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## The Language of Rats: Unwelcome Animals and Interspecies Connection in Contemporary Anglophone Fiction

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# **THE LANGUAGE OF RATS: UNWELCOME ANIMALS AND INTERSPECIES CONNECTION IN CONTEMPORARY ANGLOPHONE FICTION**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by  
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B.A., Rice University, 2012  
M.F.A., University of Mississippi, 2015  
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In remembrance of my grandfather, Dr. Nelson James Terrell, Jr., and my grandmother, Frances Carolyn Lyons.

However, there are still animals we hate. Rats, for instance. Rats haven't surrendered. They fight back. They form themselves into underground units in our sewers. They aren't winning, but they aren't losing either. To say nothing of the insects and the microbia. They may beat us yet. They will certainly outlast us.

--J. M. Coetzee  
*The Lives of Animals*

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## Abstract

*The Language of Rats: Unwelcome Animals and Interspecies Connection in Global Contemporary Fiction* consists of three essays examining the representation of what I call *unwelcome animals* in contemporary Anglophone novels from the United States, Nigeria, and India. These animals often live alongside humans yet are perceived as threats or annoyances. Literary depictions of this fraught relationship reveal, and sometimes critique, the intellectual structures that shape how we understand and represent interspecies connections. This dissertation contributes to our understanding of the interspecies dimensions of contemporary fiction by bringing together the fields of environmental criticism, animal studies, postcolonialism, and U.S. Southern studies. Chapter one concerns interspecies ecologies in Karen Russell's 2011 novel *Swamplandia!* I analyze what I call *ecoghosts*, nonhuman agencies that disrupt the language of the novel while simultaneously appearing as subjects within the narrative. Ecoghosts demonstrate a multivalent form of literary agency, suggesting that the nonhuman presence in fiction cannot be fully exorcised. Chapter two focuses on interspecies politics in Ben Okri's 1991 novel *The Famished Road*. I analyze the novel's representation of rats to reveal hidden dimensions of the novel's representation of interspecies politics. The text suggests that *hard reading*, a type of shallow but close reading, is the most ethical approach to reading animals. By depicting the rats as participants in political publics, the novel represents the rats as a bridge between human and nonhuman concerns. In chapter three, I turn to interspecies sociality in Nilanjana Roy's novels *The Wildings* (2012) and *The Hundred Names of Darkness* (2013). By giving language to animal characters' decidedly nonhuman ways of organizing their worlds, the novels critique homogenizing pressures in Delhi and present *stray taxonomies* that model modes of categorization premised on the centrality of interspecies relationships.

## Introduction

In the marshes of southwestern Florida, a girl on a dangerous journey suspects that a menacing, primeval force lurks beneath the buzz of mosquitoes. Across the Atlantic, in a city reminiscent of Lagos, a poor child lies on his sleeping mat. Awake in the darkness, he listens as rats gnaw on his family's grain, wondering if they will eat him next. From the rooftops of Delhi, a stray cat peers down at the people below. To them, she knows, there is little difference between her and her worst enemy.

In these vignettes from recent novels, the epistemological gulf between humans and animals seems impossible to bridge. Fictional animals are often understood as literary devices: tiny stage props to set the scene, metaphors to illustrate a message, or anthropomorphic characters who are more like humans in disguise. Animals with fraught, even antagonistic relationships with humans (such as the mosquitoes, rats, and stray cats in these novels) are often invoked figuratively to suggest the inferior or abject nature of certain humans or human groups; at best, they suggest resistance to hegemonic forces. When we approach these animals *as animals*, however, we see how they resist serving these transitive functions, much as they often elude human mastery within the fictional worlds they inhabit. In my analysis, the relationship between representations of unwelcome animals and marginalized humans is not simply oppositional (the animals as markers or agents of human marginalization) or substitutive (the animals as marginalized humans or vice-versa). Rather, it involves a more complex triangulation between humanistic literary modes, environmentalist discourse, and a tentative exploration of new ways to bring these together.

*The Language of Rats: Unwelcome Animals and Interspecies Connection in Global Contemporary Fiction* consists of three essays examining the representation of unwelcome



animals in four contemporary Anglophone novels: *The Famished Road* (1991) by the Nigerian author Ben Okri, *Swamplandia!* (2011) by the U.S. author Karen Russell, and *The Wildings* (2012) and *The Hundred Names of Darkness* (2013) by the Indian author Nilanjana Roy.<sup>1</sup>

Although these chapters share themes and methods, they are intended to stand alone as investigations into literary texts produced in distinct cultural, historical, and environmental contexts. The overarching argument of this dissertation is simple: fictional representations of unwelcome animals can reveal a great deal about the texts which contain them.

### **Defining Unwelcome Animals**

I use the term *unwelcome animals* to refer specifically to animals that often live alongside humans yet are commonly perceived as threats or annoyances to be expelled or exterminated. For example, unwelcome animals might be pests, urban scavengers, or stray companion animals. By reading for unwelcome animals, I interrogate the intellectual structures that shape how we understand and depict the relations between humans and nonhumans. Aside from the animal characters in Roy's novels, the animals I write about occupy minor roles in these texts. They are nameless, often interchangeable, and inessential to plot or characterization. In Roy's novels, most characters are animals; nevertheless, these animals observe that they play minor roles in the lives of humans and that they are viewed by many humans as essentially interchangeable. Each novel's animals are, for the most part, mundane annoyances. Few human characters would be particularly shocked to spy one of Russell's buzzards or Roy's bandicoot rats, though they might

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1. The title of this project, *The Language of Rats*, is a reference to a passage from *The Famished Road* in which Azaro, the protagonist, claims that "sometimes [he] could understand the language of animals" (14). However, the only non-magical animals he seems to understand are rats. The titular rats have a metonymous relationship with the "unwelcome" animals I take as the subject of my project. They are much like Wittgenstein's lion, about which he famously claims "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him" (225). Wittgenstein is not making a claim about the unique linguistic capabilities of lions; rather, he uses the lion as a vivid example. This project turns Wittgenstein's claim into a question: can rats talk through literature and, if so, what do they say?

not be pleased. Nor can these animals be dismissed as mere symbols, allegorical stand-ins for humans, or other literary sleights of hand. They are unremarkable; they are real; they are unwelcome.

These qualities make unwelcome animals unusual subjects of scholarship. So-called *charismatic megafauna* such as big cats, elephants, and whales have become, sometimes literally, the faces of conservation and ecological concern; recall the panda logo of the World Wildlife Fund. These animals' cultural and literary prominence often extends beyond, and sometimes predates, environmental activism.<sup>2</sup> Although scholars often note the disproportionate attention and sympathy that charismatic megafauna receive, sometimes at the expense of marginalized humans, their prominence in literature makes them difficult to ignore. Companion animals such as farm animals and pets also tend to attract popular and critical attention.<sup>3</sup> Animals are often categorized in ways that suggest hierarchies of value (clean versus unclean, complex versus simple, rare versus common, higher versus lower); these hierarchies, in turn, shape the ways animals are written and read in fiction.<sup>4</sup> Humans generally place unwelcome animals on the lower ends of these hierarchies, making them unlikely subjects of literary interest.<sup>5</sup>

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2. Recent examples of charismatic megafauna in literature include the Bengal tiger in Canadian author Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* (2001), whose protagonist is an Indian boy; the right whales in South African author Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* (2005); and the Indian elephant, Gravedigger, in Indian-American author Tania James' *The Tusk that Did the Damage* (2015). The novels I take as my subjects also include charismatic megafauna, notably the American alligators in *Swamplandia!* and several of the zoo animals in Roy's wilding novels.

3. For example, dogs feature prominently in South African author J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and in scholarly responses to the novel.

4. In the real world, unwelcome animals often play important roles in ecological well-being, and threats to their populations can be disastrous. For instance, German scientists recently discovered a precipitous drop in the number of flying insects over the last 25 years, indicating a potential ecological collapse that could affect the entire world, while one third of parasite species such as fleas, ticks, and tapeworms face extinction due to climate change (Hallmann et. al; Carlson et. al).

5. It is certainly possible for charismatic megafauna to be unwelcome; wolves or bears, for example, might be considered dangerous pests in certain contexts. Roy's novels about stray cats show that companion animals can also move between categories.

In this sense, unwelcome animals have much in common with more familiar categories of fauna such as *pests* or *vermin*. These categories overlap in useful ways yet are not interchangeable. As Lucinda Cole writes, *vermin* is a labile category of creatures that are “usually small, always vile, and, in large numbers, noxious and even dangerous to agricultural and sociopolitical orders” and “reproduce so rapidly and in such numbers they threaten to overwhelm their biological, environmental and—from a human perspective—sociolegal contexts” (1-2). Vermin obviously possess agency in the sense that they can act upon the world yet lack many of the characteristics by which we customarily identify living things as subjects, such as the ability to easily differentiate individuals from each other. In both ways, they are reminiscent of unwelcome animals. However, I find some key aspects of Cole’s definition limiting, particularly the notion of out-of-control reproduction.<sup>6</sup> By using the term *unwelcome animals*, I intend to highlight the ways that these texts depict direct relationships between these animals and humans, both within their narratives and on the level of representational practices. I also hope to sidestep the notion that there is something essentially noxious, negative, or “vile” about these beings; rather, these characteristics are imputed on animals by humans. This is not to ignore the sometimes-significant harm caused by these animals’ counterparts in the real world. For example, because of their tendency to transmit disease, mosquitoes are arguably the deadliest nonhuman animals in the world; stray and feral cats are so devastating to bird populations that some ecologists have called for them to be killed like (other) invasive species (Gross). In the novels discussed in my dissertation, however, these unwelcome animals are often benign; they are generally beneath notice and, when they make themselves impossible to ignore, inspire disgust or fear. Few are depicted as actual threats to the livelihood of humans or other animals.

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6. The term *pest* is similar to *vermin*, although it can sometimes refer to plants, with the added suggestion of disease or pestilence. My reservations about the terms are essentially the same.

Like Cole, Susan McHugh, and others who partake in what I call, with some trepidation, a posthumanist critical perspective, I think approaching the individual, anthropomorphic subject as the sole bearer of literary agency obscures a great deal of how literature, and our thoroughly multispecies world, can and does function. My analysis of unwanted animals in fiction contributes to a growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship that suggests that subjecthood is not a necessary condition for agency and that all life is interspecies life.

## Corpus

In *The Language of Rats*, I investigate the representation of unwelcome animals in Anglophone novels from the United States, Nigeria, and India. Unlike other studies, I approach these animals not because of their association with dehumanization or their ecological significance, but because they allow me to interrogate the assumptions about literary value which cause these animals to be overlooked. This dissertation asks a simple question: if we look for unwelcome animals in contemporary novels, what do we find? Rather than elaborating a single, sustained argument, the three chapters partake in aspects of the same methodology and overlap in significant and revealing ways. I believe that reading novels from the U.S. South, Nigeria, and India in conjunction produces a richer literary effect and shows that reading for unwelcome animals produces varied results across different texts and literatures.

Partly due to their warm, fertile climates, India, Nigeria, and the U.S. South each have long histories of conquest, colonization, and capitalist exploitation that continue to the present day.<sup>7</sup> These “human” histories cannot be disentangled from natural histories or environmental

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7. I distinguish the region of the U.S. South from the nation here to emphasize its peculiar relationship with the U.S. as a whole, not to imply that it stands on the same footing as the nations of India and Nigeria. I base this distinction on Jennifer Rae Greeson’s influential framing of the South as “an internal other for [the] nation, an intrinsic part of the national body that nonetheless is differentiated and held apart from the whole” (2); though the South is part of the imperial center, the dynamics of empire also play out in the relation between the nation and the region. Other scholars join Greeson in emphasizing the South’s relationship with regions outside of the nation’s

conditions. Thus, my use of the term *environment* is always meant to refer to material circumstances and their histories that envelop both humans and nonhumans. These largely postcolonial environments are fertile sites for rethinking the capitalist, anthropocentric ideologies which enabled—and enables—their exploitation in the first place. Although these three regions did not experience colonization in the same manner, all three were subject to European colonization. All were British colonies, and Florida was additionally colonized by both Spain and France and remains a site of settler colonization of Indigenous land. Additionally, each region exemplifies what Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee calls the essential feature of global capitalism, the development of “pockets of extreme wealth and vast swathes of poverty simultaneously on local, national and global levels” (32). Although Nigeria, India, and the United States are some of the largest, most populous, and resource-rich democracies in the world, each novel reflects the effects of uneven development on individuals and communities: Okri and Russell’s characters provide for their families through a combination of unreliable vocations, and even Roy’s cats are displaced from their affluent neighborhood as consequence of economic and environmental destruction. These novels depict colonization and global capitalism as creating conditions of possibility for new forms of interspecies relationships, while at the same time disrupting existing modes of ecological relation. This is not to say that these texts unite in a call for interspecies solidarity against empire and capitalism; although each is broadly critical of structures of oppression, reading for unwelcome animals reveals that these same structures seep into these novels as well.

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borders, particularly the Caribbean, based on shared historical, geographical, and cultural features. For example, Maria Cristina Fumagalli et. al use the term “American Tropics” to refer to “a kind of extended Caribbean, including the south-eastern USA, the Atlantic littoral of Central America, the Caribbean islands, and north-eastern South America, with outposts even further afield” (2).

Additionally, each novel (and author) achieved popularity and critical acclaim in the West and among cosmopolitan elites outside the West. Ben Okri won the Booker Prize for *The Famished Road*. *Swamplandia!* was a finalist for the 2012 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction, and Karen Russell received a MacArthur Foundation “Genius Grant” in 2013. Although Roy’s novels did not reach such enormous audiences or receive similar accolades, they were republished in Italian, Spanish, and German; drew favorable reviews in prominent publications in several countries; and, perhaps most telling, *The Wildings* received Salman Rushdie’s stamp of approval in the form of a cover blurb. Popular Anglophone texts such as these do not have a monopoly on unwelcome animals; however, I am particularly interested in the fact that these animals are so prominent, yet so overlooked, in widely distributed texts in English. Rather than seeking out these animals at the margins, I choose to read popular texts to reveal how they already circulate in global cultural forms.

I have selected novels for several reasons. First, the length of most novels—and these are not short novels—allows for the accretion of detail which makes a substantial analysis of unwelcome animals possible. In *The Famished Road*, for instance, mentions of the rats are sparsely scattered throughout its five hundred or so pages, with only a handful of sustained engagements. Although Roy’s wilding novels include unwelcome animals on every page, my analysis focuses on the relationship between the language of the text and the socio-spatial world of its animal characters that develops gradually throughout the two books. My analysis also depends on the relationship between unusual, often minute, formal elements of these texts and the broader narrative trajectories invited by the novel form. This is especially true when these aspects seem at odds, such as when the characterization of the wildings as moral exemplars is undercut by the novel’s descriptive practices, or when taking the narrator of *Swamplandia!*’s

words at face value reveals friction between the text's narrative and aesthetic dimensions. Finally, these novels integrate fantastical and realistic elements, which allows me to interrogate the correspondence between their fictional worlds and their real geographical and cultural contexts, as well as between literary animals and their absent referents. The novel form surely does not hold a monopoly on unwelcome animals, but the kinds of interspecies engagements which, say, poetry might facilitate are likely to differ. Likewise, a different corpus of novels (such as a survey of a national literature) would produce a distinct understanding of how humans and animals are represented through the novel form. The harmonious handful of novels which I have selected for this project are a revealing microcosm of a larger literary ecosystem.

### **Disciplinary Intervention**

At the heart of my analysis is the question of “seeing” the animal presence in an anthropogenic and anthropocentric form. I do not mean to decry this anthropocentrism; certainly, some degree of anthropocentrism is inescapable. Rather, I hope to see how the humanism which characterizes these—and perhaps most—novels interacts with their representation of animals. Each novel is, in its own way, critical of violence against marginalized humans as well as against animals and the nonhuman environment. I understand nature and culture to be intertwined, but these dimensions are still often experienced or represented as dichotomous. A novel which focuses on environmental issues might, for instance, downplay the social or political except inasmuch as these areas intersect with the overtly environmental and vice-versa. Attending to the ways that these novels depict unwelcome animals, however, often reveals connections between their anthropocentric and ecocentric dimensions.

Cajetan Iheka has directly addressed the question of tension between anthropocentric and ecocentric concerns in postcolonial literature, and, as such, has informed much of my project.

His work on African literature is based on the specific cultures and histories of Africa which have led to attempts to bring humans in African literature closer or further from nonhumans. Although my project does not share his geographical focus, I nonetheless draw some useful tools from his analysis. Iheka uses the term “proximity” to refer to “a spatial sense of nearness as well as a form of proximity brought about by similarities and shared characteristics” (22). Proximity encompasses everything from the bare fact of “multispecies presence” in a narrative to a complete “indistinction” between the human and nonhuman (23). Although I agree strongly with Iheka’s corrective that cultural forms already stage the “enmeshment” or “proximity” of nonhumans despite the lingering Enlightenment imperative to separate the spheres of the human and nonhuman, my methodology differs from his. Iheka writes that “the idea of proximity encourages us to read African literary texts in innovative ways with attention to the fact that nonhuman forms are often implicated in the concerns of the text even when they are not explicitly stated” (24). With Iheka’s words as a starting point, I want to make two different claims. The first is that nonhuman concerns are often overlooked in texts even when they *are* explicitly stated, particularly when the nonhumans in question are of a distinctly uncharismatic sort. Second, and relatedly, anthropocentrism is so entrenched in reading practices, both scholarly and popular, that an *implicit* depiction of human concerns in a text can drown out even *explicit* depictions of animal life. Like Iheka, however, I am wary of replicating the notion that human and nonhuman concerns are mutually exclusive; indeed, I find that overlooking the animal elements of texts can rob us of a richer understanding of their treatment of human concerns as well. On a more practical note, novels are produced by humans (albeit with the assistance and influence of other forces and agencies) and read, so far as we know, only by humans, so anthropocentrism appears to be baked into the form itself. Rather than turning away



from the human elements of fiction, if such a thing is even possible, we ought to approach it with an understanding that humans are already “embedded” in nature, to echo Clive Hamilton (138, 144). Hamilton writes that we cannot divorce ourselves from the material conditions of nature, but in many ways possess unprecedented power and responsibility toward the rest of nature. As the sole producers of literary texts, humans bear the unique responsibility of representing the animal other in fiction. If some form of anthropocentrism is inevitable in fiction, it is still possible for fiction to contribute to “a different kind of orientation to the Earth, one in which we understand deeply our extraordinary power and unique responsibility” (152). This kind of orientation is, to borrow Deborah Bird Rose’s use of the term, also a practice of *care*, “an ongoing assumption of responsibility in the face of continuing violence and peril” (G58).

The expansive, species-encompassing *we* employed in much writing about the environment can sometimes conceal the uneven distribution of the risks and rewards of environmental degradation. The hybrid field of postcolonial ecocriticism is based on the recognition that humans and the nonhuman world are susceptible to the ongoing, inherently unevenly distributed effects of colonialism. Postcolonial ecocriticism rests on the premise that colonization and imperialism have environmental impacts, and that the discourse of empire depends on the idea of an absolute distinction between humans and nonhumans. Environmental criticism and postcolonialism have often coalesced around the catastrophe: the catastrophe of colonial violence and its bloody aftermaths; the catastrophe of environmental degradation and its supreme manifestation, climate change; overall, the catastrophe of global capitalism and its effects on the material world.<sup>8</sup> The texts I analyze were published after 1989, a period

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8. In *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities*, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and her co-editors write that “postcolonial approaches emphasize how experiences of environmental violence, rupture, and displacement are central ecological challenges across the Global South” (2). The catastrophe as the locus between the “Global South” and global warming is invoked in the titles of scholarly works including Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the*

characterized by increasing market liberalization, advances in information technology, migration of humans and other biota, and awareness of planetary processes. Debjani Ganguly argues that the year 1989 constitutes a “historically significant threshold” (1) in response to which the novel form developed the capacity to “imagine the human condition on a scale larger than ever before” (2). Additionally, as the texts I analyze demonstrate, fiction from this period also reflects a broadened *scope* of the human condition to include interspecies connections. Ganguly argues that human violence against humans has become more visible due to developments in information technology and the rise of global humanitarianism. I would add that some acts of environmental violence have also become increasingly visible and understood as intertwined with violence between humans, as many scholars have noted. The legacies of colonization, the ongoing destruction caused by global capitalism, and the runaway feedback loops between human and nonhuman planetary processes form a natural place for ecocriticism and postcolonialism to come together. Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee calls for a “postcolonial green” or “green postcolonialism” in light of the two fields’ “absorption of the global debates about the environment” (58). Neel Ahuja, proposing a new configuration of postcolonialism, biopolitics, and ecocriticism, argues that

in addition to established methods of post-colonial study that define empire through histories of conquest, settlement, and the exploitation of labor and resources... the inequalities and violences of imperialism can productively be understood from the vantage of species, the field of life itself. (ix)

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*Environmentalism of the Poor*, Amitav Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, and Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. This theme is also apparent in the proliferation of neologisms, some more *neo* than others, for the current era in which humans have interfered in planetary processes, a contribution which is usually figured as violence. Anthropocene is the most popular, having gained popular traction, but critics and theorists propose others: Haraway’s Chthulucene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene. The term Anthropocene reflects the fact that humanity has become, as Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, “a force of nature in the geological sense” (207). Its usage reflects an increasing awareness of the intersection between planetary processes such as climate change and human factors such as globalization.

In general, the unification between postcolonialism and ecocriticism—commonly referred to as postcolonial ecocriticism—has become a broadly accepted field in its own right, based in part on the sense of expanded awareness captured by the use of “global” in the terms *global warming*, *global capitalism*, and *global south*.<sup>9</sup>

Much of this scholarship is, quite reasonably, concerned with overt acts of ecological violence and resistance to the same. What is a rat to a freedom fighter? What is a mosquito but a disease vector? When oil fills the rivers of the Niger Delta, why consider animals at all? Most importantly, how could a turn toward animals be anything other than a turn away from the social and political conflicts which dominate both environmental and postcolonial discourse and activism in the era of globalization?<sup>10</sup> First, as neighbors, companions, food sources, even killers, animals are an inescapable part of life. Second, there are ethical reasons to account for the presence of animals in literature. The lives of animals are valuable because of humanity’s ecological interdependence with them, and many characteristics which were once valued for being uniquely human, from language production to a sense of self to the capacity for emotion, have been found elsewhere in the animal kingdom. Third, the imperial discourse of animality has also been used to legitimize the subjugation of humans. A thoughtful approach to the representation of animals in literature can therefore benefit humans, particularly those most often

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9. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva’s *Ecofeminism* (1993) laid much of the intellectual groundwork for this unification by recognizing the shared intellectual and material roots of violence against women, particularly those in the global south, and against nature. As they argue in the updated preface from 2014, it is now even more crucial for scholars to “address the inherent inequalities in world structures which permit the North to dominate the South, men to dominate women, and the frenetic plunder of ever more resources for ever more unequally distributed economic gain to dominate nature” (2). In this era of increased globalization in almost every sense, it is also worth reiterating their warning that “in the dominant discourse the ‘global’ is the political space in which the dominant local seeks global control, and frees itself of any local and national control. But, contrary to what it suggests, the global does not represent universal human interest but a particular local and parochial interest which has been globalized through its reach and control” (9). We might more succinctly call this false globalism by another name: neocolonialism.

10. Though it must be said that many anti-colonial, postcolonial, and Indigenous intellectual and cultural traditions strongly value human-animal relationships and the lives of animals.

subject to dehumanization. As Iheka writes, “dismantl[ing] the stereotypical association of animals with negativity... can also blunt the colonialist and racist treatment of humans seen as inferior” since comparisons between humans and animals would not be intrinsically degrading (163). Iheka’s argument is convincing, but it is likely easier, at least among the global elite who consume the texts in question, to conceive of monkeys and pigs as “strangers to be respected and shown compassion” (163) than buzzards, mosquitoes, or rodents. Their association with negativity is more difficult to shake off, making it all the more challenging to interpret representations of these unwanted animals as anything more than a shorthand for marginalization.

## Methods

In *Imperfect Creatures: Vermin, Literature, and the Sciences of Life, 1600-1740* (2016), Lucinda Cole writes that one must read for vermin “‘beneath the grain’... beneath the social, political, and anthropocentric modes of humanist analysis to the life-forms and energies that enable it” (15). With gratitude, I borrow Cole’s wood metaphor to elaborate the three planks of my methodology.

The first is *reading with the grain*. In their introduction to a special issue of *Representations* entitled “The Way We Read Now,” Steven Best and Sharon Marcus identify “symptomatic reading” as the orthodox methodology of literary critics over the last several centuries. Drawing on Marxist and psychoanalytic approaches, symptomatic reading “took meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter” (1). More recently, however, alternative methodologies have gained some traction, many of which adopt terminology akin to “surface reading.” Best and Marcus write that “a surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through* (9). In this

dissertation, I employ both symptomatic (or deep) reading and surface reading. I therefore employ the ability to refuse to read between the lines of a text, even—or perhaps especially—when the text invites a “deep” reading. Not only do I selectively refuse to seek a deeper “unconscious” meaning within a text, but I find interpretive value in declining the *text’s* overt, if not explicit, invitations to be read figuratively. At the same time, overlooking the figurative, allusive, or otherwise implicit aspects of these literary animals on principle alone would be misguided, even if taking them into account might naturally lead to a symptomatic reading.

The second aspect of my methodology, *reading beneath the floorboards*, entails specifically attending to categories of life which are often overlooked despite their ubiquity, even within the novels which represent them. At first, this might seem to contradict an approach which is often intentionally surface level. However, I argue that the unwelcome animals in these novels are not quite hidden, and certainly not absent or implied. Rather, they are explicitly present on the surface of the texts. However, these unloved creatures often slip beneath critical attention. In Arundhati Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), the narrator describes a scene in which a “rat with bristly shoulders made several busy journeys” through a full hospital waiting room. When a nurse arrives, “she appeared to have rat-filters on her glasses. She didn’t seem to notice the bristly-shouldered rat even when it scuttled right past her feet” (127). The nurse’s lack of response is ambiguous: does she ignore the rat, fail to see it, or some combination?

Reading beneath the floorboards involves peeling the rat-filters off our glasses to see what is right at our feet. Most of the animals I focus on are part of everyday life in broad swathes of the globe. They are likewise explicit, if not always prominent, elements of the novels I analyze. Attending to their representation in texts, particularly fantastical ones such as these,

allows for richer interpretations of texts as well as reflecting, in my case, a philosophical commitment to noticing the nonhuman life which already crowds literary texts. For much of my life, I have lived in houses with creatures in the walls, floors, and ceilings—rats, mice, possums, spiders, lizards, squirrels (I once found a snake under my bathmat). It would be disingenuous to say that these creatures were hidden; like the rats in *The Famished Road*, they announced their presence quite clearly. I simply could not see them because of the manmade structures in the way—structures which, ironically, gave them a place to live. The novels work much the same way by fitting animals into anthropogenic structures, yet the animals, for all their obvious existence, are difficult to read because of the human-centric narrative structures in which they are embedded. The animal—its “voice” or subjectivity—is thus accessible only through hegemonic narrative structures. Framed in this way, the animal resembles the subaltern, whose utterances are not directly retrievable but mediated by elite intellectuals, who transform them even as they purport to transmit them. The mechanisms which cast an animal or a human as an absolute other “whose identity is its difference” (Spivak 80) are not just similar but mutually reinforcing; the epithet *less than human* is only intelligible in an intellectual regime which produces both the subaltern and the animal as distant from, and therefore inferior to, a Eurocentric model of humanity. However, the difference between humans and animals, unlike the notion of human superiority to animals, is not solely or primarily a product of cultural imperialism; the epistemological gulf between an earthworm and a human surpasses that between any two humans. The questions which animate the discourse of subalternity resonate with those I pose about literary animals. However, it is important to distinguish between subalterns, humans whose difference is imposed by the “violence of imperialist epistemic, social,

and disciplinary inscription” (Spivak 27) and animals, a radically diverse collection of beings whose difference is additionally a matter of stark biological fact.

