

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation:           PREHISTORIC TO POSTHUMAN: ANIMALITY,  
INHERITANCE, AND IDENTITY IN AMERICAN  
EVOLUTIONARY NARRATIVES

Deborah Juliet Bailin, Doctor of Philosophy, 2010

Dissertation directed by:       Professor David M. Wyatt  
Department of English

This project examines how Darwinian discourse has influenced representations of the relationship between animality and humanness in twentieth-century American literature. Scholarship in the conceptually rich and growing field of animal studies, to which my dissertation contributes, covers a wide range of topics, from the symbolic and metaphoric treatment of nonhuman animals to the ethics of representation and the politics of animal rights. Recent theoretical work has further broadened the scope of inquiry by raising questions about the cultural construction of animality and its relationship to definitions of the human. Although some scholars have argued for the importance of embodiment in (re)considering twentieth-century representations of the human, challenging the opposition between “animal” and “human,” only a few have addressed how Darwin’s descriptions of prehuman ancestry and a potentially posthuman future might have shaped these representations. My study aims to rectify this critical lack.

By examining how evolutionary narratives of growth, mutation, and transformation intersect with American narratives of history, progress, and identity, my dissertation complicates traditional associations between the cultural impact of Darwin’s ideas and the determinism and social Darwinism often associated with literary naturalism during its classic phase. Beginning with a chapter comparing the treatment of animality

and evolution in works by Frank Norris and Jack London, I trace the imaginative and metanaturalistic reshaping of these narratives across the century through chapters on abolition and evolution in novels by William Faulkner and Toni Morrison, evolution as apocalypse in Bernard Malamud's *God's Grace* and Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* Trilogy, and animals, evolution, and language in Edward Albee's plays.

Varying in the scope of its concerns about natural and cultural inheritance, each of my chapters considers how animality operates as a recursive trope against the disembodiment of the subject, expressing both possibilities and fears about what it means to be human.

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EVOLUTIONARY NARRATIVES

by

Deborah Juliet Bailin

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Advisory Committee:

Professor David M. Wyatt, Chair  
Professor Jackson R. Bryer  
Professor Zita Cristina Nunes  
Professor Kandice Chuh  
Professor Katherine King, Dean's Representative

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## INTRODUCTION

If we choose to let conjecture run wild, then animals—our fellow brethren in pain, disease, death, and famine, our slaves in the most laborious works, our companions in our amusements—they may partake from our origin in one common ancestor, we may be all netted together.

Charles Darwin  
*First Notebook* (July 1837-  
February 1838)

We have accepted the evolutionary theory for geology, or the history of the earth's crust. We have accepted it for biology, or the history of life upon this planet. The next question is how we can apply it to the history of the human mind in [...] literature, art, language. To this question the first answer must be: certainly not in the same way....

John Addington Symonds  
"On the Application of  
Evolutionary Principles to Art and  
Literature" (1890)

### Overview

In an essay entitled "Why look at animals?," John Berger offers an explanation to the question his title poses in words which have resonance for those of us who study the human condition as it is represented through language and literature. Berger writes, "Rousseau, in his *Essay on the Origins of Language*, maintained that language itself began with metaphor" and that "it is not unreasonable to suppose that the first metaphor was animal" (5). For humanists informed by the tradition Rousseau represents, the capacity for symbolic language, along with "reason," stands as a defining characteristic of humanness, a characteristic viewed through historically varied cultural discourses yet consistently in terms of a departure from other animals. Berger continues:

If the first metaphor was animal, it was because the essential relation between man and animal was metaphoric. Within that relation what the two terms—man and animal—shared in common revealed what differentiated them. (5)

Here, Berger suggests that this “essential relation” of difference has also always been a constructed one—indeed, a relationship constructed, paradoxically, by means of the very capacity presupposed and privileged as a marker of difference. If the first metaphor was “animal,” a signifier of both ontological likeness and difference, continuity and discontinuity, self and Other, we have inherited a trope which—as Hamlet’s compact “paragon of animals” (2.2.331) expresses within its own historically specific context—recursively resists the boundaries of reference its invocation as a comparative device aims to produce. That is, even as the trope establishes the privileged promise of difference and departure for “man,” the “animal” as irreducible metaphor forecloses upon the possibility of a human subject free from the condition, shared by all living creatures, of an embodied and species-specific existence. Thus, the first of a set of three broad claims anchoring my discussions in the chapters to follow is that the juxtaposition of the two terms, human and animal, rhetorically reifies a false opposition uniquely reliant upon both the self-creating and self-deceiving properties of language.

Nonhuman animals themselves, in their actual presence in our lives and in our representations of them in literature, resist the constraints of species hierarchy imposed by our trope of the “animal” through their nonparticipation in a world constructed through the “rational” orderings of symbolic language. In Marian Scholtmeijer’s words,

animals contend with conceptual devices that seek to subsume them. Their resistance to enculturation influences the nature and profundity of the difficulties literature addresses. In fiction, animals steer the course of events into imaginative complications upon which human powers of resolution falter. (*Animal Victims* 8)

Nonhuman animals communicate in many other ways with each other and with us, and the appropriation of their clucking, cawing, croaking, chirping, mooing, meowing, purring, barking, whinnying, braying, squealing, snarling, hooting, howling, growling, roaring “silence” reveals more about human values and ways of knowing than it does about nonhuman animals themselves. Silence signifies acquiescence only when the Other has the power to speak and be understood, and, in spite of their supposed “silence” (or perhaps because of it), many nonhuman characters fulfill important functions in the texts I consider: lions, horses, bears, dogs, cows, pigs, deer, chimpanzees, lizards, rabbits, fish, a rooster, a gorilla, a goat, and a species of slug-like space aliens. Through the constructed “animalities” of these characters and their human counterparts, I explore the importance of interrelationships, the interdependencies they reflect, and the ways these interdependencies both test and transcend the limitations of language.

This strategy returns my discussion repeatedly to recurrent challenges posed by the figurative “silence” of the animals. The protest expressed through their presence is integral, for, although it is primarily human characters who speak, as Albee’s lizards put it, “you know, English” (*Seascape* 31), the resistance of other animals resonates persistently and dramatically in such examples—to name but a few—as the elusive gaze of Norris’s lions, the disappearing footprints of Faulkner’s bear, and the wordlessly contemplative recalcitrance of Malamud’s gorilla, a creature quixotically named George by the novel’s human protagonist (after a fossil specimen of *homo habilis* discovered by the Leakeys). Even nonhuman characters who do speak, “you know, English,” characters who may appear to a greater extent anthropomorphized by their authors, protest human and humanist systems of symbolic ordering. Albee’s lizards speak English but repeatedly

challenge relationships between words and the meanings human characters in the play take for granted. Malamud's chimpanzees initially acquire human language but later, of their own volition, relinquish it. And, although they speak human languages, Octavia Butler's extraterrestrials, resembling giant, tentacled sea creatures, prefer sensory stimulation as a superior mode of communication with each other and with humans. Nonhumans, both "animal" and "alien," as they speak through their "silence," refuse to affirm the value of and values articulated through human language.

Hence, the second of my underlying claims is that the "silence" of nonhuman characters signifies not acquiescence but resistance. With this claim, I establish both connections to and departures from previous studies. Mary Allen's *Animals in American Literature* (1983) effectively sets a precedent by demonstrating the "astonishing number of actual animals [who] play impressive roles in American literature" (10). Linking images of wild animals with "the individual, freedom, and violence" (10), Allen argues that "America's affair with the frontier is clearly behind the appeal of untamed animals" (12), locating animals within the larger thematic context of an American national literature. Unlike Allen, although I examine representations of animals and animality in conjunction with enduring American ideals of freedom, individualism, independence, and democracy, I attend more carefully to the inseparability of these ideals not merely from the rugged and historically situated "violence" of the frontier, which Allen cites, but from arguably even more profoundly enduring legacies—that is, from the dehumanizing legacies of "violence" wrought by patriarchy, slavery, national division, and international conflict. In this context, representations of animals and animality intersect with those of race, gender, class, ethnicity, and nationality. The "human" as a construct opposed to the

“animal” remains tainted by these legacies of unbalanced power relationships, and “silence”—whether the result of suppressed, unheard, misunderstood, distorted, exploited, enslaved, or untranslatable voices—should never be mistaken for acquiescence.

Although my work often indirectly reinforces the arguments for animal rights central to Marian Scholtmeijer’s *Animal Victims in Modern Fiction* (1993), I state from the outset that I am less explicitly concerned with the status of animals than I am with the rhetorics of hierarchy which, through their social, political, and—for lack of a better word—environmental consequences, inescapably intertwine human and nonhuman lives. On a certain level, I feel this is one of the project’s shortcomings. However, questioning how we have constructed “human” identities through what Derrida describes as the singularized plural of the “animal” as metaphor, we expose the ways those (humans) in positions of power rhetorically attribute value, meaning, and purpose to different kinds of lives by suppressing, distorting, exploiting, and refusing both verbal and nonverbal communications with the bearers of those lives—an unkindness towards kin. My primary interests (within the confines of this project) lie less with the politics of animal rights than with the dynamic structures of language which at once create victims, both nonhuman and human, yet bear the potential to liberate them.

On the basis of the supposed nonverbal “silence” of nonhuman animals, we humans have a long history of exploiting them for food, for labor, for clothing, and for sport. We also exploit them for more abstract cultural purposes, for ends which may or may not have direct effects, positive or negative, on their lives. We exploit them in our discourses for no other purpose than to define ourselves against a relational presence both

like and unlike, both objectified and subjected to the displacement of characteristics which challenge conceptions of past, present, and future selves. Against these displacements, undercurrents of resistance have always passed, often unnoticed. In her counterpoint to Hamlet's "paragon of animals," Ophelia, in the midst of her madness, remarks, "They say the owl was a baker's daughter. Lord, we know what we are, but know not what we may be" (4.5.47-49). If Hamlet questions the purpose of "man" as "paragon of animals," Ophelia questions the very stability of this construction itself in a manner which, to the generations of humanists who precede Darwin, could signify only madness. Indeed, only according to the delusions of a feminine and feminized madness might the place of "man" along the Great Chain of Being appear uncertain.

The forms of resistance I explore in this project are as specific to a post-Darwinian America as Ophelia's are to early modern England. Thus, my third and final underlying claim is that the cultural implications of Darwin's ideas disrupt humanist paradigms in complex and often self-contradictory ways which, contrary to the overexposure, reductive associations, and political exploitation of the clichéd phrase "survival of the fittest," suggest a reevaluation of human and interspecies relationships along a horizontal rather than a vertical axis. Through his theory's reorientation of the human species towards its ancestors and cousins of other species, the cultural ramifications of Darwin's work initiate a paradigm shift away from traditional humanism. Post-Darwinian literary responses to interspecies relationships and the challenges they pose to anthropocentric hierarchies reflect this posthumanist shift in ways we are just beginning to apprehend through apparatuses provided by theorists such as Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles. Inspired by these contemporary thinkers, my return to

Darwin's own prose in the second and third chapters of this project reveals, I believe, an imagination far ahead of its time; we are just beginning to catch up.

My approach to supporting this third claim, like my approach to the second claim, establishes both connections to and departures from earlier studies. With Scholtmeijer, I agree that as humans begin "to look on other animals as family, or to experience ourselves as one kind of animal among others" (*Animal Victims* 6-7), resulting efforts "to preserve pre-Darwinian orientations towards life" have been used to legitimize the increasing exploitation of nonhuman animals in such twentieth-century practices as factory farming (*Animal Victims* 7). However, unlike Scholtmeijer and others in the field of animal studies who focus explicitly on the animals themselves, I contend that Darwin's impact on the literary imagination is not merely peripheral context but itself of central importance. Conversely, given both my poststructuralist concerns with language and the centrality of animal representation to my understanding of Darwin's impact, I also distinguish my work from that of self-described literary Darwinists such as Joseph Carroll and Robert Storey. Studies like Carroll's *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (2004) and Storey's *Mimesis and the Human Animal: On the Biogenetic Foundations of Literary Representation* (1996) suggest methods of reading "human nature" and its literary productions across cultures and throughout history through the lenses of evolutionary biology and psychology rather than through the explicitly post-Darwinian appearance of what I loosely term "evolutionary narratives." Although such studies shed light on the evolutionary function of literature, they often do so at the cost of reductionism, ignoring historical context and sacrificing the "literariness" of literature for the sake of pointing out broad patterns which "prove" the discoveries of

contemporary evolutionary science. Lisa Zunshine's *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2006) addresses the evolutionary function of literature without sacrificing its literariness—indeed, she attempts via a cognitive approach to explain why we take such pleasure in this quality—but tells us very little about Darwin's cultural impact on constructions of the “human” and nothing at all about animals.

Throughout this project, I consider the imaginative reordering of relationships between humans and animals—and between constructions of the “human” and “animal”—found in American literature produced after Darwin's popularized influence began to be felt beyond scientific circles by the end of the nineteenth century. Through works loosely documenting major prose trends in the years between this early popularization of Darwin and the present (naturalism, modernism, postmodernism, science fiction, contemporary drama), I highlight common elements which illustrate continuities between works as seemingly disparate as the naturalist fiction of Frank Norris at the turn of the twentieth century and the science fiction of Octavia Butler at the turn of the twenty-first.. Such an account of literary history over the last century highlights “evolutionary” narratives of inheritance and identity—of conception, generation, growth, development, contest, variation, kinship, survival, extinction—through their transformations in response to the increasingly widespread embrace of paradigm shift, which itself encompasses the retellings of American narratives of history and progress characteristic of so much twentieth-century literature.

Such an account makes it possible to explain, for example, the odd yet striking similarities between three passages quoted and discussed below, the first from an obscure early short story by Norris and the second and third from Butler's *Imago*, the final novel

in her *Xenogenesis* trilogy. All depict the imaginary, counter-evolutionary narrative of bodily regression, the literally impossible yet rhetorically plausible inverse of more familiar narratives of evolutionary “progress.” In the Norris excerpt, a dead man is brought back to life through unspecified scientific processes, but following quickly upon reanimation,

the process of decay became rapidly more apparent; what little lustre [*sic*] yet lurked in the eye went out, leaving it dull and fishlike; the expression of the face lost all semblance to humanity; the hair grew out coarse and fell matted over the eyes. The nails became claws, the teeth fangs [...]. In course of time all likeness to the human form disappeared from the body. By some unspeakable process the limbs, arms, and features slowly resolved themselves into one another. A horrible, shapeless mass lay upon the floor. And yet, until decomposition had set in, some kind of life was contained in it. It lived, but lived not as do the animals or the trees, but as the protozoa, the jellyfish, and those strange lowest forms of existence wherein the line between vegetable and animal life cannot be drawn.

(“Lauth” 144-145)

A precursor to his posthumously published first novel *Vandover and the Brute* (1914), Norris’s image in this story of a man regressing or de-evolving through various “lower” forms expresses the anxieties his generation experienced concerning the collective integrity of the human species, figured here through the individual. According to Bruce Clarke, “Darwin’s *Origin of Species* told an old story in a new way: bodily metamorphosis is not supernatural but *natural*.” (1). If, as Darwin’s theory informed the

naturalists, the human species had come into being through a naturally occurring process of progressive transformation, what was to prevent the reverse from happening? Anxieties over the transmutation of species fed directly into naturalists' preoccupation with the possibility that "evolved" characters could revert or regress to "type" (e.g. McTeague's regression from a semi-respectable dentist to a drunk, a madman, and a murderer). Narratives of metamorphosis after Darwin, Clarke contends, have a "distinctly evolutionary valence" (2) in contrast to earlier ones, in which the connection between original and metamorph—for example, the baker's daughter and the owl Ophelia imagines in her madness—often seems arbitrary yet less inevitable and therefore less threatening. Although Norris and his contemporaries embraced and interpreted evolutionary narratives of progress as a means of reinforcing more traditional humanist beliefs in the perfectibility of the human "race," the challenges such narratives also posed to both a stable sense of identity and stable structures of social power undermined their promise—and, ultimately, their long-term exploitability by social Darwinists. In the passage above, as in his fiction more generally, Norris expresses a profound sense of ambivalence towards evolutionary narratives. That ambivalence, in turn, reflects the impact of a Darwinian paradigm shift upon the first generation of American writers who collectively responded to it.

A century later, the image of de-evolution reappears in Octavia Butler's text, but, rather than fear of the evolutionary instabilities of form and identity, this image suggests the despair and self-dissolution of a creature's failure to find human mates and reproduce, which, for the extraterrestrial, gene-trading Oankali, means failure to participate in the "evolutionary" process of creating new species. In the excerpts below, the narrator

Jodahs, the first ooloi (third sex) to have both human and Oankali genes, finds that its ooloi sibling, Aaor,

had become—a kind of near mollusk, something that had no bones left. Its sensory tentacles were intact, but it no longer had eyes or other Human sensory organs. Its skin, very smooth, was protected by a coating of slime.  
(*Lilith's Brood* 674)

As time passes, Jodahs continues, Aaor

kept slipping away from me—simplifying its body. It had no control of itself [...]. Its body “wanted” to be less and less complex. If it had stayed unattended in the water for much longer, it would have begun to break down completely—individual cells each with its own seed of life, its own Oankali organelle. These might live for a while as single-cell organisms or invade the bodies of larger creatures at once, but Aaor as an individual would be gone. In a way, then, Aaor’s body was trying to commit suicide.  
(*Lilith's Brood* 682)

Aaor’s integrity depends, paradoxically, upon its ability to integrate its genes with the genes of others, to connect and merge, to mate and mutate. Unlike Lauth, Aaor signifies not the fear of evolutionary change but the vital necessity of it. For the Oankali, the stability of the isolated individual translates into the stasis of death, and Aaor eventually does find human mates who, unlike Lauth’s friends, successfully reanimate him. A century after Norris, Butler embraces the challenges evolutionary narratives pose to both stable identities and the stability of social power structures dependent upon such identities to reinforce dominance and privilege. Through tropes of evolutionary change,

Butler envisions social change premised upon the promises of diversity and variation, adaptation through cooperation, continuity through extinction, and stability through transformation. Her work reflects a full assimilation of the paradigm shift I trace across the century.

## Chapters

In my first chapter, “Tracking Frank Norris’s ‘Something Four-Footed,’ ” I examine works by Frank Norris and Jack London as examples from naturalism’s classic period. In the first four sections of this chapter, I investigate how Norris’s stories, novels, and nonfiction essays reflect a conflict current in the intellectual climate at the turn of the last century between humanist, essentialist beliefs about human nature and the challenges Darwin’s ideas posed to such beliefs. The “text” that unfolds across Norris’s career resists a deterministic view of human nature yet fails to provide an alternative; the “human” self he imagines in opposition to the “animal” relies unstably upon gendered performances of difference that interfere with the universal “brotherhood” he envisions as the end result of American progress. In the final section of the chapter, I address issues of critical reception, comparing Norris’s treatment of the “brute,” a recurrent trope of animality in his work which he often sets in “contest” against the human, to the unfavorable critical treatment Jack London received for his prehistoric novel *Before Adam*, which features an apelike prehuman character and his twentieth-century descendant. Through this comparison, I illustrate how the impact of evolutionary narratives on literary ones affected the representation and reception of the white male

subject as protagonist, a figure traditionally ascribed a “human” privilege upon which he could no longer reliably depend.

“Natural History as National History in Morrison and Faulkner” considers novels in which the historically parallel and congruently controversial discourses of abolition and evolution intersect. This chapter begins with a discussion of the history and etymology invoked when Morrison juxtaposes the two terms “human” and “animal” in *Beloved*. The relationship between these two terms has always been unstable, contentious, and open to interpretation and exploitation, but the problem of defining the “human” after publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, two years before the start of the Civil War, only becomes more complex. Following this introduction, I address the evolving definition of the “human” as it is represented in *Beloved* and *Go Down, Moses*. By examining complementary scenes in which the “animal” and the “human” are juxtaposed, I explore the complexity of this cultural discourse through fictions of the American South. These scenes, though somewhat recalling the “contests” in Norris’s novels differ in important ways, most notably in the representation of an intersection between narratives of “nature” and the nation. Unlike earlier naturalists such as Norris and London, who imagine evolution and its implications within broad and often abstract narratives of “human” progress, Faulkner and Morrison specifically rewrite national history—the Civil War, its causes, its consequences—through the lens of natural history. Although an exclusionary definition of the “human” was used to justify slavery, Morrison and Faulkner show how new knowledge of descent from a common ancestor begins to undermine its foundations. Used originally to re-describe the forms and functions of nonhuman “nature,” evolutionary language also re-inscribes the “human” within these

narratives. This language, I argue, continues to evolve beyond its practical uses in the sciences into a creative and critical discourse of reflection, self-redefinition and, potentially, social reform.

My third chapter, “Evolution as Apocalypse in Butler and Malamud,” shifts in focus from fictions about the past to fictions about the future, as I analyze responses by Octavia Butler and Bernard Malamud—respectively, the *Xenogenesis Trilogy* and *God’s Grace*—to Darwin’s conclusion in *The Origin of Species* that “not one species now living will transmit its unaltered likeness to a distant futurity” (647). This prediction includes the human species, and though much late twentieth-century discussion of the posthuman has centered around the disembodiment of information associated with cybernetics, theorists such as Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway have questioned this trend, arguing that information cannot be separated from its medium, including the bodies of human and nonhuman animals. Though Butler’s odyssey of extraterrestrial encounters and Malamud’s contemporary beast fable may seem an odd set of texts to compare, both invoke tropes of animality as a means of reinstantiating human identity through embodiment. Both portray the posthuman as a biocultural phenomenon rather than a cybernetic one, redirecting speculation about the next evolutionary step back towards the body. Whereas cybernetics posits a kind of immortality through technology (scanning a human brain and uploading the individual into a digital medium), biocultural evolution, as these novels represent it, entails mutation, transformation, and, ultimately, extinction. The same Darwinian narratives that appear positive when employed to describe evolutionary “progress” of the past become frighteningly “animal,” alien, and dystopic when applied to a posthuman future.

“Albee’s *Animals*,” returns the project from past and future to the present by looking at Edward Albee’s treatment of definitions of the “human.” In this final chapter, I argue that, by highlighting the importance of language in the creation of identity, Albee exposes the “human” as itself a construction—valuable yet vulnerable to the limitations of self-definition. *Seascape*, which depicts an encounter between a human couple and a pair of giant lizards who have just emerged from the sea, represents a response to evolutionary narrative that inquires into the positive role language may play in the human relationships which will propel whatever is to be the next evolutionary step for us. Contrastingly, *The Goat or, Who Is Sylvia?*, Albee’s first play written after September 11, 2001, offers a much more pessimistic view. Language, though a quintessentially human trait, fails catastrophically, as the protagonist attempts repeatedly to describe his romantic attachment to a female goat. When he finally succeeds in explaining this relationship to his wife, he simultaneously destroys her understanding of her own humanness by deconstructing distinctions between humanity and animality. Through these staged encounters and exchanges, Albee suggests that the stories we tell ourselves about human difference (our cultural inheritance) cover up difficult truths about our embodied existence (“natural” inheritance); these same stories have the potential to become dangerous fictions when we cease to accept their basic narrative premises and foundational metaphors.

## CHAPTER ONE:

## Tracking Frank Norris's "Something Four-Footed"

## Images of the Sphinx

In an essay entitled "The 'Nature' Revival" (1902), Frank Norris praises what he observes as the "return to nature" in American literature, a trend he describes as an "unerring groping backward toward the fundamentals, in order to take a renewed grip upon life" (107). Noting that "It is hardly possible to pick up a magazine now that does not contain the story of some animal hero" (107), Norris more earnestly claims for nature a literary function vital not merely as entertainment but as a rich source of metaphor and a resource that expands the scope of mimesis by extending the scope of what is relevant to human life. He writes,

The sun has come in and the great winds and the smell of the baking alkali on the Arizona deserts, and the reek of the tar weed on the Colorado slopes; and nature has ceased to exist as a classification of science, has ceased to be *mis*-understood as an aggregate of botany, zoology, geology, and the like, and has become a thing intimate and familiar and rejuvenating. (108)

In his own fiction Norris relies on the symbolic power of landscape to evoke the futility of human resistance to natural forces, as in *McTeague*'s conclusion in Death Valley.

More persistently and provocatively, however, he "grope[s] backward toward the fundamentals" by engaging with turn-of-the-century conversations about evolution that redirect questions of humanness—of human identity, meaning, and purpose—"backward" from the special design of a supernatural creator to the more humbling and

uncertain “fundamentals” of natural selection. Throughout his work, Norris revives nature not as simple entertainment or mere symbol but as “a thing intimate and familiar” by representing *human* nature as a thing itself inseparable from its animal past.<sup>1</sup>

Images of the sphinx bracket Norris’s career. His fascination with this figure suggests that his engagement with such “fundamentals” ends not with resolution or closure but with questions, questions concerning human identity, meaning, and purpose. His first novel, *Vandover and the Brute* (1914),<sup>2</sup> opens with the death of Vandover’s mother at a railroad depot where

a locomotive, sitting back on its motionless drivers like some huge sphinx crouching along the rails, was steaming quietly, drawing long breaths. (4)

Alive, brooding, and ominous, the simile symbolically situates Vandover’s internal struggle between his “brute” self (214) and his “better” self (214) within a cultural context of scientific, technological, and intellectual uncertainties, in which the “humanness” of the human subject has begun to erode.<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere in his fiction, in *The Octopus* (1901) for instance, the locomotive represents the amoral strength of an evolutionary “progress” of civilization that propels the human species forward but crushes individuals like sheep. At the beginning of *Vandover and the Brute*, the image evokes the infamous riddle: “What has four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?”<sup>4</sup> The terms of the sphinx’s riddle suggest a human version of the mortal’s journey from infancy to old age shared by all living creatures. The sphinx’s form, however, half human and half lion, instead symbolizes the dichotomy—both internal and external—between humanity and animality that has haunted the Western imagination since God first granted Adam the power to

name the other animals. Through the juxtaposition of a human head and an animal body, the sphinx's form expresses opposition and a hierarchy between the "human" mind and the "animal" body absent from the terms of her question.<sup>5</sup> The confusing "nature" of the riddle arises from this disjunction between phrase and figure, for the traditional answer to the original question, "man," becomes in Norris's work merely another question: "What is man?" Or, more accurately, "What does it mean to be human?" Vandover himself becomes "something four-footed" (276) and "no longer human" (275) when he, like Norris and many of his contemporaries reeling in the wake of Darwin's (r)evolutionary theory leveling differences between humans and other animals, loses his capacity to imagine a response.

As a visual metaphor for the "internal caesurae" that often divide Norris's characters against themselves, the sphinx looms iconically across the trajectory of his career.<sup>6</sup> Its reappearance at the end of *The Pit* (1902), Norris's final novel, suggests that he has convinced himself ultimately of an answer to the riddle neither by the dissolution of boundaries separating "brute" from "better" selves nor by the possibility of a fully integrated human subject independent from the influence of the "brute." Though he experiments with each solution in *The Pit*, the former remains untenable, a capitulation to the "cruel cult of self" he feminizes through Laura Jadwin's uncontrollable sexuality (388). The latter is a contradiction in terms that remains unresolved. As the Jadwins depart from Chicago, Curtis, "studying a railroad folder" (403), looks literally to the road ahead and metaphorically to the path of remaking himself as a man after his nearly fatal encounter with the "tremendous cloaca" of the wheat "pit" (73). Laura, however, looks out the window of their carriage to see

the Board of Trade building, black, monolithic, crouching on its foundations like a monstrous sphinx with blind eyes, silent, grave—crouching there without a sound, without sign of life, under the night and the drifting veil of rain. (403)

The symbol of so much conflict in their lives as individuals and as a couple, this “monstrous” last image of the novel (and lasting image of Norris’s career as a novelist) remaps the idealism of the new beginning Curtis envisions. Though silent and lifeless, the sphinx foreshadows a future in which Laura and Curtis will be “starting all over again” (400)—yet a future only as promising as the Board of Trade building’s “grapple of armies” of speculators that will again “commence at daylight” (36).

