively because 93990 exhibits what seem like human-like traits. However, it is the lack of regard by the humans in the story that demonstrates how humans often demonstrate their “humanity:” by withholding compassion, by demonstrating indifference.

Biomedicine and the human fear and anxiety of death have allowed the testing of nonhuman animals to remain scientifically defensible, although this defense is based on rationalization. Although a welfare act for nonhuman animals exists, it is still anthropocentric. Through Saunders's story, it becomes apparent just how little the act does to support nonhuman animal well-being. In the next chapter, we will again encounter indifference to a nonhuman animal's fate in the short story "Puppy." Furthermore, we will discover what happens when humans are treated like nonhuman animals not out of hatred but out of love.

7. THE ANIMALITY OF THE HUMAN: “PUPPY”

7.1. “Perfect:” Narrative Dummies, Communicating Vessels, and Motif

“Puppy” is one of ten stories from Saunders’s most recent collection, *Tenth of December* (2013), which is also his most acclaimed collection. The editors of the *New York Times Book Review* named it one of the “10 Best Books of 2013.” It also won the 2013 Story Prize for short story collections and, in 2014, the inaugural Folio Prize. In a review for *The Guardian*, Sian Cain describes the ten stories as being “all about people. No matter how weird the setting—a futuristic prison lab, a middle-class home where human lawn ornaments are a great status symbol—Saunders’s stories are always about humanity and the meaning we find in small moments, in objects or gestures. He paints painful portraits of domesticity, of families, of death. It could be described as melancholically happy, each story full of little truths that make us both amused and very uneasy” (2015, n.p.). If the stories do focus on human people, they also bring up issues not exclusive to them. For example, Cain is right to note how death is presented in so many of Saunders’s stories, but death is not exclusive to humanity. Such is the case with “Puppy,” a story that originally appeared in *The New Yorker* (2007).

While some of the stories carry traits of genre fiction, more than half of the collection is comprised of stories that stay closer to what Aixa de la Cruz calls a “realismo sucio.” As a whole, the stories allow us to encounter a multitude of perspectives and formal proposals “para tratar un mismo fénomeno: la América contemporanea, con sus diferencias socioeconómicas, su cultura de trabajo, su violencia structural, y su deuda pendiente con todos aquellos a los que prometió un sueño que no ha sido capaz de cumplir,” a description that aptly describes much of Saunders’s fiction (28). While it may be accurate to describe “Puppy” as representative of “dirty realism,” the narrative technique of this story seems more experimental, since we rarely encounter it in fiction. In the collection, Saunders uses the “third-person ventriloquist” technique more frequently than he did in his previous books, thereby allowing for certain imaginative elements to creep in, which I will explain in greater detail later. This technique also helps to make “Puppy” one of Saunders’s most ethically complex stories regarding nonhuman and human animals. The story complicates notions of animality, which in turn complicate notions of humanity. It achieves this by using certain literary techniques, such as the third-person ventriloquist technique, which are necessary to understand before attending to an in-depth reading of the story’s content. Before approaching these techniques, however, a brief summary will help us to understand what is at stake in the story.

Callie, a presumably lower-class woman, and her son, Bo, are visited by Marie, a middle-class woman, and her two children, Josh and Abbie. Although characters who are presumably the women's husbands are absent from the principal events of the narrative, each exerts a strong influence on the adult female characters. Marie's husband, Robert, passively condones the family's menagerie, such that Marie, whose children already have and have had pets, decides upon a "Family Mission" to buy a puppy. This puppy is being sold by Callie, whose husband, Robert, claims he must kill any sick or "extra" animals that appear. However, when Marie arrives at Callie's home, she decides against taking the puppy upon discovering Bo chained up in the backyard like a dog—a twist that complicates the story in important ways.

All of this information is relayed, as I have mentioned, through a technique Saunders calls "third-person ventriloquist." This technique allows him to maintain a third-person narrative voice while providing us direct access to the thoughts and expressions of the characters. In an interview with Edan Lepucki for the National Book Foundation, Saunders describes the technique as him departing from the third-person objective "to take on the diction and thought habits of the character. If you are looking to understand why a person might do something, a good clue would be in the way he thinks about (or justifies) it in his most private space, i.e., his unfiltered thoughts” (n.p.). While this may seem like a description of first-person narrative voice, it is different because the character is not narrating the thoughts. Instead, a more omniscient-type narrator is allowing us access to them in a way that is “unfiltered.” Thus, by remaining in third person, the technique also allows for greater narrative variance.

In contrast to the stories found in Saunders’s first collection, which are exclusively first-person narratives, third-person ventriloquism allows him to write in what essentially feels like a first-person voice while also permitting him to switch his focus from one character to another. Marie remembers “Dad being so dour and Mom so ashamed” (Puppy 32) then contrasts the family of her childhood with that of her adulthood, the one composed of her own children and Robert, exclaiming, “Well, in this family laughter was encouraged!” (Puppy 33). Rather than the narrator describing her actions to us, it is as if we are reading a running narrative of her observed thoughts, which at certain moments seem to be in first-person. Marie is always referenced in the third-person, but certain sentences, such as the exclamation, seem to come from her directly. This technique allows us to experience almost the same kind of intimacy we have with a first-person narrator, while allowing shifts in narrative focus to weave a more complex perspective.

As a ventriloquist switches dummies, so the story switches narrative voices. The third-person narrative that begins with Marie is then relayed through Callie then Marie and finally Callie again. The way Saunders uses this technique of alternating narratives is only slightly different than that which has come to be known as "vasos comunicantes," or "communicating vessels," after Mario Vargas Llosa, who describes the technique as "dos o más episodios que ocurren en tiempos, espacios, o niveles de realidad distintos unidos en una totalidad narrativa por decisión del narrador a fin de que esa vecindad o mezcla los modifique recíprocamente" (2011, 128). Although Saunders's story follows the dual narrative format A-B-A-B, as we might find in a story like Llosa's example of Julio Cortázar's "*La noche boca arriba*," the narratives are not entirely disconnected by planes of reality or by temporospatiality. This is not the only Saunders story to feature temporospatially intersecting dual narratives. The intersecting A-B narrative occurs in "Tenth of December," as well as, to a lesser extent, in the earlier story "The Falls." If A is Marie's narrative and B is Callie's narrative, the second A section occurs when both characters are present in the same location, although it is all filtered through the narrative "dummy" Marie. However, it is important we are introduced to both character's narratives separately before they are brought together in the second A section.

The two women are linked by the narrative motif of perfection. Both women are introduced observing something each believes is perfect. While Marie is the first character associated with this motif, it is in Callie's narrative where it appears most frequently. We are introduced to Marie and how she thinks by how she understands a field of corn. It is not merely a field of corn but a "perfect field of corn" (Puppy 31). In Callie's narrative, it is not clear what exactly is perfect—this will be revealed later—but we know it is related to Bo and his being in the yard: "It was still solved so *perfect*" (Puppy 35, italics original), we first read, and later, "Today he didn't need the meds because he was safe in the yard, because she'd fixed it so *perfect*" (Puppy 36, italics original). Callie's insistence on Bo not needing "the meds," or medication, suggests to us that whatever she has solved is related to some kind of difference in Bo. Whatever she has fixed seems to keep in the yard, but whether this is for his own safety or the safety of neighbors we have yet to learn.

Returning to Marie's narrative, Marie seems to decide, upon determining the puppy belongs to a "white-trash" family, that it is acceptable to adopt the dog, asking herself: "Had she come from a perfect place? Everything was transmutable" (Puppy 39). She first imagines the puppy as a character we might find in a Mark Twain tale, naming it Zeke and buying "it a corncob pipe and a straw hat;" the puppy, "having crapped on the rug," would then look at up her and say, in Twainian diction, "'*Cain't* *hep it*'" (Puppy 39, italics original). She then convinces herself that because she was able to "transmute" her life, the puppy will be able to grow up to admit, "while entertaining some friends, speaking to them in a British accent: *My family of origin was, um, rather, not, shall we say, of the most respectable*…" (Puppy 39, italics and ellipses original). By anthropomorphizing the puppy, she recognizes how its life might not be so dissimilar from that of her own. She seems capable of establishing an emotional connection with the puppy; however, even when she imagines naming it Zeke, the puppy remains an "it," the pronoun used to refer to the puppy throughout the story. Once Marie discovers Bo, any hope of an emotional responsivity to the puppy disappears.

Rather than either of the main characters, it is Abbie who next uses the term "perfect," which occurs in the continuation of Marie's second narrative section. Abbie "began to cry softly, saying, 'Really, that was the perfect pup for me'" (Puppy 41). This idea of perfection is different from what we have encountered before because Abbie qualifies it with the prepositional phrase "for me." Both Marie's perfect corn and Callie's perfect solution are presented as being perfect in and of themselves. Abbie qualifies what she determines as perfect as being perfect for her, not perfect in its own right. The puppy, then, she recognizes, cannot be perfect to all but is perfect for her. Whether Abbie is trying to manipulate her mother or not is arguable. This is the second point in the text when she cries, the first occasion being in regards to having no memory of Goochie as a puppy. However, on this occasion, Marie decides that, although it “was a nice pup”—insinuating that it is not perfect—she is “not going to contribute to a situation like this in even the smallest way” (Puppy 41), the situation being Callie’s perfect solution: Bo tied up in the yard. Likewise, Marie’s perfect field of corn ends up being the probable death place of the puppy, whom Callie leaves in the field when the text returns to her narrative. For the reader, Marie’s idea of what is perfect is undone by Callie’s action, while Callie’s idea of perfection is undone by Marie’s action. Still, the word “perfect” will appear once more in the story, just before the end, after Callie has a revelation about what love is: “Like Bo wasn’t perfect, but she loved him how he was and tried to help him get better” (Puppy 43). It is the first instance in the text when a character admits something is not perfect.

The motif of perfection unites the narratives while also reminding us that we should be careful about becoming attached to our own limited perspectives. By doubling the narrative, Saunders is able to present differing opinions and complicate a single concept or element. While it may seem that this technique could only lead to a procession of dualisms, such is not the case in Saunders’s story, as we shall discover.

7.2. “Tethered Like an Animal:” Questioning Animality and Ethics

Human perceptions of and interactions with nonhuman animals are integral to our understanding of the story and, more specifically, help us to understand character and family dynamics. Family members interact in the presence of and with pets. Indeed, it sets the plot in motion. Josh gooses Marie, his mother, with his Game Boy, causing toothpaste to spray across the mirror. They all roll on the floor laughing with Goochie, a dog, until Josh asks his mother if she remembers when Goochie was a puppy, which causes Abbie to cry because she is too young to remember Goochie as a puppy. It is this incident that prompts Marie to decide to get a puppy. Her need for the puppy seems more about her drive to have a happy family and maintain a status of privilege, a privilege that allows her family to keep a “menagerie,” than about giving a puppy a home. This need for a happy family comes through not only in the revelations about what her family was like while she was growing up but also from how she thinks about her own family.

Although only briefly mentioned, the two digital nonhumans who appear in one of Josh’s video games, Noble Baker, offer an interesting perspective on how wild animals are assessed and treated differently from those, like Goochie, we consider pets. It is important to address their role as they are linked to what we discover later in the text. In the video game, it is necessary to contend with “various Hungry Denizens, such as a Fox with a distended stomach; such as a fey Robin that would improbably carry the Loaf away, speared on its beak, whenever it had succeeded in dropping a Clonking Rock on your Baker” (Puppy 33-34). The Fox and Robin are threats that must be fought off. Interestingly, they are not anthropomorphized. The Fox, with its distended stomach, is clearly suffering from starvation, while the Robin is described as fey, which, in addition to its modern meanings suggesting unworldliness or supernatural powers—which the Robin, dropping Clonking Rocks and spearing the Loaf on its beak, almost seems to suggest—retains the archaic meaning of impending death.

Thus, themes of animality and death are introduced into the text. Animals considered wild, such as the Fox and even the Robin, can be considered pests, just as the raccoons were considered wild in “The 400-Pound CEO.” Animality can be threatening unless domesticated. If an animal can be a pet, its animality is less wild, less threatening. A pet, then, is a sort of domesticated pest. Although it is becoming more common to refer to some domestic animals as companion species, à la Donna Haraway, or just plain companions, as much as we may love the nonhuman companions we live with, they are generally still dominated and/or enslaved in some way. One of these ways is by collecting them, which seems to be the case in Saunders's story. We discover the family has more pets than Goochie and that they have been purchased using credit cards, rendering them as products rather than constituents.

Robert calls the family's pet collection a menagerie. As mentioned, he is absent from most of the narrative, but this absence and his passive remarks exert an influence: "'Ho HO!' Robert had said, coming home to find the iguana. 'Ho HO!' he had said, coming home to find the ferret trying to get into the iguana cage. 'We appear to be the happy operators of a menagerie!'" (Puppy 33). His words are apt, since the family does appear to be operating a menagerie. According to Marie, his only concerns are "what the creature ate and what hours it slept and what the heck they were going to name the little bugger" (Puppy 33). Of course, animality can still appear in pets, no matter how domesticated. Through the third-person ventriloquist voice of Marie, we learn that Robert has been bitten more than once by the iguana, but that "[t]his time would be different, she was sure of it. The kids would care for this pet themselves, since a puppy wasn't scaly and didn't bit" (34). While Marie's concern about the children being bitten is warranted, what the animal's skin-type has to do with their ability to take care of a "pet" should be irrelevant. By mentioning skin-type she implies that fur is better than scales, meaning that the iguana is too animalistic, too wild. Nevertheless, she still considers it a pet. What neither Marie nor the reader yet are aware of is the appearance of this liminality or nondistinction between wild and domesticate, humanity and animality, and, the old binary, human and animal in the subject of a human boy who seems to act and be treated very much like a puppy. This boy, is Callie's son, Bo.

We are first introduced to Bo through Callie's narrative. It may seem like Saunders is trying to shock us by withholding the fact that Bo is tied up in the yard, and in a certain respect, he is; however, because we encounter Bo through his mother's narrative, for us to read that she has tied him up here would feel, I argue, inauthentic. It would be patronizing toward us as readers and would be an instance of us being told important plot information rather than discovering it through Marie, with whom our allegiance is more likely already to have been forged. For the purpose of understanding how his character challenges our assumptions about what is human and what is animal, however, it is better to look forward in the text to Marie's second narrative section before returning to the paragraphs concerning Bo's character in Callie's first narrative section.

In the second A section, Marie discovers Bo in the backyard while she is snooping. Marie examines and criticizes the living conditions of Callie's family before reaching

> the window and, anthropologically pulling the blind aside, was shocked, so shocked that she dropped the blind and shook her head, as if trying to wake herself, shocked to see a young boy, just a few years younger than Josh, harnessed and chained to a tree, via some sort of doohickey by which—she pulled the blind back again, sure she could not have seen what she thought she had—
>
> When the boy ran, the chain spooled out. He was running now, looking back at her, showing off. When he reached the end of the chain, it jerked and he dropped as if shot.
>
> He rose to a sitting position, railed against the chain, whipped it back and forth, crawled to a bowl of water, and, lifting it to his lips, took a drink: a drink from a dog's bowl. (Puppy 39-40, italics original)

The way Bo behaves and the way he is treated remind us of a dog. He is harnessed and chained to a tree—"solved so *perfect*"—and when he runs, he runs to the end of the chain and drops, much like a dog might do. He is also described as crawling to a bowl of water to drink. Even his more human actions suggest animality. He rails against the chain, whipping it back and forth. Although he lifts the bowl of water to drink from it, it is a bowl, not a cup; furthermore, he crawls to it first.

After watching this spectacle, Marie decides to make a lesson of Bo to her son. When Josh joins his mother at the window, a “teachable moment” presents itself to her:

> She let him look.
>
> He should know that the world was not all lessons and iguanas and Nintendo. It was also this muddy simple boy tethered like an animal. (40)

If Marie does intend this to be a teachable moment, she lacks the awareness of why the boy is tied up. What is she teaching Josh by allowing him to look? If it is that it is wrong to harness and chain another human like a slave, the lesson seems fitting enough, but both the situation and what is being taught about whom is more complicated. To fully comprehend what is at stake means understanding the scenario completely.

What is clear to the reader, based on certain hints in the first Callie section, is that the boy seems to lack certain mental capabilities we take for granted in the human. He is cognitively different, it seems, and is so in such a way that humans tend to think of nonhuman animals. In other words, Bo seems to lack the kind of rational intelligence privileged by humans. In this sense, it makes sense for Bo to be tied up like an animal—yet Marie is appalled by it. Therefore, we have a double standard when it comes to our treatment of human and nonhuman animals in terms of cognitive capabilities.