Part of the challenge of reading beneath the floorboards is that unwelcome animals are often depicted as collectivities. Cole uses the term “creaturely populations” as a contrast to the individuated (or otherwise anthropomorphized) animal that scholars are accustomed to seeing. Roy’s intrepid “bristly-shouldered rat” differs from many of the animals that I take as my subjects because it is a single, individuated animal. Similarly, although Susan McHugh’s monograph *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines* is a touchstone for this dissertation, the animals I choose to focus on differ strongly from the strongly individuated companion animals she takes as her subjects. In many ways, I share her skepticism of humanism, particularly as manifested in literature through “metaphorical and other aesthetics beholden to animal-really-means-human and likewise substitutive logics” (8) and literary criticism through a focus on identity, “the humanist form of subjectivity through which an agent is understood to have a history, in the broadest sense” (13). In conjunction, these substitutive logics and the critical onus on identity make unwelcome animals difficult to see clearly; they must be rendered into more familiar, usually more anthropomorphic forms to become visible as objects of scholarly analysis. By rendering this process visible, I hope to make the animal—or the absence of the animal—more apparent.

The third aspect, a culmination of the other two, is *reading to get splinters*. Reading with the grain and beneath the floorboards allow me to demonstrate that global fiction already provides the conditions for representing interspecies politics, ecologies, and sociality. However, there is no simple ecological countercurrent within these texts. Attending closely to the literal meaning of textual representations of maligned animals can reveal emancipatory possibilities,

but it also often surfaces contradictions, inconsistencies, even hypocrisies—in other words, the rough edges of the texts. These texts complicate the notion of an oppositional understanding of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, but they do so without entirely abandoning the intellectual structures upon which this division relies. This produces startling, fragmentary, irritating results. These splinters are produced in many ways: when the literal and figurative meanings of the text are at odds, when the agency of animals is contingent, or when surface and deep readings produce contradictions which are difficult to reconcile. Seeking out these frustrating elements shows how these texts foil, sidestep, or subvert the seemingly Manichean opposition between ecocentric and anthropocentric concerns. Although depictions of animals often loop back to human concerns, the animal is never fully erased and colors the representation of humanistic concerns. This gives credence to the idea that human and animal life overlaps in fiction, as in reality.

The idea that all life is interspecies life is not new. Many cultures agree on the essential premise that human and nonhuman life intertwine. More recently, the largely Western intellectual tradition has produced fields such as animal studies, social ecology, and New Materialism which in aggregate posit the interconnectedness of different-species life as well as the value, importance, and agency of things to which post-Enlightenment intellectual modes rarely attribute the full measure of the significance of human life, such as environments, objects, and animals.

### **Summary of Chapters**

Chapter one, “Outnumbered by Ghosts: Ecoghosting in Karen Russell’s *Swamplandia!*,” concerns interspecies ecologies in Karen Russell’s 2011 novel *Swamplandia!* By focusing on the unwelcome proximity of nonhumans in the novel, particularly insects and buzzards, I make the



case for the presence of what I call “ecoghosts.” Ecoghosts are nonhuman agencies that disrupt the language of the novel while simultaneously appearing as subjects within the narrative. They are, more specifically, agents of resistance. Their appearances are marked by hesitancies, contradictions, and ambivalence in the language of the novel, and human characters struggle—and ultimately fail—to fully understand, control, or otherwise master them within the narrative. Ecoghosts demonstrate a multivalent form of literary agency suggesting that the nonhuman presence in fiction cannot be fully exorcised. Or, as I put in the chapter, that the human haunts the nonhuman and vice-versa. Ecoghosts cannot be understood simply as anthropocentric figurations nor as literary subjects. Finally, I argue that ecoghosts are depicted as giving rise to sublime experiences in human characters, which provides a splinter of an answer to the question of how to respond to the nonhuman.

In the context of the dissertation, this chapter demonstrates the difficulty of drawing clear distinctions between shallow and deep reading approaches. Although my argument in this chapter may seem based on deep reading, ecoghosts are not exactly hidden; they produce textual distortions, such as contradictory figurations, which are often written off as features of Russell’s writing style. I simply approach these distortions as meaningful aberrations, burrs on the surface of the text, rather than evidence of a consistent writerly style. Ecoghosts wade waist-deep through the text; what is above the water is as important as what lies below.

In chapter two, “‘I Wonder If the Rats Are Awake’: Reading Pests and Politics in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*,” I turn to the interspecies politics of Ben Okri’s 1991 novel *The Famished Road*. I focus on the novel’s rats, a critically neglected component of the text, to reveal hidden dimensions of the novel’s *politics of hunger*. This chapter takes a less ambiguous approach to surface reading by arguing that the novel models several approaches to interpreting

animals. The text suggests that *hard reading*, a type of shallow but close, even sympathetic reading, is the most ethical approach to animals. However, by depicting the rats as taking part in political publics with humans, the text provides the conditions for reading the rats as a point where humanistic and ecocentric perspectives are not mutually exclusive. Despite its occasional skepticism of the ability of existing language and interpretive practices to draw connections with animals, the novel ultimately suggests that such connections can be recovered through language and, implicitly, through literature.

Reading the rats as I do reveals how certain aspects of the novel's political philosophy are actually more congruent than they might otherwise appear. Specifically, I argue that attending to the rats demonstrates how Achille Mbembe's necropolitics have explanatory power in a novel, which shies away from human deaths. The novel often raises the issue of the rats at times when political violence against humans is most extreme. Attending to this juxtaposition allows the rats and humans to be read as a public, which Jane Bennett writes are "provoked into existence by a shared experience of harm" (xix). In this case, the shared harm stems from hunger and the threat of poisoning. I conclude this chapter by approaching some of the novel's overt philosophical and political engagements with animals, bringing together the text's call for "new languages" to communicate with animals with the evidence that animals are already depicted as capable of non-supernatural communication in a way which grounds the novel in the shared material concerns of humans and nonhumans.

In chapter three, "Wildings, Ferals, and Bigfeet: Urban Spaces and Stray Taxonomies in Nilanjana Roy's Wilding Novels," I turn to the representation of interspecies sociality in Nilanjana Roy's novels *The Wildings* (2012) and *The Hundred Names of Darkness* (2013), which focus on animal characters, particularly cats, in contemporary Delhi. These animal characters are

depicted as overt literary creations, yet by giving language to their decidedly nonhuman ways of organizing their worlds, the novels speak both to homogenizing pressures in Delhi and present *stray taxonomies* which model modes of categorization premised on the centrality of interspecies sociality. In these novels, humans struggle to categorize street cats and other maligned animals in a stable taxonomy, a lack which the animals themselves substitute with zoogenic organizational structures able to accommodate shifting relations between and within species. In Roy's novels, the human inability to discern difference between street animals reveals a deeper underestimation of interspecies dependence. Through the language employed by their animal characters, Roy's novels depict contemporary Delhi as an overlooked site of interspecies sociality.

I make the case for this claim by doing the following. First, I argue that the novels depict stray animals' everyday practices as models for interspecies interaction in the city. I compare the language used to capture these relations to the taxonomies employed in Indian animal tales. Second, I argue that these novels use the animal perspective to critique homogenizing, anthropocentric pressures which derive from a misapprehension of multispecies wellbeing. Third, I argue that reading the second novel's bandicoot rats allegorically reveals a message at odds with the novels' more overt valuation of interspecies sociality.

These three chapters elaborate an ethical stance as much as a scholarly one. I do not like mosquitoes, though I am content to let the house spiders kill them for me. I will confess to a distant fondness for rats, perhaps inculcated by a childhood filled with books about brave, clever small mammals. The neighborhood cats and I are nodding acquaintances. One feline benefactor snapped the necks of the housemice I trapped and released into my yard; she left them for me on the path to my front door, so I buried them under some daffodils. But one need not like animals to act as though they matter. Animals are rarely our friends; we are vastly, vastly outnumbered

and outweighed by arthropods and fish, who are seldom welcome guests in our homes, as well as by livestock, whose remains suffuse our buildings and bodies (Bar-On et. al). The unwelcome animals I write are just a small sliver of the tremendous diversity of life which, despite our best efforts, still persists on this planet. Although I employ the lexicon and conventions of literary criticism, a tongue spoken by very few, I return throughout this project to the simple idea that we are never alone. This is true on the page, in our homes, or in the picture frame. We cannot continue living as though the world is an empty stage for human ambition; even an empty stage is never really empty. Sparing a few pages for the unwelcome others with whom we share our lives is a modest start.

## Chapter 1. “Outnumbered” by Ghosts: Ecoghosting in Karen Russell’s *Swamplandia!*

### Introduction: Wrestling with Ecoghosts

*Swamplandia!* (2011), Karen Russell’s first novel, begins by describing a ghostly alligator wrestler. A young girl named Ava Bigtree, the primary narrator and protagonist, relates that her “mother performed in starlight” for hundreds of tourists, her body “just lines, a smudge against the palm trees” (3). Several pages later, a single paragraph summarizes her quick death to cancer. Hilola Bigtree’s present absence haunts her surviving family members, particularly Ava, who hopes to take on her mother’s mantle as the star alligator wrestler of the Bigtree’s theme park in the marshy Ten Thousand Islands region of southwest Florida. Hilola is far from the only ghost in the novel. *Swamplandia!* teems with manifestations of death and disappearance: Ava’s father disappears to the Florida mainland; her brother Kiwi leaves to take a job at a Hell-themed amusement park; and her sister Ossie elopes into the wetlands with a supposed ghost. Eventually, Ava is left alone in *Swamplandia!*, the family’s deteriorating theme park, which she fears is haunted. Ava’s journey to find her sister provides the main narrative thrust of the novel. This is a Stygian voyage into the underworld in both the literal sense and the figurative. Ava’s ferryman, a mysterious figure called the Bird Man, convinces her that they must intercept Ossie at a portal to the underworld deep in the swamp. The entrance to the underworld is only half a lie: he eventually rapes her after taking her far from familiar territory. These ghosts, hauntings, and voyages to the underworld contribute to the novel’s theme of coming to terms with loss. However, they also offer a less-obvious point of engagement with the nonhuman presence in the novel. In this chapter, I argue that the nonhuman, particularly the animal, haunts the human throughout *Swamplandia!*

The novel's first ghost is also an apt introduction to the text's depiction of the relationship between ghosts and animals. Hilola Bigtree was an alligator wrestler during her life, which made her relationship with these reptiles fraught and intimate. Alligator wrestling is an intense encounter between a human and an animal staged for the entertainment of an audience. Although humans set the terms of the encounter, the alligator can still potentially gain the upper hand. In this sense, literary depictions of the nonhuman are much like alligator wrestling. Depictions of nonhumans in *Swamplandia!*, as in most novels, are anthropogenic engagements that serve largely anthropocentric ends. As Susan McHugh puts it, the animal figure often "gains literary value as disassembling the human, as at best metaphorically speaking of and for the human" (6), an understanding which is abetted by both representational and critical practices. In *Swamplandia!*, representations of animals and other elements of the swamp ecosystem often serve primarily metaphorical purposes, making it difficult to distinguish between individual animals; when wrestling with an alligator is really wrestling with grief, the subjectivity of the alligator is beside the point. However, *Swamplandia!*'s sustained attention to the swamp ecosystem and the largely human forces which threaten it often reveals a perspective more attuned to the independent existence of nonhumans. Within this novel, two representational practices come into conversation: one whose goal is the depiction of nonhumans *as such* and one in which the nonhuman is fundamentally a literary device for addressing human concerns. At opposite extremes, the former is an *anthropocentric* mode (in which the nonhuman is fully subject to literary instrumentalization, for example as allegory) and the latter is *ecocentric* (in which the nonhuman becomes the focus). In the turbid passages where neither of these modes dominates, *Swamplandia!* unsettles the distinction between human and nonhuman spheres by

incorporating the nonhuman into traditionally human spheres (the social, political, and personal) and bringing the human into traditionally nonhuman spheres (i.e. the “environmental”).

I am most interested in passages where representations of nonhumans through description or figurative language produce artifacts of the difficulty, or even the failure, of this enterprise. In *Swamplandia!*, these artifacts take many forms, including logically inconsistent or contradictory descriptions, neologisms, juxtaposed sensory modes, layered metaphors, hesitant personifications, and other slippery, ambivalent literary mechanisms. For instance, when Russell describes deer as “sprinting like loosed hallucinations,” the semantic and grammatical imprecision of this figuration produces an impressionistic effect while rendering the actual deer spectral or unreal (136). McHugh argues that

contrived metaphorical breakdowns and other ostentatiously mismanaged animal representations invite critique as unequivocal formal failures, only to prompt queries about (and arguably make efforts to respond to) the inadequacies or shortcomings built into representational processes concerning animals. (11)

The text’s representations of nonhumans are not “unequivocal formal failures”; they are most easily explained as examples of a distinctive prose style, which critics sometimes associate with magical realism. However, their representational slipperiness does reveal, and to some extent critiques, the “shortcomings” of existing literary practices for representing animals and other nonhumans. These semantic and grammatical distortions of the text often orbit around specific animals, as when alligators’ fangs are described as “icicle overbites,” a swift figuration that invokes both the sensation of cold and describes a visual pattern (4). More distinctive, however, are passages where the nonhuman comes across as a more diffuse kind of subject, such as a personified landscape or a swarm of insects. I argue that these textual distortions and diffuse subjects are manifestations of the same phenomena, which I call an *ecoghost*.

Ecoghosts manifest when the literary mediation of the nonhuman is most apparent, demonstrating the distance between representation and referent. The ecoghost is different from McHugh's "metaphorical animal." Rather, it is a multivalent phenomenon produced by a strange alignment of formal disruption and diegetic subjecthood. These literary ghosts exercise agency both within the diegetic world of the novel and within the linguistic structure of the text. The agency of the ecoghost consists primarily in their resistance to human mastery, by which I mean both attempts by characters to understand or control the ecoghost within the narrative and attempts to read or depict the textual aspects of the ecoghost as fundamentally figurative rather than denotative. At the same time, ecoghosts are unable to manifest as fully realized subjects within the text in a way that even fictional human characters can. To put it simply, ecoghosts demonstrate agency through their refusal to be subsumed entirely to figuration yet are unable to make themselves understood entirely literally. For the sake of clarity, I use the term *ecoghost* to refer to an agential figure and *haunting* to refer to the manner in which a partially erased presence such as an ecoghost irrupts into the text itself. The word *haunting* can be used as an adjective, verb, or noun and is thus an apt way to refer to the distortions, ruptures, and other unusual uses of language which accompany the manifestations of ecoghosts.

One might question the usefulness of the term *ecoghost* when the absent presence of the nonhuman is already such a richly theorized subject. After all, the idea of imperfectly erased or latent nonhuman presences in literature is practically a commonplace in animal studies and other critical circles engaged with nonhuman representation. As McHugh elegantly puts it, even anthropocentric literary practices in which "animal-really-means-human" may be intended to "preserve human singularity, but their ongoing reliance on erasures invokes other potentials as perpetually deferred" (8). Scholars have theorized many terms which may seem to render some



aspects of the ecoghost superfluous, from the “erasures” and “deferred potentials” McHugh invokes, to the psychoanalytic “return of the repressed,”<sup>1</sup> to Derridean “traces” and “specters.” I concede the applicability of these terms to my analysis of the environmental dimensions of Russell’s fiction. However, the value of the ecoghost, as opposed to these related concepts, lies in the way that it represents specifically nonhuman agency both within the narrative and within the language of the text. In doing so, ecoghosts demonstrate a multivalent form of literary agency which suggests that the banishment of nonhuman agency from texts cannot ever be total.

In the following sections of this chapter, I advance several claims about ecoghosts and the haunting presence of the nonhuman in *Swamplandia!*. In the first section, I approach the novel’s swamp as an ecoghost. I situate the swamp, and the novel more broadly, in the context of the literary and material histories of the U.S. South to argue for *Swamplandia!*’s continuity with other representations of Southern swamps. I argue that the swamp is deployed as a metaphor which naturalizes the erasure of human histories; at the same time, the swamp asserts its agency within both the text and the narrative. I look at two examples of literary instrumentalization and the way that ecoghosts resist them; specifically, these examples demonstrate the relationship between the literary instrumentalization which produces ecoghosts and the erasure of human histories and presences within the swamp.

In the second section, I approach animal swarms in the novel as ecoghosts. I argue that the same aspects of swarms that make them disturbing to humans pose such a challenge to anthropogenic (and -centric) modes of representation that they appear in *Swamplandia!* as ecoghosts. Describing a swarm in literature flattens the complexity of a real swarm to

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1. See *Cities and Wetlands: The Return of the Repressed in Nature and Culture* by Rod Giblett (2016) for an example of “ecological psychoanalysis” concerning the absent presence of nature in built environments as depicted in literature (6).

instrumentalize it for narrative use. Ultimately, I argue that descriptive approaches to swarms often reveal the insufficiency of binary figurations to account for the complex agency of nonhumans. Paying closer attention to how texts depict swarms may reveal the insufficiency of representational practices based on the absolute distance between human and nonhuman and might therefore reveal overlooked innovations in texts' approaches to the relationship between humans and nonhumans.

In the third and final section, I pose several questions about responsibility which are raised by ecoghosts in the novel and suggest that recent theorizations of the sublime may provide answers. Ghosts of past and present wrongs, past and present erasures, can hold people responsible for their actions and inactions. As McClintock writes, "in their invitations to remember, [ghosts] can be harbingers of more sustainable futures" (827). Yet ghosts are generally unanswerable within the diegetic world of the novel; at most, they hold characters in sublime stasis. They arrest action, even inhibit response. When hasty responses are so often destructive, non-responses can be ethical. *Swamplandia!*'s ecoghosts induce sublime experiences in human characters, thus allowing the novel to depict non-response to the other in a manner that is arguably as compelling as response. But sometimes a response is necessary; sometimes the need for change is urgent. Can literary ghosts, or the sublime itself, really urge meaningful response to the ongoing exploitation of both humans and nonhumans, or do they lead us believe that response is not possible—and therefore to mourn that which is not yet lost?

### **Erasure, Displacement, and the Haunted Southern Swamp**

The colonial haunts *Swamplandia!*'s representations of the Floridian wetlands. The novel has an ambivalent relationship with the tradition of white U.S. American writing about the U.S. South which emphasizes its "tropical" fecundity and ecological otherness, often in service of the

exploitation of its natural resources and human inhabitants. Writers have long exaggerated and instrumentalized the actual cultures, climates, and ecologies of the subtropical South to establish the region as a place apart from the nation, full of supposedly degenerate whites, subhuman blacks, and primordial flora and fauna. In literary representations of the U.S. South, the nonhuman (in the guise of the steamy climate, so-called tropical diseases, or often inhospitable landscape) was often used to naturalize the exploitation of the region or to explain its underdevelopment relative to more prosperous parts of the nation. In this context, representations of the nonhuman in literature about the U.S. South often serve the anthropocentric political goals of the writers, yet the partially instrumentalized or erased nonhuman haunts the corpus.

One might reasonably object that the idea of a natural basis for human hegemony is hardly unique to literature about the U.S. South. The specific dimensions of its application in the U.S. South, however, must be considered. As Jennifer Rae Greeson argues in *Our South*, the intensity with which the national literature worked to exclude the South from the nation proper, from the moment of national independence through Reconstruction, was extraordinary and was often marked by an insistence that the South's climate provided a natural basis for this exclusion. Relatedly, the palimpsestic layering of atrocities committed against racialized groups in this region, from the Seminole Wars to chattel slavery, were often justified before and after the fact by the suggestion that the victims of state-abetted violence were not quite human. Finally, the anthropogenic transformation, exploitation, and pollution of Southern landscapes has often been justified by the necessity of making them useful for human use, although the intended usage has shifted over time.<sup>2</sup> In many of these cases, literary representations of the nonhuman environment

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2. *Swamplandia!* demonstrates some distinctive ways that Florida participates in this troping of the South. Florida contains the only truly subtropical climates on the U.S. mainland and has developed an economy which leverages climate in order to attract tourists and retirees. It is also, both historically and currently, perceived as a point of connection between the Hispanic Caribbean and the rest of the Latin America, and is therefore racialized

of the South (including climate, landscape, and living organisms) serve primarily anthropocentric ends.

Southern wetlands like the Ten Thousand Islands are particularly fraught sites of representative instrumentalization as well as resistance to the same. In his book *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture*, Anthony Wilson argues that Southern swamps, both real and literary, “undermined the conscious project of mainstream white Southern [literary] self-creation” (x) despite their relentless troping throughout the nation’s history. This doubled phenomena of instrumentalization and its “undermining” appears in *Swamplandia!* in the guise of a ghostly yet agential swamp. As Wilson notes, swamps are “resistant to colonization or agriculture” (xiv) as well as the “conventional narrative constructions of culture” (xvii). The novel’s ghostly swamp employs both types of resistance at once: the swamp physically resists colonization and agriculture in the diegetic world of the novel while simultaneously producing a disorienting effect on description and narrative. *Swamplandia!*’s depiction of the swamp is contradictory, and the novel’s narrative stalls and meanders once Ava leaves the theme park for unknown parts of the marsh. Ava represents the swamp as a genuinely marvelous, isolated natural space, yet her family cynically uses this idea to advertise their theme park; when visitors stop coming, rendering the park truly isolated, the park is depicted as in decline.<sup>3</sup> The title of the novel signals this tension, its cheerful exclamation mark (which is diligently replicated throughout the novel) an ironic contrast with the novel’s dark subject matter. The name of the park, with its semantically hollow but familiar *-landia* affix, can also be read as a transparently

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and othered in a slightly different manner than much of the South, where the white-black racial dichotomy holds more imaginative sway.

3. As Wilson notes, “wetlands have become not only national parks but theme parks” (175).

desperate attempt to lay claim to part of the swamp by naming it. Like Ava, I will use the term *the swamp* to refer to the Ten Thousand Islands marshlands in general.

Another irony within the novel is the literary instrumentalization of the swamp to critique the historical amnesia that continually erases the presence of non-white people, women, and otherwise marginalized groups from the region. At times, Ava figures the swamp itself as the mechanism of forgetting, a kind of limited personification that allows the swamp to stand in for the actual human culprits of erasure. According to Ava, their grandfather, Sawtooth Bigtree, taught them

the names of whole townships that had been forgotten underwater. Black pioneers, Creek Indians, moonshiners, women, “disappeared” boy soldiers who deserted their army camps. From Grandpa we learned how to peer beneath the sea-glare of the “official, historical” Florida records we found in books. “Prejudice,” as defined by Sawtooth Bigtree, was a kind of prehistoric arithmetic—a “damn fool math”—in which some people counted and others did not. It meant white names on white headstones in the big cemetery on Cypress Point, and black and brown bodies buried in swamp water. (250)

The novel clearly enunciates a stance against “prejudice” in the epistemological sense laid out here: a mechanism of remembering (“counting”) some and forgetting others. The novel suggests that remembering that which has been erased is the primary task of a historian. As Ava paraphrases her father, “to be a true historian, you had to mourn amply and well” (250).

However, the novel only rarely identifies those who perpetrated these historical erasures and literal disappearances. Instead, passive voice and a metaphor of submergence imply that the swamp water itself is the mechanism, if not the agent, of forgetting: towns “had been forgotten underwater” and those non-white bodies were “buried in swamp water,” while the official state historiography is compared to the bright surface of the ocean, which can only be seen through with effort and intention. Thus, the nonhuman (in this case, the waterscapes of the swamp and nearby Gulf of Mexico) is rendered metaphorical, leaving a passage in which agency is only

exercised by the Bigtrees, the sole custodians of history. Although it may seem as though Russell's text takes an ecological view of social and political history by acknowledging the swamp's participation in these spheres, the predominant thrust of these practices is to reduce the swamp's murky waters to a metaphor for intentional omissions in human history-keeping. The ways that the swamp is rendered ghostly are part of a pattern in Russell's treatment of erasures and marginalization: an explicit gesture toward more expansive conceptions of history, politics, and sociality accompanied by a covert erasure of the same, often through reduction to metaphor; in short, a return to representing the human and nonhuman as competing rather than complementary literary focuses. However, the ghostly swamp haunts this passage, asserting its literal presence despite attempts to reduce it to metaphor. The literary techniques through which the text instrumentalizes the swamp also render that instrumentalization, and the displacement of human culpability, more apparent.

*Swamplandia!*'s direct engagement with history offers a productive corpus for understanding Russell's ambivalent relationship with nonhuman agency. The story-within-a-story that Ava calls "The Dredgeman's Revelation" offers the novel's most extended engagement with the history of the swamp. The titular "dredgeman" is, according to Ava's sister Ossie, the ghost of a young man named Louis Thanksgiving, a white orphan who died in the swamp during the Great Depression. He escaped an abusive foster family in the Midwest and made his way to Florida, where he signed up with the Civilian Conservation Corps to help improve the swamp for human settlement. Ossie supposedly meets him in an abandoned dredge boat the sisters discover on the outskirts of the park. Ossie falls in love with Louis and disappears into the swamp to elope with him, leaving Ava alone on the island. "The Dredgeman's Revelation," Ava's retelling of Louis Thanksgiving's short life story as shared with her by Ossie,

takes up an entire chapter of the novel. These levels of mediation call the authorship of this version of the story into question, thus inviting multiple readings. For instance, the story can be read as a message from a ghost or as Ossie's fantasy about a tragic, ghostly paramour. Most importantly for my purposes, this mediation allows the novel to depict the pseudo-colonialist representative erasure and instrumentalization of the swamp from a distance that invites critique.

The swamp Louis encounters has already been imaginatively rendered into other, more exploitable landscapes. When he arrives to Florida, he witnesses scenes of timber harvesting and other "improvements" to the land before encountering the swamp: "Florida, in those days, was a very odd place... This, finally, was the vision that reached Louis T. through the train window: a prairie that looked as vast as the African savanna" (131). Florida is, in short, an exotic place that outsiders such as Louis attempt to tame and transform. Florida is not just "very odd"; its sawgrass marshes are reminiscent of "the African savanna." Louis, of course, has never been to Africa; "the" savanna is shorthand for archetypal, uninhabited tropical wilderness.<sup>4</sup> Through slippery figurations such as these, the swamp becomes an ecoghost that haunts the text. This passage evokes the idea of a distant place to describe an unfamiliar landscape; the tenuous explicit connection between the sawgrass prairie and the African savanna (both are "vast") fails to support the implication that they are otherwise similar. In reality, this prairie is likely nothing like a savanna; many such prairies are filled with water most of the year. The marsh is subtly marked as exploitable in the same passage when Ava describes the "endless acreage" of "a strange weed or wild corn," which another train passenger identifies as saw grass (131). The term *weed* has no botanical significance; any given plant may or may not be a weed in its

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4. It is worth noting that this descriptive practice also ghosts its other referent, the so-called African savanna. Expounding on the ways that the African environment has been troped, instrumentalized, and detached from its material conditions and histories is an important topic that is beyond the scope of this chapter.

specific context. As the colloquialism goes, *a weed is a plant in the wrong place*. In Russell's usage, referring to the saw grass as a "weed" implies that the swamp has already been imaginatively rendered into a human agricultural space where saw grass is unwelcome. Suggesting that it might be "wild corn" conjures an image of the swamp as latent farmland. In both cases, the swamp is represented not just as an exploitable agricultural resource, but as a ghostly landscape that has already figuratively disappeared.

Louis eventually joins the crew of a dredge tasked with clearing a navigable path through the swamp. The fervor with which the Civilian Conservation Corps, the WPA, and the Army Corps of Engineers, and (later) private developers and industries approach the project of draining the swamp reflects a desire to render the landscape arable and therefore profitable, thereby erasing the swamp itself from the nation. A swamp on domestic soil is a blight, not simply an economic opportunity. In the novel, historical proponents of draining the swamp promise a more temperate, pastoral vision of the land as a place of "fragrant globes of citrus, yellow fields of corn, and Angus cattle black as jackboots, the worthless saw grass vanquished, the alligators dead, the water drained" (177). In this vision, the swamp landscape is entirely erased and replaced with something akin to a Midwestern pastoral scene, albeit one which includes citrus groves. This vision of the drained swamp as a land of milk and oranges (if not honey) recurs several times in the novel, which sets the project of "improving" the swamp apart from non-domestic analogues, particularly the construction of the Panama Canal. The text also describes how later "snowbirds" were deceived by developers who promised a drained, arable swamp when, in reality, the swamp was far from suited to human development (239).