The future implied in the image assures not a resolution but a repetition of their “great crisis” (389), which also represents a repetition of Norris’s own “great crisis” as an artist. Not only does he set out for himself the task of reintegrating their individually fractured subjectivities and reuniting them as a couple but, in doing so, he also seeks to find a way of reconciling the thinking “human” head with the desiring “animal” body. The hallmark of his fiction is that, in attempt after attempt, he never succeeds. Not unlike Vandover, Norris views such reconciliation as a categorical impossibility. The “great crisis” between “brute” and “better” selves is an all-or-nothing contest with no room for compromise.

In the discussion that follows, I develop my claim that Norris’s representation of the human subject as irreconcilably divided against itself reflects a conflict current in the intellectual climate at the turn of the last century between humanist, essentialist beliefs about human nature and the challenges Darwin’s ideas posed (and continue to pose) to

such beliefs. By first considering, in the second section, Norris's narrative strategy and then analyzing, in the third and fourth sections, how he applies this strategy within individual works, I aim to show how the "text" that unfolds across his career urges a rethinking of naturalism itself as a literary mode. Rather than the commonly perceived expression of a philosophy of determinism, I argue that Norris's naturalism instead contests a deterministic view of human nature yet fails to provide an alternative. At least part of the reason for this failure, I contend, is that the "human" self Norris imagines in opposition to the "animal" relies upon a gendered performance of difference as deceptive as the performance of gender itself. In the fifth and final section, I conclude by broadening my discussion of naturalism to issues of critical reception, comparing Norris's treatment of Vandover as a fictional artist to the critical treatment Jack London received for his prehistoric novel *Before Adam* (1906). Entrenched in a culture of humanism, critics have taken nearly a century to refine a language for addressing the kinds of creative explorations naturalists were attempting. Writers like Norris and London anticipated posthumanist challenges to the construction of "human" identity before we knew what posthumanism was. Reexamining their work today challenges us to reevaluate the biases and boundaries of our own discipline.

#### Moments of "Great Crisis"

Norris communicates his philosophical imperative through a narrative technique reliant in both form and content on the repetition of what he describes as the "pivotal event" ("Mechanics" 114). Like Laura Jadwin, Vandover, too, in the climactic moment of his struggle between "better" and "brute" selves, "felt that he was at the great crisis of his

life” (*Vandover* 214). In *McTeague*, “the old battle, old as the world” (28), develops into the final confrontation between McTeague and Marcus, in which “The brute that in [McTeague] slept so close to the surface” (328) causes the flight and fight that destroys both of them. In *A Man’s Woman* (1899), Lloyd Searight faces yet “Another battle with the Enemy [...] who, though conquered on a hundred fields, must inevitably triumph in the end” (105). These similar moments of “great crisis” in the content of each novel reflect the strategy of form Norris outlines in “The Mechanics of Fiction” (1901), an essay laying out for would-be novelists his own “formula” for writing fiction (114).

Though this formula may seem at first more observational than original, Norris’s investment in what he calls the “pivotal event” reflects the character of the intellectual and artistic challenge he assumes for himself. He explains,

it is hard to get away from that thing in any novel which let us call the pivotal event. All good novels have one. It is the peg upon which the fabric of the thing hangs, the nucleus around which the shifting drifts and currents must—suddenly—coagulate, the sudden releasing of the brake to permit for one instant the entire machinery to labour, full steam, ahead. Up to that point the action must lead; from it, it must decline. (114)

The disparate series of metaphors—peg, nucleus, locomotive—suggests an almost desperate yet “unerring groping” for some language that effectively conveys the importance of these pivotal events. Even the energy of his syntax replicates in miniature how “the approach, the leading up to the pivotal moment must be infinitely slower than the decline” (114). Building gradually, the third sentence gathers momentum and itself coagulates around the word “suddenly,” as it releases its braking metaphors and rushes

head on into the inevitability of the next sentence, “that point the action must lead.” After this, the decline is immediate, for nothing else matters after its “great crisis” has confirmed a novel’s chief characters as one or another of their “other” selves (*Vandover* 214).

In the first paragraph of the essay, Norris alludes to the nature of the stakes involved in crafting the pivotal event; he views them as indicators of the degree to which a work of fiction represents a greater purpose shared by all meaningful human endeavors. To illustrate, he draws a parallel between writing fiction and “all human occupations, trades, arts or businesses,” in which, he insists,

there exists, way at the bottom, a homogeneity and a certain family likeness that, quite possibly after all, the discussion of the importance of the mechanics of fiction may be something more than mere speculative sophistry. (113)

His phrasing elides differences between the products of nature and the production of art and reveals another dimension to the literary trend he names the “‘Nature’ Revival.” Can the “mechanics of fiction” really have their source in the same wellspring of nature that produces “family likeness”? Norris appears to believe they do, for he suggests that a work of literature, through its pivotal event, should carry resonance recognizable as something like a voice of the species. “Homogeneity” indicates the similarity—or, “family likeness”—among human endeavors that in some way identifies them elusively yet unmistakably as “human.”

This “homogeneity,” however, hints at paradox. Norris further explains his aesthetic in another essay “Salt and Sincerity” (1902), where he illustrates “the

productive power of the writer” through what he envisions as “a silver cord of finest temper that only needs to be kept in tune” (207). This “cord” signifies the convergence of (natural) life and the (human) arts, for “Life and expression are two parts of the same instrument” (208). To keep the “instrument” in tune, writers “must go once in so often to the great Tuner—to Nature” (208), in order to seek out “those places where the Master Note sounds” (209). Though somewhat ambiguous in meaning, “Master Note” seems to refer to the originating powers of nature to self-create, for the places one might hear it include “the wildernesses, the plains, the wide-rimmed deserts” (209). Also, he adds, “You can hear it in the cry of the lynx, the chant of the wild goose, the call of the moose, and the ‘break’ of the salmon in the deeper pools below the cataract” (209). Though even the “war whoop of the savage” sounds this “Master Note” (209), “Man” can only respond—react—to it through the “silver cord” of the imagination, which, like an aeolian harp, “attunes itself to it, vibrates with its vibration, thrills with its quivering, beats with its rhythm, and [...] lives again with its great, pure, elemental life” (“Salt” 210).<sup>7</sup> The role of the artist is to empathize not with other human beings but with nature, and fiction, like the other arts, has meaning and purpose only in so far as it registers such an empathy with the “fundamentals” of creation. Nature provides both source and substance of art; humanity’s role as mere distant cousin—or prodigal offspring—is passively reactive. At stake in this aesthetic is the trick of reasserting human difference at a historical moment when the boundaries of “family likeness” separating human experience, history, and culture from the workings of nonhuman nature had come increasingly into question.

The last two paragraphs of “The Mechanics of Fiction” offer clues to Norris’s logic in crafting the pivotal events that unfold as a repeating series from Vandover’s

“great crisis” to Laura Jadwin’s. Though downplaying the value of what he approaches as a “defective system” (117), Norris’s concluding remarks resemble as much a technical guide for others’ efforts as a rubric for evaluating his own. If writers cannot manage the preferred strategy of building momentum towards a single pivotal event, the “unskilled,” Norris concedes,

may consider each chapter as a unit, distinct, separate, having a definite beginning, middle, and end, the action continuous, containing no breaks in time, the locality unchanged throughout [...]. Each chapter thus treated is a little work in itself, and the great story of the whole novel is told thus as it were in a series of pictures, the author supplying the information as to what has intervened between the end of one chapter and the beginning of the next by suggestion or by actual *résumé*. As often as not the reader himself can fill up the gap by the contest. (117)

Norris’s own novels often have more than one moment of “great crisis.,” but, more importantly, the novels (and even many of the short stories), when read more or less consecutively, align themselves into chapter-like divisions resembling the “series of pictures” described here. The utility of this “defective system” lies in its flexibility and openness, which allows a writer to expand or contract the length of each “little work” to suit the distinctive purpose and rhetorical needs of his or her own “great story.” In his invitation to “fill up the gaps,” Norris also recommends a readerly aesthetic that partially shifts the burden of resolving the “contest” to the imagination of readers.

Many authors likewise repeat variations on the same “great story,” but pivotal events, even crises, need not be *contests*. The last sentence of this penultimate paragraph

of “The Mechanics of Fiction” demonstrates how much personal stock Norris places in the contest itself as a primary narrative device and to what extent he relies on it in his work as both form and content. Readers understand the directive of the text easily, without intervention from the author, “by the contest.” That is, the substance speaks from the center of the system. Etymologically, “contest” denotes “joint witness” or “witnessing together,” as in a court of law (OED), and, for Norris, it connotes a scene of trial. His pivotal events *contest*—or, put on trial—human difference through the device of the *contest* between “brute” and “better” selves, self and other, man and woman. Through “a series of pictures,” including novel-length pictures, his own “great story” manifests itself as that singular contest implicit for him in the oxymoronic term “human nature.” Central to Norris’s fiction, this contest suggests an agonistic rather than deterministic view of human nature, an anthropogenic striving towards an ideal of humanness that yet guarantees, under the “monstrous” gaze of the sphinx, neither personal growth nor evolutionary development.

### Caged Lions

Around the same time Norris was working on “themes” related to *Vandover and the Brute* and *McTeague* (McElrath 141), he completed a short story entitled “A Caged Lion” (1894). The story recounts a visit to the circus by a former adventurer who briefly relives the thrill of past encounters with wild animals when a mishap during the lion show requires him to intervene with his own talents to rescue the circus’s own “world’s greatest lion tamer” (96). In “A Caged Lion,” Norris casts the opposition between the “human” and the “animal” as a contest between a man and a troupe of circus lions. His

characterization of humanness as a performance rather than a substantive difference dramatizes, as spectacle, the energy of what he later reevaluates as an interior conflict.

From the outset, the story's setting suggests the self-conscious construction of an artificial divide. After introducing Toppan, the adventurer who returns from "Thibet [sic] and Africa" to get married and thereby to become "a bank clerk instead of an explorer" (94), the narrator promptly accompanies him inside the circus arena, where

The ring in the middle was fenced by a great circular iron cage. The tiers of seats rose around this, a band was playing in a box over the entrance, and the whole interior was lighted by an electric globe slung over the middle of the cage. (95)

Not only indicating the relationship as one of detachment between audience and action, the setting also suggests a contrast between the privileges of modernity and the primitive dangers they restrain. Indeed, the setting implies that the audience's detachment (and hence safety) is possible only as a result of the human-made barrier of iron fencing that separates man from beast and the technological knowledge, symbolized by the electric lighting, that similarly permits human spectatorship and exploitation of animals as categorically Other. The band playing represents further human distraction from the action to follow. Human detachment from the challenges animals literally and symbolically pose relies on the construction of a competing reality, a human-controlled environment distinct from the animals' more natural habitats of wilderness, jungle, desert, and plains.

Following the description of setting, stunts performed by the animals inside the ring reinforce the believability of this construction. A dancing bear is passively

“prodded” by a keeper in lederhosen, clearly displaying indications of abuse from his “mangy” coat to a “steel muzzle” that “had chafed him” (95). In a grotesque exhibit of “elephantine mirth,” a “clown elephant,” dressed up in a ridiculous costume, “had lunch with his keeper” (96), and, finally, a pack of dogs “bounded and tumbled” into the ring, “barking and grinning all over, jumping up on their stools and benches, wriggling and pushing one another about, giggling and excited like so many kindergarten children” (96). In each act, along with their tricks, the animals also perform a contrived animality that, as Toppan observes, represents the degree to which humans have “corrupted” them by subjugating, objectifying, and degrading them (95). Only through this contrivance and corruption can the spectators and trainers themselves perform their difference by way of contrast. Human difference, Norris suggests, is as much a performance as the unnatural antics of the animals in the ring. The only real difference is that the human characters think they control the show.

Toppan, however, has a better understanding of where he stands in relation to the animals, and Norris positions him from the beginning as a foil to the other human characters. Throughout the earlier acts, the narrator hints, “we had been hearing from time to time a great sound, half-whine, half-rumbling guttural cough, that came from somewhere behind the exit from the cage” (96). This ominous noise “repeated at rapidly decreasing intervals” and “sounded cruel and menacing, and when at its full volume the wood of the benches under us thrilled and vibrated” (96). As the lions restlessly await their turn as the featured attraction, their voices comment with a power greater than words not only on the cruel charades enacted in the ring but also on the tenuousness of all of these performances, including their own. The audience literally can feel the lions’

threat to their seats of power, a threat that intensifies as the lions “came in, one after the other, with long, crouching, lurching strides, not at all good-humoredly [...] but with low-hanging heads, surly, watchful, their eyes burning with the rage and hate that burned in their hearts and that they dared not vent” (97). The lions cooperate, but they do not perform their animality submissively as the others do. When the lion tamer commands them to jump on a see-saw, “Slowly, and with twirling tails, two of them obeyed,” but “all the while their great eyes flamed with the detestation [...] of this hourly renewed humiliation and degradation” (97). Unlike the bear, the elephant, and the dogs, the lions play their role in the show but never become corrupted by their participation, and they never perform an animality other than their own.

The lions’ very threat is what makes the spectacle of their performance so enthralling, for it reminds the audience of the reasons for their own participation. Evoking the “Master Note,” Toppan tells the narrator that if he were to look into the lions’ eyes, he “would see Africa, and unnamed mountains, and great stony stretches of desert, with hot blue shadows and plains of salt, and lairs in the jungle grass” (97). Norris’s emphasis on their voices and eyes, features often associated with “human” capacities for individuality, independence, and agency, signals not only the threat they pose as predators but, as such, the challenges they also present to constructions of animality that support so many illusions about human difference—illusions, he also suggests, that the artist, in the guise of Toppan, must take some responsibility for exposing. Under the right conditions, a man or woman is still a lion’s prey.

Toppan’s insight thus prepares him to play the role of hero when the “great crisis” at last arrives. On its surface, even this contest between human ingenuity and leonine

ferocity may appear to contribute only to the story's layering of clichés. The lion tamer, of course, daringly and stupidly sticks his head inside the mouth of one of the lions. Just as the audience gasps in amazement at this "great show of strength" (98), the lion tamer finds himself in a position more precarious than he has intended. With his head encircled by the jaws of one lion and surrounded in a locked cage by other lions, "the electric light above him cackled harshly, guttered, dropped down to a pencil of dull red, then went out, and the place was absolutely dark" (98). So much for the powers of technology to illuminate human error. This pivotal moment, the first of two key events, initiates the suspense leading up to the second, Toppan's even more climactic intervention. Not surprisingly, the lions recognize their opportunity for revenge, and Toppan, at the last, steals all the applause for himself by rescuing their victim with a clever skill acquired during his years as an adventurer. In this reading, the lions become merely Norris's callow metaphor for Toppan himself, the noble "caged lion" trapped by the civilizing bars of marriage and yearning for moments of "great crisis" like this in which to relive his adventures. The story ends with Toppan back at home discussing making butterflies out of tissue-paper with his wife.

Norris, however, overcomes the story's clichés through allusions that infuse Toppan's victory with unsettling questions about the "nature" of human difference. The circus's lion tamer forfeits control of the performance—his and the lions'—when he must meet them on their own "animal" terms, for they have real advantages he lacks. The lions are stronger and outnumber him, and they can see in the dark where his whip, posturing, and commands are useless. Until Toppan intervenes, all the audience can hear are "the long snarls of satisfied hate and revenge, muffled by the man's clothes and the *rip, rip* of

the cruel, blunt claws” (100). As the action moves from seeing to hearing, Toppan, like the lions themselves, takes advantage of the darkness by imitating the sound of a snake, a sound they “had heard before in their native hunting grounds in the earlier days of summer” (102). Hearing it again, “their heads drew together between their shoulders, their great eyes grew small and glittering, the hackles rose and stiffened on their backs, their tails drooped, and they backed slowly to the farther side of the cage and cowered there, whining and beaten” (102). While the lion tamer remains at the mercy of the animals when he loses his means of coercion, Toppan instead relies not on the “animal” sense of sight but on *insight*, proving his humanness ironically by outsmarting the lions in his performance not as a man but as another animal.

The irony of Toppan’s performance as a snake resonates biblically, for the lions are not the only ones he scares. When the narrator begins to hear “the noise of the whistling of a fine whiplash, mingled with the whirr of a locust magnified a hundred times, and ended in an abrupt clacking noise thrice repeated,” it made him “shrink anew and close [his] eyes and teeth and shudder as though some cold slime had been poured through the hollow of [his] bones where the marrow should be” (101). Toppan’s performance fills the narrator with a sense of internal foreboding that suggests a resistive and primal triggering of both physical and cultural instinct, for the nature of his fear—the fear of the serpent—blurs boundaries between the knowledge of real and imagined dangers.

Unlike the lions, who simply hear another dangerous animal, the narrator recalls Genesis, and the language of his fear expresses uncertainties about both the ambiguity of

human origins and the anthropomorphic possibilities of remaking the human subject through art. He

remembered where [he] had heard it before, because, having once heard the hiss of an aroused and angry serpent, no child of Eve can ever forget it [...]. All the filthy wickedness and abominable malice of the centuries since the Enemy first entered into that shape that crawls, was concentrated in that hoarse, whistling hiss. (101)

Though Adam already has the power of naming by this time, the moment of transgression Norris alludes to in the biblical account is when the human species permanently splits off from the other animals; eating the apple proffered by “the Enemy” means challenging the “natural” order God has established. Paradoxically, the same act reveals the knowledge that, nonetheless, humans start out just like every other animal. Performance of difference begins with the knowledge of sameness and the shame that accompanies it—knowledge, shame, and performance represented when Adam and Eve recognize their “animal” nakedness and, in a first gesture of anthropomorphism, cover up. The significance of this gesture, Derrida contends, cannot be underestimated, for “Dressing oneself would be inescapable from all the other forms of what is proper to man, even if one talks about it less than speech or reason, the *logos*, history, laughing, mourning, burial, the gift, and so on” (“The Animal” 373). Toppan’s performance as a snake, though contesting the “natural” order in which humans are the prey of lions, also defines human difference as the ability to “dress”— to manipulate and transform—nature but never transcend it. The un(re)dressed irony remains that animality, not divinity, still underlies a difference of degree rather than kind.

More in agreement than disagreement with a Darwinian account of human origins, the interpretation of Genesis implied in “A Caged Lion” promotes speculation about Norris’s position in relation to versions of a positive, purposeful, “human” evolution like those proposed by late nineteenth-century scientific philosophers such as Joseph LeConte and Herbert Spencer.<sup>8</sup> For LeConte, in particular, the purpose of evolution is not merely progress among all forms of life but, specifically, the perfecting of humankind. Impressed by Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection but unwilling to accept its full application to humans, LeConte concedes that “the structural differences between man and the anthropoid apes are probably not as great as between the sheep and the deer family” (qtd. in Stephens 179). However, he claims that “consciousness, will, intelligence, memory, love, hate, [and] fear” (qtd. in Stephens 179-180) elevate humanity above other animals and lead to “the unification of man’s spirit with the Divine spirit” (Stephens 180).<sup>9</sup> LeConte, Norris’s zoology professor at Berkeley, clearly had some influence over his thinking (Bender 32), but Norris also expresses doubt about the inevitability of fulfilling LeConte’s vision of theistic evolution. Deterministic to the extent that he accepts creatureliness as an unavoidable fact of human existence, Norris, in addition, investigates possibilities for a “human” evolution that depends not on communion by the entire species with a superior and supernatural entity, as LeConte argues, but on the strength of the individual anthropomorphic impulse. In Norris’s agonistic view, the re-imagining and remaking of a “better” self—the responsive striving towards an ideal rather than merely the possession of a distinguishing set of qualities—define what it means to be human.

In *Vandover and the Brute*, Norris transfers the re-imagining and remaking of the human subject from external spectacle to internal struggle, as he himself progresses in his intentions as a writer from producing entertainment to practicing the more serious, introspective, and self-reflective work of the artist. When Vandover goes to visit Ida Wade, the woman whose fate becomes so central to his own, Norris lingers over the details of her parlor, details that include a mantelpiece, over which, not surprisingly,

hung a large and striking picture, a species of cheap photogravure, a lion lying in his cage, looking mildly at the spectator over his shoulder. In front of the picture were real iron bars, with real straw tucked in behind them.

(71)

The lion reappearing in the picture, a focal point in the room, remains the object of human gaze. While this caged lion also gazes back, however, he does so from the location of distance occupied by human spectators in the short story. The repositioning is disorienting. Norris does not make clear who is watching whom, thereby displacing the symbolic contest for human difference by shifting attention from confrontations between “man” and animals to conflicts between men and women. Relationships in *Vandover and the Brute* reiterate but refract the problematic dichotomy between human and animal—self and Other—that “A Caged Lion” explores by splitting humanness confusingly and inconsistently along the lines of gender. Neither more nor less real than the bars surrounding the ring in “A Caged Lion,” these “real bars” with “real straw” represent the necessity of constructing boundaries in the performance of difference, whether between humans and animals, men and women, or competing selves within a single, fractured human subject. Mediating not only between spectator and spectacle, subject and object,

these “real” bars also mediate between the work of the imagination and the workings of nature and society.

While never directly paralleling “A Caged Lion,” *Vandover and the Brute* echoes relationships in the earlier story first through social and sexual contests and later through both Ida’s and Vandover’s individual contests with internally competing selves. From the outset, Vandover recognizes the role of his own “brute” desire in “the eager evil curiosity of the schoolboy” (11), but other childhood experiences lead to a divided sensibility that causes him to project the contest for human difference onto women. This projection begins early, for in “the Bible which he read Sunday afternoons, because his father gave him a quarter for doing so, he came across a great many things that filled him with vague and strange ideas” (9-10). Seeking answers to the “vague and strange ideas” alluded to in phrases like “ ‘all women in the perils of childbirth’ ” from more reliable sources, like *Encyclopedia Britannica*, he learns the “terse and brutal truth” (10). Yet, culture and science both fail Vandover in his search for answers, as perhaps they did in similar ways for Norris and his contemporaries. Vandover conflates the real with the fictive, crossbreeding empirical facts with cultural explanations and confusing moral knowledge with knowledge of the body. Women become responsible for the “terse and brutal truth” about the similarities humans share with other animals and thus bear greater responsibility for anthropomorphic transformation because they have more to transcend. He holds them, not himself, responsible for upholding society’s standards of humanness, and he also holds them responsible for his own double descent. When he understands the role of women in his own birth, “The whole of his rude little standard of morality was lowered immediately. Even his mother, whom he had always believed to be some kind of

an angel fell at once in his estimation” (10-11). After Ida’s death, he copes with the guilt of date rape by arguing, “It’s the woman’s fault that men are what they are. If they demanded a higher moral standard, the men would come up to it; they encourage a man to go to the devil” (99). By projecting the contest for human difference onto women, Vandover divests himself of responsibility not only for Ida’s fate but for his own.

Norris suggests that Vandover’s distorted view of women arises from a failure of imagination that appears long before his four-footed alter ego actually emerges. Animalizing him from the outset, Norris attributes a young Vandover with “the crude raw innocence of the boy, like that of a young animal, at once charming and absurd” (9), but he is also a “young animal” who develops “the instinct of a young brute” (10). Animality, Norris implies, is normal, becoming a problem only when a character fails to take responsibility for performing his difference; the “young animal” turns into a “young brute” instead of a young man when he becomes aware of his creatureliness but finds no internal impetus for change. Lacking the anthropomorphic impulse, Vandover depends on the unreliable influence of his environment for the performance of his humanness. The “pliability” (27) of character that allows him to “rearrange himself” (17) to fit into different environments also restrains the “young brute” only to an extent determined by external conditions for the sake of keeping up appearances. His “yielding disposition,” for example, helps him overcome his resistance to attending Harvard at the expense of his dreams of going to Paris to study art (19), and “Before the end of the first semester he had become to all outward appearances a typical Harvardian” (17). Crucial to the preservation of his humanness are these and other “outward appearances,” for in the progression towards the pivotal event in which Vandover openly confronts his “brute”

self, Norris removes all external means of performing difference—first religion, which Vandover equates with “childish ideals” (10), and later, the expectations of a society that censures him for his role in Ida’s suicide by ostracizing him. Like “the world’s greatest lion-tamer,” Vandover has nothing left when his environment fails him.

Vandover’s degeneration by no means represents a firm endorsement by Norris of the anthropomorphic models of humanness most present in his society. Alternatives to the “brute” Vandover becomes include the “Old Gentleman” (15), Vandover’s morally upstanding but dead father and the “old-fashioned” family of his would-be girlfriend, Turner Ravis (80). The only other human “ideal” in the novel is Charlie Geary, an unappealing character whose “humanity” Norris represents as the calculating self-control and ruthless dominance he exerts over his environment by manipulating Vandover’s weaknesses for sex, gambling, and drinking and betraying his trust. These, too, are failures of the imagination. Vandover’s father and the Ravis family are emotionally disconnected from their larger environments. Their realities appear obsolescent in comparison to the one Vandover and his friends inhabit, their traditional values fading in relevance. Charlie Geary’s “reality” leads to his deliberately exploitative mishandling of the Wade family’s lawsuit against Vandover and interferes with the emotional imagination necessary for an empathic response to Vandover’s consequent suffering. Yet, Norris’s “sympathies,” Donald Pizer rightly points out, “are all with the Vandovers” (42); through Vandover and Ida, Norris expresses but critiques the anthropomorphic models represented by these other characters.

The terrible and unjust social consequences, for example, of Ida’s lost virginity at the end of the chapter in which she meets Vandover in her parlor contest the unnatural

values of the society expressed in this room. In addition to the caged lion, the structure of the mantelpiece itself and all of its gaudy decorations suggest this conflict:

The mantelpiece was of white marble with gray spots; on one side of it stood an Alaskan “grass basket” full of photographs, and on the other an inverted section of a sewer-pipe painted with daisies and full of gilded cattails tied with a blue ribbon. Near the piano straddled a huge easel of imitation brass upholding the crayon picture of Ida’s baby sister enlarged from a photograph. (70-71)

Gray tries desperately to transform white. Nature struggles stubbornly against the artificiality of painted plants and fake metal. Artifice transforms nature but relies on it for those “fundamentals” of form that underlie the paint and gilding. Artifice (rather than true art) itself contests the legitimacy of nature’s presence in this setting through a self-conscious and garishly exaggerated gesture of human difference.

More importantly, the exaggeration of difference in Ida’s parlor also contrasts society’s attempts to transform the “nature” of men and women with the rebellion against those attempts that occurs during the conclusion of the chapter at the Imperial, the nightclub where men drink and consort with prostitutes and Ida “abandoned herself” to Vandover (79). Though Vandover may be guilty of date rape, Ida, too, shares some complicity in what seems a mutual revolt against the social constraints that forbid the open expression of sexuality. Aware of the Imperial’s reputation but compelled by curiosity, it is she who initially broaches the subject (76), remarking against Vandover’s discouragement that she “heard of a very nice girl, a swell girl, going in there” (77). Ida’s choice to go to the Imperial parallels Vandover’s more reprehensible actions, for her own

evaluation of it as an acceptable venue for social activities, in spite of warnings, similarly contests the values implicit in her parlor.