Before criticizing Callie's treatment and perception of her son, it is best to continue to analyze Marie's, since, as I have mentioned, we are more likely to sympathize with her as readers. As I have stated, for her, Bo is tethered like an animal. This presupposes that Bo is not an animal, which, of course, presumes that humans are not animals. That Bo is tethered like an animal discloses as much about how we tend to treat animals as it does about Bo. Marie's anger manifests in a passive aggressive manner. She informs Callie that "one really shouldn't possess something if one wasn't up to properly caring for it" (Puppy 41). Ostensibly she is referring to the puppy, but she is implying Bo. It is interesting to note that although she is angry at Callie for treating her son like an animal, she uses the word "possess," which is how we think of pets, not children, while also being a term we use with objects we believe we own.

Callie, we already know, does believe she is properly caring for her son and does not understand the insinuation. Because Marie refuses "to contribute to a situation like this in even the smallest way" (Puppy 41), she indirectly sentences the puppy to death by refusing to take him. Marie's reaction also seems influenced by her own difficult childhood experiences. Outside, Bo comes to the fence, and she imagines informing him "with a single look, *Life will not necessarily always be like this. Your life could suddenly blossom into something wonderful. It can happen. It happened to me*" (Puppy 41, italics original). Marie actually imagines conveying all this via nonverbal language, via a single look, a look that is much more animalistic, in a sense. Despite her anger at Bo being treated like an animal, she has not only used language more in tune with how she understands pets—as things to purchase and own—and imagines relaying information through a look, imagining “looks that conveyed a world of meaning with their subtle blah blah blah,” which she also instantly dismisses in favor of calling Child Welfare (Puppy 41).

Callie is equally concerned about Bo, as well as the puppy, even if her concern for the latter has nothing to do with how it feels. When we are first introduced to Bo, we learn that although his mother knows he will need freedom when he is older, right now he needs “not to get killed” (Puppy 35). He is prone to running away by “darting” across streets. Callie immediately thinks of this verb when she asks herself “[h]ow had he crossed I-90? She knew how. Darted. That’s how he crossed streets” (Puppy 35). “Dart” is a verb that also might be used to describe a nonhuman animal, such as a dog, crossing a road. Rather than force Bo to take medication, which causes another set of complications, she fixes it perfectly. In other words, she harnesses and chains him to a tree. Marie, not privy to any of this, assumes that what Callie has done is cruel, but for Callie, it is less cruel than allowing her son to run across the highway, which endangers his life, and is less cruel than forcing him to take medications, which cause him to grind his teeth and pound his fist, breaking plates and, once, a glass tabletop, for which he received stitches in his wrist (Puppy 36). Thus, when Callie watches him through the window, we are presented with a more idyllic scene, one without the suggestion of how she has “fixed it” and one that causes us to be all the more shocked when we read the passage in Marie’s section.

What Callie witnesses is not a boy tethered like an animal but her son playing like any boy might play.

> He was out there practicing pitching by filling his Yankees helmet with pebbles and winging them at the tree.
>
> He looked up and saw her and did the thing where he blew a kiss.
>
> Sweet little man.
>
> Now all she had to worry about was the pup. (Puppy 36)

Although we realize Bo is different in some way, in a way that seems to affect his cognitive abilities, he behaves in ways more recognizably human in Callie’s section than he does in Marie’s section. Still, how we perceive his character as readers is dictated more by how the main characters perceive him; however, as readers we are granted access to both perspectives and can decide for ourselves whether Callie’s actions are more ethically viable than Marie’s or vice versa or both or neither. Bo’s humanity and animality, if we may call them such, are presented to us in ways that blur distinctions between the two while also blurring the distinctions between ethical responses to his being. We are privileged with knowledge of contesting perspectives and responses from which the primary characters are excluded. What is important to note, however, is how Bo is most animal in how he is treated by being excluded from the discourse. Like the puppy, he is equally excluded. In this respect, they are aligned. As readers, we have no more access to Bo’s desires and feelings than we do to the puppy’s desires and feelings. Of all the characters introduced to us in the story, their characters remain the most distant from us.

Although Saunders provides us with access to Marie’s and Callie’s thoughts through the third-person ventriloquist technique, we are not privileged with any access to Bo’s thoughts, let alone the puppy’s. The closest we come to reading the thoughts of one of these characters is when Marie imagines the puppy saying “cain’t hep it.” The lack of narrative proximity to Bo and the puppy seems strategic on the part of Saunders, for in another story from *Tenth of December*, “Victory Lap,” he includes two full sections using the third-person ventriloquist voice that is associated with the antagonist, a potential kidnapper and rapist. In “Puppy,” it is not clear that Bo even has the ability to speak human verbal language, as he is the sole human character without a line of dialogue or any reference to speech, which further aligns him with the puppy, while also rendering him more animalistic, since the puppy's possible dialogue, reminiscent of a character from perhaps *Huckleberry Finn*, is at least imagined by Marie.

While a more deliberately posthumanist third-person narrative structure might provide us more information or more access to Bo's and the puppy's experiences, what Saunders's narrative structure does instead is present us with a situation in which the ramifications are posthumanist because the story does not answer any of the questions it may stir up in us as readers. What is human? Who is more ethical? What is the most ethically responsible way to respond? Does making an ethical choice impinge on an ethical responsibility to someone else? What the story demonstrates is that there is no one proper ethical solution to the scenario presented. Ethics, as Derrida has argued, remains an impossibility. Ethics, as Saunders has claimed, can be bettered. The story's particular posthumanist angle lies in its unacceptance of a delimited ethics.

7.3. "Maybe That's What Love Was": Complicating Ethics

The ultimate ethical conundrum is presented through the character with whom we are less likely to feel sympathetic:

Callie. She is not introduced until after Marie's first section and is presumably of a lower economic background ("white-trash") than the average reader. She seems oblivious to her husband's manipulative and controlling behavior, which she actually appears to condone even when it means killing, for example, kittens. Of course, the situation is not so simple. When we discover, through Marie, that Callie's son is chained up in the yard, we, like Marie, may feel angry. Marie's response is as genuine an ethical response as Callie's, but it is only when we are presented with Callie's ethical response to her situation that the ethics suggested by the story become complex. It is on account of the narrative's communicating vessels-like nature that the story shifts from a "black-and-white" moral scenario toward the presentation of a more posthumanist ethics.

Callie's more nuanced ethical actions serve as a counterpoint to the more direct response of Marie. It is not a matter of whose actions are more right or wrong; on the contrary, our qualitative reductions of ethics are suspended. Callie does not realize that what she perceives as taking care of her son will be perceived as child abuse by Marie, which in turn will affect the puppy. Although Callie acts in a way that could be called selfless, in that she thinks of Jimmy and Bo before herself, she is troubled by the decision she makes to abandon the puppy in the field of corn. By the end of the story, Callie has convinced herself that she is helping Jimmy, who "liked her the way she was. And she liked him the way he was. Which maybe that's what love was: liking someone how he was and doing things to help him get even better" (Puppy 43). This love, however, means abandoning the puppy to almost certain death by starvation; in retrospect, the Fox with the distended stomach in Noble Baker now seems a prescient figure.

Callie's first examples of love rely on the condition of the puppy's death: "she was helping Jimmy by making his life easier by killing something so he—no. All she was doing was walking, walking away from—" (Puppy 43). The monologue is marked by em dashes. Callie interrupts her own thoughts, unwilling to consider the full meaning of and complications of her actions. She refocuses her musings from death to love and from Jimmy to Bo, but continues defining love: "What had she just said? That had been good. *Love was liking someone how he was and doing things to help him get even better*" (Puppy 43, italics original). Now she changes the examples of her definition to what seem more positive associations related to Bo, such as him mellowing out, having a family, and "looking at flowers. Tapping with his bat, happy enough" (Puppy 43). However, her thoughts also belie a hope that he will somehow become "normal" by mellowing out and starting a family.

Callie’s definition of love is typical of the kind of simplicity of expression we find both in Saunders’s stories and in American culture. On a superficial level, it is the kind of definition of love we can buy into. Although the definition does hold a grain of truth, “doing things” to help someone “get even better” is far too vague. What are these things? What is better? We are only granted access to Callie’s definition of love, but if we understand anything from the story, it is that what is perceived as ethically right or wrong is contingent upon many factors, including factors to which we may or may not have access. What Callie defines as love is a definition that works for her in the context of her situation, but the ethical choices open to Callie, it seems, are contingent upon Jimmy’s ideas about keeping pets. Bo and the puppy are excluded from the discourse (a discourse which occurs in Callie’s mind).

Bo isn’t perfect, but if he behaves more “humanely” by mellowing out and starting a family, he will be closer to perfect because he will be less animalistic. Of course, what we consider animalistic has very little to do with nonhuman animals and more to do with historical assumptions about them. The puppy arguably may have what we consider more human traits then Bo; a puppy can be trained, whereas Bo, who is older, has not learned desired human behaviors. By the story’s end, the puppy is granted freedom, even if it is a

freedom that will eventually lead to its death, whereas Bo's freedom is taken away because of Callie's fear for his death.
If Bo is literally chained, Callie is metaphorically. Her choices are limited by what Jimmy dictates: "Well, what did it matter, drowned in a bag or starved in the corn? This way Jimmy wouldn't have to do it" (Puppy 42). The choice is not whether the puppy is to live or die but who will do the killing and how. By leaving the puppy in the field of corn, Callie is ostensibly allowing the puppy a chance of surviving, although we and her are doubtful of the fact that the outcome of abandoning the puppy can be anything but death. Presumably, she can make no further efforts to find someone to adopt the puppy before Jimmy discovers it.

Jimmy's manipulations first become evident when Callie decides that if Marie takes the puppy, Jimmy will not have to kill it. She recalls that

> [h]e'd hated doing it that time with the kittens. But if no one took the pup he'd do it. He'd have to. Because his feeling was, when you were a going to do a thing and didn't do it, that was how kids got into drugs. Plus, he'd been raised on a farm, or near a farm anyways, and anybody raised on a farm knew you had to do what you had to do in terms of sick animals or extra animals—the pup being not sick, just extra. (Puppy 36)

The passage reads more like an internationalization of Jimmy's rationalizations for killing sick or "extra" animals. His argument for killing seems like an attempt at logical reasoning but is based on logical fallacy: no direct connection exists between killing so-called sick or extra animals and children taking drugs. Although Callie condones Jimmy's actions verbally, Saunders uses certain techniques to provide us with clues that she does not. For example, Callie emphasizes that not only would Jimmy "do it" but he would "have to" do it. Jimmy, of course, does not actually have to kill the puppy. Her emphasis on the action of killing that she only implies with the words "do it" read more like her own attempt to support Jimmy's decisions rather than his own decision, even if Jimmy does believe that, having grown up near a farm, it is necessary "'to do what you got to do!'" (Puppy 36). Here, doing what "you got to do" or doing "it" are just euphemisms for killing.

When Jimmy "cried in bed, saying how the kittens had mewed in the bag all the way to the pond, and how he wished he'd never been raised on a farm," Callie almost responds by reminding him that he means "'near a farm'" (Puppy 36). Callie's subversive actions do not become fully apparent until the next clause of the sentence when we read that

> sometimes when she got too smart-assed he would do this hard pinching thing on her arm while waltzing her around the bedroom, as if the place where he was pinching was like her handle, going, "I'm not sure I totally heard what you just said." (Puppy 37)

From this sentence, it becomes clear that Callie, when she does express disagreement with Jimmy, is physically abused by him. Thus, he is not only mentally abusive but physically abusive. His rationalizations for killing are now not only irrational but perhaps calculated. What makes us as readers perhaps less sympathetic of Callie is how she repeats, justifies, and excuses his behavior.

Although we may identify more with her Marie's perspective, along with her socioeconomic standing and nuclear family, her consistent denigration of the household of Callie renders her character increasingly unpleasant. Many of her negative criticisms are italicized: "the lady of the house went trudging away and one-two-three-four plucked up four *dog turds* from the rug;" "the spare tire on the *dining-room table*; the sink had a *basketball* in it;" "the lady of the house plodded into the kitchen, placing the daintily held, paper-towel-wrapped turds *on the counter*" (Puppy 38-39, italics original). These emphases reach a climax when she witnesses Bo "drink *from a dog's bowl*" (Puppy 40, italics original). She and the children then leave

> through the trashed kitchen (past some kind of *crankshaft* on a cookie sheet, past a partial red pepper afloat *in a can of green paint*) while the lady of the house scuttled after them, saying, wait, wait, they could have it free, please take it—she just really wanted them to have it. (Puppy 41)

While her first reference to Callie as “the lady of the house” may still be considered a form of polite address, by the second, after discovering Bo, she has referred to Callie in a different manner: “The cruelty and ignorance just radiated from her fat face, with its little smear of lipstick” (Puppy 40). Marie will again describe the mother using the adjective “fat” before the section’s end.

When we begin reading Callie’s second section, our feelings toward Callie may be mixed. Is she as terrible as Marie believes? Even if we find Marie’s tone too censorious, we may agree with her assessment regarding Callie’s parenting. Surely a woman who chains up her child is a terrible person. Surely someone who abandons a puppy in a field of corn is evil. Rather, I argue that Saunders’s narrative choices regarding Marie’s assessment of the situation leave us open to feeling more sympathetic toward Callie. The story also ends with Callie, and her final assessment of herself may change how we feel. Although she still seems manipulated by Jimmy, we realize that she is serious when she believes what she has done for Bo—chain him up in the yard—was done “because she loved him how he was and tried to help him get better” (Puppy 43). We learn that the previous day he had not been able to leave the house and

> ended the day screaming in bed, so frustrated. Today he was looking at flowers. Who was it that thought up that idea, the idea that had made today better than

> yesterday? Who loved him enough to think that up? Who loved him more than anyone else in the world loved him?
>
> Her.
>
> She did. (Puppy 43)

Still, we cannot ignore her abandonment of the puppy nor the fact that her display of love, which is again a rationalization, means taking away Bo's freedom. Bo remains, at the end of the story, without the freedom the puppy has gained, yet his lack of freedom is rationalized by Callie as a display of love.

If Bo is animalized, however, the puppy is treated as little more than an object. Its life is of little importance contrasted with Bo's happiness. What the reader never learns is how Callie has the puppy to begin with nor how it has remained undiscovered by Jimmy. Marie briefly mentions "the glum dog mother, the presumed in-house pooper, who was now dragging her rear over the pile of clothing, in a sitting position, splay-legged, moronic look of pleasure on her face," which, in part, gives Marie to the awareness "that what this really was, was deeply sad" (38). Her primary emotional response may be one of sadness but by the end of the section it has given way to anger. Despite her emotional reaction, she decides not to influence the situation through direct action but to walk away from it, choosing instead a passive aggressive approach that ultimately reads more as her need to maintain a status of privilege. Saunders only occasionally references pop culture or real life brands in his work, of which this story is an example of this kind of usage; notably, Marie drives a Lexus, a luxury brand vehicle.[56] To an American reader, the brand is instantly recognizable as a status symbol, which suggests that Marie's privileged status has more to do with her decision to leave without the puppy and to call "Child Welfare, where she knew Linda Berling, a very non-nonsense lady who would snatch this poor kid away so fast it would make that fat mother's thick head spin" (Puppy 41). We can also infer that the refusal of the puppy is one more way to maintain social status. The family's menagerie was purchased by credit card, but Marie refuses to take the puppy for free.

What she is really refusing, even after reluctantly deciding to accept the puppy, is association with a social status she has left behind. She claims that "it would not be possible for them to take it at this time" and decides that she "was not going to contribute to a situation like this in even the smallest way" (Puppy 41). It is a stretch to believe that by refusing to take the puppy for free, this refusal would contribute to the "situation" of Bo. Her inaction is further underscored by an earlier thought to which we are made privy, a thought that Callie interrupts:

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[56] On the website Ranking the Brands, Lexus is noted as being rated by Forbes as the seventy-third most valuable brand in the world in 2013, the year of *Tenth of December*'s publication.

> God, she would have killed for just one righteous adult to confront her mother, shake her, say, "You idiot, this is your child, your child you're—"
>
> "So what were you thinking of naming him?" the woman said, coming out of the kitchen.
>
> The cruelty and ignorance just radiated from her fat face, with its little smear of lipstick. (Puppy 40)

Marie's own assumption can be applied just as easily to her. Although it manifests in a different way, she is also cruel and ignorant. Marie's thoughts do partially align with her inaction in an indirect manner. While she does not become the righteous adult she would have killed for, she does serve as an accomplice to the death of the puppy.