The Dredgeman's Revelation engages with broader histories of transforming tropical and subtropical landscapes into more exploitable forms, whether materially or imaginatively, as well



as long-standing tropes of tropical environments seducing the imaginations and transforming the bodies of outsiders. Despite being imaginatively overlaid with both an African savanna and a U.S. American pastoral landscape, the swamp forcefully, even violently, reasserts its continued presence. The actual landscape becomes a haunting presence which actively resists its own instrumentalization by plaguing the workers with insects and birds. The hellish conditions, particularly the hungry and relentless insects, recall colonial descriptions of the tropics as well as later histories of American imperialism, from the Vietnam War to the construction of the Panama Canal.<sup>5</sup> These insects also literally transform these human interlopers. The flying insects give the miasmatic quality of the marsh air a palpable form. Essentially, they exaggerate and accelerate the degenerative bodily transformations which characterized the slightly earlier discourse around the tropics.<sup>6</sup> Rather than degenerating over generations, these adopted Southerners do so over months. And rather than dying over years because of the miasmatic airs of the swamp, the white crewmembers succumb to the swamp air come to life, first as insects and eventually as buzzards. As Louis and his crew proceed deeper into this heart of darkness, the insects transform the air, the barge, and even the crew into fearsome shapes as the insects' "dense bodies put a fur on the steel hull of the Model Land dredge" and eventually "everybody's legs acquired the cracked sheen of cockroach wings" and developed oozing sores because of insect bites (140). These

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5. One of Louis's fellow workers is described as having "survived subhuman conditions while working on the Panama Canal" yet is "undone by miniscule foes, the chizzywinks, and the deer flies" of the Florida swamp (137).

6. The crew's predicament strongly echoes late 19th and early 20th century ideas that tropical diseases were, paradoxically, especially debilitating to the otherwise physically superior white race. These transformations also echo the effects of malaria throughout the U.S. South during a slightly earlier period. Malaria infections often stunted growth, leading to the perception that diseased young men were physically and economically unfit, as well as emasculated (Ring 77-79). This presented contemporary whites with a dilemma, as "the tropical environment was not a suitable place for the white man, yet the imperatives of imperialism at the turn of the century dictated that Anglo-Saxons must learn to adjust to new locales," the pseudo-colonization of the largely uninhabited marshes of south Florida included (88). Second, experts feared that the "'tropicalized' white race" of the U.S. South was debatably "a degenerate type" (91).

swarming insects are represented as defenders of the swamp whose presence gradually transforms these human interlopers into cockroaches and their boat into a strange mammal. The swamp, then, seems to defend itself by turning humans into animals. This sort of noxious human-animal hybridity is a trope of Western representations of the tropics and subtropics in general and of the tropicalized U.S. South in particular.

Though Louis' story concludes violently, his perspective is characterized by its ambivalence between horror and pleasure. Russell draws a contrast between the nightmarish qualities of his experience and his interpretation of them as transcendent. For instance, while the other crewmembers are plagued by insects, Louis listens to the mosquitoes "as if even this were something holy" (134). Louis' narration gives the impression of a supernatural experience, which persists into the violent conclusion of *The Dredgeman's Revelation*. The dredge's boiler explodes, killing one crewmember. Then a huge flock of buzzards arrive. They complete the barge's transformation, "completely swallowing" the boat "so that the whole structure looked upholstered in black velvet; it didn't seem possible to Louis that there could be so many birds in all the world" (147). At the end, Louis "wait[s] with a pale, upturned face" as this black swarm approaches, his white skin contrasted against the dark, seemingly endless horde (148). The buzzards are ecoghosts because they are diegetic agents which exist at the intersections of literary instrumentalization and resistance, erasure and presence. They haunt the language of the text primarily by inviting two competing interpretations. The first takes the buzzards as buzzards: the birds are avatars of the swamp's hidden agency which have sprung to the ecosystem's defense, or perhaps simply motivated by their own opaque intentions to kill these interlopers. The second interpretation, invited by the descriptive emphasis on Louis's "pale" skin and the section's reliance on colonial tropes, is that Louis's whiteness renders him vulnerable to this

discursively tropicalized, “African” swamp. The buzzards, according to this interpretation, are not agential subjects so much as a metaphor for anxieties about the effects of tropical environments on white bodies or at least the unsuitability of this swamp to human habitation. These two interpretations leave traces on each other; the buzzards resist collapsing into either animals or anthropocentric figurations and rather exist in an interstitial space of irresolution. This ambiguity poses an interpretive challenge to the reader through which these literary buzzards take on a kind of agency. As carrion-eaters, their presence also suggests the presence of death; these vultures are ghostly in the sense that they bridge life and death, as well as in the sense that their multivalent agency haunts the narrative.

The idea of malevolent tropical wilderness is a cliché. However, the layers of mediation between this story and the main narrative of *Swamplandia!* provide the conditions for it to be read, by the end, as an intentional appeal to narrative tropes: a kind of campfire ghost story that might appeal to a child. By “telling” his story to Osceola, Louis brings both historical ghosts (Louis himself, of course, and the other victims and perpetrators of this environmental destruction) and environmental ones (the buzzard flock and insect swarms which ultimately take Louis’ life) into the narrative present. This narrative takes on a liveliness that invites response: Louis is far from “dead and gone.” Rather, he drives much of the plot. His haunting has material consequences and even leads Osceola, implicitly, to plan suicide to join him in death (378). The alluring tropicality of his story is part of what allows him to possess and seduce Osceola. By the end of the novel, however, Louis’s ghost has quieted: Ava narrates that, like Osceola, “I don’t believe in ghosts anymore, either” aside from the personal kind: “Mothers burning inside the risen suns of their children” (394). The issue here is not so much that Louis’s ghost may never have been “real”—he is real in his effects, both diegetic and literary—but in the fact that

personal ghosts come, by the end of the novel, to eclipse both historical and environmental concerns.

This late turn toward personal ghosts underscores an issue with the text's critique of historical erasure and environmental damage. Much as animals in Western literature have often been subsumed to anthropocentric ends, the conclusion of the novel provides the conditions for *all* of the novel's ghosts to be read as personal ones. To some extent, this is unavoidable given the centrality of identity and personal histories to most manifestations of the novel form. In what follows, I take the stronger stance that the text nonetheless reinscribes a kind of uncritical instrumentalization of the nonhuman by appealing to the purportedly natural aspects of the swamp to justify the Bigtrees' appropriation of Indian culture and identity for commercial purposes.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, the text metonymically reduces the traces of Indian presence in the swamp to two multivalent environmental elements, the shell mounds and the buzzards, thus rendering both Indians and nonhumans ghostly.

The Bigtrees represent themselves as "the Bigtree tribe of the Ten Thousand Islands" (6) but are really a family of white settlers. Although their Indian tribal status is a fiction made up by Ava's grandfather, Sawtooth, it functions as both a cynical branding strategy and as a means of distinguishing the "native" Bigtrees from tourists, who lack the traditional, if not ancestral, claim that the Bigtrees assert over their island-cum-park in the Ten Thousand Islands. It is also, of course, racial and cultural appropriation: the Bigtrees make money, if not a profit, from this fantasy. Yet the Chief draws a distinction between the family's scrappy, showy profiteering and the more insidious corporate capitalism which has taken root on the mainland. Melanie Benson

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7. Throughout this chapter, I use the term *Indian* or, to avoid confusion with the country of India, *American Indian*. Although these are contested terms, they are widely used in American Indian studies, by the native peoples of the U.S., and within *Swamplandia!*

Taylor writes that “Russell participates in a fairly conservative tradition of eliding southern distinctiveness with indigenous memory in order to service a mythology of anticapitalist, rabidly humanist exceptionalism. The question is whether or not Russell does so ironically” (204).

Taylor does not come down firmly on either side; rather, she argues that Russell compellingly depicts “the seductions of indigeneity” (211) for non-Indian southerners. Indigeneity certainly is seductive in the novel, serving as an in-group identifier for the Bigtrees and a marketing strategy for the park. The novel alludes constantly to Indian history and culture yet includes no living Indians as major characters. I argue that this and other practices erases the subjecthood and agency of Indians while rendering Indians (and Indigeneity) into literary devices. As Renée Bergland argues, “for more than three hundred years, American literature has been haunted by ghostly Indians... When European Americans speak of Native Americans, they always use the language of ghostliness... Most often, they describe Indians as absent or dead” (1). As in the Dredgeman’s Revelation, the text continues to displace human traumas and erasures onto the landscape and nonhuman inhabitants of the swamp; however, the text does not provide the conditions to read the erasure of Indians through nonhuman figurations as a critical move. In other words, the text instrumentalizes both nonhumans and Indians by attributing the erasure of Indians to natural processes. Russell partially justifies this erasure by metaphorically substituting the ecological conception of “indigenous species” for the socio-cultural concept of Indigeneity:

This swamp was not [the Seminoles’] ancestral home either, not by any stretch... We Bigtrees were an “indigenous species” of swamp dweller, according to the Chief and our catalogs, but it turned out that every human in the Ten Thousand Islands was a recent arrival. The Calusa, the shell builders—they were Paleo-Indians, the closest thing our swamp had to an indigenous people. (239)

This is a convenient solution to the problem of the Bigtrees’ false Indigeneity. If no human is truly indigenous in the grand (ecological) scheme of things, why should it matter that the

Bigtrees were later arrivals? By asserting the ability of the swamp to resist colonization, the novel naturalizes the erasure of its previous human inhabitants.

The Calusa shell mounds are the most visible markers of the way that *Swamplandia!* simultaneously renders Indians and nonhumans ghostly. These mounds of oyster shells built by the Calusa Indians signify otherworldliness to the extent that Ava and Osceola believe that the entrance to the underworld lies between two “shell islands” (187). Although Ava’s perception is not meant to be taken entirely at face value, her belief implies that the mounds lie at the deepest, most remote part of the swamp. Anthropogenic but strangely natural, material but thoroughly ghostly, these mounds embody the ambiguity of ecoghosts. These mounds are a potential locus of engagement with the lively human histories and nonhuman agencies of the swamp; to Ava, however, they simply represent death. Yet the text suggests that she may have been misled. As the Bird Man’s nefarious intentions become clear, so does the fact that he has intentionally depicted the swamp as ghostly and haunted to manipulate Ava.

In the previous section, I argued that the buzzards which kill Louis Thanksgiving represent the tropicalized, miasmic swamp air come to life; that they can be read simultaneously as the swamp defending itself and as symbols for white anxieties about tropicalized environments. I want to expand upon that conception by arguing that Russell uses buzzards to represent the possibility of retribution for past atrocities as well as to foreshadow Ava’s future suffering. At times, the buzzards seem to become agents of Indian retribution. Ava repeats an apocryphal quote from War Chief Osceola: “If the Great Spirit will show me how, I will make the white man red with blood; and then blacken him in the sun and rain... and the buzzard live upon his flesh” (238). The same passage also includes a quote from a letter Andrew Jackson wrote to Osceola in which Jackson referred to Indian resisters as “bad birds among you” (238).

Taken together, these references create the conditions for reading the novel's buzzards as symbols of Seminole resistance to U.S. genocide and white supremacy. In this light, Louis Thanksgiving's death by buzzard can be read as the prophesied vengeance for the devastation the "white man" wrecked on the Seminoles in the century before Louis' time. This reading is supported by the fact that one of the novel's few Indian characters, Louis's friend and coworker Euphon Tigertail, ominously warns Louis that he will "go in [the swamp] and never come out" (138). Euphon then quits the dredging expedition, avoiding the fate of his non-Indian peers. Louis Thanksgiving's surname takes on added meaning in this context. The reference to a relentlessly mythologized encounter between Europeans and Indians calls attention to practices of erasure.

The instrumentalization of the buzzards to represent the absent presence of Indians illustrates the interconnection between the erasure, displacement, and instrumentalization of nonhumans and marginalized humans. The buzzards cannot be read simply as birds, while Indians remain largely unrepresented in the novel except through animal metaphors. Metaphors based on animals can cut both ways, rendering both animals and marginalized humans into ghostly presences rather than vital agents. However, erasing these agencies and identities in this way, as I have argued, leaves a trace: the buzzards-as-Indians metaphor does not entirely account for their behavior in the novel, suggesting that the figuration is not totalizing in the manner of allegory, while the absent Indians irrupt into the narrative through the nonhuman. As I noted earlier, it is important to account for literary erasures, but also to look for ways that instrumentalized agencies reassert themselves textually. Throughout this section, I have attended to processes whereby human presences are partially erased through instrumentalization of the swamp landscape and ecosystem. I want to turn now to practices involving animals, specifically

swarming and flocking organisms, and how they demonstrate the subversive potential of ecoghosts and, ultimately, the sublime mode.

### **Ghostly Swarms**

I have presented several potential interpretations of the buzzards in *The Dredgeman's Revelation*. However, the buzzards actually appear earlier in the novel (though much later in its chronology) and persist after the chapter about Louis Thanksgiving. Ava's descriptions often render the buzzards as unreadable, absent presences. In Louis's story, they are "like pure holes advancing through the air, a snowfall of inky holes," a kind of swarming void, a sinister present absence (145). The Bird Man appears later in the same chapter. Ava describes him as one of a handful of "avian pied pipers, or aerial fumigators. They call your problem birds out of the trees and send them spiraling over the sloughs; then they wait for them to alight on another person's property and repeat this service" (163). The Bird Man wears a coat covered in oily black feathers which conceals his body. Ava is constantly anxious about her inability to read his moods, thoughts, and intentions. His intentions, it turns out, are sinister, and his promise to lead Ava to hell less literal than she hoped. Fittingly, given the similarity of *Ava* to *avian*, the Bird Man compels Ava away from her perch and out into the swamp. Rather than using a map, the Bird Man tells Ava that "if I am the navigator, the buzzards are our stars. They're our map, kid," yet Ava is unable to see any pattern in the "alive and legible" map flying above them (199-201). Since she cannot understand the supposed map, the implication is that Ava believes it must be legible to the Bird Man. As his credibility unravels, so do his claims to mastery over the buzzards. The Bird Man's secret is that he is simply a man. The buzzards, on the other hand, keep their secrets. The buzzards cannot be simply reduced to stand-ins for the Bird Man or for something ineffable about his evil. For instance, the Bird Man overstates his connection to the



birds. Ava is disappointed to learn that the Bird Man does not fully understand the language of the buzzards. He notices patterns in their calls but cannot decipher their social interactions. The Bird Man is unable to entirely subsume their diegetic subjectivity to his will or understanding. Similarly, as much as the texts makes use of these birds in service of tone, plot, and foreshadowing, they remain unresolved and unruly literary agents. Despite scientists' theories, their origins are mysterious, and they disappear from the novel after diving aggressively into the foliage as Ava watches from a distance.

Russell's fiction includes many passages wherein sensory modes overlap in incongruous ways. This especially true in descriptions of the buzzards, such as the "clothly waves" of buzzards "pouring" over the island (117). Figurative language strains to encompass these buzzards: Ava compares them to waves of cloth, angels, and "bundles of feathers" in quick succession (117). The text layers figurations to approximate a description of this avian collective. These unstable, palimpsestic figurations are textual markers of nonhuman agency; even buzzards, so easily reduced to symbols of death and doom, resist complete literary instrumentalization, particularly in groups. Beneath the strata of figurations, to use Russell's language, these animal subjects remain "inky holes" in the text where the strain of making sense (and use) of the nonhuman in literature is rendered apparent. The text encodes the distance between literary signifier and the nonhuman signified on the level of style: the gestalt, cumulative impression is more important than—is, in fact, built upon—the fact that the individual figurations are semantically contradictory or inconsistent.

Here the diegetic subject of the ecoghost and the textual artifacts which accompany it align. Just as the cumulative effect of figurations produces an uncanny effect, the buzzards themselves appear in the novel as an uncanny collective of independent agencies. In short, I

argue that the buzzard flock is a swarm. A swarm, for my purposes, is an unstable cluster of homogenous elements whose individual actions produce categorically different emergent effects: a swarm of bees, a school of fish, a plague of locusts.<sup>8</sup> In short, swarms are autopoietic, homogenous, and they exhibit emergent behaviors. To human observers, swarms are often unsettling and even threatening. It is not difficult to see why a swarm of bees, for example, might produce a stronger response than a single bee. An observer might, with some difficulty, track the movement of a single bee and even feel as though they understand, in a limited sense, what the bee is doing: gathering pollen, resting on a leaf, fleeing danger, etc. Increase the number of bees and keeping track of their actions becomes exponentially more difficult. At the same time, the emergent behavior of the swarm becomes more and more apparent. The behavior of a swarm is not simply multiplicative: a swarm of bees is not simply “many bees.” From a human standpoint, swarm behavior and the diffuse “anatomy” of a swarm render it startlingly alien.<sup>9</sup> Swarms are ghostly because they seem animated by some unseen force or intention (really, by a multiplicity of related agencies) and because their material dimensions are so mutable. Because of these same qualities, swarms are often ecoghosts: their complexity makes it difficult to describe the actions of a swarm without resorting to figurations, and their emergent, collective agency invites heuristic approaches to representing their intentionality. Lynn Festa writes, “descriptions remind us that the fit of words to things, parts to wholes, individuals to categories, is laboriously

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8. Swarms are thus similar to Bennett’s assemblages except that they consist of elements of broadly the same type. This might seem to be an unimportant distinction. However, I argue that the interchangeability of the constituent elements creates a meaningful difference between swarms and assemblages; not least, swarms are often easier to recognize than assemblage

9. Although it focuses on insects, Jeffrey Lockwood’s *The Infested Mind: Why Humans Fear, Loathe, and Love Insects* (2013) addresses some of the biological, psychological, and cultural reasons that humans respond so powerfully to swarms. In fact, Lockwood claims that the book was inspired by his own swarm encounter when, working in the field as an entomologist, he panicked after being engulfed by a mass of grasshoppers, an experience which he likens to “childhood nightmares” (xx).

produced rather than freely given” (445). Representations of swarms render this labor especially evident.

With this in mind, the buzzards emerge more clearly as a swarm. Ava describes the buzzards as “bundles of feathers [that] quivered all along the Pit walls and the tram-way railings, sprouting bright doll’s eyes and talons as you drew closer” (117). This description de-emphasizes individual birds as meaningful units, instead atomizing them into smaller material components (feathers, eyes, and talons) jumbled together into collectivities: waves, bundles, clouds.

According to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s “triangulated structure” of animal existence, animals appear in three forms, which McHugh summarizes as “animals in individuated forms... as stand-ins for human egos; icons built from the ‘characteristics or attributes’ of certain animals; and collectivities, ‘pack or affect animals that form a multiplicity, a becoming, a population, a tale’” (McHugh 13). The beauty of this structure, according to McHugh, is that animals are not limited to one of these forms at any given time; they may be at once stand-ins for anthropocentric concerns and threatening, “demonic” multiplicities (Deleuze and Guattari 241). In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari define a multiplicity as a structure in which there is “neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature” (8). With some work, they argue, it is possible to discover that any animal can be a multiplicity; that is, a pack, band, or any of a variety of other terms. Being swept up in a multiplicity renders an animal “more demonic” (241) than animals which are understood as individuals, such as pets, or as archetypes or classifications, as in mythology or science. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the demonic or “diabolical” is characterized by “local movement” through which, although humans cannot literally become animals, these borders can be crossed in a limited sense (252); in other words,

the “demonic reality” in which humans becomes animals may be figurative (253), but it is still “no less real for that” (252). A demonic multiplicity is an instance, affect, or haecceity rather than a subject, but is (according to Deleuze and Guattari) no less of an individual. These demonic multiplicities have many characteristics which individuated or tropic animals do not. Most important for my analysis, “every animal swept up in its pack or multiplicity has its anomalous,” which represents the borderline that defines the edge of the multiplicity (243). This anomalous may be an exceptional individual (the white whale), whichever member is currently furthest from the multiplicity (the outermost mosquito in a swarm), or an outside being (a trainer, threat, stranger, etc.). According to Deleuze and Guattari, a human “sorcerer” may enter a kind of blood pact with a multiplicity, at which point she acts as its anomalous.

Mapping the elusive concept of multiplicities onto my conception of swarms highlights important aspects of the latter. A literary swarm is never without a human observer or outsider to unite the disparate components into a multiplicity, even if that observer is the narrator, author, or reader. In the case of the buzzards, this anomalous figure or “sorcerer” is the Bird Man. The tension between the anthropogenic structure imposed upon the multiplicity by this character and the ambiguous effect the swarm has on his characterization is asserted through the Bird Man’s name, or perhaps title, which suggests both a kind of human-animal hybridity and a conflict between human and animal agency. The buzzards are ultimately out of the Bird Man’s direct control, just like Ava. On another level, the buzzards also elude literary instrumentalization. The buzzard swarms haunt the text as fundamentally contradictory figures that defy straightforward description. The text is never quite clear what the buzzards *are*, and this confusion is registered textually through their sudden appearance and disappearance from the narrative, as well as the contradictory ways they are described. Are they dark holes in the sky, waves of gauzy material,

jumbles of body parts, observing angels, the furry pelt of a dredge-turned-mammal, or a map? The sheer proliferation of metaphors, especially those which do *not* reduce them to humans in disguise, demonstrates the difficulty of apprehending a swarm textually, as well as the generative possibilities of developing new approaches to this challenge, even if they are raw and ragged. These turbulent practices are an alternative to a tidy, binaristic approach to the representation of human and nonhuman concerns. This suggests that ecoghosts, especially swarms, may open spaces of possibility for novel representations of human-nonhuman relations in fiction. I take up this possibility in the next section.

### **The Sublime and Responsibility Toward the Nonhuman**

The sublime, especially as reconfigured by Russell to depict swarms, might hold the key to resolving the questions of literary responsibility raised by the novel. Ava's encounters with swarming insects as she journeys through the swamp play a powerful role in developing both the *bildungsroman* plot and the novel's environmental ethos: specifically, that the nonhuman and human are materially intertwined and epistemologically disconnected, and that the proper response to this is a rethinking of connections to the nonhuman based on ownership and belonging in favor of those based on responsibility and humility. Russell's depictions of swarms represent a novel application of the sublime aesthetic mode to epistemological shifts accompanied by material non-response in the face of overwhelming difference. Ultimately, however, I argue that this kind of ethical non-response is not an end in itself but rather a way of revealing a lacuna in the repertoire of material and representational responses to the nonhuman. To put it in familiar terms, it is sometimes better to do nothing than something you might regret.

As I noted before, swarms in the novel are often ecoghosts in the sense that they are diegetically acknowledged as agents and demonstrate limited agency within the text itself. The

ghosts of insect swarms come to haunt Kiwi, Ava's brother, when he reminisces about Swamplandia! while working on the Florida mainland. Rather than recalling his family, or perhaps the built environment of *Swamplandia!*, Kiwi's memory emphasizes the swamp's swarming insects:

On Swamplandia!, the crickets sang to announce the day's transition to evening, the flash of pink to black time that meant: deep summer. Vernal currents, an air as lushly populated as seawater, deer flies and damselflies, a whole cosmos of mosquitoes: all this iridescent life rose out of the solution holes at dusk. [Alligators] bellowing in gravelly eruptions, launching that strange sound at the sky until you braced yourself for an astral landslide. Crickets meant that the moon was up, that a tide was rising, that his mother or the Chief would soon be calling for them across the mudflats... (205)

Russell represents indirectly perceived crickets, flies, and mosquitoes as the catalyst for an intense commingling of species. Insects envelop everything; the air is so full of flies, mosquitoes, and the call of crickets that it is "as lushly populated as seawater" (205). In this vision of the swamp, there is no such thing as empty space: everything, from the tidewater to the stars, is a field of vibrant matter. It is worth noting that crickets kick off the symphony, with alligators joining later and humans (the Bigtree parents) last of all, not during the narrated scene but "soon." Their absent presence from the scene—heard but not seen, not now but "soon"—is a haunting: the human haunts the nonhuman. The text implies that Kiwi's memory is colored by distance and that the swarming nonhuman agencies he recalls are partly his creation. As with Ava, Kiwi's sense of bittersweet longing stems in part from his grief over his dead mother but also from a feeling of distance from the ecological connections which he once took for granted. The simultaneous distance and proximity that characterize Kiwi's relationship with the nonhuman in this passage make it a sublime experience. Russell's use of the sublime mode in descriptions of swarming insects, though not entirely novel, offers an aesthetic route toward directly addressing questions of the subject's relation with the human or nonhuman other. When

Russell's characters encounter certain swarms, they are confronted with the insufficiency of their means of understanding the world.

I suggested earlier that, in addition to posing representational challenges, swarms are useful objects of analysis because of the way they work affectively on human observers. This affective relationship is an important, and mostly overlooked, element of *Swamplandia!*

Encounters with swarms in the novel are often narrated in the sublime mode. Is this an example of anthropocentrism, whereby human characters' experience of the nonhuman takes precedence? Or is it something more ecocentric given that the sublime is sometimes posited to be a response to overwhelming natural power and grandeur? Both possibilities rest on a premise that I would like to call into question: the idea that the ambivalence which characterizes the sublime must ultimately be resolved.

To that end, I want to explore a few conceptions of the sublime which posit that the connections opened up by the sublime can have lasting effects on the relationship between humans and nonhumans. In her analysis of Indian author Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* (2004), Jana M. Giles theorizes a "postcolonial sublime" which "may challenge our preconceived assumptions and open us to our human and nonhuman others, promoting an ecological perspective based on mutuality rather than dominance" (5-6). To account for Ghosh's recuperative use of the sublime, Giles turns toward a theorization from Lyotard, who, unlike Kant, "locates the sublime in the simultaneous pain and pleasure of the inevitable failure to erase sensory experience. In other words, the sublime is the nondiscursive feeling of the differend, the incommensurability between experience and idea" (6). By drawing on a definition of the sublime which emphasizes the fact of the nonhuman "being for itself," Giles argues that Lyotard's sublime, as applied in Ghosh's novel, makes visible "an ecocentric view of nature that

reintroduces nature as an agent in its own right” and potentially making possible a “reflective responsibility” which “consists in discerning, respecting, and making respected the differends” even though those differends remain unrepresentable (Lyotard qtd. in Giles 7). In this manner, the sublime emerges as a way of re-orienting oneself in more equitable relation to others, both human and nonhuman, rather than a tactic which ultimately reinforces the anthropocentric and “ethnocentric assumptions” of the Kantian sublime (Giles 5). It is thus a step toward a conception of mutual respect between the human and nonhuman, as well as within the category of human.

Lyotard argues that the sublime can facilitate a “reflective responsibility” toward the differend. “Responsibility” seems a strange word to apply to the effects of the sublime. In many forms, the sublime involves the recognition that response is impossible: an overwhelming feeling that one’s agency is minute, inconsequential, or nonexistent. Yet Christopher Hitt uses the same term when he argues that “the concept of the sublime offers a unique opportunity for the realization of a new, more *responsible* perspective on our relationship with the natural environment” through what he calls the ecological sublime (605, emphasis mine). He writes that “a sublime encounter with nature seems to have the power to jolt us momentarily out of a perspective constructed by reason and language, a perspective that, in modern Western culture, has rendered nature mute” (617). Giles concurs, positing that the postcolonial sublime reveals how “literature can shock the reader into new understandings that erode barriers” among humans and between humans and nature (7). Unlike the Kantian sublime, these ecologically-minded forms of the sublime do not produce a passing sensation of humility; rather, the shock or jolt they produce can have lasting effects which might lead to a heightened sense of responsibility rather



than apathy or superiority. What is less clear, however, is what *responsibility* really means in this context.

When I use the term *responsible*, I wish to refer to a cluster of meanings: to be under ethical obligation, to be held accountable, to have caused something to occur, and, most importantly, to possess the capacity of being responded to. But how can one use literature to respond to nonhuman agents which cannot truly be invited into literary discourse? It is not at all clear that a feeling of understanding or responsibility evoked in response to literary representations of the nonhuman will translate into meaningful action. The sublime might compel readers to reconfigure their understanding of the political, personal, and social to include interspecies connections. But is this epistemological shift really a response at all if not accompanied by action? This question does not have a ready answer. However, the lack of a ready answer may itself be valuable. Frances Ferguson argues that the sublime is ecologically useful, especially in the time of climate change, because of “an ethics that aesthetic experience under the sign of the sublime particularly captures: the holding of a thought to which we have no ready response in action” (37). This kind of indecision—which in *Swamplandia!* is often a response to a swarm—is valuable. Hasty responses to complex issues are so often violent in history and the present: extermination of humans or nonhumans, the introduction of invasive species for short-sighted ends, environmental degradation; in short, the instrumentalization of both humans and nonhumans. The swarm sublime is an aesthetic means of communicating the experience of encountering difference without the ability to eradicate it. Throughout the novel, ecoghosts produce situations which reveal that, as Ferguson puts it, “we know more than we understand” (37). Other characters’ reactions and the textual responses to these sublime swarms

narrate affective responses which lead to epistemological shifts, but do not quite suggest where those epistemological shifts might lead in practice.