Besides the caged lion above the mantelpiece, other, more understated allusions to “A Caged Lion” turn up in this chapter, too—reminders of the rebellion that animality symbolizes in relation to the artificial and often repressive performance of difference. Fire imagery recalls how the circus lions’ “great eyes flamed” and “[burned] with rage” (“Caged Lion” 97). A house fire down the street compels Ida and Vandover to leave the parlor to witness the “world of tumbling yellow smoke that made one’s eyes smart, and a great crackling and snapping of flames” (75). Upon leaving the scene of the fire, they wander aimlessly around the streets, eventually ending up at the Imperial, where Ida’s own “face was ablaze, her eyes flashing, her blond hair disordered and falling about her cheeks” (79). The caged lion thus presides over a contest between Vandover and Ida and within each of them individually. Whereas social expectations for women reinforce the need for a performance of femininity that leaves Ida few options, Norris transforms Vandover’s struggle for the preservation of his humanness into the novel’s pivotal event.

At this “great crisis of his life” (214), during which he must either commit to regaining control over his life or forego permanently his claims to respect and responsibility, Vandover has fully internalized the “monstrous” duality of the sphinx. Without the support of religion, family, friends, or society to help him resist the self-indulgent, self-destructive tendencies of the “deformed” and “hideous” creature that within him had “grown to be a monster” (214-215), he remembers what he believes to be “the one thing that could save him” (220). Namely, he “remembered his art” (220). Since the introduction of Vandover’s “artistic side” in the first chapter (11), art has helped him

cope with unpleasant realities. Notably, “In the same library where he found the famous encyclopedia article was ‘A Home Book of Art’ ” (12). Though “he might have been totally corrupted while in his earliest teens” (11), discovery of the art book offers him an opportunity to sublimate the “terse and brutal truth” he finds in the encyclopedia. In the art book, Vandover lingers over “many full-page pictures of lonely women, called ‘Reverie,’ or ‘Idylls,’ ideal ‘Heads’ of gypsy girls, of coquettes, and heads of little girls crowned with cherries and illustrative of such titles as ‘Spring,’ ‘Youth,’ and ‘Innocence’ ” (13). Though the sentimental fantasy these images depict relieves his horror at the facts of childbirth, the dramatic contrast between what he reads in the encyclopedia and what he sees in the art book borders on the grotesque. Neither represents a fully integrated female subject. Moreover, though Vandover prays “that he might become a great artist” himself (13), his escapism interferes with the maturation of his talent. Possessing good eyesight but poor insight, he lacks the vision to use his skills to mediate between the real and the ideal.

Lack of imagination thus not only distorts Vandover’s views of women but also interferes with his ability to see himself as human. His artistic sensibility remains, to his mind, “the one good thing that yet survived” (220), the only thing that inclines him, in words recalling LeConte’s “human” ideal, towards “a vague sense of those things which are too beautiful to be comprehended, of a nobility, of a self-oblivion, an immortal eternal love and kindness, all goodness, all benignity, all pity for sin, all sorrow for grief, all joy for the true, the right, and the pure” (213). This same artistic sensibility also gives him “his feeling for the flesh,” which allows him to sketch the nude models in a drawing class “better than anyone else in the school, perhaps better than anyone in the city” (66).

Instead of restoring only an awareness of “those things which are too beautiful to be comprehended,” Vandover’s artistic sensibility puts him in touch with both “animal” sensuality and “human” spirituality, though he accepts only the latter as “his real self,” the “true man” and the “better half of him [...] that could respond to the influences of his father and Turner Ravis (112). His crisis arises, in part, from his inability to integrate in his life or in his art his sense of “immortal eternal love” with “his feeling for the flesh.”

Through a single picture, Norris indicates that he most faults Vandover not for bad judgment in his personal affairs but for his artistic—and hence anthropomorphic—failure. For the duration of time between his return to San Francisco from Harvard and the scene of the novel’s pivotal event, Vandover has intermittently entertained “the idea for a great picture” that “was to be his first masterpiece” (64). In yet another echo of “A Caged Lion,” he conceptualizes this work as a final contest between man and beast:

A British cavalry man and his horse, both dying of thirst and wounds, were to be lost in a Sudanese desert, and in the middle distance on a ridge of sand a lion should be drawing in upon them, crouched on his belly, his tail stiff, his lower jaw hanging. (64)

By performing his role as servant to the man, the horse, like the man, has been beaten by other men as well as by nature. In the logic of the earlier story, he has, in the past, performed a contrived animality against which the man has asserted his difference through his dominance. Together, however, they remain at the mercy of what Norris suggests by the painting’s title as “The Last Enemy” (64)—the satanically symbolic beast who contests man’s difference, revealing it as a false construction in his threat to tear

apart the cavalry man and his horse and expose their sameness. The bars are now gone, and to the lion, both of them are flesh.

Symbolically, the confrontation in the picture represents Vandover's own "great crisis," in which "The Last Enemy" is part of himself. The picture becomes for him like the "optical machine" Agamben offers as a metaphor for the cultural process of anthropogenesis—that is, a "series of mirrors, in which man, looking at himself, sees his own image always already deformed in the features of an ape" (27). For Norris, the role of the artist—as creator or maker—is to respond by reforming the deformity, revising the ape into the image of an ideal worth striving for. Yet, as often as Vandover returns to his picture, he cannot decide "whether to represent [the cavalry man] facing death resignedly, calmly, or grasping the barrel of his useless rifle, determined to fight to the last" (64). Whether the cavalry man resigns calmly or fights against his fate with determination does not matter, Norris suggests, as long as he responds. The loss of Vandover's humanness coincides with his inability to finish the picture, for he lacks the ability to re-envision his own humanity in a way that can include his personal weaknesses. Although the "better Vandover" engages in "steady, earnest work" (221), the limitations of his imagination cage him, and he draws only "Grotesque and meaningless shapes" (225). The "brute" thus caged has no satisfactory answer to the sphinx's enduring riddle: "What is man?" When his "great crisis" ends in defeat, Vandover, "perfectly naked" (277) and "running along the floor upon the palms of his hands and his toes" (276), becomes her victim.

"Third" Selves

Though Norris continues to search for an answer to the sphinx, his efforts detour onto a course divided, among other things, by gender. Not only Vandover but Ida, too, falls victim to Norris's ambivalence about human difference. Her suicide reflects his choice not to address, in *Vandover and the Brute*, the difficulty of what his anthropomorphic vision of transformation might mean for women. Anthropomorphism is, by definition, anthropocentric, and, too often, "anthropocentric culture is androcentric culture" (Scholtmeijer 232). Relationships between men and women clearly complicate the ideal Norris cannot quite work out through Vandover alone. In *Moran of the Lady Letty* (1898), *Blix* (1899), and *A Man's Woman* (1899), female protagonists become integral. While Norris attempts to humanize the masculine subject through an adversative relationship with external Otherness, he divides the feminine subject internally through a psychological gesture of "identity ignoring self," exemplified by Laura Jadwin's "third" self that emerges at the end of *The Pit* (388). This "feminine" identity is fragmented and alienated from female characters' experiences as embodied beings, exposing the limitations of a human ideal reliant on a masculine encounter with the world.

Such limitations of the gendered imagination are the same ones that trap Vandover, and the concept of contest that engenders them deserves further reflection. The contests that shape Norris's narratives share qualities that Walter Ong attributes to humanity's long history of contest. "Contest," Ong explains, "is a part of human life everywhere that human life is found. In war and in games, in work and in play, physically, intellectually, and morally, human beings match themselves with or against one another" (15). This omnipresence of contest is significant because, Ong argues, it suggests "biological roots" as the basis for adversative behavior (20). Ong, though, does

not overemphasize these “roots” as a deterministic threat; rather, he explores adversative behaviors as indicators of the production of human consciousness, an ontological state he views as separated from its biological roots by “breaks, greater than quantum leaps” (20). Identifying “adversativeness” as “a paradigm for understanding our own existence” (15), Ong invokes the familiar Emersonian distinction between the “me” and the “not me,” stating that “in order to know myself, I must know that something else is not me and is (in some measure) set against me, psychologically as well as physically” (15-16). This is one quality Norris’s adversative relationships share with Ong’s paradigm of contest. Norris’s divided subjects represent the struggle to attain that “quantum leap” between physical and self-conscious existence. The difference between his figuration of this struggle and the underlying Christian ethos of Ong’s argument is that Norris remains unconvinced that “breaks greater than quantum leaps” really do separate mind from body or self from nature. In Ong’s terminology, Norris remains unconvinced that “I” am really separate from “my body” (32-33).

Less plausibly, however, Norris’s contests, like Ong’s paradigm, are also gendered. Ong again loosely relies on biological studies that, upon closer scrutiny, may or may not fully support his position, but his claim is this: “Need for the adversative is common to all human beings, male and female. But by and large through the entire animal kingdom, [...] conspicuous or expressed adversativeness is a larger element in the lives of males than of females” (51). Two reasons for this, Ong explains, are, first, that “the male’s psychological tendency to fight” results from his “adversary relationship with the environment, which has been seen to go back to the biological situation of the male embryo and fetus in the womb” and, second, that “Males are the expendable sex, [...] for

it is through the ceremonial struggle of males and its consequences that the gene pool is most altered” (56). Although the scientific studies he cites make no connection between male behavior and any index of humanness, and although Ong himself conspicuously tries to avoid this pitfall, his paradigm of contest, which implicitly links male adversativeness to the adversativeness that produces self-consciousness and hence humanness, implicitly renders the masculine more “human” than the feminine. For Ong, the “human” self, like the masculine self, is produced through relationships of adversity; the feminine self, in contrast, appears only as an absence, an elision, a “capitulation” to nature (to use Norris’s term for “feminine” submission), and thereby representative of a different order of being (77).

In Norris’s fiction, the “better” self and the “brute” are almost always both masculine, even when the character is a woman. Ong notes, “the only adversary who can enable one to establish male identity is another male” (78). While Vandover and McTeague, the more famous of Norris’s divided subjects, are male characters, just as many are female. Moran, Blix, Lloyd Searight, and Laura Jadwin all exemplify what Norris calls “a man’s woman,” a term which refers to a woman who initially exerts masculine dominance and purpose but later, in Moran’s words, becomes “not proud, and strong and independent” but “just a woman” (298). In Norris’s universe, a “man’s woman” begins her struggle with self by behaving like a man and ends by belonging to one. There is no place on his index of humanness for the feminine. For this reason, when Vandover submits to his “brute” self and loses his pride, his strength, and his independence, he becomes unmanned. As an unmanned man, Vandover cannot become “just a woman” like Moran or Lloyd; rather, he becomes the familiar “something four-

footed” (276) and “no longer human” (275). Indeed, “anthropocentric culture is androcentric culture” (Scholtmeijer 232). Dissociation of the feminine through construction of the “third” self ultimately renders Norris’s human ideal as “monstrous” as the sphinx’s own divided form.<sup>10</sup>

Femininity and masculinity, however, appear to complement each other without conflict in *Blix*, Norris’s novel about a superficially platonic friendship that ripens into love. The two protagonists, Blix and Condyl, grow from playful, androgynous, “fine, clean animals” (123), not unlike Vandover (the “young animal, at once charming and absurd”), into a humanness Norris equates with sexual maturity that involves “work and the world of men” (174). As the novel ends, they “take the first step beyond the confines of the garden wherein they had lived so joyously and learned to love each other” (174). As they leave the Garden, Norris divides their humanness between “All the fine, virile, masculine energy of him” and “All her sweet strong womanliness” (171). He grants both men and women responsibilities for supporting each other in the challenges that lie outside the Garden, a balance unavailable for Vandover, who projects all responsibility onto women. By encouraging Condyl’s professional ambitions, Blix “made a man of him,” causing “The very set of his mouth [to be] different; between the eyebrows the cleft had deepened; his voice itself vibrated to a heavier note” (161). Similarly, Condyl is the reason that “everything is changed” for Blix, who has “become—all of a sudden and without knowing it—a woman” (170). This balance gives Norris’s refiguring of the Fall its optimistic tone, for though they “[face] the gray and darkening Eastern sky” (174), the California couple also looks forward to a life together in New York, where Blix can pursue her dream of attending a women’s medical college and Condyl can accept an

assistant editorship at a magazine. Rather than a contest, the novel's pivotal event occurs when Blix and Condy concede their complementary differences as the foundation for their future companionship. Norris's unusually light-hearted and warm tone throughout this novel suggests a positive anthropomorphic ideal that identifies humanness—though it involves a loss of innocence—with mutually rewarding relationships and development of the self-awareness and empathy necessary to sustain them.

Clearly, *Blix* represents a wish-fulfillment, for its tone also disguises the problems that arise from gendering human relationships on the basis of socially constructed norms. Associating humanness with masculinity, as Norris does, for example, in *Moran of the Lady Letty*, restricts the real possibilities for a movement towards equality in human society congruent with Norris's notions of a progressive "human" evolution. To his credit, Norris exhibits an extraordinary ability to conceive of vibrant, original, and independent women, but though he seems to find this novel's protagonist, Moran Sternersen, compellingly attractive, he sacrifices the very qualities that make her appealing in an attempt to force the logic of an ideal in which adversativeness and dominance produce both the human and the masculine.

In particular, Norris identifies Moran's androgyny with both an immature state of individual development and a more primitive stage of human civilization—a stage defined more by "animal" instinct than "human" agency. During the novel's pivotal event, Norris conflates the contest for human difference with challenges involving gender and race that suggest the diminishment of race but the enhancement of gender as indicators of the advancement of civilization. Before Moran has the misfortune to discover she is "just a woman" (298), Norris assigns her attributes that defy all dividing

categories. Her "mate" onboard ship, Wilbur, notices this combination of attributes in "her splendid ropes of hair, her heavy contralto voice, and her fine animal strength of bone and muscle (admittedly greater than his own)" (229). She has womanly hair, a manly voice, and "animal" strength, combined with other traits suggestive of both human and masculine power, such as "her indomitable courage and self-reliance" and "her positive genius in the matters of seamanship and navigation" (229). However, Moran remains also "without sex, proud, untamed, splendid in her primal independence—a thing untouched and unsullied by civilization" (260). She has no need for men, but her independence makes her as dangerous as she is admirable. In *Vandover and the Brute*, Norris associates sex with the "animal" appetites of the uncivilized "brute," but in this novel, where gender constructions play a more significant role, it is human civilization that contextualizes sex. Through this reversal, Norris modifies his ideal of human difference by masculinizing it as a cultural means of legitimizing control over women like Moran who threaten a "civilized" social order. As "human" evolution continues and society progresses, woman displaces the animal as Other in the contest for transcendence—a contest in which, in this novel, "man" also displaces the "human."

During the pivotal event, another battle in his "series of pictures" against yet another "enemy" (282), Norris conflates human difference with differences of both race and gender, but whereas he treats race as a transient difference within a broader vision for "human" progress, gender remains one of the "fundamentals." Both Moran and Wilbur must defend themselves and their ship against a group of Chinese beachcombers, whose "faces were those of a higher order of anthropoid apes" and whose "general expression was one of simian cunning and a ferocity that was utterly devoid of courage" (248). By

animalizing the beachcombers, Norris transforms a fight over a lump of ambergris into a contest for humanness itself. Wilbur senses within himself “the primitive man, the half-brute of the stone age, [leap] to life” (285). He feels “the joy of battle, the horrid exhilaration of killing, the animal of the race, the human brute suddenly aroused and dominating every instinct and tradition of centuries of civilization” (286). In the midst of the action, even Moran “lapsed back to the Vikings and sea-rovers of the tenth century” (286). Norris’s characterization of these experiences as regressive, especially Wilbur’s, suggests that a lack of civilization rather than race alone accounts for his dehumanizing description of the beachcombers. Civilization provides the setting for the performance of race, gender, and human difference.

By marginalizing nonwhite characters, Norris demonstrates a commitment to Anglo-American exceptionalism that results in his characterization of racial “types.” Yet, elsewhere, he also envisions overcoming race as a source of conflict. In an essay that considers possibilities for a human future together with the closing of the frontier, he declares, “Every century the boundaries are widening, patriotism widens with the expansion, and our countrymen are those of different race, even different nations” (“Frontier” 61). As geographic boundaries disappear, human borders of difference dissolve, too, and (in words that have an uncanny relevance to American imperialism more than a century later) he wonders,

Will it not go on, this epic of civilization, this destiny of the races, until at last and at the ultimate end of all, we who now arrogantly boast ourselves as Americans, supreme in conquest, whether of battleship or of bridge-building, may realize that the true patriotism is the brotherhood of man

and know that the whole world is our nation and simple humanity our countryman? (“Frontier” 61)

Adversity ends when men no longer need to compete for military or technological or economic superiority. Men no longer need to contest one another’s humanness when each recognizes the others as his brothers. Species trumps allegiances of nation, race, and culture; similarity overcomes differences. Though oversimplified, overly optimistic, and even unrealistic if evaluated on the basis of history, Norris’s vision for “human” evolution and the progress of civilization is in many ways a noble one.

He also realizes that women have no real agency in such an “epic.” Moran recognizes that in this “brotherhood of man,” women remain subordinate. When Wilbur echoes Norris’s vision of community and asserts “that the best happiness is the happiness that one shares” (263), Moran insists she is “happiest when [she is] alone” (263). Alone, Moran need be reminded neither that she “ought to have been born a man” nor that she is “not a girl” (262). The human “progress” of civilization creates these categories, and alone, outside of civilization, Moran is “just Moran” (262)—neither man nor woman. Moran’s humanness appears to transcend the limitations of the gendered body; she even appears to represent an ideal that transcends the organic body itself by creating the kind of new self that Vandover fails to imagine. However, Moran’s rejection of gender also confuses Wilbur. He “knew not what to think of her,” for “Never in his life had he met with any girl like this” (229). Repeatedly, this “clubman and college-man” questions his own behavior (285) —and his own masculinity—in relation to her. Should he protect her? She can take care of herself. Should he challenge her authority as captain of their ship, the *Bertha Millner*? She knows how to navigate better than he does. His

masculinity, and hence his humanness, depends on her performance of the cultural feminine, just as humanness relies on performances of animality in “A Caged Lion.” Though Wilbur admires Moran’s originality, her refusal to perform, on some level, unmans—subordinates, feminizes, humiliates, and dehumanizes—him.

The fight on the beach over the ambergris, therefore, abruptly shifts to a contest between just Moran and Wilbur, a contest through which Norris attempts to justify an ideal of humanness that offers men victory but women only defeat—or, as Laura Jadwin expresses it in *The Pit*, “capitulation” (388). In the “fury of the battle,” Moran turns on Wilbur and attacks, “seeing nothing, hearing nothing, every sense exalted, every force doubled, insensible to pain, deaf to all reason” (286). Subconsciously, Norris implies, she recognizes him as a threat, just as he recognizes her as one. On the same primal terrain as the contest with the animalized beachcombers, Wilbur “fought with Moran—not as he would fight with either woman or man, or with anything human” but “as against some impersonal force that it was incumbent upon him to conquer—that it was imperative he should conquer if he wished to live” (287). Wilbur’s energy recalls the title of Ong’s book, *Fighting for Life*, as well as the paradigm of contest he discusses in it. The indeterminacy of the neither/nor paradigm that gives Moran her freedom denies Wilbur the power of the either/or, and for this reason, Norris transforms her from a companion into a competitor. Her loss of their contest (in spite of her strength “admittedly greater than his own”)—and subsequent concession that she is “just a woman” (298)—suggests that humanness, as a performance contingent upon gender, offers few consolations for women. Moran’s symbolic death at the hands of Hoang, one of the beachcombers who pursues them back to civilization and whom “Only a few weeks ago, [...] she would have

fought [...] without hesitation and without mercy” (321), further suggests that the constructed “femininity” Moran performs at the end of the novel removes her from the adversative contest that for Norris produces humanness. Women, Norris insists, cannot captain their own ships nor steer the course of “human” evolution on either the individual or “epic” scale.

A sense of loss and regret at the death of a character as unusual as Moran lingers beyond the pages of a novel unworthy of her presence. One mourns especially because Norris sacrifices her to an anthropomorphic vision to which he remains himself uncertainly committed. As he continues exploring the “epic of civilization” in *The Pit*, the second novel in his unfinished trilogy of the wheat, he also returns to a female protagonist whose divided subjectivity contests the subordinate role for women he projects onto a vision for the interrelationship of nature, human nature, and the future of the nation. Joseph Katz observes, “*The Pit* is the story of an illumination, an awakening, and like all of Norris’s novels its direction is to support middle class values. Extremes of any kind are intolerable in that system” (164). However, Norris himself also points out a reason for questioning these values and probing extremes. In the midst of widespread social and cultural shifts, such values offer security and stability, but

There can be no question nor reasonable doubt that the “language, instructions and religion” of fiction writers are at present undergoing the most radical revolution in the history of literature. And I mean by that that the men themselves are changing—their characters, their attitudes towards life, even the mode and manner of their own lives. Those who are not thus changing are decaying. (“Salt” 210)

Norris's sense of how a changing literature reflects changing lives—and of how changing lives change literature—supports the claim that tensions within his work suspend the certainty of endings that appear to endorse the restoration of social order. The “middle class values” Katz refers to appeal for the very same reasons they have become unsatisfactory.

Though one hesitates to use the term “evolution,” the social and cultural change in the midst of which Norris locates his generation of writers bears some relation to evolving beliefs that necessarily had an effect on “attitudes towards life,” the “manner and mode” of how people lived, and, as Norris says, on the nature of the fiction that they wrote. Tensions in his fiction arise over the inadequacy of established values to order the lives of people evolving into a new awareness of self and environment, even when Norris overtly intends to affirm those very values. Moran's dead body aboard the ghost ship that sinks as it drifts out to sea, for example, sends her back to her Viking ancestors but also represents her rejection of and, through it, his critique of a civilization into which someone like her never could assimilate.

In *The Pit*, Norris aims to realize his anthropomorphic vision through resolution of the separate “great crises” Laura and Curtis Jadwin each face and their subsequent reconciliation as a couple. However, these individual “great crises” are not parallel, and the false analogy Norris tries to draw between them illustrates again the limitations of the gendered imagination to inform the values of an evolving society. Believing that “the great word of our century is no longer War, but Trade” (“Frontier” 56), Norris personifies Chicago, the nexus of commerce between East and West and the “Heart of the Nation” (*The Pit* 57), as the heroic ideal of his “epic of civilization.” Chicago is a city in which

“throbbed the true life—the true power and spirit of America, gigantic, crude with the crudity of youth, disdainful rivalry; sane and healthy and vigorous; brutal in its ambition, arrogant in the newfound knowledge of its giant strength, prodigal of its wealth, infinite in its desires” (58). The difference between war and trade, Norris believes, is “hardly of kind and scarcely of degree” but “a mere matter of names” (“Frontier” 57). Curtis Jadwin, characterized by the same qualities as his city, becomes the agent of Norris’s vision for human evolution, the contemporary warrior who shapes the future by dominating nature, markets, other men, and even animals. By contrast, Sheldon Corthell, Laura’s artist/lover, whose elegant “hands were like a barber’s,” could never get “behind those horses of [Jadwin’s]” for “they’d pull him right over the dashboard” (148). Laura herself thinks she recognizes in Jadwin and in the world he inhabits “civilization in the making,” (58).

Though Curtis loses control of the market, of his money, and of other men, Norris continues to represent “civilization in the making” as both a contest for human difference and a struggle for male dominance. Curtis has lost only one battle and will persevere as a warrior against “the rush of millions of bushels of grain, and the clatter of millions of dollars, and the tramping and the wild shouting of thousands of men” (36). He will again reassert his will and his strength against the “resistless force,” the “tremendous cloaca” of “the pit” (73). Though he tells Laura, after their “great crises” have passed, that both of them “have been living according to a wrong notion of things” (400), Norris offers no hint that Curtis has really discovered a “right” notion of things, whatever that may be. His “great crisis” has involved not other selves but other men, and, ultimately, “he could have won if they all hadn’t turned against him” (401). Curtis has lost a fortune but no part of

himself. Retaining his integrity as a hero of commerce, he has “started his new business even while he was convalescent!” (400). Even his friends know “he will make two or three more fortunes in the next few years” (400). In time, however, Laura herself can again expect only a husband absent and emotionally unavailable, along with a consciousness of the void left by an “identity” now empty of independence, substance, and inner strength.

Like Moran’s “capitulation” to Wilbur, Laura’s acceptance of “identity ignoring self” (388) as “the only way” (388) to preserve a marriage that has in the past offered her little besides money reaffirms Norris’s rejection of the fully integrated female subject; female experience resists the agonistic, adversative drive towards an androcentric “human” ideal. Throughout the novel, Laura has “been accustomed to tell herself that there were two Lauras” (388), but unlike Vandover’s “brute” and “better” selves, Laura’s two selves do not separate into the thinking “human” head and desiring “animal” body—nor are they in conflict with each other. Rather, they balance each other. Pondering these “two Laura Jadwins” (239), she finds “One calm and even and steady, loving the quiet life, loving her home, finding a pleasure in the duties of the housewife” (239). This Laura appreciates the simple comforts of domesticity. She also

knew that there was another Laura Jadwin—the Laura Jadwin who might have been a great actress, who had a ‘temperament,’ who was impulsive. This was the Laura [...] who was conscious and proud of her pale, stately beauty—the Laura Jadwin, in fine, who delighted to recline in a long chair in the dim, beautiful picture gallery and listen with half shut eyes to the

great golden organ thrilling to the passion of Beethoven and Liszt. (239-240)

This second Laura not only appreciates the creature comforts of domestic life but luxuriates in the sensation of her own embodiment. Instead of the internal strife that causes Vandover's breakdown, Laura experiences a unifying sensibility among complementary selves. Aware that her physical person both appeals aesthetically to Corthell's intellect as an artist and attracts him sexually as a man, she personifies, as object, a unity of mind and body. As subject, as artist herself, she represents a similar unity, for the actress's body is her medium. Unlike Vandover's canvas, there is no external projection, no deformed image to reform, only the body itself to "dress," as Laura, with her penchant for reviving Shakespearean women, does extravagantly in the roles of Lady Macbeth, Juliet, Portia, and Ophelia (278).

To Curtis, however, Laura remains simply his "old girl" (396). Though intended as a term of endearment after they reunite, "old girl" suggests an identity tired and plain; the only Laura that matters to Curtis is the one who sacrifices all of her other thriving and vibrant selves for his ambitions. Yet, this "third" self "that rose above and forgot the other two" (388), this "new being" (388), is hardly new. Rather, Laura's "third" self represents a "capitulation" (388) both to Curtis and to the subordinate role defined by the patriarchy as appropriately "feminine." Norris, in spite of himself, knows better—knows Laura's "third" self is inauthentic, another wish-fulfillment, a male fantasy, that disregards the truth of her embodied being. In Laura's loneliness and distress at Curtis's persistent inattention, "She remembered Corthell's quiet, patient, earnest devotion of those days before her marriage" (340). In contrast to Curtis, Corthell "had never failed

her” (340), and, predictably, her relationship with him intensifies rather than diminishes after her marriage. It is Corthell, of course, who plays her “organ.” Curtis even tells Laura to “Let that Mr. Corthell take my place” (270). Although Curtis refers to his “place” accompanying her to the theater, Norris’s symbolism in the feminine space of the womblike, “dimly lit” great “dome” of Laura’s art gallery (303), the room she “like[d] best [...] because of the organ” (237), is almost too obvious in its evocation of sex. As she listens to Corthell play Franz Liszt’s “Mephisto” Waltz (238), a piece overtly suggestive of orgasm, she finds herself overwhelmed by “those prolonged chords of Liszt’s, heavy and clogged and cloyed with passion” that “shook her entire being and left her quivering and breathless” (239).<sup>11</sup> Later, Laura less figuratively consummates her relationship with Corthell, a better companion and a better lover than Curtis, in the privacy of her bedroom.