7.4. "Don't Look Back": Naming, Sacrifice, Shame, and the Abyssal Limit

Callie interrupts Marie's thoughts with a question. Callie asks what the family will name "him," the one instance when the puppy is referred to by a gendered pronoun. Marie thinks but never speaks the name "Zeke," and thus never formally names the puppy. What is important about Callie's question is that it concerns naming, an action that has shaped how we relate to nonhuman animals. We may recall Robert's questions regarding pets, which includes inquiring what the pet will be named. The name Marie had considered giving the puppy, Zeke, is common to both American baseball and

American football personalities. The name is also a hypocorism of the Hebrew name “Ezekiel,” a Judeo-Christian prophet, and which roughly translates to “God strengthens.”

In contrast, Bo’s name is the same as that of a famous family dog—the “First Dog” of the Barack Obama family. This Bo is named for the musician Bo Diddley, for whom it is a stage name. In addition to being a nickname, Bo is also derived from the Old Norse “*búa*,” meaning “to dwell” or “to live.” Bo, the dog-boy, lives, while Zeke is exiled to a Babylon: the perfect field of corn; however, what occurs in the story is more akin to a Daedalian Cain and Abel. The puppy is “sacrificed” to Bo by Callie, but it is Marie who will “slay” Callie by calling Child Welfare—if she actually acts on this consideration.

In “The Animal That Therefore I Am,” Derrida offers a reading of the naming of the nonhuman animals in Genesis in which God

> has created man in his likeness *so that* man will *subject, tame, dominate, train*, or *domesticate* the animals born before him and assert his authority over them. God destines the animals to an experience of the power of man, in order to see the power of man in action, in order to see the power of man at work, in or to see man take power over all the other living beings. (398, italics original)

The men, especially Jimmy, function like *deorum absconditus*: remote gods, ignoring and ignorant to suffering, including and especially that of nonhuman animals. Derrida's deconstruction of Genesis continues as he suggests that

> God prefers sacrifice of the very animal that he has let Adam name—*in order to see*. As if between the taming desired by God and the sacrifice of the animal preferred by God the invention of names, the freedom accorded to Adam or Ish to name the animals, was only a stage "*in order to see*," in view of providing sacrificial flesh for offering to that God. (Animal 426)

Derrida differentiates between naming and sacrifice. Naming does not lead to sacrifice; rather, it is God's testing of Adam's naming of the nonhuman animals that leads Him to call for the sacrifice of nonhuman animals.

Derrida then offers a deconstruction of the story of Cain and Abel. By this deconstruction, along with his reading of Epimetheus and Prometheus, he notices that

> in every discourse concerning the animal, and notably in the Western philosophical discourse, the same dominant, the same recurrence of a schema that is in truth invariable. What is that? The following: what is proper to man [...] would derive from this originary fault, indeed from this fault in propriety, what is proper to man as default in propriety. (Animal 429)

The concept of the human is contingent upon the “double insistence upon nudity, fault, and default at the origin of human history” (Animal 428), a double insistence that we find in both the story of Adam and Eve and the story of Cain and Abel, which “cannot not be associated once more with the myth of Epimetheus and Prometheus” (Animal 428). Nudity in these stories means shame.

While the women in Saunders’s story do not display shame from nudity, shame is still present. The sense of shame also explains their obsessions with perfection. Marie is ashamed of who she *was*. This shame is linked to her upbringing. When she is confronted by the state of Callie’s household, it triggers memories of her own childhood home, a house in which objects lay strewn about just as they do in Callie’s house. The confrontation challenges her current bourgeois lifestyle. Callie, meanwhile, is ashamed of who she *is*, although she does not seem fully aware of this. She decides near the end of the story, while walking away from the puppy, that she could be slimmer and should start night school. Although she reminds herself that Jimmy likes her the way she is, this way is also shaped by Jimmy’s ideas and demands. What Callie seems most ashamed of, however, is abandoning the puppy because it is while walking away from the field of corn that she begins to think about her body (not slim enough) and mind (she should attend night school). We are treated to Callie’s mental mantra: “*Don’t look back*, *don’t* *look back*, she said in her head as she raced away through the corn" (Puppy 42, italics original). We can also take her mantra to mean, in a more metaphorical sense, that by looking back at the past, it is impossible to face the present.

When both Marie and Callie are confronted with what they find shameful, they react by driving or walking away. Marie drives away after looking at Bo and thinking of what she wants her look to say to him. It is a nonverbal language that she hopes will communicate her message to him. Callie, while walking away from the pup, tells herself not to look back. In both instances, looking or seeing, or not looking or seeing, is significant. For Derrida, the ability of the animal to look or see is important, as he shares how the female cat he lives with can return the gaze, can make him feel ashamed when he is naked before her. Although he focuses perhaps too much on the singular sense of sight to build his argument, he reminds us that the animal "can allow itself to be looked at, no doubt, but also—something that philosophy perhaps forgets, perhaps being this calculated forgetting itself—it can look at me" (Puppy 392). Indeed, this gaze is what Derrida calls "the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say the bordercrossing from which the vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself" (Puppy 393). This notion of an abyssal limit is manmade or, rather, man-given. It is from this side of this supposed abyss that the narrative seems to mark its approach. The puppy exists as if without any ability to sense. The narrative never hints that the puppy looks back, nor do we have any notion of how it might experience the world.

In this chapter, we have discovered how ethics becomes complicated when humans behave more like nonhuman animals or when we do not consider how nonhuman animals or animalistic humans may have an opinion in our treatment of them. We have also discovered how Saunders's use of third-person ventriloquism allows us to access to the thoughts of multiple characters. However, the same year of *Tenth of December*'s publication, Saunders also published a Kindle Single, *Fox 8*, that returned to a use of first-person narrative but in which the protagonist is a nonhuman animal. It is his only story thus far in which a sustained narrative is carried by a nonhuman animal. In contrast to the 93990 and the puppy, we are finally granted access to the thoughts, not just the actions, of a nonhuman animal, who just so happens to be a fox.

8. BEING NONHUMAN: *FOX 8*

8.1. "Yuman": Dominionism and Human Verbal Language

Fox 8: A Story (2013)[57] has had an interesting evolution. It was initially intended to be a children's book but was rejected due to its use of misspellings. Saunders then altered it into a more sinister short story, which he published in *McSweeney's*, Volume #33 (2010). In a 2013 interview with Boris Kachka for the culture and entertainment site *Vulture*, he mentions that this earlier version "was a little more defeatist" (n.p.). He intended to include it in *Tenth of December*, but felt that "it was asking one stretch too many from the reader" (Kachka n.p.). His editor asked if he wanted to try the story once again but as a stand-alone release, which he was not even aware was possible for a short story. Thus, within months of the publication of *Tenth of December*, the companion piece, *Fox 8*, with illustrations by Chelsea Cardinal, was released as an e-book (specifically a Kindle Single).[58]

To American audiences, the title may suggest a television station affiliate of the Fox Broadcasting Company or the more notorious Fox News Channel, which features "news" with a strong conservative bias. However, Fox 8, as it turns out, is an actual fox. In his review for the *Los Angeles Times*, David L. Ulin describes the story as “a bit of an outlier, even for [Saunders]. Structured as a letter to the reader (or “Reeder”), it starts as an account of resourcefulness and curiosity—the fox learns language by listening through an open window to a human mother reading bedtime stories to her children—before becoming something considerably more pointed and bleak” (2013, n.p.). While I disagree that the story is an “outlier,” since it still contains many of the hallmarks of a Saunders story, it does, like many Saunders stories, become more dismal—but also more hopeful. Fox 8 does live to write his tale.

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[57] Hereafter, I will refer to the story as "F8."

[58] The story can also be found on *The Guardian*.

Anthropomorphism of nonhuman animals is a common feature of the storytelling of many cultures. Karla Armbruster claims in “What Do We Want from Talking Animals?” that

> to genuinely know the otherness of nonhuman animals runs through most, if not all, talking animal stories, as well as the motivations of their readers, even if this desire is sometimes almost completely overshadowed by or absorbed back into the human tendency to gaze […] at our own reflection when we look at other animals (or, more properly, to hear our own voices when we listen to them).” (2013, 19)

This may be one reason why in American literature and film, anthropomorphized nonhuman animals are omnipresent, especially throughout children’s movies and literature, which are populated by English-speaking nonhumans that may or may not interact with human beings. However, they are frequently used as stand-ins for human characters and often uphold human values or, in fables, serve as symbolic exaggerations of human qualities.[59] *Fox 8*, whose titular character is, of course, a fox, both belongs to this tradition and challenges it. The story is George Saunders’s first—second, if we count “Woof!: A Plea of Sorts,” which, with its dog narrator, was published as an essay in *The Braindead Megaphone*—in which the first-person protagonist is not a human being; however, it is hardly surprising, considering the prevalence of anthropomorphism in American culture and his tendency toward experimental narrative voices, that he has written a story from the perspective of a nonhuman animal.

“Woof!” shares enough similarities with *Fox 8* that it may be considered a predecessor to the latter story. For one, its protagonist is also a canid, although of the more domestic variety. The story is also an epistolary narrative, constructed as a letter to a human, whom the dog notably addresses as “Master.” Also similar is its interrogation of the human: “Biscuit,” whose name appears always in quotations, complains of the slippery cheap tile floor, which is not conducive to writing; however, his primary complaint is far more humorous than what we will find in *Fox 8*. We are already aware of Derrida's notions concerning nakedness and the animal, and for Biscuit, who refers to the shedding of clothes as the shedding of overskin, it is the drunken "midnight kitchen gyration sans clothing" that irritates him so much so that he threatens to bite the Master's "much-prized hanger-downer" or "unit" (Woof 124). If this were the end we might think of the "essay," which runs no more than three pages, as little more than a short humor piece. Although Biscuit explains that, aside from the naked gyrating, all is well, he does finally complain twice more, once concerning the nickname "Scout" that he feels debases him and once concerning being taken by front paws and being made to waltz. Biscuits complaints are intended to cut through the master-slave dynamic, as Biscuit has enough agency to make demands of Master. This dynamic is also what sets him apart from Fox 8, whose status as a wild being means he encounters a different set of problems than those of the domestic Biscuit.

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[59] For more information on anthropomorphic animals in children’s literature and films, consult *Animality and Children’s Literature and Film* (2015) by Amy Ratelle and *Talking Animals in Children’s Literature: A Critical Study* (2015) by Catherine L. Elick.

Like Biscuit, Fox 8 is anthropomorphized only in a certain sense, and it is that which many of still consider the most human characteristic: language. Biscuit somehow has learned to write English, while Fox 8 has also learned to write and speak "Yuman" by listening to a Yuman family through the window of a house. Fox 8's letter is addressed to the

"Reeder" but, like "Woof," the narrative is a single letter intended to be received by a single individual. In *Fox 8*, that letter is intended for the mailbox of "P. Melonsky." The letter opens with an apology: "First may I say, sorry for any werds I spel rong. Because I am a fox! So don't rite or spel perfect" (F8 1).[60] Fox 8's idiolect in Yuman includes numerous "misspellings" that actually demonstrate how language remains actively open; its meaning is never fixed. His spellings of "parking" and "mall"—"Par King" and "Mawl"—almost read like puns, suggesting different meanings to those who understand English, while "Yuman" is phonetically equivalent to "You-man," suggesting a directness and even an urgency born in us by the story/letter. Fox 8 remains unaware of the meanings associated with these alternative spellings, yet these respellings are entirely appropriate given what occurs in the story. Fox 8's idiolect also makes apparent colloquial expressions, such as "was like," which Fox 8 spells as one word: "And I woslike: O wow" (F8 4). Although Fox 8 is able to speak and write Yuman competently, he lacks a complete understanding of the Yuman dominion; nevertheless, he suspects that Yumans, despite their ability to "feel luv and show luv" in ways similar to foxes, are not as loving as he first suspected.

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[60] Due to the nature of the story's publication, I do not include actual page numbers but instead provide numbers corresponding to would-be pages if the story were read on an iPad like a "normal" book. The story can also be accessed for free as "'Fox 8' by George Saunders: a fantastical tale by the Man Booker winner" on the website for *The Guardian*.

What causes him to doubt Yumans occurs one night when he hears “a Story, but a fawlse and even meen one. In that story was a Fox. But guess what the Fox was? Sly! Yes, true lee! He trikked a Chiken!” (F8 3). This specific type of animal story that characterizes foxes with the quality of slyness, such as is found in the expression “sly as a fox,” is a common one: the sly fox tries to trick the chickens in order to eat them.[61] Fox 8 challenges our belief that the fox is being sly and consciously trying to trick the chickens by informing us this is not only a false notion but an unkind way of characterizing a fox.

Although he counters the anthropomorphization of the fox and chickens—a chicken wears glasses in the story—what he reveals instead suggests that foxes and humans have more in common than the sly fox suggests. Fox 8 insists:

> We do not trik chikens! We are very open and honest with Chikens! With Chikens, we have a Super Fare Deel, which is: they make the egs, we take the egs, they make more egs. And sometimes may even eat a live Chiken, shud that Chiken consent to be eaten by us, threw failing to run away upon are approche, after she has been looking for feed in a stump.
>
> Not Sly at all.

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[61] In *Literature and Animal Studies* (2016), Mario Ortiz-Robles notes that “[t]he most famous literary example of the clever canine in the European tradition is Reynard the Fox,” whose “genealogy can be traced back to those Aesopian fables that show the fox to a crafty and unscrupulous animal” who relies on his charm and verbal dexterity to get what he wants (65).

> Very strate forward. (F8 3)

Fox 8's argument is not dissimilar from the human argument: chickens lay eggs, humans take the eggs, chickens lay more eggs. Fox 8's purpose is to take the eggs, not trick the chickens. The "for humans"—or in Fox 8's case, "for foxes"—is implied.

Fox 8 asserts that chickens have an agreement with the foxes, in order to counteract the stereotype of foxes being sly. In *Thinking With Animals*, Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman remind us that

> [i]n fables animals are humanized, one might even say hyperhumanized, by caricature: the fox is cunning, the lion is brave, the dog is loyal. Whereas the same stories told about humans might lose the individuating detail of the sort we are usually keen to know about other people, substituting animals as actors strips the characterizations down to prototypes. Animals simplify the narrative to a point that would be found flat or at least allegorical if the same tales were recounted about humans. (9)

Saunders's story cannot be read as a fable because it does not work in service to a prototype, or stereotype; rather, it counteracts the stereotype. Furthermore, and quite indicative that this is a Saunders story, the fox seems less sly than he does exploitative in terms of the "agreement" between foxes and chickens. If foxes were humans then the "Super Fare

Deel" would be considered economically sound rather than sly: the catching and eating of a chicken is considered consensual rather than opportunistic although assent is granted only by the chicken's failure to run away. If we take Fox 8's assertions regarding the Super Fare Deel seriously, foxes seem to have more in common with human economic practices than we give them credit for having. If we want to pinpoint differences then we must acknowledge that foxes do not imprison chickens in battery cages or slaughter them in mass.

How we characterize nonhuman animals also shapes how we think about them, and how we think about them shapes our discourse about them. In "The Problem of Speaking for Animals," Jason Wyckoff notes that "animal signifiers are numerous, diverse, multi-layered and morally ambiguous" (122), which in turn leaves the discourse of species "already shaped by culturally specific and speciesist understandings of terms" (124). A fox is never just a fox because of our cultural associations of foxes as being sly or cunning; in the Occidental world, we generally do not think of foxes as supernatural or wise as the *kitsune* of Japanese folklore are portrayed.[62] In this regard, nonhuman animals, such as foxes, are treated as cyphers. Furthermore, if we call a man "sly as a fox," the idiom is meant to praise him, while if we call a woman "sly as a fox," or even just a "fox," the idiom takes on sexualized nuances.[63]

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[62] 狐 or キツネ, rendered kitsune, means fox. In Yōkai folklore they are supernatural beings, capable of shapeshifting into human forms. Kitsune can have as many as nine tails with the number of tails signifying how old, wise, and powerful the fox is. They are associated with Inari Ōkami one of the major kami of Shinto. Kami are spirits or natural forces venerated in Shinto.