The swarms which most often give rise to sublime descriptions in *Swamplandia!* are clouds of mosquitoes and other insects. These swarms are ghostly in the rather literal sense that they have an ambiguous relationship with materiality. Mosquitoes in the novel flicker between states depending on the context in which they are observed. Like light, they are not exactly matter, but not exactly *not* matter, either. Sometimes they seem more like particles of living or dead matter; at other times, waves of energy or feeling or supernatural presence. For instance, Ava says that “when you rowed into a cloud of skeeters it was loud as a tractor but there was nothing there, just these tiny molecules of sound” (237). The contradictions in this sentence are the traces of independent nonhuman existence within a text. A molecule might not be much, but it is more than nothing. And since sound is produced by vibrations in matter, there is no such thing as “molecules of sound” in the first place. To call upon Deleuze and Guattari, sounds, like multiplicities, are haecceities, not things. Finally, to state the obvious, a cloud of mosquitoes is not empty: it is full of mosquitoes. In just this one sentence, mosquitoes flicker between existence and nonexistence, matter and energy, particle and wave. This hyperbolic, contradictory description simultaneously heightens the sense of the mosquitoes’ presence to sublime levels and erases the mosquitoes themselves by rendering them as literally “nothing” (237). This tactic of rendering the mundane uncanny and ambiguous through flickering is part of what has led many critics, such as Janet Maslin of the *New York Times*, to call the novel “haunted.”

However, I argue that this descriptive practice is more than an exercise in the pathetic fallacy: the presence of ghostly insect swarms does not simply underscore the dread and longing that characterize the human interactions in the novel. Swarm encounters in *Swamplandia!* narrate

the ability of the nonhuman to insist on its own agency, even when that agency is difficult to understand, and the sublime aesthetic mode allows Russell to register an intense affective response to this insistence, which has no recourse in action. Although the development of the novel's environmental ethos through the sublime echoes the gradual revelation that Ava is clinging to her mother's memory rather than the place itself, these sublime moments represent some of Ava and Russell's most direct engagements with the question of nonhuman agency. In other words, they represent not a relinquishment of Swamplandia! through maturation and processing grief, but overwhelming glimpses of a swamp which Ava has never understood.

An early experience with the swarm sublime unsettles Ava's sense of connection to the swamp, starting a process of estrangement that culminates in the Bigtrees moving to the mainland and Ava displacing much of her attachment to the swamp onto her siblings. At this point in the novel, the Chief and Kiwi have separately absconded to the mainland, leaving Ava and her sister Osceola alone on the island. Although tourists have entirely stopped visiting, the sisters continue to maintain the park. While cutting down melaleuca saplings near the limits of their park, they notice a shape beyond the trees which turns out to be an abandoned dredger boat. Ava is unsettled by the buzzards which seem to be "everywhere" on the dredge, which Ossie does not appear to notice. Together, the sisters wrench open the door to the cabin:

When the door came loose, colors flooded over us. I screamed, too, and covered my face with my arms, and if Ossie hadn't caught me I might have fallen into the wedge of the canal between the shoreline and the boat. In that second I knew that I'd been wrong this whole time: that my sister was psychic, that the whole world was haunted, and now a ghost was tuning itself like a luminous string above me. (99)

In this sublime second, an onslaught of unspecified "colors" leads Ava to believe that her previous understanding of the world was unambiguously wrong. This moment is bookended by multimodal sensory descriptions, which evade literal interpretation: colors which flood and a

ghost which tunes itself. In both cases, the passage refers to senses without describing sensations. The reference to “colors” invokes sight, while the verb “flooded” and Ava’s protective reaction invoke touch. “Tuning” invokes hearing and perhaps touch, while “luminous” invokes sight, although Ava is presumably covering her eyes at the time. Festa writes that “*description* tends to emerge precisely at those moments when nomenclature falters” or when the word fails adequately fit or encompass its referent (445). In this passage, description is withheld despite the failure of nomenclature to adequately render the situation; the misfit between word and thing, or word and experience, is thus made jarringly apparent. The overall effect is of a sensory experience so intense as to become entirely abstract, in which concepts replace descriptions. Russell’s phrasing, in other words, uses nonce language of sensory perception to narrate an experience of sensory and affective overload. Russell’s prose is, for once, largely non-metaphorical, and the one simile (“tuning... like a luminous string”) is loose and impressionistic. The swarm is, for a moment at least, irreducible into language. At the same time, the swarm is explicitly rendered as a ghost—and it *is* an ecoghost, an irruption of nonhuman agency into the text. This is a sublime experience in Lyotard’s sense, as Ava feels “the incommensurability between experience and idea” (Giles 6) when she encounters this ghost: her senses insist that the ghost exists, but she cannot comprehend it. This bears many similarities to Hitt’s ecological sublime, which has the power to “jolt us momentarily out of a perspective constructed by reason and language” (617).

Ava’s sense (or sensation) that this experience is otherworldly persists long after she understands its rational explanation. After this long second, “the ghost broke into particulates of wings” (99). As Ossie bluntly explains, “Calm down, dummy, it’s just a bunch of moths” (99). By withholding the explanation for several lines, the text extends the readers’ non-apprehension

of the situation along with Ava's. For Ava, however, this mundane explanation does not break the spell:

Moths jumbled tunelessly above our heads, kaleidoscoping in this way that looked like visible music to me—something that would be immediately audible to an alligator or a raccoon but that we human Bigtrees couldn't hear. Could my sister hear them? I wondered. She was picking a wedgie on the deck. (99)

At this point, Ava knows that they are moths, yet she continues her synesthetic descriptions. Even after the ghost breaks apart, Ava still cannot see the swarm as “just a bunch of moths” (99). Instead, she describes it as “particulates of wings” and “visible music” (99). Both phrases articulate the swarm as an unbounded, ambiguously material phenomenon rather than a group of organisms. Even if there is no ghost, she is still certain that *something* is going on beyond the limits of normal human perception and understanding. Her ears are not keeping her from hearing the music; she lacks some sort of attunement possessed by swamp animals, and possibly her sister.<sup>10</sup> She does not leave this encounter believing in ghosts. Instead, she becomes aware of nonhuman ways of perceiving the world that she cannot share, which produces a tone of yearning distance characteristic of the rest of the novel. This passage introduces the bedrock foundation of eco-ghosting: that the nonhuman always haunts the human and vice-versa.

The primary effect of Ava's sublime, synesthetic moth encounter is to unsettle her hitherto comfortable relationship with her swamp home. This is underscored by the reprised appearance of moths at the end of the same chapter:

I told myself that I didn't believe in ghosts at all, or at least not with the ardor of my sister, but at night the huge, paper-white moths flew up to hit or kiss their wings against our bedroom window screen and even the tiniest rasp made me want to cry out. (119)

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10. The comical juxtaposition between Ava's awestruck musings and Osceola picking a wedgie is characteristic of the Russell's narrative style, which often shifts quickly between registers. These shifts are often reminders that the main characters are children despite the gravity of their situations. Perhaps more importantly, when Ava's perspective veers closer toward eco-centrism, Ossie's dismissal of the “ghost” nudges the novel back toward comfortable anthropocentrism.

This sentence describes Ava's increasing doubt about her previous ways of apprehending the world. She follows her assertion that she "didn't believe in ghosts" with a relativistic qualification ("at least not") and finally with an implied reversal ("but"). Aside from being frightening on its face, the possibility that ghosts exist challenges Ava's preexisting understanding of her home. In other words, if ghosts are real, Ava does not really know the swamp at all. These passages where Ava encounters moths demonstrate the power of the swarm sublime as a tool for narrating the introduction of epistemological doubt. Festa, writing about *Robinson Crusoe*, argues that Defoe's supremely rational protagonist "narrates through description both encounters with the unintelligible... and the reprocessing of these inchoate encounters into intelligible experience" (455). Crucially, Ava is unable or unwilling to enact this kind of "reprocessing," and the novel itself withholds explicit description in these passages, thereby allowing these encounters to remain at least partly unintelligible. This recognition of epistemological uncertainty is a prerequisite for developing new understandings of the relationship between humans and nonhumans. Ava wonders whether the "visible music" of the swamp is audible to Ossie, but Ava is the character through whom the hidden nonhuman agencies become perceptible, if only briefly and occasionally, while Ossie sees only anthropomorphic ghosts in the swamp.

This discussion of frightening moth swarms brings up one aspect of eco-ghosts that I have only touched on in passing: their connotation of horror. The proximity of the sublime to horror is also significant, if ambivalent. At times, this horror stems from fear of the other: from attitudes which entrench anthropocentric and ethnocentric visions of the world. At other times, the proximity of the sublime to horror can spur reflection, especially when this fear stems from being confronted by "the challenges of understanding ourselves" in relation to others (Giles 3).

At times, swarms in Russell's novel evoke horror through the sublime, as when Ava describes the flat marshes far from her home:

Out here the mosquitoes were after me for red gallons—you could see clouds of them hanging above the grassland. I'm sure they are still out there hovering like that, like tiny particles of an old, dissolved appetite, something prehistoric and very scary that saturates the air of that swamp. A force that could drain you in sips without ever knowing what you had been, or seeing your face. (366)

This “force” is perhaps what Ava imagines animates the rest of the sublime swarms she encounters: the ghostly agency of the swamp. This passage suggests that connection does not always mean harmony; it also encompasses “very scary” things such as predation, harm, and conflict. This “old appetite” is disturbing because it is something nonhuman which sees humans as mere matter—as “red gallons.” In short, this force frightens Ava because it sees humans how we so often see the nonhuman world: in Jane Bennett's terms, as “thoroughly instrumentalized matter” (ix). This force erases human agency; the sublimity which characterizes this passage stems from Ava's experience of the differend. Here, as elsewhere, the novel's language registers hesitation, distance, and ambivalence in face of an ecoghost. The narration slips from first person to second and back twice. Ava notes the potential for action rather than its actuality with verb phrases like “could see” and “could drain.” The frightening force is introduced as a simile and described vaguely as “something.” The ambiguity signaled by the language here comes from the contradictory nature of the sublime: specifically, the relationship between pleasure and pain, “experience and idea” (Giles 6), and thought and response (Ferguson). The sublime marks the apprehension of existing language's inability to represent and direct responsible action toward the kinds of nonhuman agency which are so immanent in this passage.

The sublime mode can be used to depict how it *feels* to briefly comprehend the ways the human and nonhuman haunt each other. The sublime makes it possible to represent human-

nonhuman difference as an affectively powerful yet nearly unanswerable call for the human to respond. Human subjectivity becomes a barrier to the full apprehension and response to nonhuman agency, which is ironically a barrier to the expression of human agency. In short, the sublime places the responsibility of response on the human without succumbing to anthropocentrism. But what kind of response is possible? More to the point, what does *Swamplandia!* have to say about human responsibility toward nonhumans?

To answer, I want to turn toward a prominent form of nonhuman life in *Swamplandia!* which I have not yet addressed: the alligators, which adorn every cover of this widely-published and -translated novel that I have encountered. The Bigtrees call them “Seths” in reference to their “expensive billboard on the interstate” which beckons tourists to “COME SEE ‘SETH,’ FANGSOME SEA SERPENT AND ANCIENT LIZARD OF DEATH!!!” (6, small caps in original).<sup>11</sup> This appellation is an ecoghosting since it renders individual animals fungible in service of commerce, but I do not want to linger on this idea as Russell’s representations of other animals have allowed me to cover much of the same ground. Rather, I want to skip to the end. “Seths” appear in two guises at the very end of the novel, after the Bigtrees leave *Swamplandia!* for good. In the first, Russell imagines the life of the red baby alligator which she had carried into the swamp with her and lost while escaping the Bird Man:

When I’m awake, I can’t seem to draw a stable picture of the red Seth in my mind’s eye anymore—it feels like trying to light a candle on a rainy night, your hands cupped and your cheeks puffed and the whole wet world conspiring to snatch the flame away from you. But in a dream I might get to see the part of the swamp where her body washed up, bloated and rippling, or where she escaped to, if the dream was beautiful. (396-7)

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11. The genesis of this name is left unclear. Perhaps the Chief designed it with the tagline in mind: “Seth” does have a pleasant consonance with “sea serpent” and rhymes with “death.” It might also stem from confusion between the Ancient Egyptian gods Seth (or Set), who has the head of a long-nosed mammal, and Sobek, who has the head of a crocodile. Or perhaps Seth is simply a funny name to give an alligator.



The red Seth has gone from being Ava's "pet alligator" to an agential animal somewhere in the swamp (392-3). Russell's depiction of the red Seth is a place of strange dissolution, a constant ecoghosting. The animal does little more than eat what Ava feeds it. Ava keeps its existence a secret, and it last appears in the narrative when Ava, driven by what she characterizes as "instinct", throws it at the Bird Man to distract him while she escapes (332). The way the Ava keeps the red alligator to herself, as both a pet and a secret, is certainly an erasure, and she ultimately (literally) tosses it away to protect herself. Ava has certainly instrumentalized this little creature for her own anthropocentric ends, as Russell implies that the alligator has a private, perhaps unarticulated meaning for Ava beyond its own existence. Characteristically, however, Ava's decision or impulse to keep the alligator a secret can be interpreted as a more ecocentric act. According to this reading, Ava takes responsibility for preventing not the just Seth's demise, but for keeping it from being instrumentalized for anthropocentric ends. One of Ava's first thoughts upon seeing the red Seth hatch is "*The Chief is going to turn a backflip! ... This alligator could save our park!*" (60, italics in original). Yet Ava never tells her father about the red Seth, partly because she develops the superstitious belief that "*if you tell anyone about the red alligator, she will die or disappear*" (61, italics in original). Russell explicitly connects this with Ava's still-raw experience of losing her mother, but Ava's behavior can also be interpreted as a way to prevent the red Seth's commercialization; in other words, that she is not reluctant to reveal the Seth to her father despite the fact that it could save the park, but because she does not want to expose the Seth to that kind of instrumentalization.

Like the swarms, the red Seth is a ghostly creature: actively hidden from humans aside from Ava, the Seth eventually disappears from human knowledge while persisting in Ava's imagination. Ava casts the real creature away yet is haunted by the realization that it has gone on

to live an autonomous life, or perhaps to die an unwitnessed death. At the end of the novel, Ava's dreams and fuzzy recollections of the Seth reveal the ways that attributing agency to the nonhuman can be experienced as a loss; that, as much as the connection between Ava and the red Seth was one-sided and anthropocentric, it is difficult to conceive of an alternative which might have acknowledged the Seth's agency. Even an ecocentric approach in literature is still limited, as Ava's failed attempts to picture the alligator suggest, by human imagination. Most existing forms of literature produce ghosts of nonhuman agencies, not real agencies, but perhaps acknowledging this fact is a way of responding to the nonhuman. By ending the novel with the image of the red alligator living its life beyond the knowledge of its narrator, Russell depicts a human *missing* a nonhuman while relinquishing any claims of ownership over that creature. An anthropocentric connection dissolves, leaving an aching space for a new, more responsible connection.

But that is not quite how the novel ends. The novel concludes, as it began, with a reference to alligator wrestling. The last reference to the alligators comes in the final paragraph of the novel, when Ava, presumably from the perspective of an adult, says that "our Seths are still thrashing inside us in an endless loop. I like to think our family is winning" (397). This final instrumentalization snaps the text's focus back onto anthropocentric concerns: the reader is meant to understand that "our" Seths are metaphors for personal histories. Only, this time, the alligators are not even alligators anymore. *Swamplandia!*'s overtures toward new ways of understanding the relationship between humans and nonhumans are left conspicuously unresolved in favor of a conclusion which emphasizes the importance of family bonds. When the reunited Bigtree family moves to the mainland, never to return to Swamplandia!, the novel provides the conditions for two interpretations of the narrative of "that summer" (395). I have

already posed the first potential interpretation: that Ava's interpretation of the swamp is revealed, at last, as an insufficient way of imagining a diegetically real space. This is an important, if incomplete, gesture toward reimagining human-nonhuman relationships from a more equitable perspective by first rethinking our existing modes of relation. The second potential interpretation stems from the way that Ava's presence as a child subtly gives way to Ava as the adult narrator. From this perspective, Ava's narration can be read as a near-total instrumentalization of the nonhuman in service of an anthropogenic and anthropomorphic narrative; that is, by having Ava stake her claim on the entire narrative of the novel at its conclusion, Russell suggests that the nonhuman agencies of the swamp are only literarily useful inasmuch as they enrich our understanding of Ava and her family. From this perspective, the red alligator is only important because Ava uses its memory to mediate her relationship to her family and to her past. Perhaps the text's lack of response to these various agencies simply demonstrates the difficulty of representing agential nonhumans through fiction. But, as Bergland argues, ghosts are also agents of hope; the task *Swamplandia!* gestures toward but leaves incomplete need not remain so forever.

## Chapter 2. “I Wonder If the Rats Are Awake”: Reading Pests and Politics in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*

### Introduction: Political Pests

Rats skulk around the margins of Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991). The novel follows the travails of Azaro and his parents in an ambiguous setting suggestive of Lagos around the time of Nigeria’s Independence in 1960.<sup>1</sup> Azaro is an *abiku* or “spirit child.” According to Yoruba folklore, *abiku* are children who die before puberty and are reborn again and again to the same family. Instead of dying and returning to the land of spirits, Azaro decides to stay in the world with his parents. While Azaro eludes the spirits’ attempts to coax, trick, or force him back to the spirit world, his parents struggle with greedy landlords, backbreaking jobs, political violence, and the constant, invisible presence of hungry rats. At times, the rats creep into dialogue, chewing audibly on the family’s grain stores while characters discuss poverty, politics, and the struggle to survive. Scenes of political activism and violence are bookended by characters pondering the wisdom of these rodents. A wide array of characters, from vicious chauffeurs to Azaro’s proud father, compare the poor to their furry neighbors. In short, the rats are important elements of Okri’s representation of Nigerian politics. By addressing the rats’ relationship to the novel’s political dimensions, I demonstrate that we can better understand a text’s stance on power, as manifested through states and publics, through its representation of animals.

I turn to the political philosopher Jane Bennett to help theorize a form of political representation which brings together the human and the animal in a literary context. In her short

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1. Taking into account the novel’s spiritual and material references, Erin James argues that “the aesthetic Okri derives from a Yoruba perspective of reality is firmly rooted in the topography and biology of southwest Nigeria” (268).

monograph *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett relates Charles Darwin and Bruno Latour's shared sentiment that the "small agencies" of seemingly inconsequential animals (specifically earthworms) could affect history (94). Bennett ultimately concludes that humans and nonhumans collude in political activity and are therefore enmeshed in what she calls political ecologies. To define the political, she draws on Jacques Rancière's definition of politics as "a singular disruption of [the hegemonic] order of distribution of bodies" (qtd. in Bennett 105). According to her reading of Rancière, "a political act not only disrupts, it disrupts in such a way as to change radically what people can 'see'" (107).<sup>2</sup> Bennett wants us to "see" the political contributions of nonhumans in everyday life and history alike. However, her gloss of Rancière implicitly puts her philosophical project in conversation with literary scholarship. Specifically, the relationship between politics and visibility is an axiomatic element of postcolonial scholarship and literature. As Robert J. C. Young argues, the enduring task of postcolonialism is to "make the invisible... visible" by revealing those people, cultures, and nations which "those in power" refuse to see, a willful refusal he calls "the politics of invisibility" (23).

Literature is especially equipped to address the inherently political question of who and what is seen by those in power. Which categories of human and nonhuman life do literary texts make visible? How do critical approaches to literature reveal or obscure the traces of various forms of life in literary texts? By analyzing the ways that the rats in *The Famished Road* reveal hidden aspects of the novel's representation of postcolonial Nigerian politics, particularly the formation of unorthodox kinds of public political engagement, I hope to make the case for the literary significance of pests and other unwelcome animals, as well as the value of critical engagement with the ways that texts depict seemingly quotidian interspecies interactions. By

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2. It is worth noting that she includes "dead rats" in her list of nonhumans which might have this political power (107).

analyzing the way that the characters of the novel “read” the rats, I argue that the text models a variety of interpretive practices which might inform interspecies political engagement. By analyzing how the rats enable certain political readings, I argue for the value of critically reading animals in literature.

In this chapter, I first argue that *The Famished Road* uses various characters’ readings of the rats to model diverse ways of interpreting animals as part of the political sphere. Most significantly, a type of consciously shallow interpretive practice that I call *hard reading* emerges as a productive and ethical approach to reading animals. Second, I demonstrate the critical value of hard reading by applying it to Okri’s rats, thereby revealing that the novel’s political theorizations are more cohesive than is often argued. Finally, I argue that the rats serve as the literary mechanism through which the novel addresses interrelated questions about language, animals, and politics on both thematic and formal levels. In this section, I expand beyond rats and hard reading to address the novel’s explicit engagement with interspecies politics.

*The Famished Road*’s broad, often conflicting political statements and invitation to political allegory make it an excellent case study in the ways that literature can be a testing ground for interspecies *political engagement* in the real world. For the purposes of this chapter, I adopt Jane Bennett’s “vital materialist” theories of political engagement, which draw on John Dewey, Bruno Latour, and Jacques Rancière to arrive at a definition of *politics* as the “conjoint action” of publics and *democracy* as the ability to previously unseen actants to “provoke a gestalt shift in perception” (107). Bennett routes John Dewey’s notion of publics through Latour’s posthumanist theory to arrive at a theory of public engagement as the conjoint action (i.e. collective response) of diverse “publics” which are “provoked into existence by a shared experience of harm” (xix). This is not to say that these publics develop a consensus or even

intend to engage in collective political action; rather, their individual responses to harm are necessarily interrelated in terms of their impetus and their consequences. Bennett folds Rancière's theory of democracy into her conception of political action. If, she argues, we do not assume that human linguistic ability is a precondition to political participation, it becomes possible to conceive of nonhumans performing political acts in Rancière's sense, which "disrupt in such a way as to change radically what people can 'see'" (107). To be clear, Bennett does not seem intent on coming to an exclusive definition of politics; rather, these theorizations are meant to be generative. In a similar spirit, I define *political action*, for the purposes of this chapter, as the behavior of interspecies publics in response to shared harm.

Bennett uses the term "political ecologies" to describe the imbrication of humans and nonhumans in political action. All politics, from this perspective, takes place within political ecologies. Bennett's use of *political ecologies* differs in usage, if not in outlook, from many other scholars. The academic discipline of political ecology as conceived of by other scholars, notably Byron Caminero-Santangelo, approaches political, economic, and social matters as intertwined with ecological ones. Although she would doubtlessly agree with this perspective, Bennett primarily uses the term to describe a type of political phenomena rather than a scholarly discipline. In this chapter, I am more concerned with the political contributions of nonhumans than a particular disciplinary approach to politics and the environment; I acknowledge, however, the significance of the field of political ecology to scholarship on the environmental dimensions of literature.

I am not the first to draw on the new materialisms for approaches to non-Western literature. Cajetan Iheka, another scholar invested in rethinking the human-nonhuman dichotomy in African literary criticism, writes that "it took recent scholarship in the new materialisms... for

serious critical attention to be paid to the effects of nonhumans on the ecosystem and to consider their participation in instances of intentional human agency” (58). The ideas brought to light by critics like Bennett and Latour are not new; as Iheka ironically notes, “it appears that we are starting to pay attention to what many African societies and other non-Western cultures believed and practiced for generations” (60). Scholars like Joni Adamson, Harry Garuba, and Marisol de la Cadena highlight the ways that indigenous cultures across continents already conceive of nonhumans as participants in social, cultural, and/or political spheres, and Iheka himself calls for “expanding the space of the political” to include nonhumans (21).

*The Famished Road*, through its stylistic and structural emphasis on repetition, facilitates a kind of reading which complements its political ethos. By depicting various characters as diegetically “reading” the rats, Okri’s text dramatizes the negotiation between anthropocentric and ecocentric demands in literature. However, by depicting the rats as joining in publics to engage in political action, the text provides the conditions for reading the rats non-dialectically: their concerns not in simple opposition but in complex relation to those of humans. I define this kind of reading as *ecopolitical reading*: anthropogenic interpretive acts which, following Bennett’s adaptation of Rancière, seek to reveal the political contributions of nonhumans. Ultimately, and counterintuitively, the novel suggests that a pre-discursive human connection with animals can be recovered through “a new language to talk to one another”; that is, through language and literature (498).<sup>3</sup>

The text elaborates this thesis on the literary level by representing rats as key to the novel’s political subtext. Hunger and poisoning allow Okri to traffic between registers of

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3. In a similar vein, Bennett writes that “the political goal of a vital materialism is not the perfect equality of actants, but a polity with more channels of communication between members” (104).



expression by linking the political, spiritual, and material on a thematic level and uniting various human and animal actors into political collectives on narrative and figurative levels. Specifically, Okri's rats facilitate the exposition of an interspecies biopolitics of hunger by acting as the hinge between the various poles of this politicality: material and spiritual, human and nonhuman, imminent and deferred, rich and poor. Rather than functioning solely symbols or allegories, the rats emphasize connections within Okri's text which otherwise might go unnoticed.<sup>4</sup>

One of these connections is the covert suffusion of necropolitics through the novel, which is primarily revealed through a transspecies susceptibility to poisoning. According to Achille Mbembe, new necropolitical techniques have gradually supplanted the colonial biopolitics of discipline with the contemporary necropolitics of extermination. In my conception, following Mbembe, the necropolitical refers to biopolitical mechanisms aimed at the "*management of the multitudes*" ("Necropolitics" 32, italics in original) by exposing entire categories of people to death. Two elements distinguish expressions of necropower from other forms of biopolitical violence. First is the relative insignificance of its coercive or disciplinary effects; the goal of necropower is generally to paralyze, disperse, contain, or eliminate rather than compel active obedience or acquiescence. Second, necropolitical violence is simply more extreme than other forms of biopolitical violence: arrest and torture give way to targeting of unarmed bodies *en masse* for incapacitation through mutilation or death ("Necropolitics" 34). Simply put, the novel's commentary on the necropolitical dimensions of postcolonial Nigeria is lost if one does not read the rats ecopolitically in the first place. Interpreting the rats in this manner does not

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4. In making this argument, I align myself with Cajetan Iheka's intention to "demonstrate that African literary narratives stage connections between human and nonhuman lives and illuminate the necessity of these interconnections for an enriched interpretation of the narratives and Africa's complex ecologies" (11).

simply reveal more about the rats; it also reveals connections between the novel's aesthetic and political dimensions that are otherwise obscured.

The multivalent complexity of the rats' role in the novel suggests the value of reading under the floorboards: the rats are the chorus, a descriptive marker of the real, symbols of suffering, metaphorical stand-ins for the protagonists, and characters in their own right. The centrality of the rats to unlocking the politics of the text suggests that literature models different ways of reading animals, and that these interpretations can both reflect and expand our ways of seeing the world.

### **The Rats as Diegetic Sites of Interpretation**

Primed by experience to expect the occasional mention of a rat, mosquito, or scorpion, we are unlikely to question the presence of pests in postcolonial literature. Like the nurse in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* who ignores a rat traipsing around the hospital, we seem to "have rat-filters on [our] glasses" (127). Yet, to echo Roy again, those "small things" which "occup[y] very little space in the world" are worth paying attention to, if only to provide a fuller picture of the political and ethical worlds of the texts which include them (12).

The logic of close reading can also apply to quotidian interspecies transactions. *The God of Small Things* suggests that daily life is suffused with interspecies interactions, and that making sense of one's life is an interpretive task that involves attending to overlooked details and, specifically, to overlooked forms of human and nonhuman life. Literary close reading is based on the similar logic that attending to linguistic and literary details enriches one's understanding of a text and reveals further possibilities for interpretation, extrapolation, and response. Of course, to bring up close reading is to invoke the intertwined histories of literary criticism and English literary instruction. I am not interested in vindicating close reading as a method of literary

analysis or as a pedagogical approach; however, I do want to suggest that ecopolitical reading can model or contribute to “learning” in the sense of developing new modes of seeing human-nonhuman relations in literature, and, further, that reading (or not) in this manner is an ethical matter, at least inasmuch as paying or not paying attention to nonhumans in everyday life is an ethical matter.