Early in *The Pit*, Laura observes a contrast between Curtis and Corthell that proves inaccurate. She believes

her relations with Corthell could never be [...] any other than sex-relations. With Jadwin, somehow it had been different. She had felt his manhood more than her womanhood, her sex side. And between them it was a more give-and-take affair, more equality, more companionship. Corthell spoke only of her heart and to her heart. But Jadwin made her feel—or rather she made herself feel when he talked to her—that she had a head as well as a heart. (31)

In the early stages of her relationships with both of them, Curtis appears the better man. As these relationships progress, however, Curtis makes her feel as if she hardly has even

a head. They have dispassionate conversations during his rare appearances for meals; Laura “saw him but seldom. Occasionally they breakfasted together; more often they met at dinner. But that was all. Jadwin’s life by now had come to be so irregular, and his hours of sleep so precious and so easily disturbed, that he had long since occupied a separate apartment” (336). After three years of marriage, the absence of children also suggests a lack of intimacy, an absence of “heart”—and the barrenness of the future they will finally share together. In fact, none of Norris’s couples have children: not Vandover and Ida, McTeague and Trina, Condy and Blix, Wilbur and Moran, Bennett and Lloyd, Vanamee and Angéle, nor Laura and Curtis Jadwin. Norris’s frequent use of androgynous names, despite his “masculine/feminine ethic,” hints at the possibility for equality between the sexes—but does so at the expense of sex itself. His consistent representation of selective behaviors but childless couples underscores the implicit contradictions in a “human” ideal requiring ascent without descent.<sup>12</sup>

Not Curtis but Corthell appeals to Laura in a way that unifies the thinking “human” head with the desiring “animal” body. During the evening they spend together in the art gallery, the intent to seduce her drives all of Corthell’s actions and words, yet their ability to communicate through the arts, particularly music, elevates their interaction in a way that eliminates the sphinx’s “monstrous” duality altogether. Unlike Vandover’s painting that aims to reform a deformed image or Laura’s acting that relies on her performance as someone else, music, Laura remarks, “is like a new language” that transmits “new thoughts too fine for language” (240). Corthell expands,

Of all the arts, music, to my notion is the most intimate [...]. It is one soul speaking to another soul. The composer meant it for you and himself. No

one else has anything to do with it. Because his soul was heavy and broken with grief, or bursting with passion, or tortured with doubt, or searching for some unnamed ideal, he has come to you—you of all people in the world—with his message, and he tells you of his yearnings and his sadness, knowing that you will sympathize, knowing that your soul has, like his, been acquainted with grief, or with gladness; and in the music his soul speaks to yours, beats with it, blends with it, yes, is even spiritually married to it. (240-241)

Clearly, Corthell wants Laura to understand music as a language of emotion, but what exactly is the “soul” he speaks of? Is it head or heart? Both and neither, perhaps, for music blends feeling with thinking. Corthell does appeal to Laura’s “heart,” evoking his desire for her through the music he chooses to play—Mendelssohn’s “Consolation,” Beethoven’s “Appassionata” Sonata, Liszt’s “Mephisto” Waltz, with its suggestion of “a woman who hesitates and then takes the plunge” (238), its tonal foreshadowing of “Isolde’s motif” from Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* (238). Yet, this music also demonstrates unsurpassed intelligence in its composition and requires years of dedicated training to play; even the listener must remain mentally attentive. In it, Laura finds “something better than Gounod and Verdi, something above and beyond the simple one, two, three, one, two, three of the opera scores as she knew and played them” (238-239). Apprehending its complexities, “She felt all at once as though a whole new world were opened to her” (389). Her awakening is both sexual and intellectual, and despite Norris’s intentions, the merging in music of “head” and “heart,” in this scene, reveals the sphinx for a liar and for the monster it is.

At the end of *The Pit*, as the Jadwins' carriage rolls through Chicago towards the train that will carry them into their future, Laura is surprised to find herself in a "locality [that] had once before impressed itself upon her" but the distinction of which now eludes her (403). As she turns to question Curtis, she finds him "studying a railroad folder" and, as usual, oblivious to her needs (403). Returning to the final words of *The Pit* quoted earlier, Laura's "last impression" is of the familiar but strangely unrecognizable "Board of Trade building, black, monolithic, crouching on its foundations like a monstrous sphinx" (403). The novel's conclusion is a repetition, and not just of the image that begins *Vandover and the Brute*. At the conclusion of the first chapter of *The Pit*, on page 37, just after Laura has initially made Curtis's acquaintance, Norris employs these exact words to convey her first impression of Curtis's world, "where the wheat pits and corn pits are" (36-37). As they embark upon their "new life" (401), her inability to identify this place, symbol of so much danger and desperation in their lives, again returns the narrative to beginnings, for she perceives but likewise does not understand its significance. The shape of the novel thus is circular, and the lasting, imposing impression of the sphinx with its impending "grapple of armies that was to commence at daylight" casts doubt on Norris's resolution of the "great crisis" in their lives—and over what appears but a tentative resolution to the "great crisis" at the center of his own "great story."

Laura and Curtis are headed West (396), "groping backward" toward the innocence of an American fantasy of the Garden. Though Norris searches for an ending to the "epic of civilization," he contends, "No sooner have we found that our path to the westward has ended than, reaching eastward, we are in the Old World again, marching against it, invading it, devoting our surplus of energy to its subjugation" ("Frontier" 56).

In the implications of oscillation in its pattern of movement, the mere promise of a “last battle” denies closure. There is no ending to the “epic,” for the story of “human” evolution is the story of the making and remaking of self and society—in Norris’s version, each battle a new contest for male dominance and “human” difference.

But it is a story, too, of “fundamentals” written in the flesh. The novel to have followed *The Pit* Norris tentatively titled *The Wolf*, a work in which he “would depict the consequences in countries such as Italy of how the profit-hungry parties pictured in *The Octopus* and *The Pit* manipulated the supply of American wheat” (McElrath 416). One can only imagine what he might have done with metaphor had he lived. Who or what would the “wolf” have been? And who (or what) would have won the “last battle”? All that we have is the “monstrous” silence of the sphinx. The internal contradictions in *The Pit* undermine its ostensible affirmation of Norris’s ideal of a “human” self disconnected from the “animal” body, a feminine self disconnected from the human, and, ultimately, a human future free from its inherited past. A pattern of subversion thus imprints itself in the “mechanics” of Norris’s fiction and expresses a tension between old and disembodied ideals of humanness and the truer “fundamentals,” traceable in Vandover’s quadrupedal tracks, of our need for a more honest and fully integrated identity—a humanity more “intimate and familiar” and, ultimately, “rejuvenating” in its long overdue reconnection with a lingering animal past.

#### Before Adam

Literary naturalism involves the conscious exploration of themes derived from natural history and explores the human place within our larger natural environment. As

more than the written record of civilization, history, to the naturalists, means something different from what earlier generations of writers—and even their realist contemporaries—conceived. Though predating by half a century the fossil findings of the Leakeys in Olduvai Gorge and the 1953 discovery by Watson and Crick of the double helix structure of DNA, literary naturalists begin to become aware of a language for probing the secrets of prehistory. The original text is written not in the codes of symbolic language that transmit the history of civilization but in bones and bedrock; each living heart that beats rewrites it. The naturalists, Norris but one example, intuitively sense rather than rationally understand this. They have Darwin, but the irony is that while science has begun to decipher the codes of nature, “nature” for the naturalists, as Norris puts it, “has ceased to be *mis*-understood as an aggregate of botany, zoology, geology, and the like” (“‘Nature’ Revival” 108). It has become less esoteric as it has become more available. As a living text, it “has ceased to exist as a classification of science” (“‘Nature’ Revival” 108), for though science translates the evidence, art explores its meanings. The more science translates, the more art interprets and transforms. Naturalism, therefore, at its best, does more than express a philosophy of determinism; rather, it explores, interrogates, and critiques the relationships between “human” and “nature” that define our history as a species, testing the limits of the evidence for determinism from the vantage point of that highly evolved adaptive faculty, the imagination. “Naturalism” is, finally, an inadequate label for an aesthetic movement that often probes both the limits of nature and the limitations of the human.

A consciousness of prehistory, even if its “text” remains mostly obscure, opens up new avenues of discourse for rewriting that history. If there is new history, there is also

new “secret” history, the investigation of which falls within the domain not of science but of culture. The concept of “human” evolution and Norris’s belief in an “epic of civilization” have their source in this consciousness. Lacan offers some insight into the cultural significance of the emerging discourse of prehistory. Explaining “ambiguity” in the recounting of personal histories, Lacan asserts, “revelation of the past does not depend so much on the vacillation of its content between the Imaginary and the Real, for it locates itself in both. Nor is it exactly error or falsehood. The point is that it presents us with the birth of Truth in the Word, and thereby brings us up against the reality of what is neither true nor false” (37). The empirical evidence for evolution enters the culture through a discourse that filters the evidence as it explores the implications, but the point, even in this context, is not that the evidence is “real” but the reality of the discourse. Without it, the evidence disappears. While the discourse itself does not create the evidence, it makes it available, and as the popular imagination interacts with the evidence, the discourse itself grows. As the discourse grows, it accommodates differing revelations of the past that are often “neither true nor false.” Their value derives from their role in the process of an ongoing search for truth rather than the truth itself.

One such “revelation” appears as the figure of Jack London’s Big-Tooth, the pre-human protagonist of *Before Adam*. In this novel, London creates characters more bizarre than mere cavemen. By setting the novel “before Adam,” he speculates about the evolutionary processes, both biological and cultural, that happened quite literally before the appearance of the first man. His characters, primates neither completely human nor completely nonhuman, challenge the cultural myth of a human/animal dichotomy by depicting the implausibility of ever pinpointing exactly when *homo-sometime-before-*

*sapiens* decided he could become “human.” Trekking through the conceptual territories of Norris’s “something four-footed,” one finds a useful comparison in Big-Tooth and his prehistoric tribe, for these creatures, though but distant cousins to Vandover and his inner “brute,” share the similarity of representing humanness as an evolving rather than a fixed state, yet one that nonetheless retains the “fundamentals” of earlier selves.

Though London’s narrator in *Before Adam* encounters Big-Tooth and the Younger World he inhabits as the content of his dreams, London intends these dreams as the expression of intersubjectivity rather than a mere plot device for rationalizing the unusual setting of an adventure story. Since his childhood, the narrator recounts, “In my dreams I never saw *anything* of which I had knowledge in my waking life. My dream life and my waking life were lives apart, with not one thing in common save myself. I was the connecting link that somehow lived both lives” (4). In his dreams, the narrator becomes Big-Tooth, and Big-Tooth’s adventures become his own. The dreams, often filled with experiences of climbing through trees, gathering nuts and berries, and drinking from streams, also torment him as a child with fears of predators and other dangers—“race memories” he correlates to such “vestigial” remnants as “the falling-through-space dream,” which he links to a formerly arboreal life (18).

London’s exploration of intersubjectivity simultaneously attempts to reveal a prehistory self-consciously “neither true nor false.” Before the narrator comes to understand the nature of his “duality” (19), he often finds himself “sick with the invasion of [his] real life by that other life of [his] dreams” (9). In one instance as a child, he sees a lion at the circus, and, he explains, “At the sight of him, helpless, within the bars of his cage, I became enraged. I grinned my teeth at him, danced up and down, screaming an

incoherent mockery and making antic faces” (8). The lion roars back, because “the sounds I made were the sounds of old time and intelligible to him” (8-9). One hears echoes of “A Caged Lion,” for like the incident in Norris’s story, this uncannily similar encounter exposes the conditions of an earlier existence and the transformation of that existence over time. The narrator’s excitement at the circus in Norris’s story is Big-Tooth’s glee over the capture of his enemy. The encounter also illustrates the importance of remembering those original conditions and respecting them. According to natural selection, human ancestors like Big-Tooth who took to the trees “trembling with fear” of “the tawny one” (8) were those who survived and left descendants. Through the relationship between the narrator and Big-Tooth, London suggests that this history is our history and worthy of retelling. What more recent evidence may now discredit as some inaccuracy in London’s version of “that period known as the Mid-Pleistocene” (1) is irrelevant, for in fiction, Norris reminds skeptics, “Accuracy is not necessarily Truth” (“Three Essays” 170).

Gradually, as he grows older and “discover[s] evolution and psychology” (13), the narrator realizes that he himself is one of Big-Tooth’s descendants. While London’s treatment of this realization lacks Norris’s anxiety about an “animal” self, the details he provides help explain this anxiety as a reaction to unsettling new knowledge about human ancestry. The narrator’s childhood attitude towards his dream life recalls Vandover’s horror at the presence of his “brute” self. In his dreams, what the narrator finds most troubling is that he “never saw a human being” (12), and he feels that “if [he] could find but one man, only one human, [he] should be saved” (12). Big-Face, Lop-Ear, Broken-Tooth, the Chatterer, the Swift One, and many other characters are human-like but not

human. Though they often seem human in their social interactions, they knuckle-walk and climb trees, have excessive hair and chimpanzee-like features, lack fire and possess only the most basic rudiments of a language. Even their names, the narrator confesses, are his addition “for the sake of convenience,” for “we bore no names in those days” (42). In their midst, he experiences a sense of dissociation but also a “perplexing mixing of personality” (137), which he attributes to family likeness, “for this other-self of mine is an ancestor, a progenitor of my progenitors in the early line of my race, himself the progeny of a line that long before his time developed fingers and toes and climbed up into the trees” (19). These are strange relatives, indeed—relatives that distort identity by disfiguring form and degrade integrity by denigrating descent. They convey an almost gothic-like quality in their evocation of our animal ancestry—of “Grotesque and meaningless shapes” (*Vandover* 225), not unlike Vandover’s brute.

*Before Adam* has not received the critical attention it deserves, and early reviews that protest its evolutionary themes provide a fascinating explanation in their indictment of the very qualities that make it distinct. In an extensive review for the *Atlantic Monthly*, Harry James Smith initially commends the novel as a good adventure story and for “Mr. London’s psychology, his capacity for realizing primitive states of mind” (260), but, he argues, “further we do not go” (260).<sup>13</sup> Finding the “very nature of [London’s] effort” objectionable (260), Smith attacks the book passionately for its point-of-view. He writes,

The imaginative process in the present instance has not been that of investing brute life with human attributes but that of divesting humanity of its human attributes. (261)

Evaluating London's use of evolutionary discourse as a threat to traditional beliefs about human difference, Smith misreads London's "imaginative process" by imposing on it the anthropocentrism of his own worldview and related aesthetic expectations. Historicizing his misreading would not diminish its significance in light of the novel's continuing obscurity; values more enlightened but not altogether dissimilar persist in a hostility towards the intrusion of science into the humanities. An appreciation of London's efforts requires an engagement with evolutionary theory.

As the review continues, Smith's anger increases—it is the anger of a man aware he fights a losing battle. Though he concedes the "triumph of evolutionary philosophy" (263), he believes it brings both moral defeat and aesthetic failure. Moral defeat results from the elimination of differences that assure a hierarchy of purpose, for "Parasite and host were seen to be produced by the self-same process; there was no distinction in nature between good and bad; there was no mercy, no benevolence" (263). In fact, nature *does* distinguish between good and bad in terms of survival and adaptability, and Herbert Spencer's famous epithet for natural selection, "survival of the fittest," does not necessarily implicate brute strength.<sup>14</sup> London knows this, contrary to popular beliefs drawn from his less sophisticated approaches to evolutionary themes in *Call of the Wild* and elsewhere, and he devotes considerable attention in *Before Adam* to exploring "comradeship" and "altruism" as important adaptive behaviors reinforced and developed over time by human culture (91). Where London professes moral source, Smith preaches moral defeat; aesthetic failure follows. Declaring the purpose of literature itself to be in conflict with evolutionary philosophy, Smith rebukes London for even deeming it worthy of aesthetic consideration. He contends, "With the elimination of each subtler and more

spiritual ingredient, personality is stripped of its distinction. [...]. As we go downward the field is restricted instead of enlarged, for we have sacrificed what is of chiefest importance in fiction: the individual.” (262). The purpose of fiction, he believes, is to celebrate human difference—each individual a reminder of uniqueness and exceptionality. Though he praises *Call of the Wild* for making “wolf-dogs [...] seem human” (261), Smith sees the pre-human characters in *Before Adam* as only “Grotesque and meaningless shapes” (*Vandover* 225), treating London as Norris treats Vandover—as an artist no longer capable of imagining human difference.

While Smith laments, anticipating the modernists, that “Undeniably the old gods are gone” (263), he does find at least one redeeming consequence to the “triumph of evolutionary philosophy” that recalls Norris’s argument in “The ‘Nature’ Revival.” Though Smith fails to recognize *Before Adam* as an expression of this consequence, he reflects in his conclusion that

nature has been reclaimed and revitalized for the imagination [...] through the recognition of its genetic relationship with all life. We are also her offspring. Our landscape setting, our social environment (the notion of “nature” must be extended beyond flora and fauna and rurality), has a vital role in the drama. (263-264)

Such an aesthetic today, particularly what he places in parentheses, would fall within the domain of ecocriticism, even post-humanism. From Smith, it signifies the acknowledgement of a changing discourse, to which the practice of criticism had not yet caught up. Entrenched in a culture of humanism, Smith hardly merits blame for misunderstanding what he lacks the interpretive tools to confront. His review of *Before*

*Adam* is significant, however, because it both exposes the intellectual source of a century of controversy over the value of naturalism as a literary mode and predicts the inevitable reevaluations of it begun a century later.

Besides the critical reception, other “reviews” of *Before Adam* are equally revealing. London’s response to several charges of plagiarism document the “nature” of an evolving literary discourse as it reacts to an expanding knowledge of nature, history, human nature, and human history. After the first installment appeared in *Everybody’s Magazine* in October 1906, Stanley Waterloo, the author of another prehistoric novel called *The Story of Ab*, accuses London of “us[ing] other people’s brains,” “starting out with the same proposition,” and employing “in some instances practically the same language” (*Letters of Jack London* 623-24). In an earlier appeal to a potential publisher, London admits Waterloo’s influence but articulates his intention to produce “the most primitive story ever written. It is vastly more primitive than Stanley Waterloo’s *The Story of Ab* [...]. It goes back before the cave-man [...] to a time when man was in the process of Becoming” (*Letters* 572). When he answers Waterloo, he not only insists, with plausible proof, that *The Story of Ab* is “unscientific” (*Letters* 624) and not “artistic” (*Letters* 644) in comparison to *Before Adam*, he also points out that the discourse of prehistory belongs to the public. No one, London tells Waterloo, can “preempt the primitive world” and “keep others out by virtue of priority of exploitation” (*Letters* 624). In his defense, he invokes both nature and history to justify the discourse of prehistory for common use, informing Waterloo that, according to the logic of his charges,

When one man describes a sunset, no other men are ever to describe sunsets; when one man writes a historical novel based on the Civil War,

no other men are ever to write historical novels based on the civil war.

(*Letters* 624)

Waterloo drops his case, but London must continue to defend himself against charges by readers until at least 1910 (*Letters* 974-75). Prehistory enters the discourse as a novelty “neither true nor false,” but rewriting it, London suggests, engages the imagination with experiences of our nature and our history as enduring as the sunset and the Civil War. Through each rewriting and rereading, we redefine who we are.

The rewritings of prehistory in the naturalism of Frank Norris and Jack London contest the illusions of a “human” self disconnected from the “animal” body, a future free from the burdens of inheritance, and a literary discourse independent of its origins both in culture *and* in nature. Before appearing as Vandover’s “brute,” Frank Norris’s “something four-footed” lay dormant in the wilderness of prehistory, an ancestor asleep in the collective subconscious. What Norris shows us in his deformity is the distortion of our own self-perception as a species. A cultural discourse of human difference has reinforced fantasies of exceptionalism that we can no longer afford to indulge, for “Our species retains hereditary traits that add greatly to our destructive impact. We are tribal and aggressively territorial, intent on private space beyond minimal requirements, and oriented by selfish sexual and reproductive drives” (Wilson 658). These traits once helped us become what we are as a species, but “The rules have recently changed [...]. Global crises are rising within the life span of the generation now coming of age” (Wilson 659). Traits that once assured our survival now contribute to the causes of war, global warming, poverty, sexism, racism, and other threats that may in time also contribute to our extinction as a species. Literary studies, in particular, must

conscientiously work to confront the “brute” that lurks beneath our own humanistic and hubristic ideals. Ignoring our creatureliness, we risk more than irrelevance. We must ask: What motivates our metaphors? What determines our critical idioms? How do our excursions into the abstractions of discourse mitigate our conflicts—and our suffering—as a species? How will our literature help us survive?

## CHAPTER TWO:

## Natural History as National History in Morrison and Faulkner

## “Characteristics”

When Sethe overhears schoolteacher instructing his nephews to “put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right” (*Beloved* 193), her sense of both physical and psychological self becomes dislocated. Before she even fully grasps what the term “characteristics” means (194), she backs away from the scene and “bump[s] up against a tree,” her “scalp [...] prickly” (193). Neither here nor elsewhere in *Beloved* (1987) does Toni Morrison entirely fill in gaps for the reader, neither identifying which characteristics are “human” and which are “animal” nor articulating precisely the cause of Sethe’s discomfort. Is it schoolteacher’s insinuation that she is only partially “human,” a reading seemingly supported by her later assertion that “no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter’s characteristics on the animal side of the paper” (251)? Is it the threat to her own sense of value as a fully integrated, embodied being possessing a host of attributes, every one important for living as a woman and a mother? Is it sudden recognition that the scope of slavery extends even to the ownership of identity? By leaving open the question of cause, inflected by Sethe’s subordinate position as both woman and slave, Morrison suggests that equally open questions of definition and jurisdiction underlie it. If “definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined” (190), Sethe’s outrage perhaps stems as much from schoolteacher’s refusal of her own capacity for self-definition—and hence self-determination—as from the definitions he provides.

This scene marks the novel as a site of metanaturalist commentary on one of the recurrent problems literary naturalism explores, namely, the problem of defining the

“human.” The problem arises historically as traditional definitions in the nineteenth century, especially after Darwin, begin to erode.<sup>1</sup> Rather than merely suggesting a new definition of the “human” not in opposition to the “animal”—although *Beloved* does this, too—Morrison recodes the problem of definition through the experiences of Sethe, Paul D, and other characters who, as slaves and former slaves, represent groups excluded from public debate over this problem by scientists, slave owners, social engineers, religious leaders, and other privileged “definers.” In doing so, Morrison prompts a rethinking of definition itself, of the categories it creates, of the instability and artificiality of cultural (naturalized rather than “natural”) identities constructed through a Linnaean preoccupation with “scientific” measurements, and of the exploitation of these identities through what Lincoln might have called the “interests” of those definers in positions of political and social power over the “defined.”<sup>2</sup>

Recoding the problem of defining the “human” through the experiences of slaves underscores, as recent ecocritics have observed, how

conceptualizations of “nature,” “wilderness,” and “humanness” have not only served the purpose of creating a rationale for the exploitation of a nonhuman nature conceived of as a resource. They show that in addition to that they have been used to discriminate against social groups associated with “wild nature.” [...] it was most notably women, Native Americans and African Americans who were in differing ways interpellated as beings that are part of the realm of nature. Since according to the tradition of Western dualistic thought this realm was defined as strictly separate from and as inferior to the realm of “culture,” subjugation and exploitation of both

“nature” and everything defined “as nature” was regarded as legitimate.

(Mayer 4)

Since, whatever else they might be, all humans have been understood to be—long before the nineteenth-century origins controversy—also animals (and hence inseparably part of “nature”), the relationship between the two terms Morrison invokes, “human” and “animal,” has always been complex, contentious, and open to interpretation and exploitation. Within the particular context of Morrison’s novel, the representation of this relationship highlights key intersections between race and gender in addressing the problem of definition, along with unlikely commonalities between the historically parallel and congruently controversial discourses of abolition and evolution.

To illustrate this congruency before proceeding further with my discussion of *Beloved* and William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses* (1942), I foreground the chapter with some reflection on Gillian Beer’s rhetorical analysis of Darwin’s language. The language used to describe evolution itself, I contend, becomes implicated in social and political change of the kinds Morrison and Faulkner explore. In a later part of the chapter, I offer my own reading of Darwin’s language in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). My reading is much influenced by Beer, who asserts in her introduction to *Darwin’s Plots* (2000) that “concepts of evolutionary theory [...] shifted the weight of words in common use: words like development, generation, variety, inheritance, individuals, kinship, transformation” (13). Especially important are words, such as these, that refer to nonhuman animals but also to human relationships with one another and with the nonhuman world. Such newly infused words begin to alter definitions of the “human” by destabilizing common assumptions about those very relationships. To the sample set

Beer lists, “characteristics” might be added, along with “animal” and “human,” for throughout *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, Beer observes, “ ‘The inhabitants of the whole world’ and their migrations include man, without setting him apart. The whole of animate nature becomes one moving and proliferating family. Words like ‘parent’ and ‘birthplace,’ so often reserved for humankind, are here set at the service of all living forms” (61). Evolutionary language, Beer argues, conveys a subversively, pervasively, and unequivocally egalitarian thrust that lies just on the edge of metaphor. Indeed, unlike many of his predecessors, contemporaries, and even early followers, as Darwin describes the evolutionary “progress” of “lower” and “higher” animals, the implied hierarchical dichotomy between those two groups, the latter including “man,” seems to serve only a superficial purpose, for all are subject to the same rules of inheritance. For Beer, this odd compressing of the hierarchical into the horizontal is one of the distinguishing features of Darwin’s language.

Additionally, Darwin’s impact on the cultural imagination involves not only infusing familiar words with new meaning but also the introduction of a complex set of narratives. Because “Darwin saw the manifold contradictions in the natural world, the interplay of life and death” (Beer 108), there exists a “multiplicity of stories implicit” in evolutionary theory that “was in *itself* an element in its power over the cultural imagination: what mattered was not the specific stories it told, but the fact that it told many and diverse ones” (Beer 106). This multiplicity of stories has generated not only intellectual conflict but cultural conflict as well. The “survival of the fittest” narrative, exploited after the Civil War to racialize power differences, seems at odds with the stories of fecundity, variety, and profusion (Beer 107) that Faulkner, for example, evokes through

the proliferating Snopeses and, indeed, through the miscegenation of a Thomas Sutpen or Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin, in spite of the strong social taboos against it.<sup>3</sup>

Narratives of phylogeny, the development and transformation of a species, are easily confused with those of ontogeny, the growth and development of the individual (Beer 98), a mistake made by Isaac McCaslin, grandson of L.Q.C., as he ponders his personal role in relation to descent and inheritance in the extended fourth section of “The Bear.” And, while narratives of species development suggest the hierarchical, those of interspecies kinship suggest the horizontal (Beer 107). Thus, paradoxically, the “stories” misappropriated to reinforce racist, classicist, and sexist positions of power also can provide new arguments for equality.<sup>4</sup>

Drawing upon an anthropocentric tradition of natural theology as it works against key concepts of that very tradition, Darwin’s language describes and reinterprets at the same time, adding new layers of meaning without entirely destroying the old. Though evidence exists that Faulkner had read Darwin himself,<sup>5</sup> writers of fiction, such as Morrison, and their readers need not have done so, for, as early as the end of the nineteenth century, “Everyone found themselves living in a Darwinian world” (Beer 3). Even today, “Precisely because we live in a culture dominated by evolutionary ideas, it is difficult for us to recognize their imaginative power in our daily readings of the world” (2). As the semantic mutations necessary to describe a common human ancestry and the further sharing of that ancestry with other animals has seeped into our cultural discourse, they have continued to inform an evolving, more inclusive, more horizontal—but never quite precise—definition of the “human.”