Although Fox 8 seems unaware that the stories he hears are fictional, how nonhuman animals are portrayed in the stories informs us of how we as humans tend to stereotype them. We may recall Wyckoff's conception of dominionism, which means that "to know animals is to dominate them […] since this knowledge is expressed in a lexicon in which the power differential is pervasive" (121). Fox 8 counters such socially contextual knowledge and the stereotypes formed through it, challenging our dominionist notions. For him, it is false that "Bares are always sleeping and nise and luvving" (F8 3), and he questions the intelligence of owls: "Owls are wise? Don't make me laff!" (F8 4). Despite his awareness of Yuman language and human stereotyping, Fox 8 does not fully comprehend the dominionism rampant in Yuman culture. It is even more difficult to understand how Yumans wield language in ways that "use" meaning-loaded language to signal something empty of those meanings. This is most prominently featured in the story when Fox 8 encounters a sign that reads: "Coming soon, FoxViewCommons" (F8 5). As humans, we recognize that this means some type of "development" will soon be constructed. What it means for the foxes is destruction. The irony is that FoxViewCommons, by its very construction, means starvation, death, and relocation for the foxes. Ultimately, there will be no view of foxes.

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[63] Further idiomatic expressions, for example, include "crazy like a fox," "fox in the henhouse," and "outfoxed."

Since Fox 8, despite learning Yuman language, does not have full access to the socially contextual knowledge system that is comprised of, as Wyckoff defines it, “the social norms and conventions that give content to the expressions used to make knowledge claims among some group of persons whose speech and behavior are informed by those norms and conventions” (119), Fox 8 cannot know what is meant by FoxViewCommons until he and his fellow foxes experience what “it” can do. First, Saunders writes,

> came Truks, smoking wile tooting! They dug up our Primary Forest! They tore out our Leaning Tree! They rekked our shady drinking spot, and made total lee flat the highest plase of which we know, from where we can see all of curashun if it is not raining! (F8 5)

The loss of the forest in turn damages the river and harms the fish living in the river. The foxes lose their habitat. Without food, many of the “Extreme Lee Old Foxes become sik, and ded, because: no fud” (F8 6). Fox 8 ventures to the “big wite boxes,” built on the once-forested land, upon which he encounters “mistery werds” that he is unable to translate.

> Upon my reading of these werds, my fellow Foxes looked at me all quizmical, like: Fox 8, tell us, what is

> Bon-Ton, what is Compu-Fun, what is Hooters, what is Kookies-N-Cream?
>
> But I cud not say, those werds never being herd by me at my Story window. (F8 7)

Without access to interaction with representatives of Yuman society and culture, Fox 8 must define the new written Yuman words he encounters—but are these terms even words? We cannot answer this question in a straightforward way.

Derrida can help us to understand what is at play here. In *Of Grammatology*, he claims that the concept of writing effaces the limits of writing because it “has begun to overflow the extension of language. In all senses of the word, would *comprehend* language” (7, italics original). Writing signifies the signifiers of speech: what is signified becomes the signifier of the signifier. The idea that writing is supplementary to language is unsound. The logocentrism of occidental metaphysics is also a phonocentrism that merges the historical meaning of being as “presence." Occidental metaphysics has sought to conceive of this presence, or being, by the denial of absence, which, for Derrida, is logocentrism. Although he never declares it in this way, the concept of a logocentrism as carnophallogocentrism also attests to this determination of being as presence. For him, however, a metaphysics of presence that denies (perceived) absence is problematic: “We are disturbed by that which, in the concept of the sign—which has never existed or functioned outside the history of (the) philosophy (of presence)—remains systematically and genealogically determined by that history" (OG 14). In other words, philosophy has claimed that truth, or reality, can be experienced by the *phonè*, or spoken word. This is the dogma of the epoch of which Derrida writes.

In "The Animal That Therefore I Am," Derrida emphasizes the impact of this dogma on the category of the animal, a "category of discourse, texts, and signatories (those who have never been seen by an animal that addressed them)," which "is probably what brings together *all* philosophers and all theoreticians *as such*. At least those of a certain *epoch*, let's say from Descartes to the present" (395), a history that belongs "to this auto-biography of man" that he calls into question (406). He further asks, "The animal that I am (following), does it speak?" (Animal 415). Derrida's concept of phonocentricity is directly relevant to how we think about nonhuman animals. For him, such a question is likely the tactic

> of a rhetorical question, one that would already be assured of a response. The question will shortly be very much that of the response, and no doubt I shall try to imply that one cannot treat the supposed animality of the animal without treating the question of the response of what *responding* means And what *erasing* means. Even those who, from Descartes to Lacan,

> have conceded to the said animal some aptitude for signs and for communication have always denied it the power to *respond*—to *pretend*, to *lie*, to *cover its tracks* or *erase* its own traces. (Animal 415)

The trace, of course, is another way Derrida earlier referred to the *grammè*.

In this sense of the *grammè*, when a nonhuman covers its tracks, it erases or changes its own writing. When humans lie, it is by no more conscious or unconscious impulse than that of nonhumans, for we cannot determine whether human lying really occurs as some "advanced" conscious and rational decision or whether it is "primitive," a behavioral evolutionary trait. To determine which is not the point. To claim that our grasp, our hold on language is even slippery at best is a generous claim. If nonhumans can also respond, can also alter or hide their traces, if they can mask their scent, roll in the dead in the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, if they can return the gaze, if they can behold us, if they can write in this theater "*θεάομαι*," which is not to remark that they cannot speak this too through the mask, then what becomes of the human, who has defined itself as that being which speaks, that being which dwells in the house of language, which dwells in a time that belongs to the language of the autobiography of the human *Dasein*?

We have reached, according to Derrida, “a turning point in the relation of the animal, in the being-with shared by man and by what man calls the animal: the *being* of what calls itself man or the *Dasein with* what he himself calls, or what we ourselves call […] *the animal* (Animal 406-407, italics original). We are unmasked. We are faced with the lie of the animal. Now, what happens when a single animal, a specific animal, an animal with the name of Fox 8, encounters that which man has taken to be for himself, has taken to be first and foremost his calling, his call to which that thing that lives across the abyss, the animal, cannot respond? Man thinks he remains unseen, unheard, that he is not cognized by that which is too far beyond, by that which he takes as mute, as if this were a negative, as if this were an erasure. Fox 8 reads and writes, both in the strictest of senses and in a sense that deconstructs the humanist understanding of logos, of reading and its “supplement,” writing, of logos as stand-in for language, of standing as two-footed and phonetic, as presence and being, as life over and against the written word, which lies, dead, or playing dead.

Fox 8 need not “reed and rite Yuman,” but his polyglottism crosses species(ist) lines as well as dominion(ist) lines. If Fox 8 cannot read the signs on the boxes, is it because humans do not value these traces? If they remain incomprehensive, is it because they do not mean or because they are not valued as meaning? If they remain a “mistery,” is it because their meaning is misty? Do we mean what we write or only what we say? Do we ever mean? Can we, as humans, ever mean when Fox 8 is not allowed to mean? Bon-Ton, Compu-Fun, Hooters, Kookies-N-Cream do not have meaning, just as language does not have meaning except as how it is determined to mean by those who dwell within the knowledge system, by those who (with)hold the key. Bon-Ton means as much as presence, Compu-Fun as much being, Hooters as much as the animal, Kookies-N-Cream as much as language. Still, they cannot be still, for in the meeting of two presents, that of Rousseau and that of Derrida, we measure: “Progress consists of always taking us closer to animality by annulling the progress through which we have transgressed animality” (OG 203). Is this true of Fox 8? Does he annul his transgression while still approaching his animality?

Progress demands that, as humans, we name and write this name on the boxes of tomorrow, coming soon, as what we call progress itself progresses “Nature” by digging, tearing, and “rekking,” by reckoning, finally, with finality, with a finitude that seeks to immortalize the word made “Mawl,” made “Par King.” The Story window excludes those words which tell us this de-story, this destroying, this denaturalization, this destruction, which is a self-destruction, an auto-destruction, which is why we must deconstruct here, deconstruct the auto-biography of the human. This is why Saunders offers us instead a window to read the story of the human, which can no longer be about the human alone, as it is authored by a non-human, as it is authored by a particular fox. It is also why Fox 8 will unname to rename, unknowingly, to know the meanings that have been spoken and inscribed. Derrida writes what Rousseau does not desire to speak, which is “that ‘progress’ takes place both for the worse and for the better. At the same time. Which annuls eschatology and teleology, just as difference—or originary articulation—annuls archeology” (OG 229). Progress is, finally, that which returns these humanist studies to nothing, which does not mean that they are no thing but, in the language absent to the human, means that the word occurs somewhere beyond the human, perhaps revealed to the fox made in its (foxy) likeness.

How Fox 8 attributes meaning to the words he does not know occurs through experience, not by definition. When confronted with progress, he goes in search of answers. What does human progress mean for the human? For foxes and fishes and trees, it means death and destruction. He determines that what something is, for the human, is important because it *is*. From a dog, he learns that Par King and the Mawl are meant by the white boxes with “mistery” words: “It was Par King, it was the Mawl” (F8 8). Although these seem to be important simply because they exist—their existence being good because they are for the human according to how the human understands them—it means that meaning is not fixed; rather, Fox 8 both understands them differently *as a fox* while also conceptualizing the words, rather than defining them, and instead by associating incidents with them. He delivers a series of examples of what humans do:

> Yumans wud go: You kids stop fiting, we're at the Mawl, kwit it, kwit it, if you don't stop fiting how wud you like it if we just skip the Mawl and you can get rite to your aljuhbruh, Kerk? Or, speeking into a small box, a Yuman mite go, I have to run, Jeenie, I'm just now Par King at the Mawl! Or one Yuman slaps the but of a second, and the slapt one leens in, kwite fond, going, Elyut, you kil me. Or a lady drop her purse and bends to retreev her guds, when sudden lee her hat blows away, at which time, speeking a bad werd, she looks redy to sit and cry, own lee a nise man appeers, and rases off in kwest of her hat, tho he has a slite limp.
>
> Yumans!
>
> Always interesting. (F8 8-9)

Such actions give meaning to Par King and the Mawl, demonstrating that Fox 8's associative language is actually more in tune with how language occurs. Logic does not occur as logos. It is not rational but free range. The written word is no more fixed than the spoken word. For Derrida, it does not matter whether logos precedes the logo or vice-versa, but if we track the trace or trace the track, writing is at least equivalent to speaking, is at least as close to thought, to being, to presence, if any of these can remain the measure of language, which, by now it should be obvious, they cannot.

At this juncture, since Fox 8 is relating his story in Yuman we may wonder how he might render his experience differently in his own language. Unfortunately, we lack access to his knowledge system. However, through his own confusion regarding American human culture, he has taken it upon himself to write his story In Yuman language. By sharing his experience with us, we can learn something about a fox *Weltanschauung*, and why a fox might learn Yuman. By contrasting his greater knowledge of fox culture with our perception of fox life, we are able to learn what is important to foxes, how they live, and what their sense of ethics might be.

8.2. “Try Being Nicer”: The Ethics of Fox 8

Before we examine the ethics we encounter in the story, we should address the elephant in the room: anthropomorphism. As Daston and Mitman inform us, “[t]he advent of evolutionary theory, which posits phylogenetic continuities between humans and other animals, has made the ban on anthropomorphism hard to sustain in principle” in both ethological studies and the life sciences (8). What does this mean for posthuman storytelling? Is it presumptuous to write about a nonhuman, especially when writing as the nonhuman? Is it sustainable? Is it bearable?

Drawing on Daston and Mitman's claims, we must proceed by being as wary of "committing the error of 'anthropodenial' (underestimating commonalities) as 'anthropomorphism' (overestimating them)" (9). That is, we must be cautious not to presume that what we hold true of humans is not also equally true of nonhumans. To put it telegraphically, we must not presume that only humans behave like humans. In terms of ethics, then, whose precisely are we encountering in the story? Are they those of George Saunders or those of Fox 8? Daston and Mitman remind us that criticism of anthropomorphism contains both a moral and an intellectual element exist, meaning that

> to imagine that animals think like humans or to cast animals in human roles is a form of self-centered narcissism: one looks outward to the world and sees only one's own reflection mirrored therein. Considered from a moral standpoint, anthropomorphism sometimes seems dangerously allied to anthropocentrism: humans project their own thoughts and feelings onto other animal species because they egotistically believe themselves to be the center of the universe. But anthromorphism and anthropocentrism can just as easily tug in opposite directions. (3-4)

We must be careful not to engage in anthropodenial by presuming that Fox 8 does not engage in ethics, that the story is only displaying the author's ethics. It is no different from how we must proceed in our criticism of any story, whether the protagonist is human or not: to presume the ethics of the story are the same as those of the author is to believe the author incapable of thinking beyond the self; however, we have a record of encountering ethical strains in most, if not all, of Saunders's stories, so we must not dismiss an authorial ethics altogether.

Furthermore, we make claims about nonhuman animals and ethics already, such as considering foxes sly thieves, which implies we hold a certain respect for an attribute they may or may not hold but which, in action, results in a behavior we generally consider "bad." Moreover, to think of foxes as sly thieves—or of humans to be as sly as foxes—means granting both foxes and humans, at least metaphorically, autonomy and consciousness, which we are often loathe to admit nonhuman beings possess. Saunders does not impart a human-based ethics to foxes—at least not entirely, if we can even determine where such an ethics would originate. Instead, he plays with a fox-based ethics that already exists, which, as it turns out, is different for each individual fox, just as no one standard human ethics exists. Saunders and Fox 8 do not share the same ethics, even if those ethics seem similar; rather, a certain ethics of the encounter between Saunders and Fox 8, between a specific human and a specific fox, between a writer and a single character, offers us a way to understand an ethics to which we generally do not have access. If Fox 8 is anthropomorphic, he zoomorphizes Saunders. The ethics of Fox 8 and Saunders, I argue, are symbiotic.

With *Fox 8*, Saunders completes a cycle—or a spiral or a helix—that began with “The 400-Pound CEO.” It is not just what Saunders might believe is ethical but how he presents ethics across his fiction that marks it as ethical. Although we can choose any Saunders story and examine the ethical scenario it presents, only when his fiction is taken as a whole can we see the progression from the human first-person narrator of “The 400-Pound CEO” to the animalized human first-person narrator of “Pastoralia” to the passive-voiced narrator of “93990” to the fox first-person narrator of *Fox 8*. In a sense, Saunders’s fiction comes closer and closer to the nonhuman until finally it becomes nonhuman. Saunders’s ethics do not change so much as how they are accessed changes. If the focus of “The 400-Pound CEO” was on a first-person human narrator whose encounter with a raccoon served as a pivotal moment in the text then the encounter between humans and the first-person fox narrator performs a similar ethical moment.

After Fox 8 and his friend, Fox 7, visit the Fud Cort in the Mawl, Fox 8 believes that it will be “a grate day for the Fox/Yuman connection” when they encounter two construction workers “at the edj of Par King,” but at this point he breaks his narrative to announce directly to the reader that a pivotal point in the story is about to occur—"Then it happened! This tells the reeder: Get Reddy."—and proceeds to recount the attack and death of Fox 7, who is killed by a construction worker's hard hat:

> I gave Fox 7 a glanse, like: What did we do rong? Then the other Yuman, kwite small, ran at us, and threw his hat, and o my frends, what happened next is hard to rite. Because that hat wonked Fox 7 skware in his face! And suddenly his nees go week, and he gives me one last fond look, and drops over on his side, with blud trikling out of his snout! (F8 16)

In a sense, we are reading the "pest" version of "The 400-Pound CEO." While the foxes, unlike the raccoon, do not attack a human, the Yumans seem to believe the foxes are attacking or at least demonstrating aggression; however, it is the humans who demonstrate violence, which goes beyond self-protection.

The two Yumans make "further hits with their hats, and kiks and stomps, wile making adishunal noises I had never herd a Yuman make, as if this is fun, as if this is funy, as if they are prowd of what they are akomplishing" (F8 16-17) This continues until Fox 8, hiding, witnesses

> the last straw of their croolty, which was: the small Yuman picked up Fox 7, now ded, and flung him threw the air! Poor Fox 7, my frend, was spinning wile saling,

> like something long with a wate at one end! And what did those Yumans do? Stood bent over, laffing so hard! Then retrieved there crool hats and went back to werk, slaping hands, as if what they had done was gud, and cul, and had made them glad.[64] (F8 17)

For Yumans, violence can be entertaining. In "The 400-Pound CEO," the antagonist is the sadist, but it is the protagonist who kills. In *Fox 8*, the Yumans not only exhibit *Shadenfreude* but *Mordenfreude*. What seems brute or bestial—what seems inhumane—is Yuman. Fox 8 does not retaliate with any demonstration of violence but instead, through his letter, asks questions in the hope of understanding and reconciliation.