My position lies in complex relation to that of Heather Love, who proposes taking cues from the anti-humanist camps within the social sciences to “develop modes of reading that are close but not deep” (375). In so doing, she argues, literary criticism might move away from the near-religious faith in “the opacity and ineffability of the text” and the “ethical charisma” of the critic which persist primarily through close reading’s domination of literary pedagogy and scholarship (371-4). She demonstrates the interpretive value of “close by not deep” reading by analyzing moments of “flatness, objectivity, and literalism” in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, a “famously ‘deep’ novel” (386). I am attracted to Love’s idea of reading that is “close but not deep,” as well as her focus on moments of exteriority in a text whose expressions of interiority are so often celebrated. These two interpretive methods are valuable when approaching the representation of rats in *The Famished Road*, another novel lauded for its depth. Ecopolitical reading is necessarily close but not deep, though perhaps in a different sense than Love intended: it entails paying sustained attention to the exteriorities of nonhuman, whose interiorities resist human interpretation, and it is also based on a form of political engagement premised on exteriorities (problems, publics, and political acts) rather than intentions.

Okri’s depiction of the rats is similarly biased toward exteriority on a formal level. For the most part, their appearance in the novel takes the form of perfunctory description. Along with the signs produced by other pests such as mosquitoes, moths, and geckos, the sound of the rats

contributes of the dense sensory texture of Azaro and his family's material reality. These small creatures, unlike larger animals and humans, are rarely spirits in disguise. Most of the time, the rats simply "chew," the flies do nothing more than "buzz" and the mosquitos "whine." The dull repetition of these details is a reminder that, although not a conventionally realist work, the novel is concerned with mundane life in Nigeria. The connection between the sound of the rats and material existence is strong enough to bring Azaro's spirit back into his body when it drifts away at night: "I would be lifted out of my body, would find it difficult to get out through the roof, and would be brought down suddenly by the noise of the rats eating. Then I would sleep soundly" (187-8). Azaro experiences this abrupt return to dreamless sleep as a relief from the spirits' endless ploys to entrap him in their world. Rats remain resolutely of this world in a novel where traffic between the mundane and spirit realms is commonplace. Through a mechanism similar to Roland Barthes' "reality effect," the rats reassure Azaro that he is in the real world and signal to the reader that the novel is proceeding in a realist mode. Elaine Freedgood neatly summarizes Barthes' argument as "objects lie around in the realist novel to signify a generic real rather than to suggest something particular about it." These objects do not *mean* anything; they simply *are* (9). In the context of this decidedly non-realist novel, however, signifying a *generic real* functions differently than in a realist novel. Azaro is often tricked into leaving the material world, or else startled to discover spirits walking the earth. The sound of the rats thus allows him to "sleep soundly" in the knowledge that he is really in his body, really in his home with his parents. Similarly, the rats guide readers to interpret the surrounding passages as reflecting material concerns; accordingly, the rats often appear when characters discuss hunger, poverty, and political conflict, as well as when creditors come knocking.

Despite the rats' propensity to return the novel's focus to externalities, one might protest that *The Famished Road* is fundamentally about dreams, visions, prophecies, and other retreats inward; in other words, that it is seriously engaged with aesthetic renderings of interiorities. I agree, which is why I am so interested in the rats. The rats are a strangely flat element of a deep novel. To the extent that they communicate, the rats speak only of the material world. They appear most often as elements of description rather than narration. Much like the objects Freedgood analyzes in Victorian novels, the rats are "mentioned repeatedly, often at crucial narrative moments, but with no attendant indication that [they have] meaning beyond the limited or weak metonymic function" (2); in this case, it is possible to assume that the rats serve as nothing more than inconsequential reminders of something already clear to the reader, namely the characters' poverty. However, novel suggests the rats' significance by lightly and repeatedly directing focus toward the signs they produce: the sounds of their chewing, the sights of their corpses, even the smell of their burning fur. Simply put, the rats are both difficult to ignore and resistant to deep analysis. Like Azaro, they are acted upon more than they act; however, Azaro's position as narrator and his frequent flights into dreams and visions make it difficult to extricate interiority and exteriority, whereas the rats' interiorities are simply rendered inaccessible. The rats are not deep so much as they call forth a variety of responses from human characters that reveal much about how humans read animals as well as their own political potentialities. That said, the rats are not inert objects of human interpretation. They shape and are shaped by the political experiences of human characters and thus participate in interspecies publics.

The "close but not deep" readings of the rats are better denoted by what I call *hard reading*. Hard reading involves a sensitive interpretation of exteriorities which withholds interpretation of interiorities; it hits a wall, so to speak, and, rather than extrapolate regarding

what lies beyond, it takes the wall itself as an object of interpretation. In this way, hard reading is like what Elaine Freedgood and Cannon Schmitt call “reading literally, denotatively, and literally” in that it “seeks to... to stop us from gliding rapidly and hazily from words to concepts. To adapt a Russian Formalist axiom: literalist reading makes the novelistic stone stony” (10). Hard reading is skin-deep; it allows the animal body, for instance, the dignity of resistance to probing. Hard reading posits a degree of epistemological, but not ontological, interchangeability between the objects of its interpretation. The reading practices enacted by Azaro and his family do not deny the individual subjecthood of the rats, but rather deny that their subjectivities, or even the mere distinction between individual rats, can be made accessible to the human interpreter. The rats exist in a middle level between the general (Azaro and his family’s familiarity with them suggests that these rats are distinct from others) and the particular (they are somehow also entirely fungible members of a universal ratdom which persists, and even threatens revenge, despite the eventual extermination of these particular rats). Approached in this way, these collectivities are able to persist through time and even death. The rats and “the poor” alike take on a durable hardness in which they are not quite symbols or abstractions, and thus evacuated of materiality and particularity, but also not quite individuated subjects which are threatened by fragile mortality. When enacted by characters, this kind of reading can also produce a tone which mediates between the hardness of existence for poor postcolonial subjects (I count the rats in this number while acknowledging that they are also a source of suffering) and the sympathy that the text extends toward them and they extend toward each other. As Azaro ponders, “the sun bared the reality of our lives and everything was so harsh it was a mystery that we could understand or care for one another or for anything at all” (161). The people of the neighborhood care for each other; the mystery is *how* this kind of caring is possible. Similarly,

the text acknowledges the rats' mysterious interiorities while "barring the reality" of their exteriorities.

The rats in *The Famished Road* are a particularly intense locus of ecopolitical interpretation. Although the rats are rarely seen, and only occasionally heard, almost every major character espouses strong opinions about them. These opinions often reflect the character's political outlook and can be read as responses to recent political events in the novel. In the remainder of this section, I outline how several major characters "read" the rats in relation to these political contexts. Specifically, I address the ways that Azaro, his parents, and Jeremiah (more often referred to as "the photographer"), interpret the rats. I take these interpretations as different analogues of ecopolitical reading, including hard reading. These readings depict a complex array of modes of relating with animals through literature by demonstrating that rats can be objects of interpretation without being reduced only to figurations. I also argue that these modes of interpretation are, like Heather Love's "close but not deep" form of critical reading, most incisive when confined to exteriorities rather than interiorities. When characters, most notably Jeremiah, conflate close observation and contemplation of the rats with understanding, however, it enables spectacular violence against them. The mastery suggested by *understanding* is a form of epistemological dominance which can result in material violence.

The first appearance of the rats in the novel demonstrates Azaro and his family's attitudes toward the rats in microcosm. While Mum and Dad recount the story of their move to the city, "suddenly a rat began chewing away at something beneath the cupboard. ... The noise of the rat increased and other rats joined in the chewing" (70). Dad laments that people are forgetting their spiritual powers. When he says that "the only power poor people have is their hunger," Mum cries out, as if in reply, "those rats!" (70). Dad, presumably listening to the rats chewing in the

darkness, says, “Azaro, rats can be our friends. They can sometimes tell what is happening in the world. They are our spies. Listen to them, Azaro, and tomorrow tell me what the rats are saying” (71).

Dad trusts that “our friends” the rats possess important knowledge about the world, although he cannot decipher it. Dad’s curiosity about the rats is surprising at this early point in the novel, when his inability to sympathize with Mum, Azaro, and his neighbors often brings him into conflict. Dad’s uncharacteristic conviction that the rats possess knowledge that he does not foreshadows his eventual transformation from a stubborn individualist into a prophetic figure who is more oriented toward those around him. His interest in the rats is lightly touched upon throughout the novel. Dad’s later ideas about humans’ responsibility toward animals are part of a long-gestating political reorientation signaled by this early passage about the rats and at least partially engendered by the rats themselves. In this light, Dad’s statement that “the only power poor people have is their hunger” (70) is not a non-sequitur; rather, he is already demonstrating his ability to draw lessons in political action from close attention to the behavior of animals by responding to the sound of the rats eating. Of all the characters, Dad has the strongest and most transformative relationship with the rats. Despite occasional outbursts of violence against them, he demonstrates an abiding interest in the rats, investing them with political power and understanding.

Azaro, for his part, takes Dad’s imperative to “listen to” the rats to heart. At first, he does not interpret the sounds they are making as signs at all; the rats “didn’t seem to be saying anything” (71). When he begins to listen more closely, he notices “the shrill intensity of the rats” (71); that is, he notices that the rats are producing interpretable signs. Finally, he manages to “understand the language” of the rodents but still cannot “understand what they meant,” while



the rats “couldn’t understand” his questions either (71). As the passage progresses, Azaro slowly attunes to the sound of the rats “beneath” the sounds of his parents having sex (71). The sounds of the “bed-springs creaking” and “Mum sighing differently” are, much like the sounds of the rats, signs which Azaro does not know how to interpret, much as he takes Dad’s command to “listen to” the rats at face value when it might also be interpreted as a simple trick to draw Azaro’s attention away from the sounds of intercourse (71). In any case, Azaro is presented with a kind of dense, layered text, yet his critical digging quickly hits bedrock. Here, as elsewhere, *The Famished Road* suggests that it is a mistake to over-interpret the signs produced by animals. Having worked so hard to understand what the rats are “saying,” Azaro is unsatisfied by the message he receives. “The world is tougher than fire or steel,” the rats say (71). This might mean that the world is difficult or that the world cannot be easily destroyed (a later paraphrase suggests that Azaro understands it to mean the former.) If it is the latter, the one rat’s “teeth of yellow diamonds” are notable: diamond is the hardest known material, certainly tougher than steel (71). A yellow diamond shape is also suggestive of a small flame. The implication, then, may be that the rats can be tougher than the world. However, I want to emphasize that Azaro need not literally understand the language of rats to arrive at this message, ambiguous as it is: he need only listen to the sound of their relentless chewing through hard grain to arrive at the idea that the world is tough for humans and nonhumans alike but that persistence is possible. The concept of a hard reading of animals is, *The Famished Road* suggests, not just a feasible but an ethical approach to interpreting the nonhuman other in both literature and life. This is especially true in contexts in which animals add to the challenges of already difficult lives because hard reading does not ask the interpreter for sympathy. Rather, it demands only attention. Azaro notes of his human neighbors that “years of frustration had turned their eyes in to instruments which looked

out at the world with a peculiar, unforgiving, sharpness; often, even, with meanness” (343). This sharpness of their instruments of perception, though borne of suffering, is not a debility but a valid and useful mode of perception.

Azaro’s bafflement at this statement also reveals his character. As an outsider to the world, Azaro lacks an intuitive understanding of earthly suffering. His eventual embrace of miseries and mysteries of the world through the first five books can be read as an allegorical *bildungsroman*. By the time Azaro has made his choice to remain in the world, the rats are long dead. What he overhears the rats saying about the toughness of the world would perhaps be obvious to his parents, yet Azaro must plead with the rats to explain what they mean. Much later, when the photographer comments that “it’s a hard life,” Azaro tells him that the rats used to say the same thing, implying that he has continued to puzzle over their statement from much earlier in the novel. The photographer is dismissive of the rats’ understanding of life, but likewise has no answer to Azaro’s question, “why is it hard?” (265). Although Azaro is a keen observer, he initially sees the material world as an outsider who may choose to leave; his narration suggests only mild interest in the cryptic interiorities of mundane beings. Later, he seems to reconcile the opacity of interiorities with the vibrancy of exteriorities. After he finally commits to living in the material world, he becomes entranced by both the complexity of human exteriorities and the opacity of interiorities, thinking:

The fact that they were alive in their bodies, containing this thing called life in their flesh, seemed incredible to me. I watched babies with open-mouthed wonder. I couldn’t get over the fact that we can look out of our eyes, out of our inner worlds at people, but that people, looking at us couldn’t see into our eyes, our thoughts, our inner words. How transparent one feels, but how opaque: it mystified me. (342)

Although the tone of Azaro’s narration shifts toward ebullient optimism and sympathy here, the descriptive practices throughout the novel demonstrate a fascination with the “alarming mystery

of reality” (342) whose telos is not the evaporation of that mystery.<sup>5</sup> Azaro’s mere attention to the rats suggests their significance without prescribing particular readings of them. In fact, Azaro’s readings of the rats shift in response to the attitudes of those around him. When Dad expresses interest in what the rats have to say, Azaro discovers that he can understand them. When the photographer describes them as a threat, Azaro appears to become wary of them. To Azaro, the rats represent some truth about material reality that he does not quite have access to, so he credulously accepts the readings of wiser minds. The passage in which Azaro decides to remain in the world, and implicitly casts away his ability to leave it, demonstrates a newfound comprehension of what he once took for granted: “like a stranger, I saw the suffering on their faces, the years of misery and suspicion, their extreme sensitivity to slights, the vigour of their reactions, the energy of their appetites, their boundless enthusiasm and hope” (343).<sup>6</sup> At this point, the rats are long dead, but Azaro seems to have developed a sense for the “hardness” of the world and what it takes to survive in it.

In contrast to Azaro and Dad, who are interested in closely reading the rats, Mum, the staunchest realist, is frankly exasperated by “those rats!” who make their lives harder while Dad and Azaro indulge in fantastic voyages and political prophecies. She lacks the freedom possessed by the men in her life. For example, when she falls ill, possibly with malaria, she is not taken on a mystical journey as Dad and Azaro often are when sick or injured. Instead, she unconsciously begins to do housework. Her concerns are pragmatic and material, not because of a lack of imagination or desire for joy, but because of her role as the custodian of the household’s

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5. Harry Garuba writes that the “primary characteristic” of the animist perspective is “the continual re-enchantment of the world” (284) whereby “the rational and scientific are appropriated and transformed into the mystical and magical” (266). Azaro’s experience here mirrors this process in miniature: once entranced by the overtures of spirits, Azaro comes to perceive equal or perhaps greater wonder and mystery in the quotidian.

6. The progression of this list touches on the spectrum of experience which relates to the politics of hunger, which I elaborate in detail in the next section.

survival. The sack of garri that the rats are eating is characterized as “Mum’s” because she is ultimately made responsible for her son and husband (70). Mum’s dismissive response to the rats is timely reminder that, as much as Okri’s rats come to take on complex roles throughout the novel, they are also competitors for limited resources. For Mum, the rats are a synecdoche for material suffering. Early in the novel, “Mum would potter about the room, muttering to herself about rats and poverty” (78). At one point, she angrily beats her husband while he sleeps. Improbably, he does not wake. In her frustration, she recalls the death of the rats, saying “why is it that when I am happy rats die all over the floor” (445). Her statement can be taken literally considering the extermination of the rats much earlier in the novel. As Mark Mathuray notes, Mum rarely has the luxury of leaving behind material concerns as Azaro and Dad do. Her groundedness helps ensure that “the centre of gravity of the text remains its realist discourse with its concomitant concerns” (*On the Sacred* 129). For Mum, as for Azaro, the rats stand in for material reality, though Mum’s perspective differs because of her long experience with suffering.

The shifting political significance of the rats is a result of their opacity. The same exteriorities which the rats present to the world come to symbolize, variously, the political value of interspecies connections, the inescapability of material suffering, and the mysteries and banality of reality. It would easy to say that each character simply projects his or her political outlook onto the rats. However, Okri also provides the conditions for the rats to be read as active members of publics alongside the same humans who insist on reading them politically. Within the diegetic world of the novel, these readings can also be politically enabling for characters like Dad. For critics, they enable new understandings of the novel’s thematic preoccupations, namely the value of interspecies communication and the concept of hunger as a way of yoking the spiritual, material, and political, as well as tying humans and nonhumans together. Hunger

functions as a means of going beyond the “multispecies presence” which obviously characterizes the novel to a more active “interrelationship” between humans and animals (Iheka 30).

*The Famished Road* suggests that there are limits to reading animals ecopolitically, and that reading animals too deeply, thus abandoning hard reading, can cause harm. The photographer, Jeremiah, demonstrates this through his interpretation of the rats, which culminates in him poisoning them *en masse*. Jeremiah implies that the rats’ hunger alone makes them a threat. Evidently unaware of the irony of his position, he elaborates on the threat posed by the rats when he hears them chewing on the family’s grain stores while he is making a meal of the same grain. He compares the rats to “bad politicians and imperialists and rich people” because “they eat up property. They eat up everything in sight. And one day when they are very hungry they will eat us up” (233). Unlike Azaro, the photographer cannot talk to or understand the rats; he can only “kill them” (233). That is, the only response he can conceive of is extermination, which is all the more cruel because he believes that the rats can understand his threats. Brenda Cooper argues that Jeremiah is a mythic figure based in part on Robert Browning’s poem about the Pied Piper legend. Although Okri occasionally depicts him as a “somewhat ridiculous figure,” Cooper takes the fact that he kills these postcolonial elite in effigy as evidence that he is meant to be read as a “political messiah” (98).

The novel also concedes that the hunger of the rats and other pests contribute literally to the suffering of the poor, or at least have a metonymic relationship with the factors which do. Shortly before Jeremiah discusses poisoning the rats, perhaps influenced by the older man’s distaste for them, Azaro narrates that “the rats continued chewing away at our lives” (188). Elsewhere, Azaro lists the ways that suffering enters the lives of his family, including “the rats and cockroaches eating away at our dreams” (493). In *A Dying Colonialism*, Fanon uses similar

language to describe the material and psychological ways that “ever-menacing death” pervades the lives of the colonized, writing “all this gnawing at the existence of the colonized tends to make of life something resembling an incomplete death” (128). The association between the rats and the material and psychological suffering of the colonized poor is undeniable. The photographer’s actions are not merely symbolic: they are also a response to what one might reasonably interpret as a mortal threat.

I argue, however, that Jeremiah’s justification for killing the rats can be read as a flawed simile: *the rats are like the rich; both exploit the poor out of avarice*. Like Azaro and Dad, the photographer acknowledges that he cannot “understand what the rats are saying” (233). However, unlike these other characters, Jeremiah insists that he can nevertheless understand their intentions. Essentially, he reads too deeply into the signs produced by the rats, projecting his well-founded fear of political violence onto less powerful beings. Although the rats may be “never satisfied,” as Jeremiah claims, he has no reason to believe that the telos of their hunger is the total dispossession of the poor, as is the case with the capitalist and colonialist elites to whom he compares them. In fact, Jeremiah’s characterization of the rats has much in common with Dad’s characterization of his dispossessed human neighbors: both groups hold the potential to harness their hunger and dissatisfaction to triumph over the powerful. The photographer lacks even the ambiguous sympathy that Azaro and Dad feel toward the rats, who understand them as rivals of circumstance with whom they share the difficulties of existence. When he finally kills the rats, he brings the family little relief. Mum and Azaro are horrified by the volume of dead rodents. Mum struggles to dispose of their bodies, which seem to multiply. Dad later expresses that he misses them. Perhaps most to the point, the family’s struggle with hunger continues unabated, and even their fear of the rats is increased now that they feel the rats have cause to

seek vengeance. By investing too deeply into his reading of the rats, Jeremiah brings more suffering to animals and humans alike. The violence of Jeremiah's actions toward the rats, ironically, underscores the political interconnectedness of rats and humans, as I elaborate in the following section. The poisoning of the rats reveals just how interconnected their lives had been with those of Azaro's family. On a more sinister level, it also reveals their shared susceptibility to political mechanisms of death.

### **The Politics and Necropolitics of Hunger**

Okri joins a rich literary tradition by critiquing the nationalist politics which accompanied Independence in Nigeria. In *The Famished Road*, Nigerian colonial and nationalist politics alike are part of a recurring cycle of violent subjugation of the poor around the world. Throughout the novel, thugs representing the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor canvass Azaro's neighborhood, quickly resorting to violence when bribery and empty promises fail to arouse support. Although purportedly rivals, the two parties make "identical claims" (390). The difference between the parties may be superficial, but Dad's early support of the Party of the Poor still leads to retaliation from the family's landlord and creditors. Okri's characters rarely interact with the Nigerian domestic elite; rather, they exert their power through intermediaries who are financially invested in the exploitation of the underclass, such as so-called "thugs," landlords, and foremen. In an expression of biopolitical sovereignty, these capitalists also leverage the family's material dependency to suppress Dad's political activity. In the absence of any guarantee of shelter or physical security, Dad's imposing body and the family's meager food stores are all that stand between them and death. This scarcity makes access to food a matter of life and death and, by extension, a threat to one's food a threat to one's life. As Frantz Fanon notes, under a colonial regime, producing even a small amount of food is "a victory celebrating a

triumph over life” and, therefore, stealing food is attempted murder (232). Jonathan Highfield notes that Mum’s and Dad’s very different responses to scarcity “emerge from the same economic system that displaces local control over food and other material necessities in favor of the removal of resources from the local area to benefit a distant elite” (150). Aside from underscoring the poor’s status as bare life (a condition wherein the state, not the subject, exercises complete sovereignty over both living and dying), the novel’s repeated references to hunger and food scarcity form a particularly literal entry point into what I call Okri’s politics of hunger.<sup>7</sup>

Hunger and poison are figurative mechanisms through which Okri expresses the political themes of his novel. As I argued in the previous section, the rats demonstrate the generative potential of diegetic ecopolitical readings as means of presenting a spectrum of political perspectives. In this section, however, I argue that a critical ecopolitical reading of the rats makes it possible to consolidate these different perspectives into a coherent political theory. Although Okri sometimes uses “hunger” and words such as “privation,” “suffering,” and “wretchedness” interchangeably, “hunger” usually implies the possibility of response to a perceived lack. In terms of aesthetics, hunger is a concept which links registers of expression. It is always both literal (as in hunger for food) and figurative (as in hunger for beauty, justice, or power). As an internal drive which can only be satisfied by changes in material conditions, it refers at once to exteriorities and to internal motivations. In terms of politics, hunger is the mechanism which

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7. According to Giorgio Agamben, bare life refers to life as a biological phenomenon. To Agamben, the conflation of biological and political life is the “the decisive event of modernity” (*Homo Sacer* 4). In other words, in the modern era, sovereign power is no longer limited to governing how its subjects live. Rather, it governs life itself. This reigning form of politics in which biological and political life merge is what Michel Foucault called “biopolitics.” Someone or something reduced to bare life has no political power beyond its ability to materially affect the world.



enables political action by the dispossessed in response to harm. It is similarly multivalent: it drives both capitalistic exploitation and resistance to this exploitation.

This concept of politically and aesthetically enabling “hunger” thus risks signifying too much and thereby becoming diffuse or simply obscure. Douglas McCabe, for instance, argues that Okri’s hunger is not as multivalent as it seems: although references to hunger and eating “are clearly meant to iconize the hard-edged material suffering and deprivation we encounter throughout Azaro’s ghetto,” they often truly “represent the spiritual potential hidden within the mundane world” (15). Taking the rats as a locus of analysis allows for a converse reading which yokes the more abstract dimensions of the politics of hunger to realist concerns, allowing for this political-aesthetic theory to be elaborated in concrete terms. Specifically, reading the rats’ and humans’ poisoning narratives in parallel reveals the necropolitical dimensions of the politics of hunger and demonstrates how the rats ground Okri’s political theory.

Okri’s politics of hunger is distinct from the related “politics of the belly” (*politique du ventre*), a Cameroonian expression adapted by French political scientist Jean-François Bayart in *The State in Africa*. In Bayart’s formulation, the politics of the belly refers to a post-Independence form of governmentality common throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Important elements include the accumulation of wealth and social influence, the entanglement of the public and private spheres, and the symbolic power of eating in African politics. Practically speaking, it often involves leveraging one’s status or position for personal gain. Like the politics of hunger, the politics of the belly is a mechanism through which both the elite and the disenfranchised can achieve power over the material conditions of their lives. Corruption, bribery, and nepotism, Bayart argues, are often necessary to avoid deprivation and even death. The politics of the belly,

in short, involves using one's social networks to fill one's belly, both literally and figuratively.<sup>8</sup> Although Okri's politics of hunger do not directly contradict Bayart's politics of the belly, Okri's poor characters are essentially cut off from the social networks Bayart describes.<sup>9</sup> They have no social leverage or institutional access to exploit. Their hunger is not sated through participation in informal, illicit transactions; it is rarely sated at all. The networks of obligation, coercion, and support which Okri's poor characters participate in are severely curtailed. It is scarcely possible for them to leverage their meager wealth into power without the aid of the supernatural.

Poison is a particular threat to those who are starving, and its presence in the novel a reminder of the literal and material facets of the novel's representation of hunger. In terms of plot, food-borne poison puts a sharper edge on the deprivation faced by humans and rats, dramatizing the exploitation of the poor through discrete events rather than gradual processes. A shared vulnerability to poison is also one of the strongest connections between humans and rats in the novel. This connection serves two purposes: first, it reveals the interspecies dimensions of Okri's politics of hunger. Second, it allows Okri to elaborate the necropolitical dimensions of these politics without occasioning the death of a human character. These two points reconcile a potential contradiction between the politics and aesthetics of hunger: if hunger never leads to character death, what is the "harm" in response to which political action might occur? One

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8. Alongside this figuration, Bayart offers the image of the African state as a "rhizome state" which is deeply interconnected underground and sends up shoots everywhere. Okri replaces the "rhizome state" and its botanical metaphor with a metaphor of two roads. The hungry road stands for human avarice (i.e. hunger without need), the most acute manifestation of which is global capitalism. The open road stands for human hope and connection (i.e. hunger for beauty and other timeless ideals), which manifests as universalist politics. Following Mathuray's reading of these roads, the networks which Okri's characters are able to tap into are bifurcated: the rich and upwardly-mobile walk a "historical" hungry road "fed by blood and violence" while the poor can potentially harness their hunger to inaugurate the "mythico-universal" open road "of knowledge and wisdom [which] looks outward to universal justice" (*On the Sacred* 135).

9. A more productive point of engagement between the politics of hunger and the belly might be the character Madame Koto, a business owner whose body swells in a grotesque mimicry of pregnancy as her wealth and social standing increase.

answer, I argue, is that the harm which might otherwise befall humans is figuratively displaced onto the rats.

The poor in *The Famished Road* are subject to a biopolitical power structure which seeks to instrumentalize them totally, rendering them into rent payments, cashed debts, unskilled labor, and votes which legitimate the state's sovereignty. As long as the poor remain metaphorically as well as literally hungry, however, they retain a vestige of power over their circumstances. This is why threats to food, such as poisoning or voracious rats, take on a strong political valence in the novel, as well as why Dad's attempts to transmute the hunger of the poor into political action provoke such violent responses from proxies of the state. Since *The Famished Road* characterizes Nigerian politics as, in part, a battle over bodies and the materials which sustain them,<sup>10</sup> one might expect the state and its proxies to exercise their sovereignty through killing. Yet there is something strange about the violent mechanisms of biopolitics in *The Famished Road*: no matter what happens to them, major characters never die.<sup>11</sup>

Mass violence against civilians would have been familiar to Okri, who lived in Lagos during the Nigerian Civil War, which was preceded by ethnic pogroms and involved a blockade by the Nigerian military which killed millions of civilians. In a 2011 article, Okri reflects that "the extraordinary impact of seeing dead bodies made me never stop asking why so much evil is

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10. On another level, it is also a battle over imagination and desire, hence the dual meaning of "hunger."

11. In an interview, Okri even stated that "this book cannot admit a death" (Wilkinson 84), presumably because the permanent removal of a central character runs counter to Okri's literary preoccupation with recurrence and infinity (Wilkinson 83). As Dad puts it, "death is too perfect" and even the dead desire "to be imperfect in order to always have something to strive towards, which is beauty" (Okri 329). The "perfect" finality of death is antithetical to a politics based on the cyclical pursuit of "beauty" and justice. In other words, death is the end of hunger and therefore forecloses the possibility of political advancement for the dispossessed—and, more cynically, the possibility of rest for the poor until justice has been achieved.

possible” (Sethi).<sup>12</sup> Given his direct exposure to politically-motivated mass killing, one might reasonably wonder why Okri chose to critique Nigerian politics through a novel which, according to him, “cannot admit a death” (Wilkinson 84). The answer, in short, is that the novel *does* depict a massacre—only it is rats, not humans, who die. I argue that the poisoning of the rats can be read as a displaced massacre which figuratively depicts the mass slaughter of the poor. In other words, reading the rats ecopolitically reveals how poisoning in *The Famished Road* is political violence to which both humans and nonhumans are vulnerable, and which therefore occasions the creation of interspecies publics. This reading is enabled by a perspective similar to that which Iheka calls for, in which the “common characteristics” of humans and nonhumans are taken into account. For example, “focusing on the vulnerabilities of death in both humans and other animals... allows for contemplating the human body in relation to other bodies easily commodified and disposable” (Iheka 23). By juxtaposing references to the rats with occasions of necropolitical violence, *The Famished Road* allows the rats and humans to be read as a public aligned against the dual threats of starvation and poisoning which Okri posits are the result of capitalistic greed. The telos of the rats can thus be read as a heightened narrative parallel to the novel’s impoverished humans: although their outcomes differ, both humans and rats face violent death as a quotidian dimension of existence.