In this chapter, I consider this evolving definition of the “human” as it is represented in *Beloved* and *Go Down, Moses*. By examining complementary scenes in which the “animal” and the “human” are juxtaposed, I explore the complexity of this cultural discourse through fictions of the American South.<sup>6</sup> These scenes, though somewhat recalling the “contests” in Frank Norris’s novels, differ in important ways, most notably in the representation of an intersection between narratives of “nature” and the nation. Unlike earlier naturalists such as Norris and London, who imagine evolution and its implications broadly, Faulkner and Morrison specifically rewrite national history—the Civil War, its causes, its consequences—through the lens of natural history. As the scene from *Beloved* cited in the opening paragraph illustrates, the justification for slavery was based on an exclusionary definition of the “human,” but, at the time of the Civil War, the new knowledge of descent from a common ancestor had begun to undermine the foundation for this definition. Additionally, I argue the necessity of gender as a key element in an equation for equality, something Faulkner seems to acknowledge but not, like Morrison, fully explore.<sup>7</sup> An inclusive definition of the “human,” like Morrison’s, both accounts for women and takes into account, by rejecting it, the underlying dualism between the “human” and the “animal” that has justified exclusions on the basis of race, gender, and other “characteristics.” Hence, used initially to re-describe the forms and functions of nonhuman “nature,” evolutionary language has re-inscribed the “human” within these narratives of “nature,” as that language itself has continued to evolve beyond its practical uses in the sciences into a creative and critical discourse of reflection, self-redefinition and, potentially, social reform.

Though Sethe overhears schoolteacher and his nephews pondering her “characteristics” in 1855, several years before the publication of *The Origin of Species*, the history and etymology of those two terms, “human” and “animal,” that Morrison so eloquently leaves open betray a longstanding cultural uncertainty about identity linked to the development of Western civilization itself, an uncertainty merely further fueled by origins controversies of the nineteenth century, themselves predating Darwin.<sup>8</sup> I linger over Morrison’s terms here, for each of them carries to schoolteacher’s nephew’s notebook—and to the novel itself—a many-layered resonance and “multiplicity of stories.” As a first entry for the adjective “human,” the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides the familiar but deceptively simple definition: “Of the nature of the human race; that is a human, or consists of human beings; belonging to the species *Homo sapiens* or other (extinct) species of the genus *Homo*.” The language is circular, the definition relying upon the word being defined. Even what appears as scientific precision remains enmeshed in fine layerings of cultural encoding. As evidenced by subsequent entries, the “nature of the human race,” at least such as language has represented it, is far from free of ambiguities. Commenting on these ambiguities in his book *Keywords*, Raymond Williams observes that, prior to the eighteenth century,

**humane** was the normal spelling for the main range of meanings which can be summarized as the characteristics or distinct elements of *men*, in the general sense of the **human** species. (All men are **human**, or in the earlier spelling **humane**, but all **humans** are either men, in the specialized male sense, or *women* or *children*.) Early uses of **humane** referred to **human nature**, **human language**, **human reason** and so on, but there was also

from eC16 a use of **humane** to mean kind, gentle, courteous, sympathetic. After eC18 the old spelling was specialized to the now distinct word **humane**, in the latter range of senses, while **human** became standard for the most general uses. (148)

By pointing out how the term denotes at least three different subgroups (men, women, and children), Williams reveals its implicit potential for instability and hierarchical misuse—indeed, the common order in which these subgroups are listed, as well as usage of the term “man” as a substitute for “human(e),” indicates the extent to which language has served the interests of the patriarchy.

Additionally, the development of a new usage for the term “humane” in the sixteenth century coincides with the rise of Renaissance “humanism,” a term itself referring to “the new kinds of interest in *man* and in **human** activities” (Williams 150). With this new interest comes the privileging of a set of “characteristics” (kindness, gentleness, courtesy, sympathy), supposedly self-descriptive, that become, by the eighteenth century, ironically also separable. If one can be “human” (a member of the species *homo sapiens*) but not necessarily “humane” (possessing “characteristics” humans in positions of power attribute to themselves but not to others), perhaps not every *homo sapiens* is altogether fully “human.” This rationale in part explains the Constitution’s infamous “three fifths” clause, not remedied until ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>9</sup> Under the “three fifths” clause, it hardly matters which of Sethe’s “characteristics” schoolteacher designates as “human” and which “animal,” because the definer’s privileged alliance with language—and, here, with the language of the law—legitimizes his manipulation of a definition that was never stable to begin with,

becoming only more so as nineteenth century questions about human origins entered public debate and contributed to the politics of race. Categorizing those “characteristics” schoolteacher thinks he observes, as, in Sethe’s words, he would “measure your behind before he tore it up” (203), serves no purpose but to reinforce his own authority.

If “human” seems a complex term on its own, it becomes even more so when juxtaposed with “animal.” The configuration of schoolteacher’s nephew’s paper with “human characteristics” on one side and “animal characteristics” on the other suggests a sharp and simple opposition that the etymology of the term “animal,” like that of “human(e),” reveals as exaggerated at best. In its earliest usage in English, the adjective form of this Latinate word “was treated sometimes as a derive[ative] of *anima*, and sometimes of *animus*” (*OED*), and its meaning varied accordingly “from ‘bestial’ to ‘spiritual’ ” (*OED*). This oddly wide and seemingly contradictory range of meanings results from a collapsing of the two Latin words, themselves ambiguous, into the English one. *Anima*, which translates first as “breath, wind, air,” denotes physical phenomena but also, in a convergence of literal and metaphoric meanings, conveys a sense of “the breath of life, vital principle, soul” (*Cassell’s* 16). *Animus* similarly signifies both the physical and seemingly non-physical but specifically as these are restricted to human experience and perception, translating as “the spiritual or rational principle of life in man,” “the seat of feeling, the heart,” “the seat of the will, intention,” and “the seat of thought, intellect, memory, consciousness” (*Cassell’s* 16-17). Both terms suggest the interdependency of body (the “seat”) and some “vital principle,” indicating embodiment as an essential quality that characterizes all animals, including humans, as, literally, “living beings” (*OED*). *Anima* and *animus* thus intersect and overlap, each containing the root and

essence of the other. The “vital principle” that *anima* signifies makes possible the “rational principle” of *animus*, but it would be impossible to identify—to name—the former without the latter.

Though over time “animal,” in contrast to “human,” has come to mean “those parts of the nature of man which he shares with the inferior animals. (Thus opposed to *intellectual* and *spiritual*)” (*OED*), it always carries traces of its roots. Indeed, how are these shared “characteristics” ever truly separable from those that are unique? How can “intellectual” and “spiritual” capacities ever be disengaged from the body, the site (or “seat”) of “those parts of the nature of man which he shares”? How are mind and “spirit” ever disconnected, except through synecdoche, from the cells that comprise the brain and the heart? Perhaps most importantly, who has the authority to decide that either nonhuman animals or the “parts” humans share with them are “inferior” to everything “human”? By projecting onto Sethe whatever “parts of the nature of man which he shares with the inferior animals,” schoolteacher individualizes and particularizes *general* characteristics. Supported by this self-serving definition of the “animal,” he exploits language—specifically the written language withheld from slaves as a means of restricting education—to ensure subordination. He does so not only to create a caricature of Sethe’s personal “characteristics” but to construct a character for himself, one that reinforces his authority as a “man” in both the general and specifically male sense. Here, race colludes with gender in the objectification and animalization of the slave woman’s body. How else are schoolteacher’s nephew’s “mossy teeth” (70) more “human” and less “animal”—in both literal and morally symbolic senses—than Sethe’s breast? During what can only be described as a scene of traumatic abuse in the barn, as he stands by,

“watching and writing it up” (70), schoolteacher assumes the definer’s power to decide, imposing a hierarchy that favors the “characteristics” of himself and others like him that condones their right to “the milk they took” from Sethe (70).

Without, as Derrida puts it, “ignoring or effacing everything that separates humankind from the other animals” (*The Animal* 47), the openness of these two terms, the “human” and the “animal,” in Morrison’s novel permits readers “to envisage the existence of ‘living creatures’ whose plurality cannot be assembled within the single figure of an animality that is simply opposed to humanity” (*The Animal* 47). Exposure of this “plurality,” if only as a means of reconciling the various “parts” of the human subject, both erases the only rationale supporting schoolteacher’s authority and sanctions Sethe’s later sacrifice of her daughter’s life as the only available means of refusing it. At the moment Sethe “took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (164), she joins together matter and metaphor: that which—or those whom—we call “animal,” Akira Lippit writes, are “metaphor made flesh” (165), signifying an existence of feeling and sensing, of living and dying, that remains, by definition, outside of language.<sup>10</sup> Whether applied to the human or nonhuman, the “animal” can always only ever be a metaphor, both alive with the possibilities of experience that eludes language and limited perversely by the “interests” of those whose own existence is circumscribed by it. Destroying Beloved’s body, the material referent for those “characteristics” schoolteacher might list on “the animal side of the paper,” Sethe removes the exploitable metaphor inscribed in her flesh and thus removes her from the reaches of the “human” language that legitimizes the lash. She does so by responding again to the “prickly” self (193), as if her bodily memory had become a moral force. In this way, Beloved’s death underscores the

“plurality” of living creatures, her mortality a reminder of the importance of “those parts of the nature of man which he shares” with every other living being. When she returns as an embodied ghost, material but not quite mortal, she does so, it seems, without many of “those parts”—hence, the sugary sweetness of her return, its strangeness, and the unnatural, unsatisfying, and swelling yet never satisfied sickness it becomes.

Linked to its rhetorical significance, the “animal” as a trope in *Beloved* also communicates an argument for the novel’s departure from conventional codes of ethics marked by a mother’s killing of her child. Representing the absolute rejection of her oppressors’ physical, cultural, and moral authority, this action, perhaps not surprisingly, causes Paul D’s initial reinforcement of that authority when he tells her, “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (165). From a speciesist perspective, the remark makes sense at first: no matter what the circumstances, only an “animal” would kill her own children. Read this way, it serves as a reminder that she, as a human being, should know better. Yet other animals do not typically kill their children, either, and the remark begs the question: how can Sethe’s purposeful action, her assertion of agency in a way that appears counter to “nature,” be anything other than “human,” in this term’s connotative designation of difference? In its weighted emptiness, Paul D’s reprimand parallels schoolteacher’s listing of “characteristics.” Even here, though lacking schoolteacher’s exploitive intent, the logic is dangerous, for Paul D defines the “human” implicitly in terms of an ethics that can include schoolteacher’s offenses by excluding Sethe’s. By responding to Sethe in this manner, a manner directly related to her position and judgment as a mother and his as a man (a relationship I will address at greater length in the third section of this chapter), Paul D, even though a victim of the same oppressors,

can (re)humanize himself as he dehumanizes her, illustrating “the possibility that most oppressed groups have of sharing (however unequally) in the profits from the oppression of others” (Kappeler 323). Though the novel ultimately revises their relationship, it also demonstrates how such alliances between oppressed and oppressor can “break the solidarity between different oppressed groups [...] and corrupt our will to join in resistance against all oppression” (Kappeler 323).

Infused with defensiveness, Paul D’s remark betrays his willingness to rationalize where Sethe refuses: “There must have been some other way,” he tells her (203), as she wonders, “Who in the world is he willing to die for?” (203). In contrast to his, hers is an ethics based on thinking through feeling, and, to appreciate the emotional strength it requires, as well as its horizontalizing overtones that extend beyond the human, one recalls her comment about women working in the slaughterhouse, whose

smiles was over. Some of them drank liquer to keep them from feeling what they felt. Some didn’t drink a drop—just beat it on over to Phelps to pay for what their children needed, or their ma’mmies. Working in a pig yard. That has got to be something for a woman to do, and I got close to it myself. (203-204)

Speaking of the unpleasantness of slaughterhouse conditions and the nature of the work that creates them, she alludes not only to the oppression the women and the animals share under these conditions but also to the alliance against the animals that the women unwillingly share with their mutual oppressors. Only desperation, she suggests, prompts them to provide in blood for their families’ subsistence, as they rely on alcohol and inner resources to numb themselves against “feeling what they felt.” Only for the sake of their

families' survival do they participate in the insitutionalized practice of killing they emotionally resist. Like Paul D's remark, this image of the women working in the "pig yard" signifies how one group, however marginally, may profit from the oppression of others—human or "animal"—through a "corrupt" and desperate alliance. And like the "Saturday girl[s]" (204), who must suppress "what they felt" to continue to work, Paul D, too, for the sake of his survival, puts away his anger, frustration, grief, suffering, compassion, empathy, and love "in that tobacco tin in his chest where a red heart used to be, its lid rusted shut" (72-73). Though Sethe admits she herself "got close" to "being a Saturday girl" (204), instead her desperation leads to an intuitive ethics based on the experience of emotion rather than the suppression of it.<sup>11</sup>

If "kindness, gentleness, courtesy, and sympathy" are "human" traits (though it is hardly certain they are exculsively so), so, too, is the capactiy to rationalize suffering—one's own, that which one witnesses, contributes to, or inflicts upon others, human or "animal." As Sethe wonders further of Paul D, "Would he give his privates to a stranger in exchange for a carving?" (203), the inequities of gender compound her refusal to accept what she knows will be the suffering of her children. Liberating herself and her children from the "corrupt" and unwilling complicity with their oppressors that a return to Sweet Home would incur, Sethe's seemingly "inhuman(e)" action in fact expresses what Marian Scholtmeijer describes more positively as the "analogue of animal otherness" ("The Power of Otherness" 232). Contrary to Paul D's words, which obtusely reinterpret her action through a fictive comparison to animals that coopts the oppressor's authority, Scholtmeijer believes that the analogue of animal otherness instead "can serve to free women from the equivocation that might lead them to collude with their abusers

[...]. Despite abuses up and down the scale, animals have not come over to the side of their oppressors” (“The Power of Otherness” 232). The animals in the pig yard, as the women who work there know, are never complicit in their slaughter.<sup>12</sup> Transposing Beloved’s killing over theirs, Sethe’s desperation begins more to resemble the desperation of the “Saturday girl[s],” who displace “what they felt” for the pigs with love for their children, the pigs a sacrifice made for the “safety” of the children. Love accommodates circumstances, and all here—Sethe, Beloved, the “Saturday girl[s],” their children, the pigs—are victims of the same “humanity” that rationalizes cruelty, exploitation, pain, and suffering of all kinds.

Complicity is relative. Though Beloved dies, she does not suffer as Sethe has, as Baby Suggs, as Paul D, as the other Sweet Home men have all suffered, although she assumes something of their collective suffering in the choral chapter: “You are my face; I am you” (216). Though “This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw” (164), she never, ever—as a mother—comes over to the side of her oppressors. Refiguring the set of “characteristics” that links femininity, “animality,” and emotionality from signs of weakness to a source of strength and transformation, her refusal upends the traditional opposition of this set of “characteristics” with that other set—the set that links (and privileges) masculinity, “humanity,” and rationality. In *Beloved*, those “parts of man which he shares” with other animals become not “inferior” but vitally important, both valuable and vulnerable, and it is through her pluralizing reintegration of this (r)evolutionary “animal” self that Morrison’s re-representation of the human subject and corresponding ethics most differs from Faulkner’s, the latter a representation, as I will

show in the next section, that reinforces collusion, even as it idealizes such “human” characteristics as humility, pride, courage, and respect for the land.

### Kinship

It is perhaps an unfair exaggeration to assert that Faulkner’s fiction, sensitive and enlightened in its portrayal of the South, reinforces in some ways the very social systems it critiques. However, Faulkner’s allegiance to the South—its values, its history, its struggles—has led to an ambivalence about questions of cause that haunts most of his major works, in particular, the set of interconnected stories that comprise the novel *Go Down, Moses*.<sup>13</sup> Addressing the theme of hunting in “The Bear,” its central story (or “chapter” as Faulkner preferred to call partitions of this text), Scholtmeijer identifies feminist and environmentalist fault lines overlooked by readers interested primarily in the novel’s treatment of race, arguing, “Faulkner sees, rightly, that historical progress has undermined the myth of masculine psychopomp, such that modern men can only go ignobly into the woods to hunt. Yet he seems also to want to predicate the now-lost myth of the hunt upon the failure to kill the totemic animal” (*Animal Victims* 250).<sup>14</sup> Put another way, an unresolved paradox characterizes the role of Ike McCaslin—woodsman, hunter, and relinquisher of his plantation patrimony—as he navigates between wilderness and civilization, past and present, and the ideals, expectations, and failures of masculinity. Though the text appears to juxtapose the values of the woodsman and hunter with those of the plantation owner, idealizing the former and critiquing the latter, Ike’s paradoxical inability to find fulfillment suggests a connection between these seemingly opposed sets of values, a connection that the text itself reiterates but also resists. Though

Scholtmeijer writes from an animal rights perspective, focusing on the victimization of Old Ben, the great bear finally killed not by Ike or his Chickasaw mentor, Sam Fathers, but by the less noble figure of Boon Hoggenbeck and the dog, Lion, her observation highlights what is for my own readings of both *Go Down, Moses* and *Beloved* an important, three-way intersection involving the struggle for human rights before and after the Civil War, the claims of the animal rights movement, and the ethical implications for both humans and animals attached to the transpecies capacity for expressing and apprehending emotion suggested by Darwin's argument in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*.

I turn first to Darwin's argument. Most striking about *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* is that the language Darwin uses to describe emotions shared by humans of all races, as well as by animals, appears as a challenge to the discourse that legitimized Southern white authority over "the other." Through the methodical, comparative delineation of crosscultural and transpecies similarities, physiological and psychological, Darwin's rhetorical strategy confronts historically accepted beliefs about humanness, race, and difference.<sup>15</sup> In his introduction, Darwin acknowledges this confrontation indirectly in the form of inquiry, asserting that a major part of his purpose is "to ascertain whether the same expressions and gestures prevail [...] with all the races of mankind, especially with those who have associated but little with European races" (19). Implicitly, he poses questions many scientists, explorers, imperialists, and social theorists of his generation and before had asked: What evidence is there that all human beings are really human? If so, what is the relationship between qualities shared and those that differ? Despite his occasional use of terms like "savage" to

refer to “those who have associated but little with European races” (recall, as Beer points out, that the descriptive language available was in the process of a transition Darwin himself was contributing to in other ways), he concludes unequivocally from his own observations and the specific queries he has sent to other observers that “the same state of mind is expressed throughout the world with remarkable uniformity; and this fact is in itself interesting as evidence of the close similarity in bodily structure and mental disposition of all the races of mankind” (23). Restating this point in the conclusion, he adds, “as far as my judgment serves, such confirmation was hardly needed” (369), a comment suggesting he was strongly motivated by the desire to convince skeptical readers to accept transracial human kinship. Though the book is a descriptive project, concerned with the physiology that enables expression of physical and psychological experiences, an implicit argument for equality based on kinship permeates it through its consistently repeated descriptions of emotional common ground.

In each of his numerous chapters on the “Special Expressions of Man” (3), which cover a host of emotions from grief and despair to joy, love, hatred, anger, surprise, astonishment, and fear (to name but a few), Darwin diligently describes not only how diverse subjects from Europe and around the world express these emotions, but he also unfailingly includes examples of individuals with both physical and mental disabilities—that is, those whose innate humanness has also been questioned. In the chapter entitled “Joy, High Spirits, Tender Feelings, Devotion,” for example, he writes, “With all the races of man the expression of good spirits appears to be the same and easily recognized. My informants, from various parts of the Old and New Worlds, answer in the affirmative to my queries on this head, and they give some particulars with respect to the Hindoos,

Malays, and New Zealanders” (210). The same chapter begins with the description of an Englishwoman, Laura Bridgman, who “from her blindness and deafness, could not have acquired any expression through imitation, yet when a letter from a beloved friend was communicated to her by gesture-language, she ‘laughed and clapped her hands, and the colour mounted to her cheeks.’ On other occasions she has been seen to stamp for joy” (195). Other examples affirm the humanness of “Idiots and imbecile persons” (196), the very young, the very old, the criminal, and the insane. In contrast to the ways others misappropriated Darwin’s arguments for evolutionary “progress” as arguments for dominance and social hierarchy, this text, on the basis of inherited physical and psychological similarities, refutes the categorical denial of human status to any human being.

In this same chapter, though classed under “Special Expressions of Man,” Darwin also digresses, typically, to similarities found in nonhuman examples. Following the observation that “A strong desire to touch the beloved person is commonly felt; and love is expressed by this means more plainly than by any other” (212), he reflects, “With the lower animals we see the same principle of pleasure derived from contact in association with love. Dogs and cats manifestly take pleasure in rubbing against their masters and mistresses, and in being rubbed or patted by them” (212). Just as his descriptions of expressive similarities do not erase differences of culture or experiences of disability among humans, Darwin’s comparisons of the human to the nonhuman neither diminish human emotional complexity nor devalue the emotions of “the lower animals.” Rather, his prose conveys a sense of wonder at the interconnectedness and transformative potential of all life. It celebrates diversity within and across species as it simultaneously

enumerates the evidence for sameness. At a time when many of his readers would have questioned not only their kinship to the “lower animals” but to “the Hindoos, Malays, and New Zealanders,” he concludes, based on his earlier arguments in *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, “the many points of close similarity in the various races are due to inheritance from a single parent-form, which had already assumed a human character” (364). That this universal “human character” should also share inherited “characteristics” with the “lower animals” neither diminishes it nor devalues those “animal” traits.

Recalling Morrison’s treatment of Sethe, Darwin marvels, in his own understated way, at the “animal” capacity for feeling, the capacity, that is, of all “living beings” to sense their surroundings, to respond, and to convey those sensations and experiences to others through the language of their bodies.

Finally, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* is a book about emotional literacy, a literacy which depends upon the “reader’s” willingness or ability to interpret the “natural” nonverbal signs both humans and animals use to communicate. At the same time, Darwin demonstrates an awareness that human language and culture can intercede between the experience of emotion and the expression and apprehension of it. He writes, “The power of communication between the members of the same tribe by means of language has been of paramount importance in the development of man; and the force of language is much aided by the expressive movements of face and body” (358). Though he articulates the obvious, that nonverbal signs reinforce verbal ones and contribute to the development of culture, he also implies, as the following passage illustrates, that otherwise innate gestures expressing particular emotions are subject to the control of culture, so that an individual may express something other than what he or she

really feels. Identities, he acknowledges, are created through cultural as well as biological inheritance: “With adults, especially of the male sex, weeping soon ceases to be caused by, or to express, bodily pain. This may be accounted for by its being thought weak and unmanly by men, both of civilized and barbarous races, to exhibit bodily pain by any outward sign” (151).

What Darwin does not mention in this passage but which one may infer from the context is that emotional gestures communicate both outwardly and inwardly. The man who has learned to suppress his tears may truly come to believe he feels no pain—and, indeed, may learn to feel no pain, disengaging himself from his “bodily” experiences by suppressing the sensation as well as the gesture. Evolution, in other words, has brought the human species to a state wherein social expectations intercede between the experience of an emotion and the expression of it, and, thus, the biologically inherited, “natural” language of the body often serves, for better or worse, the directives of culture. Though often “the force of language is much aided by the expressive movements of face and body,” the congruently evolved potential to misread even one’s own “bodily” experiences in order to reinforce status—the body itself representing “those parts of the nature of man which he shares with the inferior animals” (“animal,” *OED*)—suggests a need to reexamine the relationship between culture and the “natural” language of the body. For how has a “natural” emotional literacy, or, more importantly, the learned lack of it, contributed to the shaping of society? More specifically, how can a man who cannot feel or express pain read or respond responsibly to the suffering of others? How can he refrain from deliberately or unwittingly contributing to it? And how can he attune himself to more complex forms of distinctively “human” suffering, if expressing mere “bodily pain”

communicates a weakness he cannot betray? The performance of masculinity Darwin describes equates to a kind of emotional illiteracy, the consequences of which, including disengagement, isolation, and the exploitation of power which has traditionally reinforced interests of the Southern patriarchy both *Beloved* and *Go Down, Moses* explore.

In *Beloved*, during the scene “When the four horsemen came—schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a sheriff” (149) to reclaim their runaway “property,” Morrison shifts to their point-of-view, exposing the emotional illiteracy of those who have convinced themselves that Sethe’s actions represent something on the level of “a snake or a bear” (148). Oversimplifying Sethe’s complex emotional state by reading it through their own insecurities about masculinity and the expression of pain, they fixate on the beating she receives for telling Mrs. Garner, whose “eyes rolled out tears” (17), about the stealing of her milk; they blame “the nephew who’d overbeat her and made her cut and run” (149), instead of themselves. By likening her to a horse “if you beat it beyond the point of education” (149), schoolteacher reveals his own obsession with physical violence, his need to reinforce his authority not only through language but through the illusion that “men”—in both the general and specifically male sense—inflict but do not feel “bodily pain,” whereas slave women, like animals, “cut and run” and are therefore less human. Unlike the supposed horse schoolteacher likens her to, outrage at the stealing of her milk, love for her children, and the desire to protect them, motivate Sethe to “cut and run,” not the threat of physical pain.

Perceiving this motivation, many readers find schoolteacher’s analogy dehumanizing—Sethe, of course, is a human being and not a horse, they point out, and one of the greatest evils of slavery involves how human beings, deprived of dignity and

respect, are treated “like animals.” Schoolteacher’s analogy, indeed, is inaccurate, but similar flaws infect the logic of this assessment, merely the obverse of schoolteacher’s and an indirect acquiescence to the exploitation and abuse of “inferior animals.” Since animals lack verbal language, it is even easier to ignore the ways they do communicate. But emotional literacy, the foundation of ethical conscientiousness, requires a sensitivity to the nonverbal signs both humans and nonhumans similarly employ. Schoolteacher lacks this sensitivity and gets even the horse wrong, and the dogs, too, when he speculates, “Suppose you beat the hounds past thataway. Never again could you trust them in the woods or anywhere else. You’d be feeding them maybe, holding out a piece of rabbit in your hand, and the animal would revert—bite your hand clean off” (149-150). Though schoolteacher raises the issue of trust, he misses the point, for only his trust—“your” human trust—of the animals matters, not their trust of “you.” The hounds, who have grown to trust and perhaps love their human companions, express wariness and resentment at the betrayal of their loyalty signified by such a beating, not merely anger over or fear of “bodily pain.” A basic sensitivity, a fundamental disrespect for his relationships with other living beings, causes schoolteacher to compare Sethe to other animals, but the comparison itself diminishes and devalues—dehumanizes—only within the system of logic that disregards both the bodies and experiences of the “other.”