Although we have noticed it is not uncommon for nonhuman animals to be killed in Saunders's stories, in *Fox 8* this nonhuman animal is a member of the same species as the narrator. The axiological problem is different than that of "The 400-Pound CEO" or "93990." What transpires clashes with Fox 8's knowledge of human values, which he has gleaned only from the various books he has heard read by a single human family. Referring to the Story Window, Fox 8 informs us: "I had herd many Storys at that window but never had I herd a Story in which anything like what happened to pore Fox 7 happened" (F8 17). He seems almost in disbelief when he announces that "it was Yumans had done it" (F8 17). To generalize, the Yuman of the Storys, or at least the values espoused in such stories, does not match the behavior of real Yumans. Later, we even learn something of Fox teleological beliefs when Fox 8 asks, "Why did the Curator do it so rong, making the groop with the gratest skills the meanest?" (F8 20). Apparently, Fox 8, like many humans, also believes Yumans have the greatest abilities and are more capable.

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[64] This part of the story is actually based on an incident Saunders witnessed several years ago while working in an oil crew in west Texas. In his interview for *Vulture*, Saunders relates how he and two fellow crew members were sitting outside one day when "suddenly this vulture comes out of the brush and it was wounded. These guys rushed it and hit it with their hard hats. And once they got it down, they beat it to death, basically. And they were nice guys. They were just kind of bored. I didn't know that people were capable of that" (13 April 2013, accessed 19 April 2018).

After discovering all the foxes from the den have vanished, Fox 8 journeys until he encounters a group of Foxes in a Forest. We gain a deeper understanding of Fox ethics when Fox 8 recounts how the group treated him upon arrival. After taking "turns smelling and liking me," Fox 8 explains that "[t]hose Foxes were super nise. One came over all shy and out of her mowth dropped a froot at my paw. One dropped a gift of a part of a Berd. They showed me to a pond, where I drank so much they were slitely laffing" (F8 21). After meeting a certain Fox, Fox SmallNose/Alert + Funny, and learning that he will be a dad, he decides he must write a letter to Yumans, which is the letter that forms the narrative.

He demands to know "what is rong with you people. How cud the same type of Animal who made that luv lee Mawl make Fox 7 look the way he looked that time I saw him? Wud a

Yuman do something like that to another Yuman? I dowt it" (F8 23). Any doubt about Fox 8's understanding of Yumans—whether he thinks of Yumans as beyond animal—is removed by his question about this "type of Animal." Not only is Fox 7's murder speciesist, it is indicative of how Yumans treat many of their own supposed species. What Fox 8 doubts, we know undoubtedly: Yumans do murder Yumans. Fox 8's understanding of—or at least hope for—human ethics, does not, in this instance, mesh with the practice of human ethics. Fox 8's misunderstanding of human ethical behavior in theory and applied does not mean that he is without ethics but rather suggests that Fox ethics are perhaps more closely aligned in theory and in action than they are for Yumans. Fox 8 does not link the Mawl with the desctruction of his family's home but rather considers it "luv lee." What Fox 8 cannot accept is that a type of Animal that makes something "luv lee" can also "make" something as disgusting as mutilating a fox.

Fox 8 therefore resolves to leave a letter—the story itself—at the house where he frequently notices a "serten rownd guy feeding Berds. His male boks says his name is P. Melonsky" (F8 24). Fox 8 then addresses P. Melonsky directly with the following plea:

> You seem nise enough, P. Melonsky. Reed my leter, go farth, ask your fellow Yumans what is up, rite bak, leeve your anser under your Berd feeder, I will come in the nite to retreev and lern.

> I am sure there is some eksplanashun.
>
> And wud luv to know it. (F8 24)

As the story approaches its conclusion, we sense George Saunders, the author, beginning to intrude, but if he is there he is addressing himself as much as us. It is as if, through Fox 8, he is testing his ethical awareness. Saunders's narrator remarks that upon reading the

> Story bak just now, I woslike: O no, my Story is a bumer. There is the deth of a gud pal, and no plase of up lift, or lerning a lesson. The nise Fox's first Groop stays lost, his frend stays ded.
>
> Bla. (F8 24-25)

The passage allows us to understand the story as a sort of metanarrative because Fox 8 interrupts and comments upon the narrative devices at work in his writing of his own story, which he has learned by listening to human stories.

When we read Fox 8's story, or almost any story related to us by a nonhuman animal, we are extremely aware of the human author, more so than if we read the first-person narrative of a human narrator. In a 2017 interview for the magazine of the same name, Saunders admits to fellow author Zadie Smith that

> whether I'm doing the future or the past, I'm doing a kind of "nudge-nudge wink-wink" with the reader, like: "O.K., we're in the future. Right? But not really. I'm going to pretend to be writing about the past (or the

> future), and we're going to enjoy the fact that I'm not really doing it assiduously." Because the real goal is not precise depiction, but using the apparent effort of precise depiction as a source of context and fun. (n.p.)

I believe the same sentiment holds true for *Fox 8*. Saunders's fox-as-narrator works, in part, because Saunders plays at being a fox without using Fox 8 as a human stand-in, which often occurs in films and cartoons. *Fox 8*, as an epistolary tale, does not read as an allegory, parable, or fable. Even if it is a parable, the moral lesson being offered—which Fox 8 does offer, unlike most protagonists in Saunders's stories—is suggested by a fox, not a human—or at least a human writing as a fox. It seems that precisely because Saunders is able to play at being a fox that he can get away with offering a clear moral statement: "If you want your Storys to end happy, try being niser" (F8 25).

Of course, as we have learned, simplicity is deceptive in Saunders's fiction. If the ethical claim to "try being niser" is made by Fox 8 then can we assume that it is also Saunders's opinion? We can argue that it is based on his statements regarding ethics and morals in his nonfiction and based on what we have gleaned from his previous short fiction; however, the words are those of a character. Fox 8's solution seems simplistic, but it is similar to Derrida's notion of a hyperethic, an ethics beyond ethics, which, as I have already demonstrated, is how Saunders conceives of ethics. In fact, Fox 8’s words are remarkably similar to those proclaimed by Saunders in *Congratulations, by the way*: “It’s a little facile, maybe, and certainly hard to implement, but I’d say, as a goal in life, you could do worse than: *Try to be kinder*” (n.p.) Although it may seem as if Fox 8 is merely paraphrasing Saunders’s commencement speech claim, it is actually more likely that the inverse is true. Did Saunders, by playing at being a fox, discover a way to concisely formulate his foremost ethical claim? Fox 8 was published April 9, 2013 while the commencement speech was delivered May 11, 2013. By indulging in this chronology, we may grant that Saunders slyly takes his ethical claim from Fox 8 because he has played at being a fox.

In *Interspecies Ethics*, Cynthia Willett notes that “key features of play provide the material grounding for an egalitarian ethos by functioning to level playing fields and to build camaraderie” (50). When Saunders, as author, plays at being a fox, we, as readers, must play with him. When Saunders nudges and winks, we know we are playing; however, play is serious because it helps us to establish ethical awareness by dissolving hierarchies and solidifying kinships. This play helps us to prepare for ethical challenges by allowing us to experience ethical scenarios in active yet imaginative ways without the risks present in an ethical moment and without moral delimitation. Willett makes clear that “key resources for ethical flourishing” may be found “in the social intelligence of animal society," rather than through moral laws and dictums (69). Thus, Saunders's fiction serves a necessary function, checking and balancing moral codes with egalitarian ethos. Satire and humor are ethical. As Willett claims, "A joke is not always a joke. Sometimes a joke can offer a subtle glimpse into an interspecies political ethics" (52). While we may expect a comic tale from the Yuman-speaking and writing fox protagonist, what is revealed is something far more intuitive, tragic, and compassionate, even as it maintains a playful streak. Its challenge to us concerns not only our understanding of interspecies political ethics, if we even have such a notion to begin with, but an intraspecies one as well. How can we be kinder to nonhumans if we cannot be kind to humans?

Fox 8 demonstrates yet again how posthumanist ethics appear in Saunders's fiction in terms of nonhuman animals. In his next book, the novel *Lincoln in the Bardo*, nonhuman animals are further associated with death. However, they also mingle with a different species of posthuman that frequently appears in his fiction: ghosts. In the final chapter, I engage with both the ghostly beings and nonhuman animals that inhabit the novel as well as how Saunders's further experimentation with form opens new possibilities in the writing.

9. BETWEEN THE DEAD AND THE LIVING: *LINCOLN IN THE BARDO*

9.1. "I've Peaked!": The Significance of Saunders's First Novel

On 14 February 2017, Saint Valentine's Day, George Saunders's first novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, appeared. By 5 March 2017, it was on the *New York Times* hardcover best-seller list. Later that year, it won the Man Booker Prize. As with his previous books, an audiobook version is available. Saunders, who usually performs the readings himself, instead enlisted, for the 166-character cast, American humor author David Sedaris, along with film celebrities such as Julianne Moore, Don Cheadle, and Susan Sarandon. His friend Nick Offerman and Offerman's wife, Megan Mullaly,[65] who both purchased the film rights, also have parts, as do Saunders's parents, wife, and daughters. In an article for *Entertainment Weekly*, Isabella Biedenharn reports that Saunders called it a "fanboy experience" to have so many people he's admired reading his words, going so far as to exclaim, "My whole career is over now. I've peaked!"

Indeed, it seems all that's left for him to do is win a Nobel Prize. Judging by Saunders's record, however, it seems unlikely he will rest on his laurels. In an article written by Saunders for *The Guardian*, he explains that he never intended to write a novel and especially had trouble writing this particular story, the impetus for which came to him decades ago

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[65] Both appeared on the American political satire mockumentary sitcom, *Parks and Recreation*.

> during a visit to Washington DC, [when] my wife's cousin pointed out to us a crypt on a hill and mentioned that, in 1862, while Abraham Lincoln was president, his beloved son, Willie, died, and was temporarily interred in that crypt, and that the grief-stricken Lincoln had, according to the newspapers of the day, entered the crypt "on several occasions" to hold the boy's body. An image spontaneously leapt into my mind—a melding of the Lincoln Memorial and the Pietà.[66] (WWRD)

The image remained with Saunders for over twenty years, but he was too afraid to write anything based upon it because it seemed too profound. He admits that it was not until 2012 that he decided to try to write the story, "not wanting to be the guy whose own gravestone would read 'Afraid to Embark on Scary Artistic Project He Desperately Longed to Attempt,'" and so began to explore it without commitment (WWRD).

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[66] The Lincoln Monument (built 1914-1922) is an American national monument in Washington, D.C., constructed in the design of a Greek Doric temple with a statue of a seated Abraham Lincoln, carved in white marble, gazing down from his nearly six-meter height. The *Pietà*, or the Pity, is a common subject in Christian art that depicts Jesus held by the Virgin of the Mary and is frequently found in the form of sculptures, such as the marble Renaissance piece of the same name (1498-1499), carved by Michelangelo Buonarroti and housed in St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City.

Lincoln in the Bardo is the result of many years of contemplation and a few years of serious writing. The bulk of the novel transpires over the course of a single night, 22 February 1862, two days after the death of young Willie Lincoln, whose body, interred in a crypt, is visited by his father, President Abraham Lincoln. Unbeknownst to Abraham, Willie's "ghost," along with many more post-bodied beings, is in the graveyard too, which serves as the bardo (Tibetan: བར་དོ), a liminal and transitional space between death and rebirth, of the title. Unless three "older" fellow "spirits" can help Willie realize he must leave, Willie will be trapped in the graveyard forever. The plot plays out against the backdrop of the American Civil War and the final years of legalized slavery.

Saunders, who practices Buddhism,[67] takes liberty with the concept of the bardo. In an interview for *Weld*, also published 14 February 2017, he admits that he did not intend for "bardo" to be taken literally, but that by using this term, instead of "purgatory," he could "help the reader not to bring too many preconceptions to it. Whatever death is, we don't know what it is, so in a book about the afterlife, it's good to destabilize all of the existing beliefs as much as you can" (n.p.). His bardo draws from a mix of concepts about the afterlife. In this bardo, we find beings who do not realize they are dead—and who may or may not influence the living. However, a bardo is also considered by some to more generally refer to any transitional state, and in this sense, those of us who are alive are transitioning between what we call birth and death. Thus, the title of the novel may refer to either Lincoln, Willie or Abraham. Does it refer to Willie in a bardo that he experiences? Does it refer to Abraham's visit to Willie in the bardo? Does it refer to Abraham in a bardo of his own? What Saunders's novel actually achieves is the blurring of these bardos as liminal spaces so that boundaries become less discernible while also centering on the president who wanted to preserve the Union during one of the most divisive eras in American history.

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[67] In "Coming Out Buddhist," an article for *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, Amie Barrodale claims that Saunders is a Tibetan Buddhist, acknowledging that Saunders is not keeping this fact a total secret, since at least fellow Buddhists are also aware of this. Saunders has also mentioned practicing Buddhism and the *Nyingma* lineage that he follows in certain interviews.

Saunders has played with history in his fiction before, usually in a more speculative way—e.g., "Civilwarland in Bad Decline" and "My Chivalric Fiasco"—but has never written what can loosely be defined as historical fiction. That is, until *Lincoln in the Bardo*, most of his stories used contemporary or speculative settings rather than moments in history. In the novel, he even intersperses several quotes from historical nonfiction sources, although deciphering which are fiction and which are true is virtually impossible for the general reader. Perhaps fellow contemporary author Colson Whitehead, writing for *The New York Times*, describes the novel best, comparing it, as many critics have, to Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*, admitting that conservative readers "may (foolishly) be put off by the novel's form—it is a kind of oral history, a collage built from a series of testimonies consisting of one line or three lines or a page and a half, some delivered by the novel's characters, some drawn from historical sources," all organized by a narrator who serves as "a curator, arranging disparate sources to assemble a linear story" (n.b.). Saunders varies the content of the chapters. The majority are devoted to series of monologues delivered by the ghostly beings, but these are punctuated by chapters containing "historical" citations, some of which actually are historical, drawn from real sources, but many of which are created by Saunders. If the use of historical sources suggests he has become more academic, the unorthodox style, form, and cast of characters is undeniably Saunders.

Most of the novel is comprised of narration by characters whom Whitehead calls "the talking dead." These ghostly entities are, in fact, its main characters—and give a different meaning to the term "posthuman." That they are primary agents in this story is unsurprising, considering such ghostlike or zombielike beings have appeared in Saunders's stories since his first short story collection. In "The Wavemaker Falters," from *Civilwarland in Bad Decline*, the ghost of a boy returns to haunt the man whose negligence killed him. In "Sea

Oak," from *Pastoralia*, a zombie-like, recently-deceased woman returns to demand her family do what she orders, in stark contrast to the meek woman she was before death. In "CommComm," from *In Persuasion Nation*, a PR man returns each night to the house he shares with the ghosts of his parents.

Like so many Saunders characters, several "posthuman" characters in the novel are trying to do what they think is right while remaining oblivious—or trying to remain so—to the grander scheme of sociocultural circumstances that impinge upon them. They speak using terms that, while seemingly appropriate to the era, are resonant with modern jargon: coffins are "sick-boxes" and when they leave the bardo it is by the "matterlightblooming phenomenon." Characters names or the titles and authors of the source materials, real or fake, are only listed after the text. For example, when Abraham visits the crypt, the trio of dead beings who serve as the primary narrators in the choral-like narrative inform us that:

> For nearly ten minutes the man held the—
>
> roger bevins iii
>
> Sick-form.
>
> hans vollman
>
> The boy, frustrated at being denied the attention he felt *he* deserved, moved in and leaned against his father, as the father continued to hold and gently rock the—

roger bevins iii

Sick-form.

hans vollman

(*Lincoln in the Bardo*, 58)[68]

Saunders's novel reads more like a play in this respect, except that we must wait to find out who has spoken, rather than receiving the indication beforehand. Saunders also furthers the third-person ventriloquist technique with this method by allowing the dead characters to enter the body of Abraham Lincoln and relay Abraham's thoughts. In the following excerpt, the ghostly Willie has "entered" the body of his father. We read the switch between Willie's own voice and that of his father's thoughts, Abraham's being in italics, which Willie relates to us:

> In there held so tight I was now partly also in father
> And could know exactly what he was
> Could feel the way his long legs lay How it is to have a beard Taste / coffee in the mouth, and though not thinking in words exactly, knew that / *the feel of him in my arms has done me good. It has. Is this wrong? Unholy?*
> (LB 61, italics original, backslashes my own)

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[68] Here and in certain quotes that follow, I try to preserve a sense of the form of the novel but am limited by the format of this thesis. I indicate line breaks consistent with how they would be used for poetry. Also, hereafter, I will refer to the novel as *LB*.