The mass poisoning of the compound by the Party of the Rich foreshadows and is reconfigured by the later extermination of the rats by poison. Azaro’s first taste of nationalist party politics, which he simply calls “politics,” comes when “The Party of the Rich” drive a van into his neighborhood, making grand promises and handing out powdered milk. When a

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12. This blockade recalls Mbembe’s reading of the “state of siege” and “infrastructural warfare” as necropolitical techniques which enact indiscriminate, even unwitnessed, mass killing against broad categories of civilians (“Necropolitics” 29-30).

politician with a megaphone calls his party “FRIENDS OF THE POOR,” someone in the crowd replies that “the poor have no friends” and another concludes “only rats” (123). These anonymous rebuttals inaugurate a mocking call and response in which the crowd subverts each promise. For instance, when the politician promises to “FEED YOUR CHILDREN,” the crowd appends “lies” (123). The visual contrast between the politician’s words, which are rendered in capital letters, and the sentence-case responses of the crowd represents the power difference between the speakers. However, rather than responding to the politician’s bold proclamations in kind, the crowd twists the statements into mockeries of their original intent. Although their intent is to mock, the crowd’s sentence-case responses to the politician’s shouted lies are exaggerations of what the novel elsewhere suggests are truths. In this context, and considering Dad’s earlier claim that the rats “can be our friends” (71), the anonymous citizen’s claim that “only rats” are the friends of the poor can be taken nearly at face value (123). Although the rats never become friendly figures, a hard ecopolitical reading of this scene reveals a connection between the political lives of the dispossessed and rats which is reinforced by their shared susceptibility to necropolitical violence.<sup>13</sup>

Specifically, the rats and the poor share a vulnerability to politically driven poisoning. The Party of the Rich cement their sincerity by passing out free powdered milk. The rally dissolves into violent confusion. The crowd scrambles for the free milk until “blood mixed with milk on the earth” and the politicians, who underestimated the hunger of the crowd, make their

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13. The crowd falls silent, however, once the politician promises that “WE WILL MAKE YOU RICH LIKE US. THERE IS PLENTY FOR EVERYBODY. PLENTY OF FOOD. PLENTY OF POWER. VOTE FOR UNITY AND POWER!” (123). These claims are particularly compelling to the crowd because they pledge a change to the status quo: a wholesale shift from a politics of hunger to a politics of plenty through the universal acquisition of power. Rather than depending on the supposed friendship of the rich, which is less dependable than the friendship of rats, the poor would become rich themselves

escape by tossing coins behind the van as they drive off (125).<sup>14</sup> Azaro refers to the day as “that Saturday when politics made its first public appearance in our lives” (127). The first “public appearance” of politics is thus characterized by the exploitation of the hunger of the poor contrasted by half-joking identification with rats and, as soon becomes clear, poisoning. The next day brings Azaro and his community “the secret faces of politics” when everyone falls sick from what is characterized as poison or “a plague” (128, 131). The relationship between politics and poison enters the vernacular when the neighborhood residents dub that day “The Day of the Politicians’ Milk.” Although no one dies and the poisoning is presumably accidental, Azaro’s account of that day reveals “the secret faces of politics” to be the violent exploitation of hunger, that is, the exploitation of the poor’s attempts to resist the instrumentalization of their lives. This poisoning introduces politics into Azaro and his community’s lives by showing that they could be killed with impunity. The community faces similar threats as their rodent “friends.” Indeed, Azaro and his family are occasionally called rats by those more proximate to power. As Mbembe notes, glossing Fanon, “sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (“Necropolitics” 27). The poisoning is an expression of the disposability of the poor and their inability to choose life over death<sup>15</sup>; that is, their lack of sovereignty under a regime which wields the massacre as a political tool, even if it is never deployed against humans.

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14. As Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “The colonized subject is so starved of anything that humanizes him, even if it is third rate, that these trivial handouts in some cases manage to impress him. His consciousness is so vulnerable and so inscrutable that it is ignited by the slightest spark. The great indiscriminating thirst for enlightenment of the early days is threatened at every moment by a dose of mystification. The violent, unanimous demands of the revolution, which once lit up the sky, now to more modest proportions” (90).

15. Azaro has the power to choose whether to live in the material world or the spirit world. He cannot opt out of death, however; he would die many more times by choosing an *abiku* life over a mortal one. By choosing to stay in the material world, he chooses to face death the same way as his mortal peers.

The end of the chapter juxtaposes this revelation about the violence of the Nigerian political parties with a reference to the rats, implicitly establishing a connection between the two. After the family “went to sleep in fine spirits, bonded by prayer” and the parents have sex, “a voice, out of the darkness,” speaks aloud: “I wonder if the rats are awake” (132). Dad’s abiding interest in the rats makes him the most likely speaker. But why this statement, and why now? Coming as it does at the end of a chapter about the poisoning of Azaro’s community, it foreshadows the eventual extermination of the rats by poisoning and sets up the metaphorical link between the poor and their “friends,” the rats, which later allows the death of the rats to serve as a figuratively displaced massacre of the poor. It is also a moment in which Dad, apparently in an expansive and generous state of mind, casts his thoughts toward the silent and unseen rats. This statement again invites an ecopolitical reading by implying that the rats are part of the family’s political and intimate lives which, under a biopolitical regime, are often collapsed together. Dad’s statement expresses curiosity but does not require an answer: it interrogates poisoning and hunger as mechanisms which establish synchronicity between the lives of humans and rats, a pattern which is further developed elsewhere in the novel.

The community’s hunger, like that of the rats, makes them uniquely vulnerable to poison. When Mum falls sick early in the novel, she accuses Dad’s creditors of poisoning her (58). Later, Mum fears being poisoned by the other market women, who shun her because of her husband’s politics, and “Dad was convinced that an enemy was trying to poison us” after tiny animals appear in their home during the rainy season (311). One scene stands out. When Jeremiah visits in the night, Azaro tells him that “some people” had knocked down their door and poured water on Mum’s cooking fire. According to Azaro, Mum suspects that these people might poison them. Presumably, this is because of Dad’s support for the Party of the Poor, which the supporters of

the Party of the Rich take as an affront. As Azaro explains to the photographer that this means they have no food to offer, “the rats began to eat” and “Mum chewed her mouth” in her sleep (231). Mum’s unconscious mimicry of the rats reinforces their shared hunger and vulnerability to poison. The family’s food stores are their lifeline; when something comes between them and their food, whether hungry rats, angry strangers, or the vague threat of poisonous retaliation, it is a threat to their lives. Thus, Mum dreams of eating freely like the rats, drawing an implicit connection between their desires. Yet Mum’s fear of poisoning does come true in a sense (and the connection between rats and humans is reinforced) when the photographer chooses this night to make good on his promise to poison the rats.

When the family wakes, they are greeted by the sight of a rat massacre. While the living rats were an invisible, mostly benign presence, the dead rats are suddenly, grotesquely visible and more threatening than ever, filling the room with their bodies: “all around the mat, under the centre table, by the door, on top of the cupboard, near the bed, were the bristling corpses of rats” (235). Azaro compares this scene to Calvary, the site of Jesus’ crucifixion. The Biblical allusion relates to Dad’s later warning, delivered with admiration, that “if we are not careful [rats] will inherit the earth” (441). This metaphor invites a direct comparison between the rats and the Biblical account of Jesus, whose degrading death at Calvary precipitated a triumphant return. The rats’ return, however, carries the sinister prospect of revenge, which Azaro locates in the “solemn vacant threat of vengeance” gleaming in the dead rats’ eyes (235). This Christ metaphor also suggests that the rats have died in place of someone else. If the rats stand for capitalists, then Jeremiah kills the postcolonial elite in effigy.

However, the novel more consistently associates the rats with the poor. Jeremiah, at other times a kind of folk hero, uses poison to exterminate these “friends” of the poor. Although he,



perhaps rightly, feels that he has done the family a favor by eliminating a threat, the lurid and wholesale killing of the rats is a redux of the “Day of the Politicians’ Milk” in which necropower is fully expressed through the mechanism of the massacre. The rats have died in place of the human poor. As Mbembe writes, “in Africa after colonization, is possible to delegate one’s death while simultaneously and already experiencing death at the very heart of one’s existence” (*On the Postcolony* 201). Drawing on Heidegger’s concept of the *Dasein*, Mbembe argues that, in the postcolony, one can “delegate one’s death to another” (202), a process which draws one close with that other even as they are offered up in one’s place. This is perhaps what the photographer has done by killing the rats with the same weapons with which the state threatens his community. This bargaining with state-sponsored death serves primarily as a reminder of the ubiquity of death in the lives of Okri’s characters, including nonhumans. Once again, a sensitive reading of the rats directs attention toward realist concerns.

By displacing necropolitical violence onto rats, *The Famished Road* makes the process of dehumanization which facilitates violence against humans disturbingly literal. The rhetorical, and then epistemological, transformation of certain groups of humans into vermin is a familiar step in a process of dehumanization which culminates in indiscriminate killing.<sup>16</sup> Before the Nigerian Civil War, for instance, massacres of Igbos in northern Nigeria were accompanied by rhetoric comparing these groups to snakes, dogs, and other maligned animals.<sup>17</sup> Similar rhetoric also appears in the novel. Car drivers, who are necessarily proximate to wealth, often shout at

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16. For an accessible attempt to schematize and explain dehumanization, see philosopher David Livingstone Smith’s book *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (2011). Note, however, that Smith does not seriously engage with the implications of his argument for the treatment of nonhumans.

17. For a firsthand account of this rhetoric, see “The Price of Nigerian Victory” by ethnomusicologist Charles Keil.

Azaro, calling him a rat, and a rich man bets against Azaro's father in a boxing match, dubbing him "Black Rat" instead of "Black Tyger" (471). Although these comments are meant more as insults and boasts than dehumanizing ontological claims, they contain the seeds of the kind of the rhetoric which reduces groups of people to threatening shapes devoid of full humanity. The violent fate of the rats suggests that this kind of rhetoric has material consequences and warns of the dangers of simplistic equation of animal and humans while still making the case for human-animal connection.<sup>18</sup>

This scene also recalls others in which the poor residents of the neighborhood riot, their hidden frustration and power revealed through the photographer's lens. The rats have previously been invisible. By killing them, Jeremiah ironically emphasizes the ways that their lives have intertwined with those of Azaro's family. The rats die in Azaro's sleeping mat with him, cover the family's table, and fill Dad's boots. As Azaro puts it later, "the number of rats who had died there was frightening. It was impossible to imagine that we had been sharing our lives with so many rats" (236). Iheka writes, "in forcing us to imagine sharing lives with rats, Okri's novel challenges the anthropocentric conception of the inhabitants of homes; we are urged to see the so-called human spaces as sites for realizing that humans are always commingled with nonhumans" (34). If a political act is one which fundamentally changes what people can see,

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18. Although there are situations where killing animals makes practical and even ethical sense, the low importance attached to the lives of animals is not only a problem when it facilitates dehumanization and violence against humans. *The Famished Road* often suggests that the lives of animals have value and are, at the very least, not to be taken from them without reason. In *The Lives of Animals* (1999), J. M. Coetzee's fictional proxy Elizabeth Costello rejects Saint Thomas Aquinas' argument that "how we treat animals is of no importance except insofar as being cruel to animals may accustom us to being cruel to men," instead calling for sympathy toward animals (29). One of Costello's equally fictional interlocutors rebuts Costello's stance by implying that the animal-rights movement is colonialist in its pretenses of "access to an ethical universal to which other traditions are blind" (60). Both perspectives have, no doubt, made their way into *The Famished Road*. If nothing else, it is worth considering the ways that respect for animal lives also exists outside of, and predates, the modern framework of "animal rights" and its corollary movements such as veganism and vegetarianism. Costello concedes as much.

reading the rats ecopolitically reveals Jeremiah's poisoning of the rats to be as political as his publication of photos of the neighborhood's riot.<sup>19</sup>

### **Talking to One Another**

If existing rhetoric around human-animal connections can often lead to dehumanizing comparisons and attempts to interpret the signs of animals can be deceptive, is communication with animals possible? *The Famished Road* suggests that existing forms of language and literature cannot recover human-animal connections which were degraded by colonization and Western modernity, but that new forms are both necessary and possible. Similarly, Bennett writes that we must "need not only invent or reinvoke" concepts to discuss the political contributions of nonhumans, but must also

devise new procedures, technologies, and regimes of perception that enable us to consult nonhumans more closely, or to listen and respond more carefully to their outbreaks, objections, testimonies, and propositions. For these offerings are profoundly important to the health of the political ecologies to which *we* belong. (108)

The inability of humans and animals to communicate with each other, and the desperate need for this kind of communication, are intertwined themes of the novel.

This is made explicit in an extended passage wherein Azaro and a captured duiker (a kind of antelope) stare into each other's eyes. Azaro "felt [him]self being drawn into its consciousness" where he sees "the forms of serene ancestors... for whom the stars were both words and gods, for whom the world and the sky and the earth were a vast language of dreams and omens" (456). Azaro's vision shows him the progression from these "ancestors" through the arrival of Europeans from the Atlantic to the current day. Throughout this passage, the progress of time brings with it the loss of many connections between humans, animals, and the world. The

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19. Mathuray argues that "the spontaneous rebellions of the subaltern" through rioting are "the only form of political intervention available to them" in the novel ("After Postmodernism" 1111).

arrival of white invaders bearing “strange texts” led to the destruction of “great shrines” and “mighty trees” which once housed “sacred texts” and ultimately ushered in a “new age” in which “the freedom of space and friendship with the pied kingfisher and other birds became more limited” (457). Azaro’s vision concludes with two opposing statements: “When human beings and animals understood one another, we were all free. But now the hunters pursued me in the duiker’s eyes” (457). Azaro contrasts “hunters with new instruments of death” against the “creators” humans once were (456-7). By allowing Azaro to imaginatively adopt the duiker’s vulnerability to human hunters, Okri again implies that poor humans and animals now share the same sources of harm, where once they shared a mutual understanding of the “vast language” of the world (456). This passage further implies that the “strange texts” brought by Europeans and the “new instruments of death” are related. This recalls Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s analysis of the linguistic dimensions of colonization in Africa. He writes that “the bullet was the means of the physical subjugation” while “language was the means of the spiritual subjugation” (9). That the duiker’s eyes still “spoke a language of mood and blood” to Azaro suggests that the linguistic understanding between humans and animals, which was eroded by colonization, is not totally lost (459).<sup>20</sup> These languages and texts are depicted as simultaneously literal and figurative, linguistic and epistemological. The conclusion that Azaro draws from his moment of unspoken communication with the duiker is that the animal is “gazing at me as if my freedom lay in freeing it from imminent death, from being sacrificed” to inaugurate Madame Koto’s political

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20. With Thiong’o’s words in mind, one might aver that *The Famished Road* employs English, a (human) language often associated with colonization, to call for a pre-colonial linguistic connection with animals. Addressing a similar objection to using “narrative strategies” and “so-called ‘human languages’ for critiquing environmental challenges and staging sustainable lifeworlds,” Iheka invokes the famous debate on the proper language for African literature at Makerere University in the 1960s. Implying his agreement with Chinua Achebe’s argument for the value of “domesticating” English as a pan-African language, Iheka concludes that “the tool’s origin and history matter less than the strategic work being accomplished with it” (14). I am inclined to agree with Iheka. *The Famished Road* uses English to express the challenge and necessity of new forms of connection; it does not necessarily posit that English is the solution.

ascendance (458). Iheka, writing about a different passage in which Azaro encounters forest animals, notes that “there is an inkling of a form of interaction devoid of hierarchy and the ecological violence often associated with it” in this kind of physical and gaze interaction (33). This passage sets up a contrast between freedom and death, shared languages and hunting, for both humans and animals. Both share a vulnerability to political harm, but also the potential for shared responses to such harm. Such a response to mutual harm constitutes political action. The potential for this kind of interspecies political action, although it is not actualized in the narrative, is an important subtext of the novel, which is revealed primarily through a sustained ecopolitical reading of the rats which, unlike the duiker and almost every other animal, are closely associated with realist concerns.

The novel suggests that literature can help reveal lost modes of linguistic connection which once created freedom and harmony between humans and animals. The passage about the duiker demonstrates this on the thematic level; elsewhere, Okri’s rats suggest on a formal level that paying attention to the overlooked signs produced by animals can reveal emancipatory political potentialities even when those signs cannot be fully understood. For instance, the passage in which Azaro hears the rats say that “the world is tougher than fire or steel” can be interpreted to suggest that Azaro has not heard the rats “speak” but rather came to understand the signs they were already producing; that is, the sound of their chewing (71). This interpretation is supported by the form of the passage, which eschews quoting the rats in favor of Azaro’s paraphrase. Azaro’s status as a spiritual being doubtless contributes to his ability to interpret the rats; however, the novel asserts a sharp distinction between the resolutely non-otherworldly rats and most other animals, which are usually potential spirits in disguise. Accordingly, this scene differs from scenes in which Azaro speaks with magical animals. For instance, Azaro first

realizes that “sometimes [he] could understand the language of animals” after speaking to a cat. However, this is no mundane cat: Azaro soon wakes from his “enchantment” (14). In this novel, the rats do not literally speak or otherwise offer up their knowledge quite so readily. Rather, the signs they produce are juxtaposed with human speech and behavior to imply connections. I already discussed a passage in which “the rats began to eat” while “Mum chewed her mouth” in her sleep (231). At another point, the rats and the family’s landlord chew at the same time (90). These juxtapositions are points of shallow connection which mark the absence of the “understanding” once shared by humans and animals. Conversely, they also suggest that certain overlooked interpretive modes, such as hard reading, can still recover a modicum of the communicative potential of animal bodies themselves.

Even the absence of the rats is perceived to have meaning. After Dad tells a horrifying fable about a hungry road, Azaro cannot sleep “till I noticed for the first time the silence of the room, the absence of the rats” (261). The absence of the rats is palpable because the sound of their chewing registered their presence as a feature of existence. Azaro believes that “Dad must have noticed the same thing” because he tells Azaro to feed some dead rats to the road (261). The rats also have a strange afterlife in which their bodies continue to exist as interpretable signs after they die. For example, Azaro still considers them a threat. He asks the photographer for more poison in case they “come back to wage war on us” (263). Their bodies also persist materially. Mum dumps their corpses in the back of the politicians’ van which the community burned in their uprising against the Party of the Rich. Someone sets fire to the van again, echoing that night of the community’s victory over political corruption. The “street stank of smouldering rubber and burning rats” for two chapters before wind blows the smell away in the third (271). The nature of the association is ambiguous (are the rats political rivals who have been defeated

or simply victims of political violence?) but the connection between rats and politics is once again made clear.

The persistence of the rat bodies as signs which demand attention also suggests that it is possible to resist the erasures of necropolitical violence. Mbembe writes that the skeletons left over from a massacre are reduced to “simple relics of an unburied pain, empty, meaningless corporealities, strange deposits plunged into cruel stupor... In these impassive bits of bone, there seems to be no *ataraxia*: nothing but the illusory rejection of a death that has already occurred” (“Necropolitics” 35). The dead rats’ rejection of their deaths, in contrast, does not seem entirely “illusory.” No impassive (or passive) bits of bone, their bodies burn and stink, filling the lungs of their killers. From their death in a scene compared to Calvary to Dad and Azaro’s oblique prophecies of their return, the rats suggest a different kind of *abiku* rebirth in which more rats arrive with renewed hunger. A hard reading of the rats treats each as essentially fungible; rather than rendering their corpses as “empty, meaningless corporealities,” this interchangeability suggests the possibility that struggles might continue despite suppressive violence.

The gazes of animals are particularly intense sites of ecopolitical reading. After his mystic journeys in the final book, Dad seems finally to situate himself in multispecies ecology predicated on the possibility of communicating with nonhumans:

The earth is in us. The trees of the forest, the animals of the bushes, tortoises, birds, and flowers know our future... We need a new language to talk to one another. Inside of a cat there are many histories, many books. When you look into the eyes of dogs strange fishes swim in your mind. (498)

In the context of the rest of the novel, the idea that there are books “inside of a cat” is at least partially literal in the sense that reading animals ecopolitically can involve interpreting embodied signs. The specific reference to “books” (as opposed to, say, stories) is a reminder of the material dimensions of communication. Similarly, the ability of animals’ eyes to communicate complex,

but often opaque, messages recurs throughout the novel, from this passage to Azaro's vision in the duiker's eyes to the "solemn vacant threat of vengeance" in the dead rats' eyes (235). We must be wary, however, of placing too much trust in our understanding of what animals have to say. Dad proclaims that "we need a new language," implying that it is not yet possible to achieve true interspecies communication. Similarly, the "many histories, many books" contained within a cat are as-yet-uninterpretable. The "strange fishes" are not messages but rather describe the sensation of becoming aware of unglossed animal signs. There remains, however, tension between Dad's desire to "talk to" nonhumans and his characterization of them as hiding important secrets about humanity. Here, as elsewhere, he seems more interested in extracting anthropocentric truths from animals, or perhaps issuing commands, than with creating mutual lines of communication; shortly thereafter, he tells Azaro, "If you want the lizard out command it to go and it will go" before demonstrating his "powers" to do so (499). In Dad's conception, nonhumans are to be "treated with respect" and even emulated, but the natural hierarchy of humans over animals means that humans must be cautious to "not become tyrants" (499). Dad's paternalistic anthropocentrism is a reminder that communication is not inherently egalitarian and can even be exploitative. Dad has become aware of, in Iheka's terms, the inescapable "proximity" of animals and the need to act responsibly toward them, but has not fully abandoned the hierarchical structures of thought and communication which entrench the human as the latent tyrant and the animal as the perennial subject of tyranny. This recalls, too, the contrast between Dad's musings that rats might "inherit the earth" and his macabre glee at delivering the *coups de grâce* after Jeremiah poisons them.

Dad's political perspective by the end of the novel is that humans and nonhumans can come together to understand and change the future. On one level, this sounds suspiciously like a



New Age maxim and, as I have suggested, there is good reason to believe that this arrangement would be far from egalitarian.<sup>21</sup> Yet Dad's universalist awakening also seems like the answer to a question that he has been asking throughout the novel: how can the poor transform their hunger into power? The answer seems to be to reach outward to others who seek the same. Dad's uncommon curiosity about the rats anticipates this conclusion, and a sensitive reading for the rats allows one to understand that Dad's vision involves the creation of not just international but interspecies publics.

Now that Dad has achieved a transcendent understanding of the world and his place in it, how can that translate into sociopolitical change? Mum's response to Dad returning from his journeys seems to downplay this possibility through a gentle reminder of what he missed:

“My husband,” she said, “we have been worried about you. For three nights we have wrestled to bring your spirit back. We have been hungry and full of fear. Get some more sleep now. In the morning resume work. Resume your struggles. Be what you are. We are happy that you are well again.” (500)

On one hand, Mum's kind admonishment is a reminder that “the centre of gravity of the text remains its realist discourse with its concomitant concerns” (*On the Sacred* 129); that is, that Dad's fantastical flights are in many ways beside the point. On the other hand, Mum's command to “resume work. Resume your struggles. Be what you are” sounds like a command to be like the rats, who Dad has noted “work very hard” and “understand their destiny” (441, 498). Mum, it seems, has not overlooked the political significance of the rats after all. For all of Dad's curiosity how the rats can inform political action, he fails to consider whether the woman next to him might also have something to say. The issue here, as with many representations of animals in

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21. Perhaps it is literally a New Age maxim. Douglas McCabe argues that “Okri's abiku novel clearly draws inspiration from a New Age spiritual source” (17), though I should note that other critics have contested McCabe's dismissive interpretation, notably Esther de Bruijn in “Coming to Terms with New Ageist Contamination: Cosmopolitanism in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*,”

literature, is a simple lack of attention stemming from the complex operation of overlapping systems of oppression.

Mum and the rats' similar messages about the need to "work very hard" and "be what you are" reads simultaneously as the politicization of the everyday life of the poor and skepticism about the political value of the imagination.<sup>22</sup> Dad's problem is not only that he fails to "see the others" (493). He also lacks patience: "He wanted justice now. He wanted truth now. He wanted world balance now" (494). Eventually, he learns the serenity to ask a simpler question: "WHAT IS THE FIRST STEP?" (494). The answer is for Dad to "resume work" (500). The last line of the novel recasts Okri's lofty aesthetic pursuit of justice and beauty as potentially fruitless, like Mum and Dad's endless labor. If "a dream can be the highest point of a life," what is the point of political struggle and material suffering (500)? Maybe all the rats have to say is that this question is not worth asking; that relentless pursuit of a better world needs no justification.

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22. One might hear in this rhetoric the dismaying echo of "*arbeit macht frei*," especially in the context of a chapter about the extermination of putative vermin. However, I believe that Mum's phrasing grants Dad agency over his life by granting him possession of "his" struggles. She suggests that he can "become who" he really is by pursuing his personal struggles. Dad's work is freighted with the possibility of actual emancipation or at least fulfillment, unlike the cruel, disingenuous promise which still adorns the gates of Auschwitz.

### Chapter 3. Wildings, Ferals, and Bigfeet: Urban Spaces and Stray Taxonomies in Nilanjana Roy's Wilding Novels

#### Introduction: Cats in the Big City

Midway through the Indian author Nilanjana Roy's novel *The Wildings* (2012), a cat with years of experience living on the streets of Delhi has a conversation with a kitten who lives with a doting human family. The older cat is "puzzled" to hear that the kitten has no desire to hunt. She thinks, "Most cats wanted to know the how of killing, not the why; and the how was complicated enough. The world was divided into predators, prey and Bigfeet [humans], and what made it hard was that all three could change places at any time." When the kitten tells her that a moth had pleaded with her for its life, the older cat retorts that "the point of being a predator is that you're not supposed to listen" to prey (*Wildings* 177). These ideas attributed to the older cat contradict each other: the first represents the categories of predator and prey as shifting and contingent, while the second suggests that the relations between predator and prey are fixed and innate. This contradiction runs through *The Wildings* and its sequel *The Hundred Names of Darkness* (2013) like a hairline fracture. As I have argued elsewhere, teasing out subtle discrepancies in fictional representations of nonhumans can reveal how human-animal relationships are mediated through literature. Unlike the other texts I analyze in this dissertation, these novels are explicitly ecocentric and implicitly anthropocentric. The overt fictionality of its animal characters belies a quietly subversive message in support of practices of interspecies interaction and against practices which produce exclusionary urban spaces. Unlike the nonhuman presence in *The Famished Road* and *Swamplandia!*, these tiny paper tigers do not unlock new ways of understanding nonhuman agency; rather, these animals' novel taxonomic practices demonstrate how even thoroughly instrumentalized animals can play a part in imagining more equitable potentialities for all species.

In these novels, which I will refer to as the wilding novels, most of the characters are stray cats from the Nizamuddin neighborhood of Delhi who spend their days and nights dodging dogs and humans while stalking their prey across rooftops and down alleys. These titular “wildings” are heroic, charismatic, and principled, and their animal neighbors, from songbirds to tigers at the zoo to birds of prey, are depicted as valuable members of a complex social and environmental order. In each novel, attempts by social outsiders to disrupt this order drive the plot. The lives of these animal characters in a fictional version of contemporary Delhi highlight the nonhuman life on the margins of the real megacity. By depicting the animal protagonists as sympathetic subjects whose livelihoods depend on the specific geography of Delhi, the novels suggest that contemporary pressures to exclude certain categories of life from parts of the city are unethical and unsustainable. By inhabiting animal perspectives, these novels represent official responses to street animals as misguided, chaotic actions which reflect a misunderstanding of the social and environmental order which allows various species to live together in Delhi. For instance, the first novel characterizes a dog extermination campaign as an event terrorizing the animal community: “the stench of fear that rose from the [dogcatcher] van was awful for the other animals to feel, as they watched their old friends from the park being driven away” (*Wildings* 291). This scene, like many aspects of Roy’s novels, filters a real exclusionary practice through an imagined animal perspective. In India’s cities, stray dogs are commonly killed or illegally relocated by residents who fear they may carry rabies (Kurian and Ram), and official campaigns have been organized to remove or cull dogs, cows, and monkeys (Baviskar 400)<sup>1</sup>. Reading in the context of such actions, the wilding novels reveal these

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1. Cows now enjoy greater protections under Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government. Killing a cow is a serious crime in many states (Bedi).

exclusionary acts to be part of a continuum of homogenizing practices that stem from an inability to organize the world in a manner which accounts for difference.