For schoolteacher, horses, hounds, and slaves have no intrinsic value, except for their usefulness to “you”; indeed, according to him, “Unlike a snake or a bear, a dead nigger could not be skinned for profit and was not worth his own dead weight in coin” (148). This statement not only illustrates the ruthlessly self-centered limitations of his perspective but the contradictory logic of his position: slaves are only “like” animals

sometimes. To schoolteacher, Sethe is “like” any other domesticated female animal “having at least ten breeding years left” (149) but conveniently “unlike” when she “made fine ink” and “damned good soup” (149). To him, she has both “human characteristics” and “animal characteristics” but intrinsic value as neither, because, from his perspective, the “other,” whether human or animal, does not exist as a living being but as an object for his use. He exploits both equally, the “human” and the “animal,” for he recognizes neither as an independent living being. Though he relentlessly misreads the feelings of even his horses and dogs, schoolteacher has thus far seemingly profited from his learned emotional illiteracy, bolstered by laws and conventions. This scene exposes the emptiness and injustice of those profits, for “The whole lot was lost now” (150), and, though “They didn’t look at the woman in the pepper plants with the flower in her hat. And they didn’t look at the seven or so faces that had edged closer in spite of the catcher’s rifle warning” (150), there were “Enough nigger eyes” to answer to (150).

In addition to this emptiness, the response of schoolteacher’s nephew, the one who has come along “on the hunt” (150), who “nursed her while his brother held her down” (150), exposes the unreliability and inadequacy of their position. Though “his uncle had warned him against that kind of confusion” (150), “the warning didn’t seem to be taking” (150), for he finds himself involuntarily expressing fear at the consequences of what he has done. The disjunction between what he feels and what he understands is keen. Darwin writes, “One of the best-marked symptoms [of fear] is the trembling of all the muscles of the body” (*Expressions* 293-294), but this nephew “didn’t know he was shaking” (150). In the person who experiences acute fear, “The salivary glands act imperfectly,” and “the mouth becomes dry, and is often opened and shut” (*Expressions*

293); the nephew “was swallowing hard, over and over again” (150). The nephew cannot read his own body’s answers, and so he asks himself repeatedly, and then aloud, “What she want to go and do that for?” (150). His body knows she did it because of what he did to her, but his culturally distorted experiences of pain, “bodily” and otherwise, interfere with his ability to read her behavior and offer only an inadequate comparison: “Hell, he’d been beat a million times and he was white. Once it hurt so bad he’d smashed the well bucket. Another time he took it out on Samson—a few tossed rocks was all. But no beating ever made him . . . I mean no way he could have . . . What she go and do that for?” (150).

He fixates on the beating because it offers the only point of reference available in his own experience. Persistently, he returns to those moments of, by contrast, trivial weakness when he succumbed to the expression of “bodily pain,” as if those moments might offer some clue. Even as his body registers the fear of accountability for the killing of a child, he misses this clue, which is the emotional honesty of those former expressions of pain and anger. Yet in spite of schoolteacher’s warnings “against that kind of confusion,” he begins on a nonverbal, emotional level, even as he consciously shows no regret for throwing rocks at his dog, to recognize Sethe as a living being instead of an object, a mother instead of just breasts and a womb. The above ellipses that punctuate his response to the scene in the shed—“a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other” (149)—suggest the gaps caused by his illiteracy, his inability to receive the knowledge his own body communicates of his role in producing this scene. Evidence that his illiteracy, like schoolteacher’s, is learned (and, hence, the double irony of schoolteacher’s name)

appears in their involuntary expression of guilt, the “eyes” they cannot avoid but refuse to meet, as they leave: “[N]ot enduring to meet the gaze” (264), Darwin writes, “The guilty man is said to avoid looking at his accuser, or to give him stolen looks” (264). They cannot conceal their sense of culpability for this scene of horror, for their own bodies express to all “eyes” but their own the responsibility they refuse.

*Beloved* overtly and without exception indicts those who benefit in any way, real or imagined, material or social, willful or inadvertant, from the refusal of knowledge. In this novel, neither personal history nor historical precedent, not the sanction of any law or custom, nor the narratives of any culture excuse the learned illiteracy that enables the treatment of other living beings, human or nonhuman, as objects. Morrison’s indictment of the Southern white patriarchy through the characters of schoolteacher and his nephews condemns their illiteracy as a cancer infecting the nation, as well as a crime against nature. Through their involuntary susceptibility to the experience of emotion, the novel demonstrates how discourses of national history and natural history intersect. In *Beloved*, the body becomes a book through which to read the struggles for freedom and universal human rights, struggles which gained strength from evolving, broader, and more diverse descriptions of “animal” kinship and a concurrently expanding definition of the “human.”

In important ways, Faulkner shares Morrison’s indictment of the learned illiteracy that enables the conceptualization of animals as objects lacking the “feelings and sentiments of human beings” (*Go Down, Moses* 150) and the resulting treatment of other human beings as such supposedly unfeeling “animals.” Nowhere in *Go Down Moses* is this more dramatically represented than in “Pantaloon in Black,” the third story (or “chapter”) of the novel. In its first section, “Pantaloon in Black” gives an account of a

black man's grief over the death of his wife that ends in the murder of a white man.

Rider, who has been a good man—a hard worker at the sawmill and a loving, devoted, and responsible husband—grieves inconsolably over her unexplained death six months into their marriage. He expresses his grief through a variety of actions, first by burying Mannie himself,

flinging the dirt with that effortless fury so that the mound seemed to be rising of its own volition [...] until at last the grave, save for its rawness, resembled any other marked off without order about the barren plot by shards of pottery and broken bottles and old bricks and other objects insignificant to sight but actually of a profound meaning and fatal to touch, which no white man could have read. (131-132).

Here, from the outset, Faulkner alludes to the illiteracy of the “white man,” as he carefully conveys the depth of Rider's grief and its place within a rich cultural history of the expression of this specific emotion. By extension, he also admits to the limits of his own imagination, especially in representing the inner lives of his black characters.

Rider, however, is characterized by both the depth of his emotions and his unwillingness to accept support from family and human friends. Telling his friends to “Lemme alone” (133) and his aunt and uncle “Ah'm awright” and “Ah doan needs no help” (145), perhaps reflects a concern that admitting he “ain't awright” (140), as others suspect, would signify his submission to unmanly weakness in a man who “was better than six feet and weighed better than two hundred pounds” (131). Alone, Rider returns after the burial to his house, noticing on the way “the splay-toed prints of his wife's bare feet” (133) in the dusty lane and feeling “his body breathing the air her body had vacated,

his eyes touching the objects—post and tree and house and hill—her eyes had lost” (133). Faulkner exquisitely illustrates the keenness, intensity, and complexity of what Rider feels through this bodily experience of loss. Yet his emotional isolation, recalling characters such as his “Uncle Lucas Beauchamp” (134) and Morrison’s Paul D, bespeaks the black male subject’s difficult position with respect to the performance of masculinity among those by whom he is perceived as someone who, in the words of the sheriff’s deputy who arrests him, “ain’t human” (149). Before the murder and arrest, his aunt, meaning well, urges Rider to release his grief through prayer, a culturally ritualized act of submission, insisting, “ ‘Can’t nothing help you but Him!’ ” (146). Rider replies compliantly but defiantly, “ ‘Awright. Hyar Ah is. Leff Him come down hyar and do me some good’ ” (146). When his aunt tells him to get on his knees to pray, he leaves, preferring to numb his feelings through the effects of “uncured alcohol” (143). As he drinks through the night from a gallon jug of it, “solid and cold with fire” (143), he finds that “he was all right, his striding shadow and the trotting one of the dog traveling swift as two clouds on a hill” (143); as he distances himself through the alcohol from other human beings, his dog, aware of him as a “man” only in his canine sense of “human” as another living being, another kind of animal, is his only trusted companion. Rider recalls explaining the dog to his wife, telling her upon their marriage, “Ah needs a big dawg” (135), as if to underscore the importance of the kind of culturally unmediated understanding the dog provides, in contrast to men like the sheriff, to his aunt, and to his friends.

The murder itself, writes Linda Wagner-Martin, represents Rider’s attempt to “both stifle his grief and rejoin Mannie” (141). It also represents a symbolic assault on

the injustices of the white men in the community whom Rider, without the excesses of grief and whisky, is too well-adjusted to confront. More importantly, it signifies a revenge against these injustices merely provoked and compounded by the greater injustice of Mannie's premature death; Rider's relative valuation of these injustices, Faulkner suggests, attests to a strength of character matching his physical strength. The white night-watchman at the mill "has been running crooked dice" on the black mill workers "for fifteen years" (151), a fact Rider seems conscious of, even in his drunkenness watching "the white man pick up the dice and flip them back to him" (148). Knowing the man would reach "toward the pocket where the pistol was" as soon as "the second pair of dice clattered to the floor" (148), and knowing, too, the consequences of killing a white man, he grabs the "razor hung between his shoulder-blades from a loop of cotton string" (148) and slits the man's throat. The night-watchman, a petty symbol of unfairness, stands in as a substitute for Rider's profound sense of the more intangible unfairness of Mannie's death; earlier, as he enters his house, he finds "the dusk-filled single room where all those six months were now crammed and crowded into one instant until there was no space left to breathe, crammed and crowded about the hearth where the fire which was to have lasted to the end of them [...] had already fallen to a dry, light soilure of ashes" (135-136). His breathlessness, along with the ashes of the fire, allude to Mannie's connection, for him, to the very "breath of life," the "animal" self of the living being both embodied and intangible. Literally, his wife was his life, a life they were to have shared together for many more years.

Indicating Rider's willingness to let go of his own life as an expression of this loss, the motivations for the murder completely escape the white sheriff's deputy, who

recounts from his own shallow perspective in the second part of the story the events that occur in the first, inaccurately “animalizing” Rider in the process. Among many details, the deputy sardonically misreads Rider’s insistence on burying Mannie himself not as an expression of grief but as a lack of it: “All right. His wife dies on him. But does he grieve? He’s the biggest and busiest man at the funeral” (150). Instead of an effort to escape the weight of what he feels, the deputy misreads Rider’s return to work the next day as disrespect and lack of propriety: “a white man would have took the day off out of pure respect no matter how he felt about his wife, when even a little child would have had sense enough to take a day off” (151).

Indeed, against Faulkner’s rendering of Rider’s overwhelming love and acute grief, the white sheriff’s deputy’s comments about “Them damn niggers” (149) after the murder recall “the four horsemen” in *Beloved*, in their rhetorically objectifying use of “you,” the self-serving constructedness of what is “human” and what is “animal,” and the utter misapprehension of Rider’s emotional state. The deputy tells his wife, “They look like a man and they walk on their hind legs like a man, and they can talk and you can understand them and you think they are understanding you [...]. But when it comes to the normal human feelings and sentiments of human beings, they might just as well be a herd of wild buffaloes” (149-151). If the deputy sees himself as an example of “normal human feelings and sentiments,” the text suggests he has perhaps confused what is actually “human” and what is “animal,” for Rider’s dog apprehends the contours of his feelings, if not their consequences, better than this man. The dog “began to howl just before dawn yesterday” (135), the day Mannie died. The night Rider returns to his house after the burial, the dog perceives Mannie’s ghost, appearing for but a moment, before Rider does,

as Rider first notices “the uplifting of its head as the howl began, and then he saw her, too” (136). In “Pantaloon in Black,” the relationship between the “animal” and the “human” imagined by the deputy sheriff is inverted, animality rather than humanness signifying, through Rider’s dog, feeling and understanding. This rhetorical inversion implicates the “human” subject, the originating site of so much self-deception and suffering, as the source of some of the very “characteristics” falsely attributed to animals. At the same time, Rider’s “human” characteristics—for Faulkner, his emotional depth, his complexity, and his sensitivity—coincide, without any diminishment, with the emotional response of his dog, who, interestingly enough, Rider notices was “gone now” (146), just before he enters the dice game and commits murder.

Unlike the other chapters of *Go Down, Moses*, “Pantaloon in Black,” because it touches Ike McCaslin’s story only in passing (the single mention cited above of “Uncle Lucas Beauchamp”), may seem for readers difficult to place in relation to “The Bear,” the novel’s central, longest, and most significant chapter.<sup>16</sup> However, Rider’s emotional literacy, represented through both his relationships with his wife and his dog, obliquely comments on Ike’s failed relationship with his wife and the kind of knowledge he supposedly gains through his initiation into the life of what Marti Kheel calls the “holy hunter” (87). In *Go Down, Moses*, Rider and Ike represent two sides of the same problem—respectively, the difficulties of black men and white men in overcoming the legacy of slavery. If Rider’s tragedy lies in the incompatibility of his emotional experiences with the constraints of his environment, Ike’s tragedy arises from the inadequacy of his idealized training as hunter and woodsman to prepare him for the emotional and ethical demands of assuming responsibility for contributing to this

environment—that is, for his inheritance, equally of material property, biological ancestry, and cultural codes, which he can neither accept nor escape.

Ike, it seems, is trapped deterministically by the failure of human agency to overcome the “natural” inheritance of a self-defeating culture of masculinity. In a 1955 interview, responding to praise for Ike for “reject[ing] a tainted past” (“Interview” 225), Faulkner reflects, “I think a man ought to do more than just repudiate. He should have been more affirmative instead of shunning people” (“Interview” 225). Yet unlike Morrison, Faulkner approaches the subject as a writer who, like his character Ike McCaslin, has himself inherited the cultural legacy of the oppressor rather than the oppressed. The ethical discourse of the “holy hunter” with which Faulkner equips Ike cannot provide him with the resources to be “more affirmative” in righting the wrongs of the past, for it reinforces rather than resists his patrimony, functioning as a “decoy” for the discourse of patriarchal dominance that enabled the creation of this inheritance in the first place.<sup>17</sup> Though Faulkner exposes the problems of slavery’s legacy, and even envisions through Ike’s encounters with Old Ben the possibility for more holistic relationships among men, women, animals, and the land, he has trouble imagining a means of resolving these problems beyond the relative isolation of the wilderness (and even there it is uncertain). For Faulkner, implicating the long and confrontational history “man” has had with the wilderness, nonhuman nature(s) seem to hold both source and solution to these problems. As the wilderness and the animals in it disappear over the course of Ike’s lifetime, so, too, in Ike’s words, does the promise of “hold[ing] the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood” (246).

Faulkner's Big Woods represents for Ike a place of sacred purpose, but the violence inherent in the way he interprets this purpose conflicts with the ethos he imagines it to have. Beginning with "The Old People," an account of Ike's first killing of a deer, building through the coming-of-age events of "The Bear," and concluding with Ike as an old man in "Delta Autumn," Faulkner appears to absolve the "holy hunter" of his responsibility for acts of violence by investing those acts with the mythic dimensions he expresses first through the Native American spiritual discourse of Sam Fathers, Ike's teacher, and later through Ike's Christianized version of it. As he narrates Ike's initiation as a hunter in the opening paragraphs of "The Old People," Faulkner describes the appearance of the buck, just before Ike shoots him, in language that at once elevates and reifies the animal, translating him into a symbol while he still lives, so that the killing itself becomes a symbolic act before it occurs:

Then the buck was there. He did not come into sight; he was just there, looking not like a ghost at all but as if all the light were condensed in him and he were the source of it, not even moving in it but disseminating it, already running, seen first as you always see the deer, in that split second after he has already seen you, already slanting away in that first starting bound. (157)

An image of light and motion, beautiful and spiritual, the buck lacks a body even as he still lives, the only sign that he has one in "the antlers even in that dim light looking like a small rocking-chair balanced on his head" (157). The antlers are the least vulnerable part of his body, the least like living flesh yet his only visible feature while he lives, an important detail for Ike, as well as for "you," the human reader, for Faulkner elides the

moments of the killing itself, the moment Ike pulls the trigger on his gun and the next moment when his shot pierces the flesh—not the antlers—of the buck. Instead, Faulkner writes, “The boy did not remember the shot at all. He would live to be eighty [...] but he would never hear that shot nor remember even the shock of the gun-butt. He didn’t even remember what he did with the gun afterward. He was running” (158). According to Kheel, “One of the distinguishing features of the holy hunt is that the hunter not only claims to revert to a primeval, animal state; he also claims to identify with the animal he kills” (100). The logic is self-serving and contradictory, a displacement of the pain of the animal with the prowess of the hunter. Here, as Faulkner elides the moment of the killing, the true initiation of the hunter (a moment perhaps too important to remember), he transfers to Ike that mythicized “primeval” life of the buck, who, just before Ike fires, was also “already running.” The word “running” thus rhetorically functions as a move of continuity and identification, infusing Ike with the life he has taken, even as he conveniently cannot remember the taking of it. As Sam Fathers “dipped his hands in the hot smoking blood and wiped them back and forth across the boy’s face” (158), he completes the process of reification, marking Ike with what had given life to the buck, as if that life belonged to Ike—as if life itself were a thing that could and should be taken from one creature because it rightfully belonged to another more “worthy” (159) of possessing it.

From his earliest experiences as a hunter, Ike internalizes through the teachings of Sam Fathers an ambivalence about ownership rooted in this and similar contradictions found within hunters’ discourse. For Euro-American “holy hunters,” often also environmentalists (like Barry Lopez and Gary Snyder), Kheel writes, “the purpose of

identifying with nature is precisely so that one will wish to avoid harming those beings with whom one identifies” (101), but to rationalize the contradiction between identifying with animals and then killing them, “the spiritual teachings of native cultures are imported into their narratives to bolster the notion of the holy hunt” (Kheel 101). Immediately following Ike’s killing of the buck, Faulkner introduces the history of Sam Fathers, the son of Chikasaw chief Ikkemotubbe and a slave woman. Drawing upon the mythologies of Native American cultures, Faulkner employs Sam as a medium for importing key elements of these cultures, which Ike assimilates but also recontextualizes.

Perhaps most important among these for Ike’s later development and attitude towards ownership is the notion of the “gift.” Kheel explains,

Native American tribal cultures experienced feelings of ambivalence and guilt about the killing of animals. One of the ways some native cultures seem to have dealt with their uneasy feelings is by developing a mythology or worldview according to which it was believed that the animal “gave” her or his life as a “gift.” Holy hunters have uprooted this notion of the “gift” from the context of native cultures and transplanted it into their own narratives of the hunt [...]. The animal’s death is viewed not as a personal conquest, but rather as a “gift” to those who are worthy and who demonstrate the proper attitude. (101-102)

In native cultures in which hunting was a necessity for supplying food, hunting became a sacred practice—hunters could identify with the animals and accept their lives as “gifts”—precisely because of hunters’ ambivalence towards this necessity. Their

gratitude and the gratitude of the people they fed was genuine, as were their feelings of pride, humility, and worthiness in receiving this “gift.”

Sam tries to communicate his cultural knowledge to Ike with only partial success, because he himself, “childless, kinless, peopleless” (236), has already outlived the context for it. After Ike kills the buck, in language suggesting the animal’s life as a willing and sacred “gift” but obscuring the complications of the cultural transplantation of this myth, and of its obsolescence, Sam “consecrated him to that which, under the man’s tutelage, he had already accepted, humbly and joyfully, with abnegation and with pride, too; the hands, the touch, the first worthy blood which he had been found at last worthy to draw” (159). Ike’s “abnegation” of his inheritance from his father and grandfather begins here with his physical connection, his “blood” relation, to Sam Fathers and those beliefs and values he imagines to have belonged to Sam’s ancestors. But his feelings of pride, joy, humility, and worthiness, though genuine, arise through the cultural hybridization of his experiences. The McCaslin blood he inherits—and all the claims of history and identity it entails—produces these feelings no less than the buck’s blood Sam marks him with.

By accepting Sam as his “father,” Ike paradoxically indicates his willingness to renounce his patrimony, as well as the ethos of ownership that accompanies it, even as he takes possession of the animal’s life without the sacred context and feelings of kinship Sam’s ancestors had. Sam hails the spectral deer they see later as “Chief” and “Grandfather” (177), but he does so only “in that tongue which the boy had learned from listening to him and Jobaker” (177). Much of the cultural significance of Ike’s initiation is lost in translation, for though Ike may partially understand Sam, no one else among the

other hunters does. For these men, and for Ike and Sam, too, animals' lives are not "gifts" for the hungry but "concrete trophies—the racked guns and the heads and the skins—in the libraries of town houses or the offices of plantation houses or (and best of all) in the camps themselves where the intact and still-warm meat yet hung" (184). Sam's ancestors, "the wild men whose grandfathers without guns hunted" (243), clearly had a different relationship with the land and its creatures than the men comprising the hunting parties of the present, those such as Major de Spain who, like Thomas Sutpen and L.Q.C. McCaslin, was a "white man fatuous enough to believe he had bought any fragment of it" (183). Even Ikkemotubbe Ike acknowledges as an "Indian ruthless enough to pretend that any fragment of it was his to convey" (183). The possessive relationships all of these men have with the land and the animals underscores that the original context for Sam's "tutelage" is already gone. Whereas native cultures honored the lives of the animals sacrificed to feed the people, these hunters celebrate their deaths; the "meat" is "best of all"—has the most value to them—*before* it is consumed, as a symbol rather than as sustenance. Whereas native cultures expressed compassion and guilt for the lives of the animals they took through the myth of the "gift," those same lives for these hunters become what Carol Adams calls "absent referents" (40), reified as "meat," "heads," and "skins." Thus, when Ike confronts Old Ben, as well as when he confronts his wife in the fourth section of "The Bear," he does so with a kind of cultural dyslexia that affects his emotional literacy in odd ways, impeding it and enhancing it, and always interfering with his performance of masculinity, rendering him impotent as both husband and hunter, unable to produce an heir and unable to kill the old bear, whom he reads as so much "like a living man" (185).

In addition to the “natural” literacy, the skill to read the wilderness, which Ike learns from Sam, at camp he also learns how, as hunters, men (re)define themselves as “men” not through contests with each other but with nature and animals, a strategy, Faulkner suggests, for dealing with conflicts of race and masculinity in the post Civil War South. At the beginning of “The Bear,” Faulkner describes how the hunting party reinvents itself through a narrative that meets the needs of its current members. Ike’s initiation, from this perspective, represents his entry not into an ancient Native American tradition but into a recursive fiction told and retold by the men in his own community:

He was sixteen. For six years now he had been a man’s hunter. For six years now he had heard the best of all talking. It was of the wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document [...]. It was of them, not white nor black nor red but men, hunters, with the will and hardihood to endure and the humility and skill to survive, and the dogs and the bear and the deer juxtaposed and relieved against it, ordered and compelled by and within the wilderness in the ancient and unremitting contest according to the ancient and immitigable rules which voided all regrets and brooked no quarter. (183-184)

The first three sentences establish a relationship between identity and language, between being a hunter and talking about hunting, that necessarily changes how one reads the rest of the passage, which is not about hunting at all per se but about the “best of all listening” (184), as well as “the best of all talking.” Ike becomes a hunter as importantly through what he hears from hunters about hunting as through what he actually does. Their “talking” indicates not a description but an interpretation of the relationship between the

“wilderness” and “men.” In this context, that relationship resembles a “contest,” very unlike the interpretation of kinship Sam alludes to when he calls the deer spirit “Grandfather.” In this present interpretation, differences of race and culture disappear, for all “men” fight on the same side, “juxtaposed” generally against nature and, in particular, against animals. In the first chapter, “Was,” set before Ike was born, his father and uncle, Theophilus and Amodeus McCaslin, hunt for their tomcatting half-brother, Tomey’s Turl, the product of incest between their father and his own daughter by the slave woman Eunice. In the dehumanizing discourse of slavery, even though Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy are in the process of disengaging themselves from the practice, Tomey’s Turl becomes a “fox” who has “broke out again” (5); they plan to “circle him through the woods,” like any hunted animal, and “bay him at the creek ford” (8). Now, Tomey’s Turl’s son, known as Tennie’s Jim, joins the hunting party as one of the men, “not white nor black nor red but men.” As easily as hunters’ discourse served slavery’s ends, designating “men” as those who hunt “animals,” human or otherwise, here it reinstates all men as “men” in both the specifically male sense and the general “human” sense.

The redundancy of the phrase “a man’s hunter” underscores the gendered performance of the hunter’s identity, an assertion of dominance over the feminine and the nonhuman in themselves and in others. Indeed, “definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined” (*Beloved* 190), for, after the war, white men could redefine themselves in ways that reinstated, if not their actual power, at least their feelings of power after the South’s loss, at the expense of animals and women. Their gendered “rules” are “immitigable” only given these hunters’ particular interpretation of the relationship between all “men” and the wilderness, a relationship based on violence because these

men “feared it” (185), fearing the weakness of their own “puny” efforts against it (185). Hence, they admire the stoicism of Lion, especially his refusal to express “bodily pain,” which, at Sam’s hands, he meets with “a cold and almost impersonal malignance like some natural force” (209). Though he is a dog, they anthropomorphize what he appears to express, reading through him the naturalization of their own masculinity. Only within this particular context do the “rules” permit starving and beating a dog to train him, even if, like Lion, he is “*The dog*” who will bay the bear (208). Only in the wilderness, beyond the “rules” of society, can a man like Boon Hoggenbeck touch this same dog, “as if Lion were a woman—or perhaps Boon was the woman. That was more like it” (211), let the dog sleep in his bed (211), and then knowingly send him into a “contest” destined to end only when “his guts are all out of him” (231). The violently sexualized language of the “contest” itself explains how poorly the “man-talking” (300) at camp prepares Ike for life with his wife—that is, when Old Ben “caught the dog in both arms, almost loverlike, and they both went down” (230), when, in a reified tableau with Boon, “they almost resembled a piece of statuary: the dog, the bear, the man stride [*sic*] on his back, working and probing the buried blade” (231). Only here in the wilderness is it permissible to torture an old animal, like Old Ben, year after year with “his worn teeth and his mutilated foot and the little hard lumps under his skin which were the old bullets (there were fifty-two of them)” (236). At the same time, for all of his scars, his wounds, his pain inflicted by themselves, they imagine he participates of his own volition and approaches them willingly “to see who’s here, who’s new in camp this year, whether he can shoot or not, can stay or not. Whether we got the dog yet that can bay and hold him” (190). Really, what other choice does the bear have but to approach and know these adversaries he did

not invite, to participate in the “contest” he did not devise, to follow the “rules” he did not contrive? By uniting not with the wilderness but against it, the hunters define themselves as “men”—in both the general and specifically male sense—through repeated acts of violence and cruelty against animals whose complicity they convince themselves of and rely upon for the reenactment, year after year, of the hunter’s narrative of masculinity.

Yet here is where Faulkner’s text, through Ike’s encounters with Old Ben, so famously departs from the narrative of the “holy hunter,” for Ike, though he has more than one chance to do so, cannot kill the old bear. Earlier, in “the green and soaring gloom of the markless wilderness” (199), Ike leaves his gun “by his own will and relinquishment” (198), leaves aside also “the watch and the compass” (199), and thereby frees himself for “a meeting with Old Ben” where “all the ancient rules and balances of hunter and hunted have been abrogated” (198).<sup>18</sup> Their encounter, Darwinian in scope of both past and present, at once hearkens back through evolutionary time to a prehuman ancestral stage before “man” invented for himself a cultural identity and made the “rules” that gave him, in Ike’s later words, God’s sanction “to hold suzerainty over the earth and the animals on it” (246). At the same time, the encounter happens acutely in the present, Ike following Old Ben’s disappearing footprints, “seeing as he sat down on the log the crooked print, the warped indentation in the wet ground which while he looked at it continued to fill with water until it was level full and the water began to overflow and the sides of the print began to dissolve away” (200). In those prints, disappearing almost as quickly as they appear into the “markless wilderness,” Ike reads the bear’s mortality, and knowing the bear’s mortality, he begins to know his own. Such kinship that they share is

the kinship not of culture but of descent. Each is the representative of an evolutionary chain linking past to present—each, finally, “childless” (186), the last of a line of ancestors extending back into the prehistoric wilderness, back perhaps as far or farther than the first amphibious steps onto the sandy shore some ancient sea creature took, ancestor of both bears and “men,” its own “prints” filling with the water of waves, overflowing, until those prints, too, the lost history of life on earth, “began to dissolve away.”