Abraham's thoughts, which are not necessarily words, are relayed as such by Willie, who serves as a the "dummy" for Lincoln's thoughts, which are in italics. Saunders uses this technique throughout the text, thus offering a narrative that lends itself to becoming more posthuman: without spoiling the ending, we are briefly treated in one of the final sentences to one formerly enslaved postliving beings's narration of the thoughts of a horse. While the novel does not overtly address nonhuman animals—and those humans we denigrate as animals—a close reading provides us with an awareness of the implications of what happens when we consider the nonhuman Other, the human Other, and death.

9.2. "I am Horse": Life, Death, and Liminality

While references to nonhuman animals may seem scant in a cursory reading, they in fact occur every few pages. The first occurs in a citation from a real source, *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, by Elizabeth Keckley, a formerly enslaved woman who later became First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln's dressmaker. She recounts that Willie, who receives a pony as present, "was so delighted with the pony, that he insisted on riding it every day" (LB 8).[69] This pony indirectly leads to Willie's death, for he rides it in inclement weather. According to Keckley, the

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[69] Rather than cite the originals of the historical sources used by Saunders, I cite them from the novel.

"exposure resulted in severe cold, which deepend into fever" (8). While it may be a worthwhile historical footnote, the importance of a small horse leading to Willie's illness and eventual death becomes clear later on after a succession of references to horses, which recur intermittently in the novel.

Receiving considerable attention is the horse ridden by Abraham to the cemetery. In a fictional passage, the cemetery watchman reports that Abraham arrives on horseback:

> Had no driver with him but had arrived alone on small horse which I was quite surprised at him being Pres and all and say his legs are quite long and his horse quite short so it appeared some sort of man-sized in-sect had attached itself to the poor unfortunate nag who freed of his burden stood tired and hangdog and panting as if thinking I will have quite the story to tell the other horsies upon my return if they are still
> awake […] (LB 64)

The watchman's speculation of horse thought and feeling is not unique to this passage as the speculation occurs again with a different character, Isabelle Perkins, who also lives in proximity to the cemetery. In a Civil War letter, she writes to her brother that "[t]here is a horse over there, across the way, tied to the cemetery fence—A calm and exhausted fellow, nodding, as if to say: Well, though I find myself at the yard of the Dead in the dark of night, I am Horse, & must obey" (LB

182). Here, it is notable how the horse, death, and civil war are all related in a single brief passage.

Finally, as I briefly mentioned above, by the end of the novel, one of the "ghosts," a formerly enslaved man briefly enters the body of Abraham's "horse, who was, I felt at that moment, pure Patience, head to hoof, and fond of the man, and never before had I felt oats to be such a positive thing in the world, or so craved a *certain blue blanket*" (LB 343). Although it is tempting to read into the pony and horse certain symbols or themes or to compare the horse's enslavement with that of the formerly enslaved beings, who have their own separate burial ground, this is best left for a more extensive exploration of the novel. What is worth noting here is how the living humans wonder what the horse thinks and feels while one of the dead is able to enter and "mindread" the living horse's thoughts. While the living attempt to think beyond the human, the dead are able to know the thoughts and emotions of living beings by merging with these bodies.

In addition to living nonhuman animals, dead ones—or ones associated with death—appear throughout the text. While Willie lies sick in bed, a lavish party is being held downstairs in the White House. The liveliness of the party is contrasted with details that remind us of death. In one of the novel's citations, which is ascribed to a Melvin Carter but seems Saunders's own, we read:

> The flower arrangements of history! Those towering bursts of colors, so lavish—soon tossed away, to dray and go drab in the dim February sun. The animal carcasses—the "meat"—warm and sprig-covered, on expensive platters, steaming and succulent: trucked away to who-knows-where, clearly offal now, honest partial corpses once again, after brief elevation to the status of delight-giving food! (17)

Here, both flowers and animals not only serve, in a sense, to portend Willie's death but also serve as reminders that all living things die, that they all become "meat." The flowers are already dying, while the "delight-giving food," we are reminded, is comprised of "animal carcasses" and "honest partial corpses." According to the author of the citation, the term "meat" actually "elevates" the status of the carcasses or corpses, at least in terms of human enjoyment.

It is also worth noting that the meat is called both carcass and corpse here, since "carcass" is generally used in reference to the dead body of a nonhuman animal while "corpse" is reserved for the dead body of a human.[70] It seems hardly coincidental that, later in the novel, when Hans Vollman relates to us the musings of Abraham in the crypt, Abraham is thinking about Willie's corpse using the same scare quoted term as we find in the above passage: "*Meat*" (246, italics original). Saunders's novel recognizes what we generally ignore: humans are as much meat as nonhuman animals are meat, if we recognize meat as being, in full or in part, a carcass or corpse.

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[70] Thus, even when we speak of the dead, the human/animal binary remains intact.

We again encounter nonhuman animals as meat in the monologue of Jane Ellis, one of the dead, who recalls a Christmas memory of meat that she seems to cling to fondly.

> Above a meatshop doorway hung a marvelous canopy of carcasses: deer with the entrails pulled up and out and wired to the outside of the bodies like tremendous bright-red garlands; pheasants and drakes hung head down, wings spread by use of felt-covered wires, the colors of which matched the respective feathers (it was done most skillfully); twin pigs stood on either side of the doorway with game hens mounted upon them like miniature riders. All of it bedraped in greenery and hung with candles. (LB 76)

This Christmas memory is almost wholly comprised of a memory of meat. The corpses are garnishedc and made to seem, like the meat displayed at the White House party, delightful. The repulsion that we often feel at encountering a scene of death is instead altered to charm and attract. What is also intriguing here is how this display of decorated dead flesh occurs as part of the celebration of the birth of Christ. Jane, dressed in white, throws a tantrum until her father buys a deer and lets her "assist him in strapping to the rear of the carriage. Even now, I can see it: the countryside scrolling out behind us in the near-evening fog, the limp deer dribbling behind its thin blood-trail" (LB 76). The dead deer, apart from exposing the death of a nonhuman animal in its own right, also hints at what will become of Jane.

Her Christmas memory is tethered to what she recalls as a new awareness of herself in what seems a transitional state. As she describes it, she felt herself "a new species of child. Not a boy (most assuredly) but neither a (mere) girl" for whom the "boundaries of the world seemed vast" (LB 76). The term "mere," as ascribed to a gender, is later repeated by her, after her life as this "species," for whom the world seems almost limitless in its bounds, comes to an end. In other words, she soon encounters the limits of her gender, as a different "species," prescribed by man. She goes on to recounts how she was married to a man who "only endeavored to *possess*" her, and that for whom "she was of 'an inferior species,' a 'mere' woman" (LB 77). The implication here is that she is an animal inferior to the human, a domain reserved for her husband and his like—that is, men.

More literally, the former hunter Trevor Williams, another of the dead and perhaps, in life, like the men of whom Jane remains scornful, must "resurrect," in a sense, each one in "the tremendous heap of all the animals he had dispatched in his time: hundreds of deer, thirty-two black bear, three bear cubs, innumerable coons, lynx, foxes, mink, chipmunks, wild turkeys, woodchucks, and cougars; scores of mice and rats, a positive tumble of snakes, hundreds of cows and calves, one pony (carriage-struck), [and] twenty thousand or so insects" (LB 127). It is difficult not to read this passage as a more direct presentation of Saunders's ethical concern, especially knowing that Saunders considers both children, like Willie, and nonhuman animals as "blameless." The former hunter must "briefly hold, with loving attention, for a period ranging from several hours to several months, depending on the quality of loving attention he could muster and the state of fear the beast happened to have been in at the time of its passing," each of these beings, until "that particular creature would heave up, then trot or fly or squirm away, diminishing Mr. Williams's heap by one" (LB 127). One of the protagonists, Hans Vollman, remarks that Mr. Williams is "a good sort, never unhappy, always cheerful since his conversion to gentleness" (LB 128). What is especially remarkable about this passage is that it suggests more directly, for Saunders, an ethics that extends beyond humans, one which tends toward posthumanism in its concern for both the dead Williams and the nonhuman animals.

9.3. "Black Beasts": Racialization and Animalization

Death unites the posthuman beings in the novel with the nonhuman animals. It also bleeds into the physicality of enslavement and violence. References are made to the Civil

War dead, while formerly enslaved humans, now residing as ghostly beings at the mass grave outside the whites-only graveyard where Willie is interred, are able to freely come and go from the graveyard. Meanwhile, those whose corpses are held within the graveyard ironically are unable to leave its confines, thus bringing up another reference point of enslavement, which is furthered by the protagonist trio's fear that Willie will be forced to remain in the graveyard forever, their desire being for him to be exposed to the matterlightblooming phenomenon. This occurrence transpires upon the departure of one of the "liberated" dead. Thus, if Willie is not liberated, he will be subjected to "[t]he alternative," which is "his eternal enslavement" (LB 104).

Here, the language directly relates to enslavement, the violence of which is later manifested through certain characters referenced by such phrases as "[b]lack beasts" and "[d]amnable savages," phrases which are intended to denigrate both human and nonhuman (LB 213). Derrida remarks in the first volume of *The Beast & the Sovereign* (2009) that "the worst, the cruelest, the most human violence has been unleashed against living beings, beasts or humans, and humans in particular, who precisely were not accorded the dignity of being fellows," which is not just a question of racism and class but of the individual (155). Derrida connects the "unrecognizable," or "*méconnaissable*," with "the beginning of ethics, of the Law, and not of the human" (B&S

155). What he means is that as long as Man only grants ethics to those who are recognizable to him, to those who are most like him, ethics remains inert, that is, “dormant, narcissistic, and not yet thinking” (B&S 155). In other words, ethics is not just human, not just for men. Ethics must acknowledge the unrecognizable, which includes nonhuman animals and humans who are “less close and less similar (in the order of probabilities and supposed or fantasized resemblances or similarities: family, nation, race, culture, religion)” (B&S 155-156). Derrida thus includes in this ethical questioning human and nonhuman animals alike, implicitly but especially taking into consideration those whom the dominant culture oppresses.

It is not my intent here to equate, for example, the enslavement of blacks with our treatment of nonhuman animals but rather to display that each is symptomatic of a greater systemic dominionism. One of the dead, Elson Farwell, who in life was enslaved, is well aware of the similarity between his lot and that of the “beast of burden,” whom he recognizes as more rebellious than he was. He laments that it is too late now, but if given the chance he would “rend and destroy” the family that “owned” him and destroy their property, thereby guaranteeing for himself “[a] certain modicum of humanity, yes, for only a beast would endure what I had endured without objection; and not even a beast would conspire to put on the manners of its masters and hope thereby to be rewarded" (LB 217). We are soon introduced to Litzie Wright, a quivering mulatto "of such startling beauty" that she causes the white dead to stir. Like the "beast," however, she is silent, or rather silenced—or so it seems. Her silence may also be read as an objection. She is accompanied by "a stout Negro woman" who seemed as if she might have been jolly in life but was "livid, and scowling; and her feet, worn to nubs, left two trails of blood behind her" (LB 221). This woman, Mrs. Francis Hodge, speaks on behalf of Litzie, whom we discover was raped on multiple occasions, as Mrs. Hodge repeats, like a refrain, "[w]hat was done to her was done," followed by a statement regarding on how many instances it was done or threatened or by whom it was performed (LB 222). We may read Litzie's animal silence not strictly or necessarily as one of fear but also as one of protest while Mrs. Hodge's insistence on speaking of the abuses suffered by Litzie serves a complementary role.

Those human and nonhuman animals that domains of power believe they consign to silence may not recognize that silence may be intentional and serve as a rebellion against the dominionist system. Silence, then, is as much a part of language as that which is spoken. [71] In *HumAnimal: Race, Law, Language* (2012), Kalpana Rahita Seshadri states that

> the practice of dehumanization depends on the logic of a power that can decide on the value of a given life.

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[71] Of course, Deaf people speak with signs while often remaining in what "Hearies" would consider silence.

> Such a decision works fundamentally to exclude the other from the realm of human intercourse, which can be achieved only by denying access to speech and, of course, law. In fact, the *locus* of power's decision on life is the conflation of language and law, while the *exercise* of power is the withholding of access to the law-speech nexus in order to consign the other to silence. (x, italics original)

Those who are perceived as lacking the ability to speak or lacking language, such as nonhuman animals or those who object to the privileging of spoken language or those who are consigned to silence, are denied rights. They are allowed to be kept as slaves, whether human or nonhuman. However, for Seshadri, silence exists as a space "both within and without language—a site of the inhuman, it is also the site where the traditional dichotomies (human/animal, sovereign/outlaw) and the traditional pairs (law/language, belonging/name, mind/body) find their mediation through the inoperativity of an active stillness" (40). In a novel in which so many characters desire to recount their stories, Litzie's silence is an active stillness that challenges dominionism.

In his trenchant critique of colonialism, *On the Postcolony* (2001), Achille Mbembe makes clear the connections between enslavement, colonialization, racialization, animalization, and violence as he contends that "it was through the slave trade and colonialism that Africans came face to face with the *opaque and murky domain of power*, a domain inhabited by obscure drives and that everywhere and always makes animality and bestiality its essential components, plunging human beings into a never-ending *process of brutalization*" (14, italics original). The colonized native, as well as the slave, traditionally "becomes the animal in one of two ways, the first being characterized by Mbembe as Hegelian and the latter being characterized as Bergsonian. In the former, the colonized native, or the slave, is made animal through a subjugation that denies any recognition of recognizability, leaving "the only possible relationship" as one based on "violence and domination," with the enslaved being "envisaged as the property and *thing* of power" (26). The second tradition posits that it is possible to "*sympathize* with the colonized" in a manner similar to how we may sympathize with nonhuman animals (27), thereby domesticating the "beast." In Saunders's novel, the life experience of Litzie was of the former, more physically violent tradition of animalization. Meanwhile, that of Thomas Havens, a character who was also enslaved in life, was of the more domesticate tradition. Havens is also the one who will later go on to enter and "inhabit" Abraham Lincoln and, briefly the horse, thereby "becoming with," to borrow Donna Haraway's term, both living human and living horse in an even more direct sense.

The black "slave narrative" that remains buried throughout the majority of the novel disrupts and deepens the ethical intensity of the text in what constitutes, more or less, the final third. In *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014), Alexander G. Weheliye holds that

> racialization figures as a master code within the genre of the human represented by western Man, because it's law-like operations are yoked to species-sustaining physiological mechanisms in the form of a global color line—instituted by cultural laws so as to register in human neural networks—that clearly distinguishes the good/life/fully-human from the bad/death/not-quite-human. (27)

In other words, racism and speciesism are both part of the same sociocultural system instituted and supported by codes and laws that maintain dominionism through binaries and correspondences that work to predefine moral characteristics. In "Outer Worlds: The Persistence of Race in Movement 'Beyond the Human'" (2015), Zakkiyah Iman Jackson claims that because "the nonhuman's figuration and mattering is shaped by the gendered racialization of the field of metaphysics even as teleological finality is indefinitely deferred by the processual nature of actualization or the agency of matter," any "movement toward the nonhuman is simultaneously a movement toward blackness" (217). The inclusion of the dead black former slaves pushes the narrative into a more inclusive, more complicated posthumanist ethical terrain than Saunders's earlier fiction because it takes into account what is often set aside in posthumanist ethics, especially in the so-called posthumanisms that take as their primary concern issues more aligned with transhumanism. While there is a sort of transhumanism at stake in the novel, it is not one over which humans have control. It is the transition to death—and beyond—by which we "transcend" the human, a transcendence we share with every living being.

However, what throws all this into even stranger and more complicated ethical territory is that Abraham resolves to end the killing of the Civil War by increasing the bloodshed, believing that by killing more efficiently, he might bring the war to an end sooner. We may ask how this is effected by his soon being inhabited by Thomas Havens, but what remains is an ambiguity. Whether Abraham is ethically right or wrong in his decision seems less the point—although when lives are at stake, they should always be the point—than that it is an ethical choice. I leave this as yet another of the novel's complications that allow us to reconsider how we construe ethics.

Lincoln in the Bardo demonstrates more fully than most of Saunders's stories just how much is at stake in the discourse on posthumanism. The novel achieves this by maintaining an undercurrent of references to nonhuman animals and, later, by introducing the historically disenfranchised and oppressed as primary agents in what at first seems a subplot but is soon thrust into the foreground in the novel's final chapters. If the plot of the novel is ostensibly concerned with Willie's awareness and acceptance of his death, it also examines a pivotal point in American history in such a way that it allows us a unique experience of what is at play in ethics. Moreover, it also widens the ethical sphere of Saunders's writing in a single book. Since its publication, very little has appeared in print by him. While it is safe to assume he has accomplished more than he could have wished for in his lifetime, we can only hope that he continues to challenge himself, as a writer, and us, as readers, as he continues on with his already illustrious career.