Roy's novels suggest that quotidian, close-quarters interspecies conflict over the hardscape of the city is preferable to the homogenizing pressures that arise when interspecies life and livelihood become devalued. The novels encode this conflict through language which is depicted as zoogenic and embodied yet reveals itself to be anthropogenic and literary. In these novels, animals can communicate with their own species by "linking," a magical means of transmitting messages across long distances, while interspecies communication takes place through an oral pidgin called "Junglee."<sup>2</sup> Roy's Delhi is suffused with animal communications analogous to radio waves, with whiskers serving as antennae. The primary protagonist Mara's exceptionally powerful linking abilities make her a rare "Sender." The texts thus depict the animal characters as having superhuman linguistic ability, specifically the ability to communicate with interspecies others whose subjectivities are distinct from their own, although they cannot understand or communicate with humans. However, the novels are written in English and replete with literary allusions and wordplay, particularly in the names of animals, which, as Salman Rushdie's cover blurb of *The Wildings* alludes, evoke T.S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. This overt literariness invites metafictional awareness on the part of the reader. The contradiction between the narrative, which presupposes a world of linguistically gifted animal subjects, and the markedly anthropogenic language with which the texts depict this world draws attention to the novels' representations of language use and production. Thus, the novels make apparent the unidentified interlocutor (the author or narrator) who grants the animals their ability to articulate their zoocentric worlds in a language intelligible

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2. *Jungli* means "wild" in Hindi, as in "wild animal."

to other humans. Few readers would imagine, then, that these novels access the “real” animal; putting aside this idea allows the novels’ representations of animal sociality to be read as aspirational or figurative rather than verisimilar.

Like some other contemporary animal fictions, the wilding novels use language to reflect the sense that animals organize their worlds along different lines than humans. Fields such as biology and biosemiotics have convincingly demonstrated, to use Cary Wolfe’s phrasing, that the capacity for language is one of many “traditionally distinctive marks of the human... [which] flourish quite reliably beyond the species barrier” (2). In many animal fictions, however, any linguistic innovation produces a very human version of how animals might see the world rather than reproducing a verisimilar or even convincing facsimile of animal subjectivity. Some amount of anthropomorphism is inescapable in an anthropogenic cultural form. Cautious anthropomorphism can be a tool for revealing, or at least imagining, connections between the animal and the human. As Jane Bennett writes, “in revealing similarities across categorical divides and lighting up structural parallels between materials forms in ‘nature’ and those in ‘culture,’ anthropomorphism can reveal isomorphisms” (99). When Roy’s cats use the invented term “wildings” to refer to themselves, their use of language is both anthropomorphic and part of an attempt to depict a fictional world in which the subjectivity of animals is self-evident. By attempting to imagine a beastly Delhi, the wilding novels reveal the interspecies dimensions of the real city, much as, in Roy’s recounting, her attempts to imagine the “secret life of cats” led her from reading “everything I could find on cats and feline behaviour” to wandering the streets of Delhi in search of actual cats (“Mara’s Story”).

In this chapter, I argue that the wilding novels navigate questions of difference and dominance through the fictional schema animals use to organize their interspecies communities,

particularly the ways which they express social belonging through language. The effects of this use of language are ambivalent: these schemas explicitly call attention to the value of the interconnected lives of urban animals but do so by representing its animal characters as thoroughly literary inventions. This allows me to pose a question which speaks to the broader goals of this dissertation: can “ventriloquizing” animals, to use Phillip Armstrong’s phrasing, still model equitable interspecies interaction (417)?

I arrive at an equivocal “yes” by doing the following. First, I argue that the novels represent stray animals’ quotidian practices as a principled deviation from the intended uses of the urban spaces they inhabit, thus bringing Roy’s novels into conversation with the legacies of animal tales in which hierarchical codes direct the behavior of animals who are, in this sense, understood to be analogous to humans. Second, these categories and the behaviors with which they are entwined valorize interspecies sociality in the face of homogenizing pressures, both material and ontological, from systems and bearers of official power, and suggests that humans also suffer from these pressures. Third, as the animal categories come to more explicitly refer to human groups through the mechanism of allegory, the vision of interspecies community begins to challenge itself. Ultimately, by giving language to novel forms of interspecies sociality in Delhi, the novels demonstrate the latent potential for rethinking these connections through literature, including thoughtful variations on the venerable animal story form, as well as the challenges posed by any such attempts to depict interspecies relations in fiction.

The interspecies world depicted in these novels is complex, and various ways of organizing it into language come into play. These approaches can be divided into three taxonomic schemas. The first is *species* in the broad, folk taxonomic sense, whether cat, dog, mynah bird, or cobra. In this case, it is primarily the connotation that differs between human and

animal usages. The second is *territory*, which applies most pointedly to the horizontal network of cat clans, which often name themselves after human landmarks, whether neighborhoods like Nizamuddin, Jangpura, or Mehrauli or historic sites like the Nizamuddin dargah (shrine) or Humayun's Tomb. The third, and most significant, are references to *social relations*, which are most likely to result in neologisms: Bigfeet (humans), wildings (a capacious term for clan-affiliated cats), "big ones" (large, mostly predatory animals) etc. These categories sometimes shift and overlap. Aside from being simply a cat, Mara, for instance, is referred to variously as an indoor cat, a wilding, a Nizamuddin cat, a predator, prey, and one of both the "big ones" and the "small creatures" of the neighborhood (*Wildings* 226, *Hundred Names* 61). I call these zoogenic systems of categorization *stray taxonomies*. This phrase is meant to evoke the relationship between schemas for organizing interspecies society and the linguistic practices through which these schemas are expressed and reified.

The novels' stray taxonomies deviate from anthropocentric norms of both social organization and linguistic expression. However, they do not capture a realistic animal-eye-view of the world. For instance, the animal's names elaborate the tension between their representation as overtly fictional animals and as autonomous linguistic agents. The names are obviously anthropogenic within the metafiction and often only make sense in English but are explicitly zoogenic in the fictional world. For instance, a mated pair of cheels<sup>3</sup> (a bird of prey) are named Tooth and Claw, a phrase most often associated with Alfred, Lord Tennyson's famous line about "nature, red in tooth and claw" (*In Memoriam* LVI). Similar wordplay and allusion characterizes

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3. In *The Wildings*, but not *The Hundred Names of Darkness*, cheels are sometimes referred to as "pariah cheels," an allusion to the subspecies' former English name "pariah kite." In response to concerns that "pariah" invokes caste-based discrimination, the name has gradually been supplanted by "small Indian kite" in scientific usage.



most of the animals' names yet is never remarked upon by the characters themselves. The word "stray" encapsulates this double meaning: a stray is an animal which ought to be subject to human mastery yet exercises a precarious kind of independence that does not preclude it from finding social structure with other strays.

Each of these stray taxonomies denotes or implies a proper ordering of the social, ecological, and spatial topography of the city as well as laying out appropriate forms of quotidian interaction. To the cats, for instance, an encroaching "stranger" can, by definition, be attacked; "prey" can, and ought to be, killed and eaten; bandicoot rats<sup>4</sup> are disgusting but suitable for hunting; and "wildings" follow a code of behavior that "ferals" disregard—again, seemingly by definition. The specific applications of these taxonomies are sometimes the subject of disagreement among characters: can Mara, for instance, be both an "inside cat" and a member of the Nizamuddin clan? The novels suggest their intrinsic value, however, by allowing only two types of creature to question them: the antagonists of both novels and Mara, whose coming of age involves leaving behind her youthful doubts about the necessity of predation. I sometimes use the term "eco-social" to highlight the ways that Roy's animals experience the social and the ecological as inextricable. However, any reference to sociality in this chapter should be understood to also invoke interspecies ecological interactions.

The series' application of novel practices of categorization shows that the homology between spatial, social, and linguistic practice elaborated by urban theorists like Michel de Certeau and postcolonial theorists like Frantz Fanon is transportable to interspecies contexts. The cats' everyday practices are fundamentally at odds with the theoretical, intended, or "proper"

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4. Bandicoot rats should not be mistaken for Australia and New Zealand's bandicoots, marsupials which were named after bandicoot rats but otherwise bear no close relation. In the rest of this chapter, I will follow the novels in referring to bandicoot rats as *bandicoots*.

uses of the urban spaces they inhabit, and the texts depict this deviation in part through stray taxonomies. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), Certeau argues that the top-down, geometrical city as envisioned by powerful institutions is distinct from the city as actually “practiced” by those who walk its streets. Certeau invokes a linguistic metaphor to summarize how quotidian practices reconfigure the planned city, writing that “a migrational, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city” (93). Roy sometimes uses similar language, her animals creating “wild places strewn among the [humans’] manicured greens” of a golf course (*Hundred Names* 298). When Certeau writes of the city as a “text” or, elsewhere, argues that walking the streets of a city is an enunciative act (97), he draws on a homology between urban geography and language. By analyzing the use of stray taxonomies in the wilding novels, I want to suggest that geographical relations between species, especially in the city, also have linguistic dimensions and vice-versa.

Caroline Herbert pulls together Certeau’s and Frantz Fanon’s theorizations of the city, writing that “it is somewhere in the complex traffic between the material violence of the disciplined Manichean city mapped by Fanon and the melancholic and utopian writings of urban life offered by Certeau that the city in postcolonial literature often emerges” (202). She also notes that Certeau’s city sees walkers disrupting the order imposed by panoptic observers above, while Fanon’s sees the colonized transgressing colonial frontiers; thus, the conflict over Certeau’s city is vertical while Fanon’s is horizontal. Roy’s animals experience the city on both axes: the cats, for instance, look up for predatory birds, down from rooftops on prey and humans, and out to the borders of their territory. As Madhurima Chakraborty writes, synthesizing the essays in her co-edited collection *Postcolonial Urban Outcasts*, “urban outcasts are... increasingly characterized in South Asian literature not always as victims or revolutionaries, but

as negotiators and strategists of these complex cityscapes” (5). Certainly, Roy’s animals are clever navigators of Delhi’s roofs and stress. However, I am more interested in the ways that these novels’ language depicts an imagined Delhi in which vital interspecies relationships are not just visible but embedded in linguistic, social, ecological, and spatial practice.

With this mention of the spatial dimensions of the texts, I will pause for a moment to clarify the difference between space and place. This distinction is contentious, especially among human geographers and other social scientists for whom these rhyming terms are vital. Henri Lefebvre writes of the “distance that separates ‘ideal’ space, which has to do with mental (logico-mathematical) categories, from ‘real’ space, which is the space of social practice” (14). Certeau makes a similar distinction between place and space: one is “the order” while the other is “the effect.” More recent scholarship on space and place tends to draw a similar distinction while mirroring the terminology. For example, Doreen Massey writes that space is “constructed out of the multiplicity of social relations across all spatial scales,” and place is “a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings” (4-5). I will adopt a straightforward distinction between space as a location as it is intended or understood to exist by those in positions of power and place as a location as it is produced and experienced through everyday social practice.<sup>5</sup> Crucially, I hope to reveal the transactions between conceptual, spatial, social, and linguistic practices as represented in Roy’s novels. As Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert write,

Human discourses contain within them a definite imaginative geography serving to position “them” (animals) relative to “us” (humans) in a fashion that links a conceptual “othering” (setting them apart from us in terms of character traits) to a geographical “othering” (fixing them in worldly places and spaces different from those that we humans tend to occupy). (10)

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5. For a succinct overview of specifically postcolonial engagements with spatiality, see the introduction to *Postcolonial Spaces: The Politics of Place in Contemporary Culture* by Andrew Teverson and Sara Upstone, who rightly acknowledge that “space has *always* been central” to postcolonial studies (1).

The wilding novels instead expose the reality and necessity of close interspecies relations while providing a “zoogenic” conceptual framework which embeds these relations in neologisms and other adaptations of standard English. The resulting stray taxonomies both the transformative potential and the risks of inhabiting animal perspectives through literature.

### **Interspecies Social Hierarchies and the Animal Tale Tradition**

In this section, I argue that stray taxonomies encode stray animals’ quotidian practices as a principled deviation from the theoretical, intended, official or proper uses of the urban spaces they inhabit. The distinctions between wilding and feral, and predator and prey, particularly capture the novels’ vision of a Delhi in which social and ecological responsibility are conflated and shared among all species. In so doing, these stray taxonomies adapt the taxonomies implied by Indian animal tales, which traditionally use animals to instruct readers about human social hierarchies, to reveal complex interspecies networks of responsibility and care.

The term “wilding” is the most prominent linguistic expression of the novels’ stray taxonomies. Although never defined explicitly, the term takes on meaning through two means: comparison with what wildings are *not* and through the quotidian practices which define those to which to appellation apparently applies. The term is not synonymous with *cat* or even *street cat* as it is possible for cats to fall into other categories, such as ferals, strays, or strangers. Rather, it refers to a certain category of cat who exist in a specific social and spatial relation with other animals, including humans. Outside of these novels, *wilding* is an uncommon English word. As a noun, it can refer literally or figuratively to a wild animal (OED).<sup>6</sup> In the wilding novels, however, it takes on a new meaning. The fictional wildings are wild in the sense that their primary social orientations are toward each other, not humans, and that their spatial practices are

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6. As an adjective, *wilding* essentially means “wild.” It thus has a similar meaning to the Hindi word *jungli*, which Roy borrowed for the name of the interspecies pidgin Junglee.

based on freedom of movement within zoogenic social bounds. Although the real noun does not derive from a verb (it is formed from a different usage of the *-ing* suffix), Roy's imagined version suggests a deverbal noun derived from a practice of "wilding" ("Wilding"). The practice of wilding, implicitly, involves the quotidian adherence to rules of social engagement, including rules of territory, which deviate from human norms as depicted in the novels. It is thus depicted as a principled alternative to domestication or domesticity, not the simple absence of cohabitation with humans. Whereas *stray cat* draws a tether between the animal and its assumed role as a pet and *street cat* is more blandly descriptive, *wilding* implies a set of social and spatial practices which constitute an autonomous identity. Wildings carve up Delhi in a manner contrary to human delineations of space, making homes out of temples, disused stepwells, and marketplaces. The implication, then, is that wildness consists not of chaotic, violent, or amoral behavior, but of individual adherence to collective norms through quotidian practices.

The texts reconfigure the meaning of the category term *feral cats* to emphasize the importance of mutualistic interspecies relations. A key irony of *The Wildings* is that the "feral" antagonists are housecats, albeit neglected ones. Although one feral insists that the Shuttered House where they live "is our kingdom, our domain" (*Wildings* 91), the novels' first scene inside the house reveals that the ferals are cared for by an old, sick man, and that their confinement is imposed by their leader, Datura, who was never exposed to the outside world as a kitten. In real-world use, *feral cat* may refer specifically to cats who survive without human intervention and are "unapproachable" by humans or may be used interchangeably with "stray," "street," or "free-roaming" cat (Gosling et. al.). Thus, the wildings come much closer to these loose conditions of ferality than the so-called ferals, rare friendly interactions with humans notwithstanding. The Nizamuddin animals shift the definition of the term slightly, coded ferals as social others who are

“unapproachable” not just by most humans, but by properly socialized animals. Social othering, in the novels, takes on strong spatial dimensions. The feral cats “do not respect boundaries or scent markings, or territory lines” (*Wildings* 242). Their lack of respect for social and spatial boundaries is explained by the wildings as the result of their confinement indoors, unlike the wildings who learn as kittens to balance freedom of movement with socially defined boundaries.

Although humans are the primary architects of urban spaces, there are a variety of practices through which animals create what the geographers Philo and Wilbert call “beastly places,” which are produced through everyday animal practices; in other words, places “as lived by... animals themselves” (19). Wilding refers to cats with a proper understanding of the relationship between predator, prey, and human; conversely, the ferals have a divergent sense of these categories, coding everything that they can kill as something they should kill. To them, the world is not a shared world but a “world of prey” (234); their leader, Datura, is unsure how to interact with him until he decides, evidently without reason, that they must be prey. The contrast between behavior which is coded as wild versus feral helps make sense of the significance of sympathetic prey animals in the novels. The protagonists generally accept the social hierarchy implied by the categories of predator and prey, even when it works to their disadvantage, while antagonists like the ferals disregard it. Responsible predation is even implied to lead to warmer social relations between predators and prey. As a particularly wise cat says to a bird of prey, “Perhaps it’s because we hunt them that we know them... Hunting is one thing, caring is another” (*Wildings* 309-310).

By suggesting that killing and caring are not mutually exclusive, the novels depict a world in which social hierarchies need not be challenged in order to behave responsibly. These representational practices reveal the novels’ indebtedness to Indian animal tales, which often

cross-code social and ecological taxonomies. Roy's novels mediate between a sense of stable—if constraining—social and spatial order and of unmanageable development and change. Through their representation of social taxonomies based on close interspecies relations, the novels replicate the tension in animal tales between difference and dominance, as well as their complex relation to the hierarchies they depict.<sup>7</sup> Patrick Olivelle argues that the fundamental message of most Indian talking animal tales is that

animal society functions naturally and appropriately when the species are kept separate and in their distinct roles. Human society, likewise, made up of different species of humans functions best when these species are kept separate and social boundaries safeguarded. (24)

Uma Chakravarti concedes that the *Jatakas*, a set of popular Buddhist tales which often feature animals, also “deal with unequal [animal] characters in a hierarchical situation,” but stresses that “many stories project negative feelings about exploitation of a ‘weak’ (or inferior) partner and display support for the underdog quite unlike the social norm” (51). Thus animals, like humans, “attempt to break out from their imposed identity” even if they ultimately “cannot escape the hierarchy that governs them” (53). Thus, these culturally significant stories use animals to naturalize hierarchy as a social (and perhaps ecological) fact, even if their attitudes toward this hierarchy differ.

Like these tales, Roy's novels often elicit sympathy for the less powerful within these hierarchies. However, the essential distinctions between predators and prey, and the hierarchy implied by these distinctions, remain largely unchallenged within these novels. In fact, this hierarchy is celebrated because of its ability to bring stability to social and ecological

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<sup>7</sup> Although Indian animal tales are often ancient, they remain an influential part of Indian culture and literature. For example, Kamal Sheoran calls the animal fables from the *Panchatantra* as “[Indian] society's traditional vehicle of social and moral instruction” (128). A comprehensive analysis of the influence of Indian animal tales on Roy's novels is beyond the scope of this chapter.

interactions. The codes of behavior to which the protagonists adhere evoke both the Vedic “division of animals into prey, designated as ‘grass eaters’, and predators, designated as ‘meat eaters’” and the famous “law of the jungle” from Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* (Olivelle 15). The animal characters of wilding novels coexist in a stable, if not necessarily peaceful, network based on spoken and unspoken social rules. As a reviewer in the *Hindustan Times* puts it, in these novels “it is the dharma of cats to make their peace with the night, the dharma of birds to fly, the dharma of all animals to know their place in the ecosystem” (Subramaniam). Each clan of cats has its own territory which overlaps with the habitats of other species but not with other clans. The laws of hospitality, which are “the first thing all cats learned when they were old enough to leave their mother’s side” (*Wildings* 86), urge cats to shelter strangers in need, but cat customs also allow for a violent defense of territory from threatening strangers. These “laws” are not just guidelines for behavior but actual codes, which cats learn in rhyming form:

Help, water, shelter and feed  
To any of the clan in dire need;  
No one shall refuse a stranger  
Sanctuary, should he be in danger;  
Hear these laws, and hold to them fast  
As have all wildings from the days of Bast (85-6)

These laws echo the Law of the Jungle in Kipling’s *Jungle Book* and its sequel. The version followed by Kipling’s wolves begins “Now this is the law of the jungle, as old and as true as the sky/And the wolf that shall keep it may prosper, but the wolf that shall break it must die” (“The Law of the Jungle”). The wolves’ version of the Law of the Jungle, like the cats’ laws of hospitality, is a rigid code of behavior presented in rhyming form to young members of the community as a supposedly timeless oral tradition.<sup>8</sup> Similar explicit laws of animal behavior are also present in Sanskrit literature, which underpins many Indian animal tales, as in a story from

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8. “Bast” is likely a reference to the ancient Egyptian cat god more commonly known as Bastet.



the *Panchatantra* in which a cat pretends to be an ascetic by reciting the “Code of Laws” in verse form to a hare and partridge in order to draw them close enough to kill.

By alluding to and adopting tropes of older Indian animal tales, the novels similarly suggest that certain social and spatial orderings are natural, necessary, and right. However, the didactic function of predator-prey relations in the wilding novels translates unevenly to human social structure. Taking the representations of humans in the novels at face value suggests that “Bigfeet” have a flatter social structure than animals; however, the texts constantly wink ironically or metafictionally toward the constructedness of their narratives. The animals’ perceptions of humans are ambivalent: the inability of humans to understand themselves in complex social relation with other animals enables a critique of anthropocentrism; at the same time, the human reader’s tacit understanding of human social ordering and the animal’s misunderstanding of the same produce a humorously ironic effect. The extent to which the predator-prey taxonomies of the novels invite parallels with human social structure is limited. I prefer a reading which holds that the exceptional aspects of the predator-prey relationship are the most important, namely its mutuality, its interspecies scope, and its ecological basis. In short, the novels’ treatment of the dichotomies of wilding and feral, predator and prey do, like other animal tales, imply the value of social order to preserve the livelihood of heterogeneous societies. However, as I elaborate in the following section, that social order is explicitly not the narrowly anthropocentric status quo.

### **Homogenizing Pressures in Delhi**

In this section, I argue that Roy’s novels valorize interspecies sociality in face of homogenizing pressures, both material and ontological. The stray categories of Bigfeet, strays, “big ones,” “little ones,” and “small creatures” model a form of interspecies sociality in which

belonging is relational and ultimately based on a social ethos of care, despite the conflict which is a necessary part of living with in networks of radically different beings. The quotidian threats faced by the animals—predation, angry humans, structural hazards such as powerlines—are represented as necessary consequences of living in close quarters with other species. However, the acute threats which drive the plots of these novels stem from groups which, in their attempts to exert dominance over the space of the city, supplant an ecological view of interspecies mutuality with Manichean, zero-sum covetousness. These acute threats allow the texts to critique the consequences of urban development in Delhi for its animal denizens as well as, in a curtailed sense, marginalized human Delhiites.

In *The Hundred Names of Darkness*, humans reshape the animals' world both conceptually and physically in service of their mastery of space. The animal's stray taxonomies shift in response, demonstrating their capacity to adapt to new eco-social contexts but also, given the importance of these networks to the animals' livelihoods, depicting urban development as a force of material and social violence. After the feral invasion leads local humans to mistakenly blame the wildings for the deaths of many prey animals, the humans become overtly hostile to the cats, who suffer from injuries inflicted by angry humans and starve because they are unable to hunt freely (*Hundred Names* 56). This fear re-shapes the cats' geographies as they become "scared to even step onto the roofs we used to roam so freely before" (56). The changed attitude of the humans is accompanied by changes in the urban geography as "forbidding new buildings" rise in Nizamuddin (14). The cold winter, human development, and human hostility result in what one cat characterizes as the loss of "all of their world" (60). Similar references to worlds—their world, our world, the world—pervade both novels, often referring to something slightly different each time.

The cats' world, in this case, is not literally destroyed; Nizamuddin and Delhi still exist. So what, then, is the "world" which is lost? I turn to Hans Robert Jauss' conceptions of *Umwelt* and *Mitwelt* for a possible answer. Westphal summarizes Jauss's position thus: "if the Umwelt is the realm of simple existence, the Mitwelt requires action, or rather interaction, which gives meaning to the existence of the individual" (5-6). Animals, it is generally thought, possess only an Umwelt; their minds, or perhaps their social structures, are insufficiently complex to support Mitwelts. Giorgio Agamben, summarizing biologist and progenitor of biosemiotics Jakob Johann von Uexküll, defines umwelt in the context of ecology as "the environment-world that is constituted by a more or less broad series of elements that [Uexküll] calls "carriers of significance" (Bedeutungsträger) or of "marks" (Merkmalträger), which are the only things that interest the animal" (*The Open* 40-1). In the novel, however, the "world" which is lost is patently a Mitwelt, a "with-world," in which animals derived a sense of belonging from social interaction; the loss occurs when everyone except for the Nizamuddin clan is displaced from the neighborhood.

The effects are felt by all the "strays," which in this context refers to all the non-domesticated animals of the neighborhood:

It sometimes seemed to Katar that he and the Nizamuddin wildings had paid in their own blood and freedom for Datura's dark war; not just the cats, but all of the strays, the birds and the smaller animals as well. There had been hope in the air in summer... But then the old houses had started coming down, and the Bigfeet who lived in the towering new buildings had no liking at all for cats and dogs and other small creatures. (60-61)

This passage demonstrates a linguistic shift in response to humans' restrictive spatial practices. Katar's conception of his community expands to include "not just the cats" but all of the "small creatures" who call Nizamuddin home. This echoes the introduction of the terms "little ones" and "big ones" in *The Wildings* in response to the feral threat. Introduced into the novel by the

squirrels Ao and Jao, the “little ones” include the mice, squirrels, and songbirds who face predation, whereas the “big ones” include the cats and cheels. In response to the literally bigger threat from human development, the big and little ones alike are recategorized as “small creatures.” This passage suggests that urban development is accompanied by decreased tolerance for the presence of nonhumans in “human” spaces.

By depicting this development as destructive to the livelihoods of animals (and, as we shall see, some humans) to the extent that their means of categorizing their social networks are disrupted, Roy levels a critique against the homogenizing forces that reshape the material and eco-social worlds of the novels. But what are these forces? Chakraborty points to the effects of global capitalism on South Asian cities, writing that “long-standing practices of stringent hierarchizing have been further sharpened in the neoliberal moment wherein the intense demands of the private sector have exacerbated, for instance, poverty conditions” (2). Although Chakraborty is referring to human hierarchies, the cats’ demotion from “big ones” to “small creatures” similarly reflects the assertion of new, more rigid and anthropocentric transspecies hierarchies through changes in the cityscape and social attitudes toward animals. However, this explanation does not fully capture the nature of Roy’s critique, which only addresses diffuse global mechanisms, to the extent that it does so at all, through the mediation of group and individual behaviors and their effects on the space of the city.

To understand the object of this critique, I turn to Amita Baviskar’s definition of “bourgeois environmentalists” in India’s cities. Baviskar defines bourgeois environmentalism in contrast to Guha and Martinez-Alier’s “environmentalism of the poor,” a term used to describe how “Indian mobilization around the use and abuse of nature is intrinsically linked to issues of material distributive justice” (Baviskar 401). For bourgeois environmentalists,

[E]nvironmentalism is a mode of expressing and addressing their anxieties about themselves in relation to their habitat, that is, their physical surroundings, both proximate and distant, and other species.

Concerns about health and hazard, beauty and order, pervade this mode and have precedence over issues of life and livelihood that are central to “the environmentalism of the poor.” ...

The place of nature in the city is thus a matter to be ordered and regulated. (Baviskar 401-2)

The bourgeois environmentalist perspective is not, as Baviskar notes, monolithic; many are members of animal rights organizations which protest the removal of (certain) animals from the streets. For instance, some members might disagree about which animals belong in the city and where, as well as how, to remove undesired species. Factors which regulate the presence or absence of animal life in India’s cities are not always so overt. As Anand Taneja writes, a combination of rapid growth, political action, and unequal development of infrastructure has made the poor, densely-populated area of Old Delhi inhospitable to animals while birdsong remains “a constant (and unremarkable) background to everyday life in leafier, more genteel parts of Delhi” (209), such as the Nizamuddin neighborhood in which Roy’s cats live.<sup>9</sup>

The humans who move into the colony share with Baviskar’s bourgeois environmentalists a preference for “health and hazard, beauty and order” (401) over the wellbeing of the multispecies residents of Nizamuddin. Implicitly, this change in identity categories reflects changes in how the wildings and other animals conceptualize their social spaces. In *The Wildings*, they measure scale relative to the animals in their community: “little” or “big.” This notion of scale as a dimension of social interaction complements Fanon’s horizontal and Certeau’s vertical theories of how power operates in the city. This dichotomy also reflects their social and ecological roles along the lines of older animal stories: the relationship between the “little ones” and “big ones” is that of predator and prey. The animals of Nizamuddin,

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9. It also appears to be where Roy lived while she wrote the novels.

erstwhile “big ones” included, are re-categorized as “small creatures,” their internal differences subsumed to the human conception of them as an undesirable group which ought to be expelled from human spaces.