“He,” the bear “who had earned for himself a name, a definite designation like a living man” (185), becomes “it,” not because Ike sees him here as an object but because the mask of masculine symbolism is removed:

Then he saw the bear. It did not emerge, appear: it was just there, immobile, fixed in the green and windless noon’s hot dappling, not as big as he had dreamed it but as big as he had expected, bigger, dimensionless against the dappled obscurity, looking at him. Then it moved. It crossed the glade without haste, walking for an instant into the sun’s full glare and out of it, and stopped again and looked back at him across one shoulder.

Then it was gone. (200)

The bear is not a man but—though a distant relative—a wholly “other” being, a different kind of animal not subject to the constraints of human culture. The bear could have killed him but does not. Not provoked, not threatened, not hungry, the bear has no reason to attack a man, unlike the human hunter, who, year after year, hunts the same animal in order to reenact the narrative of identity that defines him as a “man.” The “crooked print,” recalling Rider’s wife’s “splay-toed prints” (133), appears as an expression of who

Old Ben is—a sign of an independent “animal” existence, the expression of a living body which Ike at last, if only for a moment, can “read” unencumbered by culture, unmediated by metaphor. Stripped of his gun, his compass, his watch, his identity as man and hunter, at last Ike sees the old bear not as a mythic beast, nor symbol of masculinity, nor hunter’s “trophy,” nor adversary, nor enigma of the wilderness, nor token of his own worthiness, but as a fellow creature, different yet vulnerable to time and the elements. For the first and perhaps only time, Ike sees that the bear “looked back.” Through this exchange of looking, he sees this bear, for the first and perhaps only time, as just a bear—as no more and no less, “not as big as he had dreamed it but as big as he had expected, bigger, dimensionless against the dappled obscurity” (200). Baring his bear-ness, Old Ben appears “bigger” than Ike had expected and “dimensionless,” because, whatever his experience as a bear has been of the men who have imagined him and pursued not him but what they imagined, Ike realizes here that he can never know that experience except remotely, obscurely. Only when he finally “reads” the bear as bear, rather than as man, does he understand the inaccessibility of the bear’s utter otherness. The best he can do is accept it and respect the right of the truly “other” to exist, following its own path, pursuing its own ends. Close enough to the bear to see the “*big wood tick just inside his off hind leg*” (183), Ike also “reads” enough similarity in the bear’s creatureliness to know it as a sentient being whom he cannot himself harm or kill. The moment is almost apocalyptic, a personal encounter that, in the immediacy of its impact, disrupts the continuum of Ike’s development as a “man” by causing him to rethink his relationship to nature and kin.

At the same time, the later consequences of this encounter—the relinquishment of his patrimony to his cousin McCaslin Edmonds, his relationship with his wife that fails, in his wife's words, "to get you that son you talk about" (300-301), his heartless treatment of the distant and unnamed female cousin in "Delta Autumn," granddaughter of Tennie's Jim—suggest, on Faulkner's part, a very different and deterministic reading of Darwinian narrative. Rather than representing inheritance and kinship in terms of mutation and transformation, as the possibility for newness, diversity, and generation, the actions Ike takes as an adult to free himself from his "cursed" (284) ancestors instead reinscribe him within the very same narratives that, in taking action, he has tried to resist—narratives of inheritance as repetition rather than revision and change as extinction rather than reinvention. He tries to "save and free his son" (335) by refusing the McCaslin land and, with it, the legacy of ownership, bondage, and incest etched in the commissary records of the two branches, black and white, of the McCaslin family. By "saving and freeing his son," however, he "lost him" (335), for the son is never conceived by the wife who refuses her body to Ike once she knows for certain that he, without compromise, refuses the land. Ike recognizes the selfishness, fear, violence, cruelty, and exploitation in his inheritance of the McCaslin plantation, "that whole edifice intricate and complex and founded upon injustice and erected by ruthless rapacity and carried on even yet with at times downright savagery not only to human beings but the valuable animals too" (285). Yet between the obsolescence of Sam's culture, which he accepts unquestioningly, and the culture of self-deception he acquires at camp, he cannot recognize the disingenuous patriarchal authority he grants himself through Christian

myth: God, he tells his cousin, “created man to be His overseer on the earth and to hold suzerainty over the earth and the animals on it in His name” (246).

In this myth, recursive rather than revisionary, Ike idealizes his own role but excludes his wife. Man, he tells his cousin, is “not to hold for himself and his descendents inviolable title forever, generation after generation, to the oblongs and squares of the earth, but to hold the earth mutual and intact in the communal anonymity of brotherhood” (246). However, in the “anonymity of brotherhood,” infused with the irony of Ike’s desire for a male heir juxtaposed against the refusal of what he himself inherits, there is no place but a subordinate one for wives, sisters, and daughters. Indeed, in expecting his wife to produce a son without respecting her vision of their life together (he begins building a new house for them without her knowledge), Ike displaces his title to the land with a sense of entitlement towards his wife, not altogether different from the hunters’ sense of entitlement towards the animals they kill. Her refusal to participate in this narrative contrasts with the agency Ike imagines he asserts. Though hers is a negative form of agency, so, too, is Ike’s, for Faulkner emphasizes the inevitability of his “inheritance” not of land, not of ancestors, but of his role within the patriarchy. Believing he has freed his would-be son from the burden of this role, Ike simply passes it on to other family members, who assume it without the degree of conscience he himself has acquired. At the end of “Delta Autumn,” when the granddaughter of Tennie’s Jim brings the child she has had with Roth Edmonds to camp, she tells Ike of Roth, “You spoiled him” (343), to his surprise, “When you gave his grandfather that land which didn’t belong to him, not even half of it by will or law” (343). The cycle of possession, ownership, and exploitation becomes a collective responsibility to overcome, but the very individuals who have the

greatest stake in breaking it, women like Ike's wife and Tennie's Jim's granddaughter, like so many of Faulkner's other female characters (Judith and Clytie Sutpen, Drusilla Hawk Sartoris, Temple Drake, Eula Varner Snopes), remain powerless to do so.

This vision of female powerlessness in relation to the pettiness of male power underscores the sense of defeat conveyed in Faulkner's depiction of the post Civil War tragedy of the South. As if to reinforce the inevitability of this imbalance, as if in acquiescence to it, Faulkner naturalizes "man's" authority over the "feminine"—women, animals, nature—through Roth's killing of a doe at the end of the chapter. Reminiscent of the earlier naturalists, he casts the Darwinian meme "survival of the fittest" through a patriarchal lens: a man can either perpetuate the system of male dominance that has produced a disappearing wilderness and legacy of ownership or relinquish it and be the last of his line. By unwittingly doing both, uniting impotence with the inevitability of male dominance, Ike embodies the paradox of Faulkner's vision of the nation. Men like Roth Edmonds, the "fittest," those who are able to contribute their offspring to the future, value that future, those offspring, and their mothers no more than the "neat sheaf of bound notes" (341) Roth leaves with Ike in an otherwise "empty envelope" (341) for the mother of his child. Through Roth, the true inheritor of L.Q.C McCaslin's legacy, Faulkner preserves the social fiction that male privilege is inevitable, even as he criticizes it, by underwriting it with the "natural" narrative of descent. Equally Darwinian narratives of kinship, empathy, and emotional literacy dissolve into the wilderness with Old Ben, recalled through the compassionate and generous but ultimately ineffectual gestures of Gavin Stevens in the final chapter, "Go Down, Moses."

## Community

Reading *Go Down, Moses* through *Beloved* in late 2009, one finds useful and expedient the frequently quoted but controversial words of recently appointed Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor: “I would hope that a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who hasn’t lived that life.” These words are easily rephrased to differentiate how Morrison and Faulkner treat similar material—how a “wise” black woman writing in the 1980s might invite insights about the relationship between “nature” and the nation unavailable to even an equally “wise” white man writing nearly fifty years earlier, before the end of the second World War, before the civil rights movement, before the women’s movement, before the environmental crises of the later twentieth century, “who hasn’t lived that life.”

In an essay originally appearing in 1965, more than twenty years after *Go Down, Moses* but more than twenty years before *Beloved*, Lewis P. Simpson alludes, without fully understanding it himself, to the “nature” of some of these insights. Faulkner, Simpson speculates,

is one of the last writers [...] who really feels what it means for modern man to have lost the chance to enter into a living, instead of a bull-dozing, relationship with nature. We may now be entering the age of ‘post-modern man.’ A unique characteristic of this age will be the full acceptance of a mass-technological society as the one and only way of existence. No doubt the people who live in the post-modern world will accomplish the revenge of the ‘ruined woods,’ but will they realize it? (209)

Simpson perhaps could not have predicted that a writer with Morrison's heritage and background might become an important voice for "postmodern man," a writer re-imagining "nature" not from the perspective of those who have lost, sold, "bull-dozed," or otherwise sacrificed it but from the perspective of those who have had to reclaim it in the form of their own bodies. Redefining "man" in fiction after Faulkner, from Simpson's perspective, involves an even greater separation from "nature," a more absolute dichotomy between the two, but Morrison instead reunites nature and the "human" through her revisionary treatment of the human body. Whereas Faulkner relinquishes Darwinian narratives of "animal" kinship, empathy, and emotional literacy with the primeval and hopelessly disappearing wilderness, Morrison revives them, representing the nation—in *Beloved*, a re-imagined community not of ideals or mythic heroes but of bodies and the individual women and men who must reclaim them—as the site for a return to "nature."<sup>19</sup> In doing so, Morrison also exposes the source for what must have caused Faulkner so much difficulty in conceiving of a future which does not simply repeat the past. For Morrison, unlike for Faulkner, the narrative of male dominance is "not a story to pass on" (274). Instead, Morrison unequivocally confronts it, deconstructing its familiar tropes as she rebuilds the relationship between Sethe and Paul D.

The experiences of Paul D and the other Sweet Home men under Mr. Garner's "special kind of slavery" (140) suggest a complicity alluded to earlier between constructions of the masculine and constructions of the "human" that not only works against black men in the novel in at least two different ways but ultimately helps to explain the double obstacle faced by black women. The first of these two ways involves

Mr. Garner's treatment of the male slaves at Sweet Home. By training the Sweet Home men to take initiative, think for themselves, and participate actively in the running of the plantation, Garner fosters Paul D's belief, as he grows up, that "of all the Blacks in Kentucky, only the five of them were men" (125). Garner's bragging to other farmers about their manliness and his insistence that "Deferring to his slaves' opinions did not deprive him of authority or power" (125) suggests that Garner's claims about the Sweet Home men have more to do with proving his own manhood than with accepting their humanity. His motives aside, however, within the isolation of the Sweet Home community, Paul D and the others were "Allowed, encouraged to correct Garner, even defy him. To invent ways of doing things; to see what was needed and attack it without permission. To buy a mother, choose a horse or a wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted to" (125). Thus instilled with a sense of authority, self-worth, and self-determination, as well as granted power over women and other "inferior animals," the Sweet Home men see themselves as "human" as much as they see themselves as men. By conflating being human with being a man, Paul D's belief reflects how Garner's endorsement of their manhood disguises his refusal to acknowledge their membership in the broader human community by retaining them as slaves.

Yet, just as what makes Garner's "special kind of slavery" so special involves the conflation of masculinity and humanity, less special kinds of slavery, Paul D discovers, rely merely on a rearrangement of the same intersecting set of constructions. The second way that constructions of the masculine and constructions of the "human" work together against the black male subject is more obvious. While his relationship with Garner remains in Paul D's mind "true metal" (125), after schoolteacher replaces Garner, that

relationship begins to seem more like “A truth that waved like a scarecrow in rye; they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home. One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race” (125). Reflecting not only a sense of animalization, Paul D’s description also suggests emasculation, for upon leaving Sweet Home, the Sweet Home men become “Watchdogs without teeth; steer bulls without horns; gelded workhorses whose neigh and whinny could not be translated into a language responsible humans spoke” (125). In contrast to both his identification with and his contempt for the figures of these altered and impotent animals, he envies the rooster named Mister, for Mister, he explains to Sethe, “was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn’t allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you’d still be cooking a rooster named Mister. But [...] I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub” (72). Mister, as his name implies, retains his “manhood” intact, and Paul D envies him because just as Garner’s “special kind of slavery” operates on the conflation of manhood and humanity, schoolteacher’s version of it and other less special kinds function through the conflation of animality, femininity, and emasculation. Hence, once free of Sweet Home, the obstacle of reclaiming his humanness becomes linked intimately with the challenge of reasserting his masculinity.

It is this very linkage between the human and the masculine that creates the double obstacle for women. While Sethe must contend, like Paul D, with the obstacle of racism in reclaiming her membership in the human community, unlike him, she must also contend with the obstacle of being a woman. Before schoolteacher and his nephews “put her human characteristics on the left” and “her animal ones on the right” (193), and before she is assaulted by, in her own words, the “two boys with mossy teeth, one

sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up” (70), she must resist the Sweet Home men themselves, who were “young and so sick with the absence of women they had taken to calves” (10). The Sweet Home men never violate or mistreat her, yet “All in their twenties, minus women, fucking cows, dreaming of rape, thrashing on pallets, rubbing their thighs,” they wait for her (11). Projecting their desire onto her female “flesh,” the men, white and black, conflate gender with sexuality and sexuality with animality; women, after all, can be milked like cows and cows fucked like women. Instead of confessing to Sethe his feeling that “ ‘I am not a man,’ ” Paul D attempts to confirm his humanity by affirming his manhood. Telling her, “ ‘I want you pregnant’ ” (128), he seeks to overcome uncertainties about the humanity of his own contested “flesh” by shifting them to the more certain site of hers.

As Morrison ultimately re-imagines it, the human community recovers from the exclusionary and exploitative power of a human/animal dichotomy only by reclaiming the “flesh” itself—the body, that is, and all the “animal” attributes that go with it—as an inescapable, unconditional, and arguably, according to Baby Suggs, essential and precious part of what we are. Reified by the discourse of slavery, “flesh” is a nonliving thing of value to be bought and sold, used and consumed, but, as Baby Suggs invokes it in her preaching in the clearing in the woods behind 124 Bluestone Road, “flesh” becomes valuable not as a commodity but, as who “we” are:

in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in the grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick

em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder do they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. (88)

Through the “flesh,” Baby Suggs reassigns meaning to the body, dislodging it from the dichotomy dividing “man” from “nature” and “human” from “animal.”

The “flesh” then becomes a metaphor of convergence. When Amy Denver finds Sethe “Down in the grass, like the snake she believed she was” (32), about to give birth, swimming in milk and blood, she might have left her alone to die, but she doesn't. Instead, “She squatted down and stared at Sethe's feet” (32), asking, “What you gonna do, just lay there and foal?” (33). Learning that Sethe cannot get up on her own, Amy helps her crawl to a cabin where she can lie more comfortably, and “Then she did the magic: lifted Sethe's feet and legs and massaged them until she cried salt tears” (35). It is this empathic relationship, this emotional literacy, that Morrison re-imagines at the heart of human communities, a relationship based on an ethics of the “flesh”—an ethics of feeling rather than thinking, of love rather than the law. Sethe believes that “what she had done was right because it came from true love” (251). When the town comes to understand, they reclaim her as a member of their own community; when Paul D himself finally understands, he re-embraces her humanity—and with it, his own. As both an expression and a critique of anxieties of what it means to be human, Paul D's earlier words, “ ‘You got two feet, Sethe, not four,’ ” take on a new significance. The novel

concludes with his return to 124 Bluestone Road not to count Sethe's feet, but recalling Amy Denver's "magic," to rub them and to restore life, love, and sense to the "flesh."

In Sethe, Morrison creates a new kind of heroine, because Sethe's journey has meant, above all, never to return to Sweet Home—never, at last, to "pass on" the McCaslin legacy but instead to build, on a foundation both old and new, a house of love and freedom. If Sethe's home can be a metaphor for the nation, then the "natural history" Morrison invokes in *Beloved* does for the nation's history what Sethe herself does for Paul D. For him, "She is a friend of my mind. She gather me...The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order" (272-3). *Beloved* gathers the fragments of the nation's past, even as Faulkner attempts to make sense of them in *Go Down, Moses*, and gives them back to us whole.<sup>20</sup>

## CHAPTER THREE:

## Evolution as Apocalypse in Malamud and Butler

Giving up human exceptionalism has consequences that require one to know more at the end of the day than at the beginning and to cast oneself with some ways of life and not with others in the never settled biopolitics of entangled species.

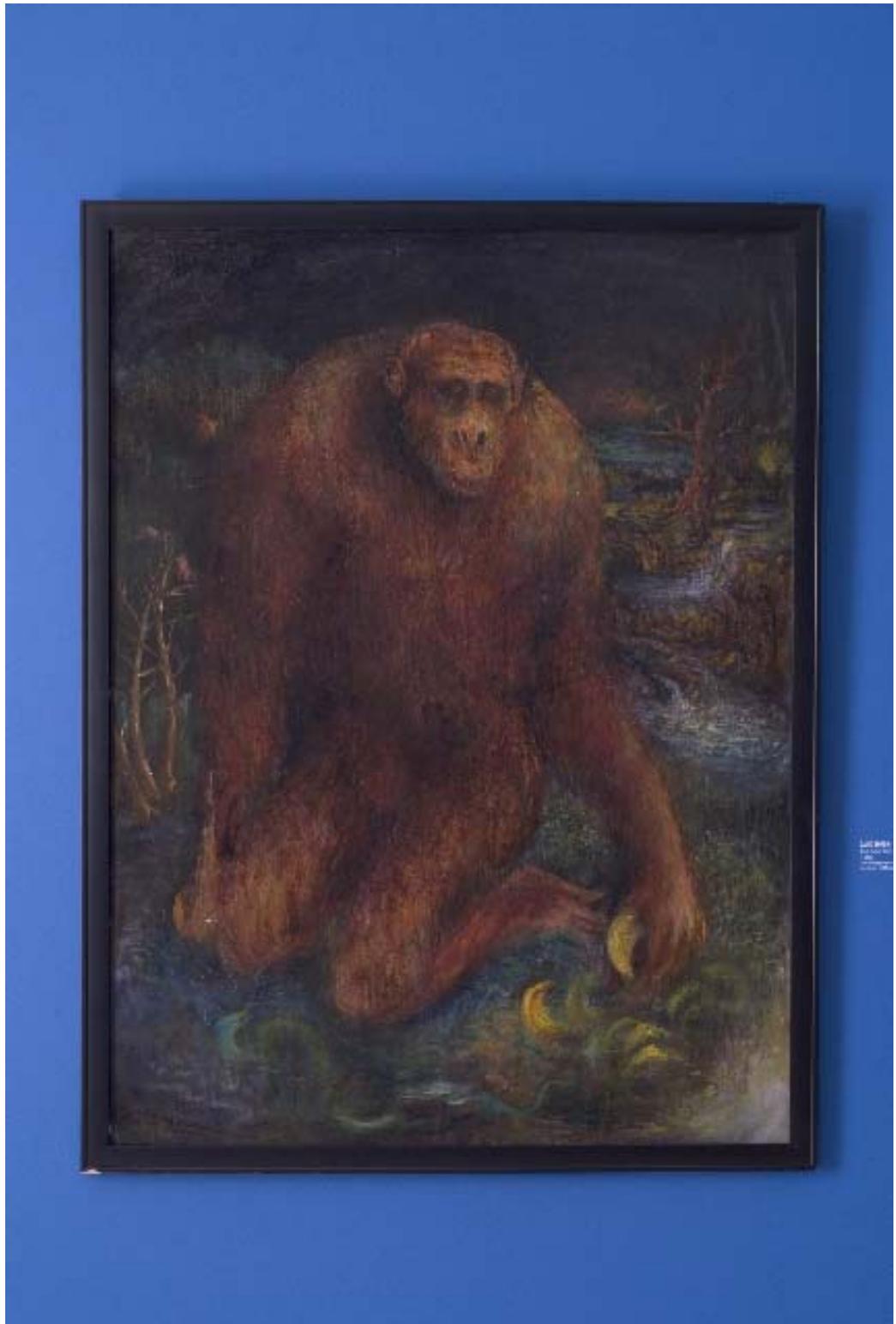
Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (295)

If animal life and human life could be superimposed perfectly,, then neither man nor animal—and, perhaps, not even the divine—would any longer be thinkable. For this reason, the arrival at posthistory necessarily entails the reactualization of the prehistoric threshold at which that border had been defined. Paradise calls Eden back into question.

Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (21)

## “A Far Distant Futurity”

David Borghi’s hauntingly odd portrait entitled *Eve After the Fall* mythically merges human and nonhuman in the image of a single figure (**Figure 1**).<sup>1</sup> Unlike a number of earlier works of art bearing the same title (**Figure 2**), including a painting by Alexandre Cabanel (1863) and sculptures by Auguste Rodin (1886) and Eugène Delaplanche (1869), Borghi’s portrait of Eve depicts not a woman but an ape. The oddness of Borghi’s portrait, however, derives not specifically from this choice. To a stmodern sensibility, Eve as an ape suggests perhaps a satiric but not especially exotic compounding of Western civilization’s two most compelling and conflicting origin stories. Rather, Borghi’s Eve is striking because, in spite of her apelike shape, she gazes back at the viewer with disquietingly reflective eyes. Whereas other artists have emphasized Eve’s body, Borghi’s focal point is her face, specifically the eyes. In the other works, a voluptuous Eve, knowing her nakedness, looks away in shame, her face hidden by her arms. Contrastingly, Borghi’s Eve lacks even a distinctively female body, but her eyes, always looking back at the viewer yet without noticeably anthropomorphic distortion, eerily recall the famously “human” eyes of *La Gioconda*. Invoking



**Figure 1: David Borghi's *Eye After the Fall* (c. 1980)**  
Private Collection. New York.



*Eve After the Fall*, 1869, Marble by Eugène Delaplanche  
Musée d'Orsay (Paris)



*Eve After the Fall*, 1863, Oil on Canvas by Alexandre Cabanel  
Private Collection

**Figure2: Other works of art entitled *Eve After the Fall***

the very problem of opposition, her expression seems at odds with her body: Is she human or animal? Both or neither?

This quality of indeterminacy arises less from what might have been the artist's attempt to render a "missing link" than from an aesthetic reversal that puts into question defining assumptions about how *homo sapiens* came to think of themselves, in a cultural sense, as "human." Was it our ways of looking at the body or looking away that made us "human"? Was it knowledge—or, knowledge followed by the refusal of knowledge? Does the "animal" ancestor of modern *homo sapiens* perform a "human" rite when her body, symbol of "the animal that resides in the human being" (Scholtmeijer 53), first becomes an object of shame in her own eyes? Borghi's Eve complicates this question, telling a different story about her relationship to her body, a body neither objectified nor eroticized, an "animal" body yet not an "animalized" body. In the earlier images, Eve's figure—her form as well as her gesture—signifies her humanness through the familiar dichotomy between mind and body; in Borghi's, the figure signifies only ambiguity, dislocating identity from form, cultural narrative from physiological characteristics.

I begin with Borghi's figure of Eve—and she is a figure in every sense of that complex word<sup>2</sup>—because the questions of categories she raises, in a broad sense, lie at the heart of this chapter. Bernard Malamud's final novel *God's Grace* (1982) and Octavia Butler's Xenogenesis trilogy, comprised of the novels *Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), and *Imago* (1989), republished as *Lilith's Brood* (2000), explore the cultural (de)construction of humanness through the competing cultural narratives of evolution and creation. In particular, by raising the possibilities of a posthuman future which can be

“thinkable,” to use Agamben’s term quoted in the epigraph, as neither human nor animal, both texts, I believe, are responding to Darwin’s statement in the conclusion to *The*

*Origins of Species*:

we may safely infer that not one living species will transmit its unaltered likeness to a distant futurity. And of the species now living very few will transmit progeny of any kind to a far distant futurity. (647)

Buried in a long paragraph summarizing the book’s argument and implications, this prediction is perhaps Darwin’s most radical statement for contemporary readers, accustomed as we have become, unlike Darwin’s first audiences, to thinking of our descent from apes. It is harder to imagine that in “a far distant futurity,” the world may be as different from its present state as its present state is from the world of the dinosaurs—or, that our own distant descendants may be as different from *homo sapiens* as we are from the ancestor of millions of years ago our species shares with modern chimpanzees. Such a prospect challenges what we take for granted as the enduring if evolved fact of the “human” as a fixed presence, as biological entity and cultural identity. If the human species, like all other species, eventually must either become extinct or evolve into something else, possibilities over which both Butler and Malamud speculate, the dichotomy between “human” and “animal” necessarily collapses, even in the present, for what comes after the human? Will it be some other kind of “animal,” like the Oankali-human hybrids in Butler’s trilogy? Something better and more “human” than *homo sapiens*, like the doomed creature Malamud’s protagonist, Calvin Cohn, dubs “homo ethicalis” (162)? The questions about posthuman future(s) these texts pose by engaging with evolutionary narrative—to the extent such future(s) are even “thinkable” in the

present—are questions that look backwards in order to look forward and are as much questions of metaphor as of mutation.<sup>3</sup>

Through this chapter's argument, expressed by the title phrase "evolution as apocalypse," I propose a correlation between the increasingly widespread and popular acceptance of Darwinian narrative in the twentieth century and concurrent developments in literary narrative. On the specific subject of narrative and apocalypse, Frank Kermode invites reflection on how the relationship between the two has been affected by an increasing rate of technological, scientific, political, cultural, and social change since the latter half of the nineteenth century. According to Kermode, we no longer perceive the "end" as something that will occur in the future but as something already in progress. Since "we claim to live now in a period of perpetual transition" (28), he writes,

the End itself, in modern literary plotting loses its downbeat, tonic-and-dominant finality, and we think of it [...] as immanent rather than imminent. Thus [...] we think in terms of crisis rather than temporal ends; and make much of subtle disconfirmation and elaborate peripeteia. And we concern ourselves with the conflict between the deterministic pattern any plot suggests, and the freedom of persons within that plot to choose and to alter the structure, the relations of beginning, middle, and end. (30)

I agree with Kermode, but I believe the perception of transition he refers to indicates a paradigm shift, in a Kuhnian sense, rather than merely a reflection of rapid change.<sup>4</sup> If one replaces the phrase "modern literary plotting" with "evolutionary narrative," Kermode's words themselves evoke the non-teleological yet transformational continuity which characterizes Darwin's descriptions of the evolution of organic life; both novelists

and natural scientists have inquired, equally inconclusively, into what freedom persons within this “plot” have “to choose and to alter its structure.”<sup>5</sup> If literary naturalism—so often preoccupied “with the conflict between deterministic patterns” and freedom of choice—represents one well-documented aesthetic response to evolutionary discourse, the dystopia, a twentieth-century genre with “its roots in the traditions of literary naturalism” (Wegner 170), represents another.<sup>6</sup>

In this chapter, I explore how *God’s Grace* and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, both post-apocalyptic critical dystopias, appropriate evolutionary discourse as a contemporary means of reinterpreting “the End,” disconfirming the global nuclear war after which each begins.<sup>7</sup> In such an “End,” which first entered the apocalyptic imagination on August 6, 1945, there exists today (in our age of genetic engineering, cloning, germ warfare, and bio-terrorism) an almost reassuring, if oversimplified, sense of freedom in the relationship between human agency and the seeming certainty of its consequences: someone pushes a button and the world blows up. We know, as Malamud puts it, “that story” (3), and although it exposes human vulnerability in new and terrifying ways, it does not fundamentally conflict with traditional definitions of humanness that trace back, at least in the West, to the ancient civilizations of the Near East, Greece, and Rome. In the nuclear apocalypse “story,” everyone dies, but human “essence” survives the narrative. Identity is preserved through what is lost, for there is no “posthuman.”