CONCLUSION

As should be evident by now, Saunders's fiction holds up under a posthuman analysis, especially in terms of how it presents ethical scenarios. I have demonstrated how the variable ethics in his fiction, an ethics that calls us to always extend our capability of kindness, follow the hyperbolic ethics of Derrida. They also relate to the ethics proposed by posthumanist theorists, if not completely, at least in certain regards, and are comparable to the notions of ethics proposed by critics from Braidotti to Wolfe, including Haraway, Oliver, and Willett. Likewise, Saunders's writing demonstrates how concepts as varied as carnophallogocentrism and dominionism relate to sexism, speciesism, and racism. Although the focus here has been on how these concepts and practices are embedded in American culture and Western capitalist culture, as presented through the writing of Saunders, that does not mean they are limited to these areas.

While most early criticism of Saunders was rightly concerned with presentations of class, politics, society, and postmodernism in his stories, the recent publication of the collection of critical essays on his writing has filled in several gaps, some making their arguments compellingly and cogently, some less so. More attention has been granted to the ethical nature of his writing, especially by Layne Neeper and Adam Kelly. A greater assessment of how irony and sarcasm in his fiction function could still be accomplished. I have begun that task here. Along with Christina Bieber Lake, I have also begun the work of performing a posthuman analysis of his writing.

The monograph on Saunders that I have presented in this thesis is far from complete. Many of his stories have not been analyzed and several more could have been included here as examples of the posthuman elements at play in his fiction. However, most of the stories addressed have received virtually no analysis by critics. Although the primary function of this thesis has been to examine his fiction through a posthuman lens, this monograph may also serve as a reference point for future Saunders criticism.

Leaving such considerations aside, another relevant contribution of this tesis resides, I believe, in the fact that it explores a living and highly acknowledged writer like Saunders at what appears to be a peak in his career. The publication of his first novel and winning of the Man Booker Prize in the past year has made him a more popular—and, I suspect, busier—author than ever. However, as my anecdote indicated in the introduction, Saunders is both personable and humble. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that he granted me an exclusive interview, which is why, rather than end on my words, I feel this thesis really ends on his. The interview that follows demonstrates precisely the kind of attitude and ethical regard that has come to characterize not only Saunders's fiction but also Saunders as a human animal

“MAYBE WE DON’T KNOW WHAT PROCESS REALLY IS”: AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE SAUNDERS

In this exclusive interview, my questions and comments appear in bold. The responses by Saunders appear in standard text.

What is your experience with the ideas of posthumanism or posthumanist ethics? Have you ever encountered these terms? What do they evoke for you?

I’m not familiar with them, no. I just looked it up but maybe give me your notion of it and I can respond to that?

I think it’s fine that you haven’t heard of these terms, but I’ll try to explain it a bit telegraphically. Posthumanism gets defined a lot of ways. For some, it’s about cyborgs and robots and such, but how I understand it is that since Humanism, especially since the Renaissance, keeps reifying notions of the human, or Man, at the expense of the Other, especially nonhuman animals, posthumanism is a way of deanthropocentrizing Humanism. A posthumanist ethics then would be one that does not limit itself to humans. What I mean is that humans aren’t the only ways who get to “have” ethics and that ethics are not something that can be

normatized. I don’t think this is a concept particular to posthumanism, but in Western capitalist society, it’s one way of reconsidering…well, a lot.

If we define a posthumanist ethics as “one that does not limit itself to considering humans when contemplating how to live in the world”—then I am for it. I understand, for example, Buddhism to be “posthumanist,” in this sense—interested in “all beings” and not seeing any big demarcation between an animal and a human. Same brain-structures but just on different points of a continuum and therefore no less worthy of loving treatment.

You once responded to an email I sent you regarding nonhuman animals in your fiction by mentioning that you believe both children and nonhuman animals are “blameless.” In the email, I mentioned that Cary Wolfe once said that we often think of animals as “retarded humans.” Here is part of your response:

I think one reason that animals get into my stories so often is that an animal, abused or mistreated, has a very clear moral valence - there is no way to claim that the animal "deserved" it and even claims of utility (as I think would be made re "93990" feel inadequate, when one is observing the actual suffering). So I don't think of them as "retarded humans" as much as "blameless humans."

Do you mean by this that when violence or harm is done to them, they are already, in a sense, enfolded into our ethical sphere, that we must care for them, that we have a sense of responsibility to them, or did you intend this term differently?

Right. With that in mind, my answer to your original question would be:

I think I just meant that, within the complicated dynamic system that is a story, when harm is done, we look for some causation. So, for example, Scrooge is told he's going to be damned after his death, we think, "What did he do?" And then we feel and interpret the story on the basis of the answer to that question. But with certain types of characters, we assume that they didn't (couldn't have) "done" anything to deserve harm. I'd put kids and animals in that category. I mean, a kid in a story can makes a mistake and receive the consequences (I think of "The Stone Boy," a masterpiece by Gina Berriault, for example) but even then, we don't perceive the moral consequence as being of his of her doing, exactly. In that story, we feel bad for the kid in part because he is internalizing blame unfairly. With animals, this is even more pronounced. We understand that even if an animal bites, it is doing so from natural motives. In that email, you mentioned that people sometimes think of animals as "retarded humans." I think that's all wrong. They are way beyond us in certain things and we are way beyond them in others but, you know—we all *live*, and have been doing so for a long time. So who's to say whose way is better?

What have you learned from your stories, or how have they changed you? More precisely, I mean what have you discovered about George Saunders through writing?

I don't know that I've learned anything about myself personally but, rather, I'd say I've improved certain capabilities. For example, I learned to think things through while trying to be aware of my biases, and to separate a factual observation from wishful thinking/projection. Working with sentences helped me with those things. I think I've also slowed my habitual reaction to many things. That is, I'm more able to invoke a form of "on the other hand" thinking. Again, this comes with working with sentences through revision. What might start out as a vague, lazy assertion gets more focused as I try to make the language more precise. This carries over into one's general way of thinking too.

Writing fiction can also teach a person about his auto-mind. For example, mine tends to be a little snarky and negative. I can be in a situation and easily access the negative or morally suspect parts of it. But under the surface there's another mind, which is more generous and open. Writing has made me aware that I default to the first mind and rewrite my way into the second mind, or into some combination of the two.

Aside from literature, what, that you are aware of, affects your writing? Has Buddhism had an influence, or is it complementary to the writing? What life events influenced your writing?

I really think writing affects my writing most – to finish one project and move on to another as if propelled to it by the excesses or failures of the other. That is an interesting thing: you try on, through language and form, one view of the world, and then, via the process of intense engagement, get tired of it and come to see its limits. And, all along the way, the next mindset has been developing, in part by the thousands of little frictions and bumps along the way, where the current mindset is proving itself to be not quite right. And then you jettison that mindset and start another book. Over and over…

The main life events that have influenced my writing are my relationships with my wife and our daughters and the life we've all enjoyed together. If you have (see above) an auto-mind that is fearful/negative/cynical, a life of love, in which you see positive efforts being rewarded (and frankness and kindness and aspiration and good wishes), well, that auto-mind is going to start to seem inadequate, as are the stories it produces. Or maybe not "inadequate" (because they do speak to certain experiences within life) but maybe "incomplete."

I do a lot of thinking, in and out of the writing room, about the relation between fiction and "real life." What are we trying to do when we write a story and what is the relation of that story to the actual life we are living?

I am trying to formulate another question in response to your question here and keep coming back to a moment when I was writing, in a story, a scene in which it was raining, and when I stopped and looked outside I felt confused for a moment until I realized that I had actually believed it was raining. I don't know if that relates to what you mean, but it's always stuck with me.

I think that just means you were in the zone – had put yourself into what John Gardner called "the fictive dream." I feel like that's my whole goal – to stop thinking of what I'm doing as "typing" and start experiencing the described reality as *reality*. I understand this as a form of respect for the reader, like, "Let me get this scale-model really working before you step in here. And in order to make you believe it, I have to really, viscerally believe it myself."

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida claimed that ethics are possible only by their impossibility. He

described a hyperethics, or an ethics beyond ethics. In other words, he believed ethics cannot be predetermined, cannot be codified or prescribed by rules. To me, this notion of ethics is found, in a different register, in your commencement speech, in which you claim we always can be kinder. I think it also plays out in your fiction. How would you conceive of ethics? Are there limits? I think human beings generally agree that killing human beings is wrong, but there are plenty of people who still do this or condone it. Nonhuman animals are slaughtered or tortured every day, yet most humans do not think of this as an ethical dilemma. What are your thoughts?

If I am understanding the Derrida correctly, it sounds right to me, in the sense that any effort to codify ethical rules could lead to a level of rigidity that would fail to respect the complexity of a given moment. The highest ethics would be, I think, awareness. If a person possessed infinite awareness, he would know, in any given situation, all of the repercussions of any of his actions. Since this is impossible for most of us, I think a certain level of humility vis-à-vis one's actions and ethics would be part of an ethical system. Sort of, "Well, you never know, but this seem right to me right now." And, for my money, you can't go wrong by "leading" with sympathy – trying to go around with a fundamentally gentle and hopeful vision of people. Someone quoted me as once having said, "Smile first, then speak." I don't know that I ever said that, but

I like the idea. But basically: any moment of potential ethical or unethical behavior arises uniquely. In this sense, the highest form of ethics might be to develop our awareness – our clear vision of what's happening. Then, whatever arises, we'll be in a better position to bring benefit and avoid bringing harm.

I agree that ethics need awareness, humility, and sympathy. I think without these then ethics can slip into a kind of lazy rationalization, which I think most of us are prone to, to some extent.

Yes, this can be a form of "auto-pilot," something we all love and crave – to be able to "decide," once and for all, and then stop thinking about it. This is tempting, in everything: relationships, ethics, aesthetics.

You started writing about violence toward nonhuman animals even before you became vegetarian. Do you ever feel that your fiction is doing something on an ethical register that is still beyond you, in a sense?

Oh yes, I hope so. It's leading me, in some ways. There is a part of the mind that we gain access to when working that is very intuitive, very open to all sorts of normally hidden data.

But I should note—I am now on a break from vegetarianism. So, this might be linked to the previous question. Am I suddenly unaware of the cruelty done to animals? No, I am not. Do I feel great about eating meat? No. But I noticed I wasn't feeling great. So, I am on a break from what I know to be right, and trying, also, to not be excessive in my feelings about this, if that makes sense.

I have, in myself, always, a strong desire to figure out a way of thinking and living that is correct and beyond reproach (see "auto-pilot," above me). And then I get obsessive about living that way and proud of it and become a bit of a pain in the ass about it. So, I'm thinking lately about the relation of that tendency and ego. I get more like this after a book comes out and I'm yapping about myself in public all the time – I get more determined to attain perfection, once and for all. Which is a form (in me anyway) of *imperfection* -- of control-freakery, of ego, of craving auto-pilot. I am misunderstanding my own importance and expecting a level of infallibility that a more sane and human person wouldn't. Why should it bother me so much to be imperfect?

What do you mean by a more "human" person? I think one of the defining features of humans is this kind of "control-freakery."

It is, you’re absolutely right. But what I’m talking about is the phenomenon of getting too much attention and then believing, more than usual, that one is the center of the universe. It’s a perceptual shift based on nothing. You see in really famous people, this sense that they have to weigh in on, and be correct/authoritative on everything. So, in a more sane/human mode, I can say: “I believe in not eating meat” and “And yet I am eating meat.” It’s a contradiction and an indication of imperfection. But—and this is key—it’s not the only such indication operative in me right now. It’s just one that’s easier to see.

How do you manage satire in your writing? Does it just sort of emerge from the story, or do you find moments in the story in which you feel there needs to be some kind of humor or exaggeration?

The former, I think. Or maybe the two possibilities you mention are really the same thing. Feels that way to me. You reach a certain point in the story and something just feels right—more truthful, more funny. You are always adjusting the eco-system that is the story. It starts to feel a little straight and preachy—a fix presents itself. It starts to feel too madcap, it feels you are condescending to your characters—a fix presents itself. I see a story as a series of near-falls-off-a-bike, followed by necessary adjustments. And the flavor of both the near-falls and the corrections add up to who a person is as a writer.

Great writers are always very attentive to language; interestingly, you use language in ways that closely resemble, for example, corporate jargon and frequently use certain terms across stories. You have a particular idiolect that emerged fully-formed from your first collection. You have mentioned in interviews that you had been writing in another style, but when your wife came across some poems you had written, she seemed to enjoy them more than the other writing. Is your writing style a development from these poems, or did they lead you to a style that became comfortable for you? How has that style continued to develop?

When I wrote those, I just gave a certain part of my mind permission to step forward. If I had to describe that part, I'd say he or she or it was more jester than seer; a little bit ornery; more natural; very attention-seeking. So, because I wasn't "writing" when I wrote those, but just killing time, that mind-part could come out and once I'd seen what he/she/it had done, I was like, "Ah yes, that's pretty good. I think I'll let that part out of the box for my "real" writing." Something like that. The other "tell" was that I could do that kind of writing very easily—much more easily than the attempts at realism that had preceded it. I had strong, joyful opinions in that mode. Decisions were relatively easy. In a word, it was a more genuine mode for me. I was making stories out of my natural language—I had a deep barrel out of which to ladle, so to speak—I know corporate speech and salesman patter and working-class talk and so on.

At first, that mode was always funny but over the years the definition of "entertaining" got broader. Now I think of it as going into a mode where I am trying to be intimately communicative with the reader—considerate of any readerly doubts and, in a sense, making an argument—trying to counter any readerly resistance with an explanation (or joke, or any kind of compensatory move that will say to the reader, "Right, yes, I understand that you are resisting the story at this point. I still care how you feel about it. Watch this. See? I knew where you were." That's an approach that is useful in any mode—comic, tragic, whatever. And it's interesting and I don't fully understand it—but that mindset has something to do with why people tend to use words like "empathy" or "compassion" about my (admittedly very dark) stories. I think the main compassion or empathy (or connection, or intimacy) in my work is from writer to reader.

Do you write with a specific audience in my mind? Do you have an idealized version of a reader?

It's basically me if I hadn't already read it a million times. But that's another way of saying that I am trying to imagine my reader as being my equal. If I write and edit to please myself and then hand the finished product to my reader, I am saying that I expect a lot from her—I am saying that she is as bright and worldly and well-intentioned as I think myself to be.

A lot of your writing, like your commencement speech, tends to use relatively simple language to engage with more complex ideas. Is this a conscious choice? When you revise, do you have a sense of how the story should sound, or do you find out only when you have reached that point where the story carries the kind of language it is meant to have?

What I did with that speech was to actively imagine the setting in which it was going to be given: spoken over a big PA, in a huge sports stadium, restless grandparents and kids, very hot room etc. And this caused me to simplify the language. I felt I was telling a simple, personal truth rather than trying to "prove" something. So, the language was editing into a more simple or Lite version as I was doing it. Also, I'd given a version of that speech to one of our daughters' Middle School graduations, so I was familiar with that transform, and especially with the value of sounding somewhat colloquial and improvised, and of writing the speech out with that in mind—testing it aloud as I was writing it etc.

I think I find out how a story should sound through the revision process. There’s a goal of a certain kind of efficiency, and a related goal of trying to move the language away from the pedestrian, even in small ways. Sometimes there is a little initial “back of the throat” feeling that is roughly equivalent to a feeling of having a certain voice that wants to get out…and that will have rhythmic aspects—almost like a drummer who has an urge to play a certain type of pattern.

And then, once I’ve revised a certain section and like it well enough to keep it, it teaches me things about the way the rest of the piece might want to sound. Sometimes, for example, I’ll achieve a certain level of brevity, and then, down the line, will have to (will have created a space in which to) become even more concise (and the reader will feel this as a form of escalation.) I think it’s not so different from music—while improvising, you hit on a certain riff or tone, and then go deeper into that mode. All very instinctual and hard to describe…

Your notion of kindness in that commencement speech is remarkably similar to Fox 8’s conception of kindness. I know Fox 8 was published before the speech, but they

were not published all that far apart. Is there any overlap in their development?

I'm not sure but I think they were written about the same time. Really, I see all my stuff as being overlapping in that way: a few questions, being mulled over at (I hope) deeper and deeper levels, or at least from different angles.