The appellation of “Bigfeet” to humans contradicts the novels’ sometimes pointed representation of marginalization within human society. Some cats rely on humans for food or shelter, and Mara’s family is characterized sympathetically. One particular character, known simply as the fakir, demonstrates the human impact of a focus on order over wellbeing. The displacement of the Nizamuddin cats is paralleled by the novels’ sympathetic human characters, thus suggesting an interspecies scope to what is characterized as impersonal, top-down urban development. The fakir, a Sufi Muslim ascetic, lives on the grounds of the Nizamuddin dargah, a shrine. Roy writes that “The fakir was the only Bigfoot that all the cats of Nizamuddin trusted. His home and the small shrine that he tended was neutral ground” (*Wildings* 37). When the development of Nizamuddin ramps up in the second novel, the fakir is “sent... away” (*Hundred Names* 62) and replaced by other humans who refuse to feed the cats. The reasoning for the fakir’s expulsion is ambiguous; evidently, however, his presence is contrary to the desires of the new residents who prefer homogeneity to difference. As Anand Taneja notes, “in the long-established dargahs of Delhi, such as Nizamuddin and Qutub Sahib, the distance between the local ecology and the human experience of these dargahs has grown exponentially in the last few decades... The shrine of Nizamuddin, like much of the rest of the city, is now all too human” (215). By connecting the expulsion of the fakir, a human who lives on the margins and the only Bigfoot to successfully cultivate interspecies social relations, with the fictional and real extinction of animal life in many of Delhi’s dargahs, Roy implies that the wellbeing of marginalized humans and of animals in the city are intertwined, and that both are targeted by

bourgeois homogenizing pressures. Roy shares this sentiment with Baviskar, who argues that bourgeois campaigns to rid the streets of cows are accompanied by attempts to remove rickshaw drivers, with the ultimate goal of clearing passage for their own automobiles at the expense of both poor people and animals (392-3).<sup>10</sup> In fact, the first image in chapter one of *Hundred Names* contrasts the dargah with new development:

the grey winter mist rode through the bylanes of the dargah, the ancient shrine at the centre of the neighbourhood, rising towards the high rooftops of the forbidding new buildings in Nizamuddin proper, creeping around the frozen iron bars of the gates that blocked off many of the colony's roads. (14)

The tall buildings here, suggestive of Certeau's panoptic city, make the city increasingly difficult for animals to navigate; the iron gates, suggestive of Fanon's Manichean city, speak to human exclusion.

The fakir, however, is an outlier, so distant from social norms by dint of his appearance, beliefs, and behavior that even animals are able to differentiate himself from the rest of his species. The wilding novels rarely depict marginalized human groups. When they do depict members of these groups, the tone is lightly ironic. For instance, Mara is fond of the "Chief Bigfoot," who, from the kitten's perspective, possesses "far more freedom" than the couple who live in the house because "she came into the house only twice a day, in the morning and the evening" (*Hundred Names* 23). It is made clear to the reader, but not to Mara, that the Chief Bigfoot is the couple's maid. This ironic perspective opens up the conditions of possibility for a critique which is not realized in the novels, yet Mara's opinion that the woman is "superior" to the kitten's owners is not subversive. Rather, it stems from a comical misapprehension of the woman's subservient role in the household.

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10. As noted earlier, many cows are now shielded from molestation by the BJP. The same cannot be said for Muslims like the fakir, who face legal and social discrimination. Although the novels largely predate Modi and the BJP's ascension to political hegemony, the fakir's expulsion is an uncanny echo of current events.

The novels' flattening of humans into the category of Bigfeet allows the texts to critique the homogenizing pressures in contemporary Delhi which threaten the livelihoods of marginalized humans and animals. However, with the notable exception of the fakir, the texts shy away from an overt depiction of how these mechanisms might affect human groups. In the next section, I discuss what happens when the texts depict the relationship between marginalized animals and marginalized humans through the mechanism of allegory.

### **Human-Animal Allegory and Speciesism**

In portions of the second novel, the vision of interspecies community I analyzed in the previous section is contrasted with a schema in which certain species are excluded from social subjecthood precisely because of their species. By inviting a troubling cross-coding between bandicoots and poor Delhiites, what might otherwise be read as merely an inconsistency in the moral perspective of fictional animals instead illustrates how the discourse of species can contribute, as Wolfe puts it, to mechanisms of discrimination against all kinds of social others. In contrast with Roy's critique of the pressures which threaten to exclude certain types of life from spaces within Delhi, the depiction of the bandicoots instead reads as an uncritical replication of a symbolic economy which often underlies discrimination against humans. Ultimately, this demonstrates how the discursive structures that enable violence against certain categories of life may even infiltrate works which are explicitly critical of such discrimination.

Having argued that Roy's stray taxonomies bring her novels into conversation with older animal tales as well as homogenizing pressures in the modern Indian city, I want to argue that the discourse of species filters into the series as well, opening up an allegorical mapping of certain animal groups onto human communities within Delhi. Specifically, given that the animal characters in Roy's novels are represented as subjects capable of discrimination, I argue that



Roy's representation of certain species naturalizes a form of speciesism, broadly defined as discrimination against others based solely on their species. Cary Wolfe associates speciesism with the belief that "the theoretical, ethical, and political question of the subject is automatically coterminous with the species distinction between *Homo sapiens* and everything else" (1) and argues that this fundamental logic of speciesism can be used to mark any social other—human or animal—as a non-subject and therefore open them to exploitation and killing with impunity. What is the significance, then, of fictional animals engaging in speciesism? The idea of conscious animosity and discrimination between animals of different species is a trope of animal narratives. Throughout Roy's novels, what one might call a coarse speciesism drives the plot and leads to what I have characterized as homogenizing pressures: the feral cats perceive the world as sharply divided into immutable categories of predators and prey, between which there can be no correspondence; most humans perceive little difference between animals of the same or similar species, which allows them to commit acts of indiscriminate and futile violence against animals in their pursuit of order; and the bandicoot rats envision a world in which only bandicoots exist. The novels critique this kind of broad othering as short-sighted, immoral, and destructive to the eco-social networks which provide for the wellbeing of life in the city. In contrast to this coarse speciesism is a more granular form of discrimination predicated on the proper or expected characteristics of each species. I call this aspect of the novel's discourse of species *species essentialism*.

Species essentialism arises in both prescriptive and descriptive ways. In a memorable example which combines both, the kitten Southpaw chides the feral cat leader Datura for deviating from social norms, saying "The crows peck at strangers as you do; the rats round on the young and helpless as you do, Datura; but no true cat would behave as you and your kind do"

(*Wildings* 89). This initial confrontation between Southpaw and Datura abandons the naturalistic dialogue found elsewhere in the novel for an elevated, verse-like style which recalls both Kipling and Indian folktales. It also suggests an essentialist mode of categorization which is at odds with the relativistic logic of most stray taxonomies. Crows and rats, it seems, cannot escape their natures; similarly, a cat who does not behave in a certain way is not a cat at all.<sup>11</sup> The feral cats are depicted as true outliers who are “different from us wildings” because of their experience living in confinement (*Wildings* 102); “Whatever those creatures in the Shuttered House may have been when they first went in, they aren’t cats any more” (*Wildings* 209). Different species of animals are, of course, different from one another. The novels are inflected by cultural norms which valorize some animals (cats, songbirds, squirrels) and demonize others (stray dogs, rats, bandicoots). It is thus unsurprising that widely despised vermin like rats and crows come to serve as nefarious contrasts with Roy’s protagonists. What does it mean, however, when a novel invites allegorical readings in which vermin map onto human groups?

The series concludes with the Nizamuddin cats moving to the Golf Course, a kind of urban pastoral setting where the rules of engagement between humans and nonhumans are clearer. However, this setting draws the racial and class-based allusions of the animal social hierarchy into the light. The novels employ allusive names to suggest that the animals which inhabit the Golf Course are meant to allegorically represent various members of the Indian elite. The Mor family of peacocks, members of which include Thomas, Henry, and the late Noah, are likely British or Anglo-Indian. “Mor” is Hindi for peacock; Thomas More was the English author of *Utopia*, which is apt given the golf course’s Utopian depiction, while Henry More was

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11. Southpaw’s phrase also recalls the “no true Scotsman” device or appeal to purity, a logical fallacy. In this case, rather than accepting evidence that some cats *do* behave like Datura, Southpaw shifts the very definition of *cat* to exclude cats who behave contrary to the social norm.

an English philosopher (Noah Mor may simply be a pun on the phrase *no more*, a reference to the fact of his demise). The so-called “Clubhouse Cats” are coded as government officials, including “His Excellency Billi Bunter Singhji, Esq, KCB, MBE, OBE, KCS, of the Diplomatic Cat Corps, resident of Golf Links (with lifetime access to the Golf Course)” A.K.A. “the Diplocat” (*Hundred Names* 245). “Billi Bunter Singhji” is evidently an Indianized play on Billy Bunter, a pompous, obese schoolboy who served as the protagonist of stories in a variety of British media during the late colonial era. This representation parallels the real-life version of Roy’s “Golf Course”: the Delhi Golf Club, a notoriously exclusive private club with a decades-long waitlist (“Want Delhi Gymkhana membership?”). The poshest cats refer to the Nizamuddin cats as “Common Cat[s]” (245). This stray category is essentially played for laughs, as are the Clubhouse Cats. With the depiction of the Golf Course’s elite denizens, the novel delves into satire, but only in the broadest and gentlest sense; these aristocratic vestiges of the colonial era range from harmlessly arrogant to charming, and they welcome the Nizamuddin cats onto the Golf Course without much fuss.

However, the novel’s representation of the Golf Course’s underclass is biting, and an allegorical reading foregrounds parallels with colonial and neocolonial racism. The bandicoots are represented as an undifferentiated, disgusting mass of social inferiors to the cats. Their wheedling obsequiousness, embodied by their leader, Moonch, conceals a deep resentment for the cats and other animals:

“So much jibber-jabber, chitter-chatter,” said Moonch, spitting out some of [his lieutenant] Poonch’s fur. “Now you listen, okay? Maybe you’re satisfied with crawling to the peacocks and the cats all the time—‘Yes, saheb! No, saheb! A few scraps from your beak will suffice, saheb!’—but you tell me, why shouldn’t the Golf Course belong to us?” (*Hundred Names* 353)

Moonch, despite Poonch's protests, literally undermines the other residents of the Golf Course by intentionally overcrowding and expanding the bandicoot burrow system by inviting "cousins" and "uncles and auntyjis" (*Hundred Names* 257) from around the city to take up residence there. The cats view the bandicoots as physically repulsive, and the novel does not provide the conditions for readings which challenge the cats' presumptions that the bandicoots are rightfully outcast from society. The close third person narrator's disdain for the bandicoots is vicious and seems untethered to any specific character's perspective.

The narrator's adjectival insistence on the "oiliness" of the bandicoots' leader, Moonch, aligns with essentialist notions of the innate moral and physical repulsiveness of unwanted groups. His voice is "oleaginous" and "oily" (*Hundred Names* 258), and the novel refers to the "filthy, oily stink" (300) of his compatriots at least eight additional times. Roy depicts bandicoots as intrinsically stinky, cowardly, and possessing strength only in overwhelming numbers, while Moonch's "oily" voice is wheedling and seductive. The implication here is that the bandicoots' behavior and appearance are intrinsic to their species. Therefore, individuals are essentially fungible, precluding character development and differentiation for most bandicoots. Even Moonch, their leader, agrees with this sentiment, thinking that "there was little difference between a Slinky and a Chamcha" (382). Although the feral cats from the first novel are depicted as incorrigible, the novel repeatedly presents the idea that their environment led to their deviance from normative cat behavior. The bandicoots, however, behave essentially as could be expected from their kind. Even when the novel suggests internal variation among the bandicoots through Poonch's disputes with Moonch's leadership, it undermines this difference by having Poonch betray Moonch to his doom rather than confronting him in a more honorable manner. Ultimately, it seems as though Poonch is the only character who has any qualms about massacring

bandicoots. The climactic battle scene of the second novel is a dark reversal of the battle between the Nizamuddin strays and the ferals: rather than feral cats killing small rodents and songbirds, cats and peacocks slaughter the smaller bandicoots with ease until blood soaks into the sand, “the fairways run with the blood of bandicoots,” and the “greens are black with the blood and guts of bandicoots” (384).

This depiction of the bandicoots as rightful targets of non-predatory violence based on their species is, on the one hand, inconsistent with the respectful mutuality that characterizes most interspecies relations in the series. More importantly, however, these issues are especially problematic since the bandicoots are linguistically coded as Indian in a way that many other characters, especially the cats, are not.<sup>12</sup> Three of the four named bandicoots have names that are also common Hindi words. Moonch and Chhota Poonch’s names are Hindi for “mustache” and “little tail,” and Chamcha’s means “ladle” or, idiomatically, “sycophant.” Phrases like “uncles and auntyjis” (256) and “saheb” (353) mark their speech as distinctively South Asian in contrast to the Nizamuddin animals’ less traceable speech patterns and the Golf Course creatures’ Queen’s English. The novel’s represents the bandicoots as greasy, deceptive, indistinguishable, and overly populous “brown hordes” (*Hundred Names* 255), which evokes racist tropes of Asians. Moonch and his bandicoot family are an ungenerous analogue of Delhiites who perceive themselves—wrongly, if the allegory is followed to its end—to be disrespected and marginalized by the elite class. The bandicoots recruit the help of their fellow downtrodden, the rats, to suddenly overwhelm and oust the elites, some of whom are quite literally fat cats, and lay claim to a space that would be solely theirs. The narratorial and authorial perspective is clearly on the

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12. The species of bandicoot rat to which Roy refers is likely the lesser bandicoot rat (*B. bengalensis*), which resides on the Indian subcontinent (“Bandicoot Rat”). The appellation of “bandicoot” rather than the more generic “rat” emphasizes the particularity of this animal.

side of the powerful in this case. In a sinister monologue, Moonch expresses a parodic version of anti-colonial rhetoric:

[The cats] carry their whiskers as though they belong here by right! Their fur oozes their dislike of us, their contempt for our kind; they detest the way our burrows take over everything, instead of seeing how beautiful it is, how right, how proper, that the bandicoots should inherit the earth. Grass! Flowers! What nonsense. All that space going to waste, instead of being packed shoulder to shoulder with bandicoots. (353-4)

The cats and peacocks are, in contrast, depicted as benevolent custodians of the Golf Course whose disgust for the bandicoots is a natural response to their physical and moral repulsiveness. In Roy's depiction, the cats truly do "belong here by right" (353); even the "common cat[s]" from Nizamuddin are welcomed readily into this exclusive space, while the bandicoots' claims to territory are depicted as self-evidently ridiculous and destructive (249). The bandicoots are meant to exist on the margins. When they come together, as they do in the second novel, to carve out a place for themselves, they become a threat to the social order.

The massacre of the bandicoots replicates the bourgeois environmentalist obsession with order and health through a kind of displaced speciesism: the critical distinction is not between *homo sapiens* and other animals (or even *felus catus* and other species) but the related, finer distinction between desirable (orderly/clean) and undesirable (disorderly/dirty) animals as defined by those with the institutional or physical muscle to enforce such categories, particularly as they are mapped onto urban spaces. As one cat puts it, dismissing the possibility that the bandicoot massacre might come back to haunt the cats, "the Bigfeet rarely cared if rats, mice or bandicoot were slaughtered, though they would make a fuss over an injured pet or a missing cow" (387, sic). It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the authorial perspective agrees. Philo and Wilbert write that "many groups may erroneously be coded by a dominant culture with non-human pests and vermin, and it is obvious that all kinds of metaphors of threat, contagion and

pollution come to surround such associations and cross-codings of peoples and animals” (14). By inviting such a “cross-coding” between Delhiites and bandicoot rats, Roy implies that both can be subjected to righteous violence when they disrupt the ecological, social, or spatial ordering of the city. As both prey animals and unwanted vermin, they are also subject to violence when they have *not* committed a transgression, although Poonch believes that this violence would be less severe. On a similar note, Agamben writes that the murder of Jews in the Holocaust “constitutes... neither capital punishment nor a sacrifice, but simply the actualization of a mere ‘capacity to be killed’ inherent in the condition of the Jew as such” (*Homo Sacer* 114)—a capacity which humans and cats agree is inherent in non-human vermin. In Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, for instance, the relationship between Nazis and Jews in the Holocaust is represented by depicting these groups as cats and mice, respectively. The Holocaust was not aberrant in this sense; the philosopher David Livingstone Smith argues that “dehumanized people are imagined as subhuman animals, animals, because they are conceived as having a subhuman essence” and that this discursive and psychological transformation paves the way for all sorts of genocides and mass killings, from Rwanda to Hiroshima (264). In any case, the rare alignment of Bigfoot and wilding attitudes around the bandicoots is notable not because it is surprising (who would have thought that humans and cats hate large rodents?) but because it clarifies how speciesism can operate within the categories of human and animal as well as across them. Quoting a phrase from Derrida, Wolfe writes that

the effective power of the discourse of species when applied to social others of whatever sort relies, then, on a prior taking for granted of the *institution* of speciesism—that is, of the ethical acceptability of the systematic “noncriminal putting to death” of animals based solely on their species. ... We all, human and nonhuman alike, have a stake in the discourse and institution of speciesism; it is by no means limited to its overwhelmingly direct and disproportionate effects on animals. (7)

The confrontation between bandicoots and their social superiors on the Golf Course stages a scene in which the moral exemplars of the series, the Nizamuddin wildings, gleefully slaughter members of the city's underclass, most of whom have done nothing more than enter an elite space. In so doing, the wildings win the approval of the elite to remain on the Golf Course.

Additionally, an allegorical reading of the bandicoots creates the conditions for drawing parallels with discrimination and exclusion at the real Delhi Golf Club. As the presence of the Diplocat and other posh Clubhouse Cats might suggest, government offices, particularly the Ministry of Urban Development and Poverty Alleviation, as well as the Chief Justices of India and the Delhi High Court exercise outsized influence over the management of the club and have often nominated Indian elites as members ("Information Commissioner"). Recently, an activist named Subhash Chandra Agrawal argued that the club is a defacto "public authority" "considering the Central government's influence in the management of and the 'financial generosity' showered on it in terms of leasing it a large chunk of land for a 'petty consideration'" ("Information Commissioner"). Substantial official pressures have thus played a role in making the Delhi Golf Club an extraordinarily exclusive space, which has led to discrimination against members of groups who appear not to belong. For instance, in 2017, a visitor wearing indigenous clothing was "told by club officials that she needed to vacate the place as she looked a like a 'dustbin'" and was wearing a "maid's uniform" ("Meghalaya Woman"). The Golf Course is a refuge for the cats not because it is free of the homogenizing exclusionary practices that drove them from Nizamuddin, but precisely because it is pervaded with them. The series concludes with the cats shielded from bourgeois environmentalism and urban development by the even stronger force of government-abetted elitism.



In depicting alternative modes of categorization that might reveal the importance of interspecies connections in Delhi, the novels replicate familiar hierarchies which characterize both the Enlightenment-influenced discourse of species and older traditions of animal tales. This is perhaps a consequence of the difficulty of reconciling the demands of anthropocentric and ecocentric approaches to problems or, more specifically, to the challenges of reconciling humanitarianism and environmentalism in India. Roy disputes some of the consequences of bourgeois environmentalism, particularly those which might result in a homogenized Delhi, but seems to agree with their ideological emphasis on order—only it is the cats and their interspecies networks which are orderly and rational, not humans. The hierarchy of rational humans ruling over chaotic beasts is not deconstructed but merely inverted.

I want to conclude, however, by analyzing a passage that stands apart from the rest of the series. In a series which fizzles with allusive, evocative names, it includes no names at all, despite being supposedly being about naming. In a series grounded in the specific topography of Delhi, it takes place in a sketchy dreamscape. In a series which often takes a didactic approach to character development, it is difficult to parse. In a series which sometimes trades in species essentialism, it presents the only character of indeterminate species. The “names of darkness” story serves as a type of diegetic animal tale. In this passage, stretching across two chapters, the cat Beraal tells Mara a story in response to her trepidation about the darkness. When Mara asks, “How do you make friends with the night?” Beraal replies, “By learning its names” (*Hundred Names* 183) and begins her story, which she claims has been passed down for generations. In the story, a cat encounters a massive beast which she cannot make out in the darkness. It offers to kill her quickly if she guesses its name. She begins guessing; as she exhaustively guesses it soon becomes clear that she will never succeed. Finally, she stops guessing and begins brushing

against the creature. When it protests, the cat replies that the brushing is “part of the naming.”

The creature avers that it has “no name,” to which the cat disputes:

“You do, friend,” said the cat.

“Friend?” said the creature, as the sun started to come up from behind the mountains.

“Friend,” said the cat. “I have named you my friend.”

The creature raised its shaggy head in bewilderment, and then the sun rose above the black mountains. And as its rays touched the great misshapen creature, it shook and shook and shook, until it had shaken its fur and its skin and its fangs off. The creature’s pelt lay on the ground like an abandoned shell, and then the skin shook once more, and a sleek black cat stepped out of it, preening his whiskers and shaking his paws out. (207-208)

The story concludes with the two cats watching the sunrise with their tails intertwined. This passage is unusual in the context of these novels. The story is introduced as serving a didactic purpose, yet its meaning is unusually opaque. Although Beraal’s framing suggests that this is a story about “mak[ing] friends with the night” by “learning its names” (*Hundred Names* 183), the story itself seems to elude such straightforward exegesis. The creature eventually reveals itself to be the “cat who lives on the other side of the night” (203) the cat was seeking, but this does not fully explain the meaning of the story.

With a critical lens attuned to the practices of naming and categorization used in the rest of the series, it is possible to read the story of the cat as a parable about naming practices rather than the specific relationship between cats and the night. The cat first fails to name the creature because she relies on existing taxonomies. She succeeds, however, not by correctly choosing a name nor by “learning its names,” but by granting it a new name that derives from, and is inextricable from, social interaction. The crux of this story, then, is the homonymy between two different definitions of naming: naming as a practice of reference fails but naming as a practice of social interaction succeeds. Like the category of wilding, the name “friend” in this context is relational and contingent on particular social (and inherently spatial and ecological) practices;

hence brushing against the creature is “part of the naming” (207). Essentially, this scene posits naming as something that is simultaneously a social, embodied, and linguistic act. This animal tale reveals how social interaction, as encoded in linguistic and material practices, can produce taxonomies which are relational rather than essential. The monster becomes a cat only after becoming a “friend.”

This parable, in short, suggests that practices of naming and categorization can create social relations which were previously unarticulated and thus unrealized. The wilding novels, and this animal tale, demonstrate that an anthropomorphizing approach to animals in fiction can model interspecies sociality through language—not by depicting this sociality as it is or should be experienced, but by presenting it as an important corrective to exclusionary practices that cause harm to humans and animals alike.

## Conclusion

Before attending Louisiana State University, I received an M.F.A. in fiction writing from the University of Mississippi, which is just a short walk from where I am sitting now. Since I did not intend to pursue a scholarly career at the time, my literature coursework consisted of whatever classes seemed relevant to fiction writing, which ended up being mostly eighteenth-century British literature. I turned my teaching assistantship into an ad hoc independent study, asking Dr. Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, my supervising professor, about postcolonial, mostly African, literature and immediately reading anything she mentioned. Thanks to my accidental focus on British literature and my independent study of Anglophone postcolonial fiction, I became interested in the rise of the English-language novel. I was especially intrigued by the popularity of the form and the way that its early normlessness reflected rapid changes in the Western understanding of the world, from the popularization of technology like the microscope and telescope, which allowed us to observe the natural world from literally new perspectives, and the expansion of global imperialism. I was particularly obsessed with *Robinson Crusoe*, a novel which is somehow both boring and morally horrific, fastidious and wildly implausible. I believe that *Crusoe* and J.M. Coetzee's postcolonial response novel, *Foe*, were among the first two texts I ever taught, albeit as a teaching assistant. I became personally interested in tracing the lineage of *Crusoe*, including both its legacies in "desert island" tropes and literature and the range of postcolonial, including *Foe* as well as Derek Walcott's poem "Crusoe's Island" and more. I wrote two seminar papers about *Crusoe* from what I now understand to be ecocritical and new materialist perspectives; I adapted the second paper, about animal skins in *Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*, as my writing sample when I applied to LSU. My M.F.A. thesis, a novel, followed a young man stranded on a very different island—Galveston, Texas—after the hurricane of 1900.

All that to say, I arrived at LSU interested in how the novel form strains to encompass new perspectives on the world, particularly encounters with the human and nonhuman other, especially when the attempt is so bizarre that authors and scholars around the world spend three hundred years making sense of it.

If the seed for this dissertation was planted during my time in Mississippi, it did not sprout until Fall 2016, when I took Dr. Pallavi Rastogi's African literature class. I chose to write my seminar paper on Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, which I had read at the offhand suggestion of Dr. Armillas-Tiseyra several years prior. It was the most challenging seminar paper of my career, but I clung to the stubborn conviction that the rats and other pests in the novel mattered, even if they were only mentioned, usually in passing, on a few of its five hundred pages. Behind this conviction was a hunch that representations of a certain type of organism would resonate with both postcolonialism and ecocriticism.

From my preliminary reading, and my personal experience living in the subtropics of North and South America, I made the reasonable assumption that literature from or depicting the tropics might also be full of vermin. This led me down a trail of primarily Western texts that I ultimately found interesting mostly because of their revealing, usually negative comparisons between noxious nonhumans and non-Western and/or non-white people. Although this is an important topic, I decided to focus on the handful of texts which had surprised me with their sensitive, complex representations of human-animal connections. I also found myself straining to justify my earlier claims about a unified, global counter-aesthetics of vermin. I reminded myself that I was interested in the way the novel form adapts to strange encounters. Over time, I simplified my approach and returned to my intuition: when I read for unwelcome animals, I uncovered unexpected aspects of texts. Instead of fitting these explorations to a single

overarching argument, which I felt would be difficult and perhaps irresponsible to do, I used the three essays in this dissertation to achieve several goals: first, to explore the value of reading unwelcome animals using both denotative and connotative interpretive approaches. Second, to analyze examples of the ecological, political, and social dimensions of human-animal connection as represented in novels from across the world. Third, in so doing, to complicate and critique the notion that human and ecological concerns in fiction must edge each other out.

I took a rocky route. I worked from each text “out” to theory; my approach was rhizomatic instead of top-down. You might see traces of this approach in my mercenary citation of poststructuralists, postcolonial scholars, new materialists, southern studies scholars, ecocritics, and more. In my attempt to come to grips with something I had not seen reflected in criticism, I produced a dissertation that is in some ways a bricolage. In other ways, however, I think these three essays, as much as they are meant to be independent, hang together well: in one, swamp creatures link with ecology and history; in another, rats have a lot to say about bodies and politics; and in the last, stray animals reveal the interspecies dimensions of space and society. Each offers a focused reading of a novel or two for those who are interested in analysis, and a portable concept for those who are mining for theoretical contributions: ecoghosts, hard reading, and stray taxonomies. I have also provided points of engagement between fields that have only recently reached out to each other, such as postcolonialism, ecocriticism, and southern studies. Overall, I am hopeful that scholars of literature and culture, regardless of field, find *The Language of Rats* intriguing, challenging, and generative, and that my ideas infest the works of others.

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## **Vita**

Kieran Leigh Lyons was born in Houston, Texas, and has lived in the United States, Argentina, and Bolivia. While pursuing a bachelor's degree in cognitive sciences and studio art from Rice University, he took several classes in creative writing. After graduating from Rice, he completed a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing at the University of Mississippi. Through this program, he developed an interest in global fiction and the field of literary criticism. To advance his scholarly understanding of literature, he enrolled in the doctoral program in English at Louisiana State University. He anticipates graduating in August 2020.