In "The 400-Pound CEO," Jeffrey originally comes off as the kind of underdog we root for. He's bullied, and he passively takes it. Then he kills a raccoon and a human being, both for reasons that might seem at least defensible. However, Jeffrey, rather than turn himself in, tries to live out his ideals, seemingly for selfish reasons. In the end, what the reader is left with, I think, is a kind of ethical ambiguity. This ambiguity frequently turns up in your stories. You generally do not push a moral perspective on us but rather leave it up to us, as readers, to determine how we feel. In other words, the stories work on an emotional level before we really think about them. You've described this process as going through a black box and compared it to riding a rollercoaster. Do you ever fight an urge to give a more direct moral message, or does the story naturally veer toward a less obvious ethics?

I am always trying to give the more direct moral message. But that incarnation of the story feels facile. So, then the game begins to challenge the too-facile moral message narratively. If a situation, and the character's moral stance, feels "facile," well, that really means that all of the repercussions of that stance have not been admitted into the story (otherwise it wouldn't feel facile, but satisfactory, and even wise.) So, in this sense, the writer might be seen as a kind of moral referee, asking, "Has this moral situation been presented fairly?" And if the answer is No, he has to contrive a way to make it fairer. With Jeffrey, I'd say that all of his early passivity was, maybe, a form of having a very high ego. To take it and take it, a person has to believe in something, or, in his case, be incapable of something (namely, standing up for himself.) So that makes a certain excess in him and it felt, as I recall, very natural for him to then get a little out-of-control at the end. A person, suppressed, and a person, explosive, are essentially two points on the same arc.

I think what I'm saying is that, for me, the highest form of ethics is a feeling of "God, this life is complicated. Let me live that way—a little smile on my face, prone to sympathy, slow to act, aware that the other guy might be having a shit day." And an "ethical" story might be one that temporarily induces that mindset.

In "Pastoralia," English is "verboten" in the cave, but the characters are quite capable of communicating via body language. In fact, this language seems far more effective and direct in its expression than the kind of vague, contradictory, jargon-filled language we encounter in the bureaucratic notes. Usually we privilege speaking and writing. Were these different ways of communicating something that grew out of the nature of the story, or did you have a sense going into the story that you wanted to explore these different ways of communicating?

No, I had no idea of what I wanted to explore, really. You get yourself into a situation (i.e., they aren't allowed to speak) and then you get yourself out of it, in the individual moments of the story. This is, I think, felt as wit, if it's done well. Like when a song has a very high note in it, we may find ourselves wondering, "Wow, can she hit that note?" And then, when she does, with confidence, that's fun. It is also where the singer most reveals who she really is.

Now that you've been, at least briefly, vegetarian, would you write *The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip* differently now? In other words, would the action that unites the characters at the end still be fishing?

Oh, sure, because all of the story that came before it leads to that moment.

You mean that all of the story leads to the fishing moment?

Yes, in the sense that you arrive at a particular fictive moment fully “armed” (or “prepared” or “obliged to respond to”) everything that came before it. There has to be some honest responsiveness at play. Having described the physical reality of the town, fishing became a viable solution and, in the world of the story, it’s the one that an intelligent person would have arrived at. I’d put it in play via the setting—being on the ocean. It exists as “that which is not what they have traditionally always done.” I didn’t do that on purpose but once I had reasoned through the story (by writing it)….there it was. A group of hungry people without a livelihood and…an ocean.

If I omitted that moment just because I didn’t approve of it, I think that would have been a form of falsification. But that’s also why I put in the line on page 77 (“Except of course the fish.”)—to acknowledge that the town had not arrived at a perfect moral solution. Sometimes, I think, that’s all a story takes—some acknowledgement that the story is not perfect, or that the solution attained is still wonky, as all of our worldly solutions must be.

In other words, the story has a moral of sorts (be good to each other) and a contradiction to that moral (except the fish) and an acknowledgement of the contradiction. That might be what we mean when we talk about “ambiguity” in fiction. All of those notions hanging there above the story and the reader may walk away with this sense: “Yup, that’s how it is in this world.”

In one of the outtakes from *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*, the title character claims at one point that although Inner Hornerites may seem to behave like humans, they are just copying humans. In other words, Phil animalizes them while implying Outer Hornerites are human. There are no references to humans in the published text. Was that something you wanted to avoid? In the published text, there is also an incident in which the Inner Hornerites are said to be like animals. This kind of animalization, in the promotion of genocide, is always intended to disparage the Other. Why do you think such campaigns so often turn to nonhuman animals to demonstrate disgust and contempt of our fellow humans?

It’s a step along the path, isn’t it? If I want to eventually kill someone, I might first want to compare them to something we routinely kill, i.e., animals. That way, we can still kill that person while feeling human ourselves.

(I don't think I was consciously trying to avoid the word "humans": I always thought of the Hornerites as human, even though they're…unusual humans.)

"93990" was originally included in a story-cycle published in *McSweeney's*. When you included it in *In Persuasion Nation*, without the three stories that originally preceded it, do you think the difference in context changed how we, as readers, understand the story? This change in context happens frequently with your work since much of it is published first in *The New Yorker* before being collected. Do you have a preference as to how your work is presented?

My approach is to think about my work in whatever way will help me do more of it, more fluently and naturally and, well, better. And what helps me is to think, "Yes, a change in context changes the way the story is read. How fun. What an opportunity." And a related feeling is that if I get too tied up in controlling/predicting the readerly experience, I am going to get myself tied up in knots.

In another sense, though, what actually happened was this: I was putting that collection together, thought of that larger sketch (*Four Institutional Monologues*) and dropped the whole piece into the collection-in-progress—and it was just too much. The prose was tough going and it felt like a goiter—a very conceptual goiter—had been dropped into the book. So, then I just scanned each piece to see if maybe one would do. And “93990” felt just right.

So again—it tends to be feeling over analysis, in the faith that feeling, correctly applied, will produce the most complex and meaningful final result. Because feeling subcontains analysis, I would say. And also contains many other valences that are impossible to articulate but still felt by the reader.

“93990” is also based on a real incident about a real monkey whom you called the “Christ monkey.” Did you feel an obligation to tell 93990’s story, or did it just seem like it might make for interesting material?

No, it just felt like amazing stuff. Which might be a form of “feeling an obligation to tell the story.” But if the material wasn’t alive for me, no matter how much I wanted to tell the story, I wouldn’t have been able to, if you see what I mean. But again—these two things feel, to me, to be co-arising—the material seems interesting because it is so sad and it is so sad because it is unjust and the injustice screams out to be told, in the name of honesty.

In “Puppy,” there is a motif of “perfection.” We hear a few characters call something “perfect” in the story. Was this a way to unite your characters as you switched

between perspectives using the third-person ventriloquist technique?

No, honestly, I’ve never noticed that before. That doesn’t mean you’re wrong—in fact, that is really interesting because I think both women are shooting for something like perfection. I just didn’t consciously notice it. But, as my answers above might suggest, that doesn’t mean it wasn’t “intentional.” When I’m teaching other writers’ stories, I tell my students that we should make the assumption that everything is on purpose or to purpose—the writer, whatever her methods, “approved the message” and since the story is an efficiency-loving form, the great story (I almost wrote “perfect story, ha ha”) is the one where every comma is “intentional”—has been closely considered, many times, and been judged to be doing the correct work for the story’s larger mission (which, also, must remain unspoken and irreducible.)

Neither the puppy nor Bo has a voice in the story, yet the story is propelled by them. These kinds of “minor” characters became major points in your stories. Did you deliberately leave them a bit more mysterious for readers? If they had more to say, would it dampen our ethical response to them?

I tend to write from a minimalist stance—ideally a story would only have one narrator. It only gets a second when the material demands it. So, there’s no inherent value in having all points-of-view represented. Neither of those characters has anything to do in the story, really—nothing that would affect the actual plot. The POV narration is there, basically, to produce action. Callie decides to sell the dog, then decides to kill it. Marie decides not to buy the puppy and to call Protective Services on Callie. So, we need to hear them in order to believe in them—to believe that they would do what they do. It would be interesting to hear from Bo and the puppy but my experience has been that, if that voice isn’t strictly necessary, it strains credulity—makes the reader suspect that the writer is just showing off or something like that. It cuts into the feeling of urgency (“What’s going to happen here?”) and makes the story feel less like it’s actually unfolding in front of our eyes, and more like an intellectual construct. It’s interesting—we believe in a fictive construct in proportion to its necessity, especially as related to dramatic urgency.

What led you to write from the perspective of a fox? Why that particular animal? Was it right for the story you wanted to tell, a creative challenge, or something else? Were you ever concerned about how your readers might receive a talking, writing fox? I know there is a long tradition of what we call anthropomorphic characters in fiction, but American media culture, especially advertisements and children’s animation, is also

swarming with nonhuman animals who otherwise behave like humans. How did you keep Fox 8 "real" enough?

I am feeling increasingly crass as I answer these very intelligent questions and reveal the instincts of a Vaudevillian, but….I had written two humor pieces. In one, the narrator was a really intelligent dog, commenting on his humans. In the second, called "Coarse Evaluation," a bunch of semi-literate high-school kids assessed their teacher. This was full of misspellings and syntactical mayhem. So, I got the notion of using both approaches. I'd just read a book written by writers, about their dogs, and didn't want to copy any of those, so made my character a fox. Beyond that, I'm not sure why. A fox is cool because it can get out in the world, and I've always thought of foxes as being sort of gentle yet crafty. But really, it was just a case where the notion arose and that silent, judging part of myself went: "Yup, that will be fun." Which is another way of saying: "Yes, there is verbal and comic abundance there, for you." And I've learned to trust that part of myself. This sometimes sounds like an anti-intellectual approach ("I dunno, I just FEEL it") but actually I think it has taught me to expand the definition of "intellectual." We have this very refined and intelligent and intuitive capability – so any analysis of art, say, should treat this as a real thing. Maybe the most real thing of all. If we've omitted it from our criticism (choosing to talk, instead, always, about the artist's intention, as if she controlled the whole process) then the mistake lies with the criticism.

You have another story, "Woof!: A Plea of Sorts," collected as an essay in *The Braindead Megaphone*, in which a dog writes a note to a human. I find it intriguing that it was published as an essay rather than a story. Do you think of essays as not necessarily nonfiction, or did it seem to fit better in that collection?

That's the one I mentioned above. I don't think of it as an essay but as a piece of light comedy. I grouped a lot of disparate types of pieces into that book. I think I would have preferred to call it, like, Miscellany or something but that is off-putting.

Anyway, I have a pretty highly specific model of what is and isn't a story and that one…. isn't. It doesn't do enough work somehow. It doesn't' ascend to be about more than it appears to be about. At least I felt that way at the time.

In *Lincoln in the Bardo*, there are several references to nonhuman animals, sometimes just in passing, sometimes in a more sustained passage. We also encounter a number of references to dead animals, such as in one of the early "historical" citation chapters, where you created a quoted a source—at least, I am pretty sure

it is one of your fictionalized historical accounts—of the "carcasses"—which are also later called "corpses," a term usually reserved for humans—being served at the Lincolns' dinner party. Later in the story, the word "meat" is used by Lincoln to describe Willie's corpse. Were you working with certain terms that evoke this kind of bodily sense of death, and did you intend to link nonhuman animal death with human death? How do ghostly beings, nonhuman animals, and formerly enslaved people relate? There is a lot of liminality in the text. What does this liminality mean to the story?

I never have a sense of what sorts of themes or motifs I'm going to use when I'm starting out. And I'm not really consciously aware as I'm going. But, as I mentioned above, that doesn't defy a certain kind of whole-body/mind "intentionality," if you see what I mean. So, I think I was aware that the "meat" at the party "spoke to" the "meat" at the end. But this occurred naturally, was noted, was left to stand. That's the nature of the intention, rather than the fulfillment of some plan.

Sometimes I think the way we talk about the appearance of certain motifs is kind of backwards. For example, as you've correctly noted, there are instances of meat, animals, corpses, and of liminality. But I'd say that stuff is sort of guaranteed by the setting (a graveyard at night). So, my feeling is that you put a story in some time and place and then, as you write, you are enacting a kind of ritual alertness to those motifs and tropes that are already implied or nascent, if you will. In a sense, the reader is already alert to those, and part of her pleasure occurs when you show, by introducing particular manifestations of those tropes/motifs, that you were alert to them too, right there with her.

For example—if I set a book on a farm, we know we are going to be writing about, you know: rebirth, fallowness vs fertility, frozen soil vs thawed soil, birth, death, etc. If a novel set on a farm didn't engage with these things it would have be a deliberate effort and would seem….weird.

True, the primary setting is a graveyard, but we also find these references to nonhuman animals and meat in the party scenes and in the monologues offered by the dead. For example, Jane Ellis holds a Christmas memory of seeing decorated meats and of a deer trailing blood from the sled on the ride home. She later notes how she is perceived as an "inferior species."

Right, good point. But I think the point still holds—if you write a book about an intersection between the dead and the living say, and about the question of what separates the dead from the living, then these sorts of borders (meat vs living flesh, etc). Just as an interesting tidbit – that Christmas memory was from a much-earlier work, set in a different graveyard, based on a photo I saw of a store like the one described. So, the actual move was to remember that; find it; refine it; approve its insertion in this book. All very intuitive but, as we discussed above, that doesn’t preclude a (capacious) form of intentionality.

I think the interesting notion is that the idea of "intention" is wide-open. Your observations about the stories are 100 percent accurate and insightful from a critical perspective. The fact that I wasn't thinking of them in that particular way doesn't invalidate at all what you've found. But, to me, it seems to make the whole thing more interesting—maybe we don't know what process really is. I don't, anyway.

Do you have any sense of what might be next for you, in terms of publishing or a different artistic endeavor? I read that Nick Offerman and Megan Mullally, who both appear on the audiobook of *Lincoln in the Bardo*, also bought the film rights to your novel.

I just (well, in December) started a new story. I’m just trying to get back my old expectations re productivity and pace. I’m pretty much a two-story-a-year person. When you publish a book, there is this sudden rush of attention, that feels like accomplishment, but then messes with your accomplishment barometer—you get addicted to some little jolt every day. And that's not how good writing gets done. So now I am decompressing, or maybe I am re-brainwashing myself.

We are working on a movie version but that's something that happens apart from my morning writing time, for the most part.

Finally, what has been your most satisfying moment as a writer?

Well, on the accomplishment plane, the Man Booker was really great: unexpected and truly satisfying. But you can't, of course, count on such wonderful things happening, and I think an artistic life that was too centered on them would be no good. I think you have to wrest yourself back from that sort of hankering (which is very real and also very deep when satisfied) back to the question of what moments really matter, are sustainable, can't be taken away, aren't conditional – and these are the thousands of little moments during the process, when something "comes out of the stone"—when the fictive reality suddenly pops a little more clearly into focus and you know, infinitesimally more clearly, what you and the work are saying. Or, you know—it is suddenly actually starting to say something or (more accurately) it is starting to BE a certain something in the world—its own thing, an original thing you didn't plan, but are happy to see.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Animal. “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)” [Derrida]

AR. *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* [Wolfe]

B&A. *The Beast & the Sovereign* [Derrida]

CEO. “The 400-Pound CEO” [Saunders]

CL. “Consider the Lobster” [Wallace]

CSM. *The Companion Species Manifesto* [Haraway]

EUP. “E Unibus Pluram” [Wallace]

F8. *Fox 8: A Story* [Saunders]

HQ. “Re: Humble Question Regarding ‘93990’” [Saunders]

LB. *Lincoln in the Bardo: A Novel* [Saunders]

MVS. “Mr. Vonnegut in Sumatra” [Saunders]

NS. “Re: [no subject]” [Saunders]

Outtake #4. “Outtake #4: Having Eliminated Inner Horner, Phil Introduces the Loyalty Suspenders.” [Saunders]

Outtakes. “Outtakes from *Phil*: Introduction.” [Saunders]

P. “Pastoralia” [Saunders]

Puppy. “Puppy” [Saunders]

TBFRP. *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* [Saunders]

TBM. “The Braindead Megaphone” [Saunders]

The Book. “The Book.” [Saunders]

TNS. “The New Sincerity” [Kelly]

TPG. “The Perfect Gerbil: Reading Barthelme’s ‘The School’” [Saunders]

TVPGF. *The Very Persisten Gappers of Frip* [Saunders]

USH. “United States of Huck: Introduction to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.” [Saunders]

Woof. “Woof!: A Plea of Sorts” [Saunders]

WIWP. “Why I Wrote *Phil*” [Saunders]

WP. *What is Posthumanism?* [Wolfe]

WSM. *When Species Meet* [Haraway]

WWRD. “George Saunders: What Writers Really do when They Write” [Saunders]

Zoontologies. *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* [Wolfe]

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