By contrast, to the extent the *Xenogenesis* trilogy and *God’s Grace*, both published in the final decade of the Cold War, raise the question, “What comes after the human?,” they represent “the End” not as a single, catastrophically violent and destructive event, an event perceived as increasingly less probable as the Cold War

waned, but instead as change itself—biological and cultural, gradual, inevitable, uncontrollable, unpredictable, and profound. To live through this “End” means to mutate, and perhaps to cease to exist as such, as if the bombs had fallen. To survive means paradoxically and impossibly to become something other-than-human. Kermode writes, with lucid prescience, that our fictions

change as the reality from which we, in the midst, seek a show of satisfaction, changes; because “time changes.” The fictions by which we seek to find “what will suffice” change also. They change because we no longer live in a world with an historical *tick* which will certainly be consummated by a definitive *toch*. (64)

In contemporary evolutionary narratives of human origins, with their debt to Darwin, the beginnings of our ancestry as a distinct species disappears through a vanishing point on the horizon of the far distant past where it becomes entangled with the ancestry of other species. As the beginning loses its distinctness, even as we learn more about it, so, too, does the end. Perhaps, as Kermode generalizes, “among all the other changing fictions, literary fictions take their place. They find out about the changing world on our behalf” (64). In *God’s Grace* and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, evolution becomes a metaphor for the transitional uncertainty of the “End.” Evolution *is* apocalypse.

In the remainder of this first section of the chapter, I frame my discussion of the novels with some reflection on the term “posthuman,” a complicated term I have already used to refer to the evolutionary future(s) beyond the “End” these texts represent. Readers may be familiar with Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway, both of whom have addressed “posthumanism” as a revisionist response to humanist discourse in provocative

and relevant ways, upon which I will comment. However, posthumanism is also a term frequently exploited in contemporary critical discourse—sometimes used interchangeably (and not always, in my opinion, effectively) as a synonym for the postmodern or other discourses prefixed by the “post.” It is therefore deserving of some consideration, and my purpose is to articulate, through the word’s past and present usage, what will serve as my own working definition both within the context of this chapter and within the larger project of which it forms a part. In the second section, “Trees of Knowledge, Trees of Life,” I compare how the novels represent natural selection as apocalyptic narrative by tracing suggestive tree imagery appearing in both back to its origins in Genesis and through Darwin’s (r)evolutionary refiguration of the “great Tree of Life” (171) as an extended metaphor for natural selection in Chapter Four of *The Origin of Species*. In the final, very brief section entitled “Posthumanities,” I conclude by returning to the “posthuman” and speculating, through my readings of these novels, about the impact of Darwin’s work for readers and writers entering a twenty-first-century posthumanities.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* “posthumanism” or “post-humanism” and its siblings (“posthuman” or post-human and post or “post-” humanist) arose during the twentieth century and designate two distinct but related sets of meanings, often but not always differentiated by use of the dash. In its original (and still prevalent) usage, “posthumanism” refers to “The idea that humanity can be transformed, transcended, or eliminated either by technological advances or the evolutionary process.” The simplicity of this definition belies a history of complex and conflicting associations, along with disagreement over how transformation, transcendence, or elimination will occur (and, indeed, whether they have already, to some degree, occurred). The earliest

cited usage dates from 1916. In this instance, like other examples from the first half of the twentieth century, the “posthuman,” an adjective defined as “Of or relating to a hypothetical species that might evolve from human beings, as by means of genetic or bionic augmentation,” bears distinctively negative connotations. These are illustrated best in the *OED* by this quote from H.G. Wells’s 1940 novel *Babes in Darkling Wood*: “If *Homo sapiens* fails in his promise, then I do not care whether it is *his* degenerate descendants, post-human monsters. . .or whether it is totalitarian ants or rats or mice or what not which come next in the succession.”

Here, the “posthuman,” invoked in relation to degeneracy, monstrosity, animality, and oppression, signifies unwelcome departure from an essentialized ideal, a “promise,” of humanness, yet an ideal since critiqued for its many exclusionary limitations (of women, people of color, the poor, the disabled). In this kind of “post-humanist” critique, post-humanism (sometimes spelled with the dash in this sense) becomes a synonym for postmodernism, referring, in this secondary and more recent usage, to both “A system of thought formulated in reaction to the basic tenets of humanism” (*OED*) and to “writing or thought characterized by rejection of the notion of the rational, autonomous individual, instead conceiving of the nature of the self as fragmentary and socially and historically conditioned” (*OED*). Thus, at the same time, the “posthuman” can refer to both the future, in its first usage, and the present in this secondary usage. Past criticism of the texts considered in this chapter documents how the two sets of meaning coincide: Whereas critics of Butler frequently have read “posthuman” characters in her fiction (modified human characters and the evolving human-Oankali hybrids) as representations of “post-humanist” (fragmented, interdependent, interrelational) subjectivity, Malamud’s

“posthuman” characters, the child Calvin Cohn imagines as “homo ethicalis” (162) and the gorilla who mourns Cohn’s death, finally finding his “human” voice (223), merely refigure a more traditionally humanist subjectivity—a contrast I will consider in more depth later.<sup>8</sup>

As usage examples from later in the century indicate, the connotative evolution of “posthuman” loosely parallels narrative developments in the genre of dystopia which, within these “bad places,” preserve elements of hopefulness and “promise.” All of the common usage examples the *OED* provides for “posthuman” dated after 1980 assume much more positive associations, as the following illustrate: from a 1981 *Time* article, “His humor, his presence, his act seem not only post-funny but posthuman”; from the *Village Voice* in 1999, “The posthuman is not just some Edward Scissorhands amalgamation of gizmos and flesh,” but instead, from Douglas Coupland’s 1995 novel *Microserfs*, humans might “want to become ‘posthuman’—to make their bodies like the Bionic Woman's and the Six Million Dollar Man's—to go to the next level of bodyhood”; from a description in Kodwo Eshun’s 1998 book on cyberculture and music, *More Brilliant than Sun*, “Moving into the possibility space of hyperrhythm, posthuman rhythm that's impossible to play, impossible to hear in a history of causation.”

Eshun’s “possibility space” perhaps best captures the positive yet elusive quality the term “posthuman” shares with the critical dystopia as a narrative genre. According to Tom Moylan’s history of this genre, “dystopian narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century” (xi) and, from varied roots, including both naturalism and utopia, “emerged as a literary form in its own right in the early 1900s” (xi). By the 1980s, the decade in which *God’s Grace* and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy were published, a

new species of dystopia, the critical dystopia, matured in American literature conjointly in response to the “sociopolitical circumstances” of the Reagan era and the contrasting utopianism of the 1960s and 1970s (Moylan 188). Whereas classic dystopian novels (like *Brave New World* and *1984*) portray “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as worse than contemporary society” (Sargent 222), the critical dystopia distinctively also “includes at least one eutopian enclave or holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome and replaced with a eutopia” (Sargent 222). Critical dystopias, in other words, preserve “progressive possibilities” (Moylan 188) and “allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse within the work” (Baccolini 7). In the *Xenogenesis* trilogy and *God’s Grace*, the “posthuman” as a figuration for these “progressive possibilities” functions as a utopian device. It enables both a critique of the dystopian world from within the text itself and the affirmation of an evolutionary “promise” that persists beyond the formal extinction of the human species implicit in the final words of each text.<sup>9</sup>

*God’s Grace* begins “after the thermonuclear war between the Djanks and the Druzhkies, in consequence of which they had destroyed themselves, and madly, all other inhabitants of the earth” (3). Along with Calvin Cohn, a scientist, who had “miraculously survived in a battered oceanography vessel” (3), a chimpanzee Cohn names Buz also survives on the vessel. Formerly a pet belonging to one of the other scientists onboard, Buz has an artificial voice box allowing for rudimentary speech. Besides Buz and Cohn, a number of other chimpanzees, baboons, and a gorilla also survive, all ending up together,

eventually, on a tropical island. Once settled on the island, after the radiation sickness passes, Cohn begins to build a society, with Buz's help teaching the other chimps to speak and instructing them in knowledge about history, science, and culture. Through this process, Cohn hopes to humanize the chimps and, through them, restore what the war has destroyed. At first, they acquiesce, curious and more or less willing. However, when the male chimps realize that Cohn's plans include exclusive relations with the only reproductively available female chimp, they rebel against Cohn and all that he represents, willfully relinquishing human language and culture. The struggle for dominance between competing human groups destroyed humanity, yet Cohn repeats their mistake by attempting to "monkey with evolution" (168), exploiting evolutionary narrative to explain his own desire for dominance. Following Cohn's execution by Buz at the end of the novel, George the gorilla, who has throughout remained silent and aloof from the tensions arising between Cohn and the chimps, "began a long Kaddish for Calvin Cohn" (223). Since Cohn's father was a rabbi and a cantor, George, who hears Cohn's records of his father singing these Jewish songs of mourning (before the chimps destroy them, too) becomes Cohn's culturally "posthuman" descendant, inviting the hope that he may reanimate, albeit in his own gorilla ways, humanity's evolved capacity for empathy and compassion sacrificed within the novel for an equally evolved capacity for telling stories—or, as the Oankali put it in Butler's text, an intelligence which "does enable you to deny facts you dislike" (39).

The *Xenogenesis* trilogy similarly begins after nuclear has destroyed most of the human population and rendered the environment for those who remain alive inhospitable for long-term survival. By chance discovering the planet and its population in this dying

state, a species of interstellar space travelers, the Oankali, intervene, rescuing the remaining humans, taking them aboard their planet-like spaceship to be nurtured back to health, and restoring the Earth's ecosystem, readying it for repopulation. The price for their rescue is a genetic "trade" (40) through which, together, humans and Oankali will reproduce and eventually create an entirely new and independent species.

The first book of the trilogy traces Lilith Iyapo's early relationships with the Oankali as she gets used to their strangeness, struggles with the humans she has been chosen to lead (humans who rebel against the plans of the Oankali and against Lilith for cooperating), and ultimately succumbs to seduction by Oankali mates. Both attracted to and disturbed by a unique characteristic they describe as "the Human Contradiction" (467), the Oankali find human "Intelligence at the service of hierarchical behavior" (467). Like the "beautiful" cancers (22) through which they hope to learn to "regenerate limbs and reshape our bodies" (42), they find the "Human Contradiction" both "desirable and dangerous" (577). According to them, humans "can't grow out of it, can't resolve it in favor of intelligence. That hierarchical behavior selects for hierarchical behavior, whether it should or not" (501). This is one of a number of arguments arising from evolutionary theory developed in the novel, the deterministic argument of contemporary sociobiology—that is, biology is destiny. Once the Oankali have established human partners, they admit, "you're more than only the composition and workings of your bodies. You are your personalities, your cultures. We're interested in those, too" (154), but they are a species "powerfully acquisitive" (41) and "manipulative as hell" (72). In order to convince humans that extinction through "crossbreeding" (42) is preferable to extinction through self-destruction, they make the sociobiological argument early in their

relationships with humans, persuading at least some to accept the interspecies gene trade which will, in Lilith's words, "finish what the war began" (42). However, attesting to the complexity of evolutionary theory and the limits of its deterministic elements, the human "Resisters" (268), those who refuse to accept genetic "trade" (40) with the Oankali, make an initially compelling counterargument, based explicitly on how natural selection works through variation and modification, as they plead with the aliens for a colony on Mars and reproductive independence. They point out, "Chance exists. Mutation. Unexpected effects of the new environment. Things no one has thought of" (501-2). Yet though the resisters feel their resistance commits them to preserving the biological integrity of the human species, they are essentially simply making a case for a different evolutionary path to the posthuman—that is, descent will still depend on modification of the species.

In the second and third volumes of the trilogy, Butler develops this latter argument through the children of Lilith and her Oankali mates many years after the birth of their first hybrid "construct children" (258). Like the constructs, these later descendants inherit the Oankali "organelle" (544) and many traits of their human ancestors, too. Unlike the constructs, who require both human and Oankali parents and mates, later descendants are not functionally a hybrid, intermediate variety but instead "represented the premature adulthood of a new species" (742). They are the result of centuries of crossbreeding and coadaptation and are finally capable of reproducing amongst themselves. These creatures, with both their human and seemingly oxymoronic "multispecies Oankali history" (63), personify the outcome of evolution in action and represent Butler's most sophisticated response to Darwin, who writes in *The Origin of Species*, "I can see no limit to the amount of change, to the beauty and complexity of the

coadaptation between all organic beings, one with another and with their physical conditions of life, which may have been effected in the long course of time” (141). To the extent that the word “posthuman” describes the visionary worlds of these novels, the prefix remains in relational contact with its root, a future species not merely reiterating the “human” but evolving from it, coming “after” it in some way, yet inheriting, within the interrogative dimensions of each narrative, something of its unfulfilled “promise.”

In addition to the “progressive possibilities” which the posthuman signifies in these texts, one potentially positive usage of the term I wish to exclude from my discussion is as a synonym for the “transhuman.” These terms overlap in meaning and are often used interchangeably. But they differ crucially in connoting the role of the body, of human agency, and of a culturally imagined human “essence”; in discussing the “posthuman” as a metaphor for evolutionary uncertainties, one should not confuse “after” with “across” or “beyond.” In the *OED*, the earliest cited usage of “transhuman” occurs in 1812, a century before the first cited usage of “posthuman” (the latter perhaps evolving from the former). In this instance and most of the other nineteenth-century examples, “transhuman” appears in the context of commentary on or translations of Dante’s *Paradiso*; however, the following example from the 1936 book *Worship* by Evelyn Underhill, poet, novelist, and religious mystic, best illustrates the spiritualistic “beyond” which “transhuman” connotes but “posthuman” does not: “Gazing on the Saints in their manifest humanity, their heroic virtue, and ‘spiritual pervasiveness,’ ” one “shares their trans-human experience.” As this example suggests, in its early usage, “transhuman” does not raise questions about humanness itself (the way “posthuman” has always done) but instead preserves it as a kind of spiritual essence, carrying it intact beyond the boundary

of the living human body. The body exists merely as a medium, not in itself consequential for a reckoning of “manifest humanity.”

By the 1950s, the term loses its exclusively religious associations but retains a strong humanistic sentiment. In 1957, Aldous Huxley’s brother, Julian, writes in *New Bottles for New Wine*, “The human species can...transcend itself...in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this belief. Perhaps transhumanism will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature” (“transhumanism” *OED*). Whereas “posthumanism” refers to “The idea that humanity can be transformed, transcended, or eliminated either by technological advances or the evolutionary process” (*OED*), by the end of the twentieth century, “transhumanism” signifies primarily “A belief that the human race can evolve beyond its current limitations, esp. by the use of science and technology” (*OED*). Although overlapping in reference to the role of science and technology, the two terms differ in interpreting how evolution works and what the result will be for the human species. The quote by Huxley above captures this difference succinctly with the phrase “man remaining man.” For transhumanists, the “human race” will find ways to overcome “current limitations” but will fundamentally remain the same. Yet, through dissociation of identity from form, the sameness of a future “human race” to present *homo sapiens* seems disconnected from the very notion of “species,” for the body represents to transhumanists the “current limitations” to which a transcendent human self need not remain bound.

The definition of the “posthuman” makes a distinction—an important one, I think, for the texts under consideration here—between “technological advances” and “the

evolutionary process,” which the definition of “transhuman” does not. Whatever role technology may play in producing a “posthuman” future, the term’s definition suggests we should not suppose it will completely replace natural selection. Contrastingly, transhumanists take humanity for granted as natural selection’s greatest achievement, believing that humans, becoming godlike, should, as the next step, take control of the evolutionary process—believing, against what we know about how natural selection normally works, that our own evolutionary “selection” is something we *can* control, analogous to the kind of control we exercise through artificial selection over animals and plants under domestication. On the subject of artificial selection in comparison to natural selection, Darwin himself remarks, “How fleeting are the wishes and efforts of man! how short his time! and consequently how poor will be the results, compared with those accumulated by Nature during whole geological epochs!” (112). Natural selection operates over thousands of generations under the pressures of changing environments to produce new species; artificial selection, having produced many new breeds but never a wholly new species of plant or animal, does not and cannot operate on the same scale.

Transhumanists do take this difference into account but sacrifice the complexity of how natural selection may operate upon the human species by sacrificing the body to a vision of artificial selection with doubtful results and even more doubtful motives. According to Oxford futurist Nick Bostrom, “Transhumanism [...] advocates not so much a change in how we think of ourselves, but rather a vision of how we might concretely use technology and other means to change what we are – not to replace ourselves with something else, but to realize our potential to become something more than we currently are” (“Posthumanism”). By “concretely us[ing] technology”

transhumanists mean, according to Katherine Hayles, among other things, to “extract human memories from the brain and import them, intact and unchanged, to computer disks” (13). Humans are “to be seen primarily as information processing entities who are essentially similar to intelligent machines” (Hayles 7). Arguing against transhumanism, what she calls the “cybernetic posthuman” (4), Hayles urges recognizing “the importance of the embodied processes constituting the life world of human beings” (20) and supports “a version of the posthuman” without “fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival” (5). The key phrase one might extract from Hayles’s assessment is “embodied finitude.” Whatever role technology may play in a possible posthuman future, bodies, she argues, ought to matter in any serious speculation about it, considering “that 70 percent of the world’s population has never made a telephone call” (Hayles 20). What transhumanists call our “limitations” remain an important and inescapable part of both the individual and collective human condition. Who stands to gain from the promotion of transhumanist notions of the erasure of the body?

Socioeconomic factors (not to mention race, ethnicity, and gender) contribute to a technology-driven “transhuman” vision that is exclusionary but not evolutionary. From an evolutionary standpoint, diversity and numbers are crucial to the future of any species. As Darwin puts it, “the species which are most numerous in individuals have the best chance of producing favorable variations” (142), and “the more diversified the descendants become, the better will be their chance of success” (169). Perhaps the

transhuman represents a form of “diversified” descendant, but numbers and both genetic and cultural diversity are on the side of the majority with only limited access to technology. Alluding to an identity politics underlying transhumanism, Hayles observes,

the erasure of embodiment is a feature common to both the liberal humanist subject and the cybernetic posthuman. Identified with the rational mind, the liberal subject possessed a body but was not usually represented as *being* a body. Only because the body is not identified with the self is it possible to claim for the liberal subject its notorious universality, a claim that depends on erasing markers of bodily difference, including sex, race, and ethnicity [...]. Although in many ways the posthuman deconstructs the liberal humanist subject, it thus shares with its predecessor an emphasis on cognition rather than embodiment. (4-5)

What is the difference, Hayles asks, between having a body and “*being*” a body? What is at stake for the posthuman subject—or from a post-humanist perspective—in making this distinction? And what are the limitations not of embodiment but of disembodiment?

The “posthuman,” as Butler and Malamud invoke it, renders suspect a number of transhumanist claims. Both authors question whether our species can effectively manipulate the next stage of evolutionary change with predictable results, how improvement necessarily follows reinvention, and why humanness—its only flaws being what Bostrom disputably calls the “real limitations” of our “biological constraints” (“posthumanism”)—is something we should want to preserve unquestioningly into a “far distant futurity,” even if we could. Indeed, by highlighting tendencies towards violence, aggression, intolerance, dominance, and self-destruction through the wars that begin each

text and the often difficult relationships among characters throughout, *God's Grace* and the Xenogenesis trilogy suggest the importance of considering how the very cultural narratives we might hope to revise and reform operate to reiterate and reproduce themselves. Why would we want a future in which—"man remaining man"—these same qualities reappeared? Yet how would it be possible, given "man remaining man," for humanity to reinvent itself without them, even in cyberspace? Removing (or profoundly forestalling) the possibility of technological transformation through the effects of nuclear war on population, environment, and infrastructure, Butler and Malamud create post-apocalyptic yet "natural" worlds (even the Oankali spaceships are symbiotic living organisms) within which to explore instead the evolutionary consequences of embodiment. Human characters find themselves contemplating their own role—and, more generally, the role of human agency—within an "evolutionary process" ongoing since long before it produced a species capable of taking a conscious role in this process. The "posthuman" result in both texts is complex, offering neither the utopian illusion of control nor the anti-utopian illusion of determinism.

The body is central to this vision, for both human and "posthuman" characters represent embodiment as an inherited yet evolving condition of descent—embodiment itself a condition of transformation. In different ways positing the disingenuousness of identity constructions which disinherit the "human" from the body, *God's Grace* and the Xenogenesis trilogy suggest instead that by narrating ourselves as embodied, evolving beings, our descendants have a better chance of arriving at a "distant futurity," whatever that is to be. By ignoring the embodied "nature" of his own motivations, Calvin Cohn creates a social environment among the chimpanzees he lives with, an environment rife

with sexual tension and aggression that leads to his own demise and human extinction. The “posthuman” in this novel belongs not to Cohn’s hybrid descendants but to our closest primate relatives. By resisting the embodied mutability characteristic of the evolutionary process, in spite of their arguments for chance and modification, the human “resisters” in Butler’s novels relegate themselves to eventual extinction. Where there are no Oankali, where humanity has the chance preserve itself without change, the Mars colony “will destroy itself as certainly as the pull of gravity” (475).

Neither text, however, concedes the (trans)humanist belief that the body itself is bad or unimportant—that nothing good about humanness or a “posthuman” future can arise from the condition of having a body. Instead, as “good” characters struggle to preserve the integrity of their bodies and their descendants against aliens who want to crossbreed with them and animals who want to kill them, readers sympathize, for the plight of these characters illustrates how positive “human” traits such as love, compassion, and altruism, indeed, even rationality and language—traits which result from brain size and organization—are inseparable from the bodies which evolved them. Because no one can say for sure what will become of these embodied traits—what the descendants of our descendants will need or value—in the altered natures, cultures, and relationships of “a far distant futurity,” the body remains an important and dynamic site. Evolution becomes in both texts a narrative trope for exploring the relationship between embodiment and various kinds of natural and cultural change, the speculative prospect of a “posthuman” future functioning as a metaphor, respectively, for its “animal,” alien, and altogether uncertain results.

Thus, although “posthuman” future(s) represent positive possibilities for hope through continuity in these dystopian texts, the “post-humanist” outlook towards embodiment, difference, and change—both within the self and between self and other—necessary to realize them also generates profound elements of fear, revulsion, and transgression. Relationships with animals and aliens destabilize what human characters imagine to be discrete boundaries between individual bodies and separate species; these texts illustrate, in Donna Haraway’s words, how “interdependence is the name of the worlding game” (*When Species Meet* 19). In the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, the Oankali use the thin, exquisitely sensitive filaments of their sensory tentacles to penetrate the flesh of other living beings as a means of communicating by becoming and becoming *with* one another. Among themselves, “They spoke aloud very little, but there was much touching of tentacles to flesh and tentacles to tentacles” (57). Yet the Oankali, in spite of their desire to commune and communicate, appear repellent, overwhelmingly ugly and unapproachably loathsome, at first to all humans though later only to the resisters. When Lilith sees an Oankali for the first time, she recoils in horror at the “tentacles” which “were elastic. At her shout, some of them lengthened, stretching toward her. She imagined big, slowly writhing, dying night crawlers stretched along the sidewalk after a rain. She imagined small, tentacled sea slugs—nudibranchs—growing impossibly to human size and shape” (14). As aliens, the Oankali literalize a human tendency to react to embodied difference not only as a potential physical danger (their tentacles can sting poisonously) but as a threat to the integrity of self. The Oankali are “worms” (321), but they are also “people” (58), grotesque not only because their intelligence seems at odds with their animalistic appearance but because their always moving, interpenetrating

bodies and intimate curiosity disrupt what characters once perceived as the relationship between self and other, human and animal. Lilith, initially unable to approach her first Oankali friend, Jdahya, wonders at her own “true xenophobia” (23), asking, “Why couldn’t she just accept him? All he seemed to be asking was that she not panic at the sight of him or others like him?” (23). Through what human characters perceive as frighteningly alien ugliness, Butler exaggerates not only human responses to difference but to embodied encounters which “make a mess out of categories in the making of kin and kind” (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 19).

In *God’s Grace*, embodied encounters also “make a mess out of categories”; a zone of convergence between “nature” and narrative opens up when Calvin Cohn realizes his life and his evolutionary fate as the last representative of humankind—and of human history and human story—is interwoven with the lives of other animals. Haraway, commenting on the “human” as a social construction, observes that, although “we have never been human, much less man” (*Haraway Reader* 2), “people are human in at least one important sense. We are members of a biological species, *Homo sapiens*” (*Haraway Reader* 2). Since humans are creatures both born and made, she continues, “There is no border where evolution ends and history begins, where genes stop and environment takes up, where culture rules and nature submits, or vice versa” (*Haraway Reader* 2). Recognizing these intersections, Malamud suggests we cannot help but wonder about them: How has our “nature” as a species contributed to narratives of origin, identity, and end? And how have our narratives reconstructed that “nature” in both meaningful and dangerous ways?

Like the Xenogenesis trilogy, *God's Grace* exposes rather than repeats the naturalistic fallacy, the argument that something is good or “right” because it appears to occur naturally. For example, some humans today rationalize killing other animals for food on the basis that our ancestors did so “naturally” as hunter gatherers. Similarly, as omnivores “naturally” adapted to eating meat (among so many other things), we invoke the naturalistic fallacy when we assert this explanation to justify how right and good it is that we do so. Haraway points out, “The naturalistic fallacy is the mirror-image misstep to transcendental humanism” (*When Species Meet* 79). Narrative itself, if we believe it possesses an evolutionary function, can operate either to reinforce or revise “natural” behaviors which may or may not serve the ends they once did. “Performance, feedback, revision” is one way of describing how evolution works in all species, as performance artist Baba Brinkman, critically recognized for his *Rap Guide to Evolution*, elaborates:<sup>10</sup>

Genes are like a text with a thousand pages,  
and revisions occur in the random changes that come from mutation.  
When they see the light, that's the performance—that's the phenotype.  
And natural selection, well, that's the feedback side—that's about who  
survives  
and whose genes catch a ride to the next generation.

Drawing a connection between natural selection and the evolutionary function of the arts, Brinkman asks, “How do human beings ever learn to do anything? Performance, feedback, revision.” For *homo sapiens*, the arts—narrative in the context of this chapter—offer a unique means our species has evolved for cultural self-feedback on the “performance” of our genes. This feedback can potentially lead to the “revision” of no

longer selectively valuable “natural” behaviors. Natural selection itself instructs us to avoid the naturalistic fallacy, for human nature—not just the cultural construction of it but the biology of it—changes from one generation to the next as the result of the relationship between the processes of selection and pressures of the environment.

As *God’s Grace* illustrates, however, because narrative does play such a major role in the condition of our species and is yet as imperfect as the evolving beings who generate it, we can also get caught in feedback loops. In a moment of anger, as Cohn tries to make sense of his fate, he wonders aloud, “Why hadn’t the Almighty—in sum—done a better job? It wouldn’t have been all that hard for Him—whether man appeared first as a gene with evolutionary potential, or as Adam himself and his rib fully formed—to have endowed him with a little more control over his instincts” (135). The chimpanzees he addresses, students of humanity, respond with “Dead silence” (135), as if Cohn misses the significance behind his own words. In this post-apocalyptic world, Cohn is trapped within a narrative of the “End” he hopes to revise, but he misunderstands how “instincts” potentially drive narrative, overlooking how his own “instincts” to reproduce shape the role he creates for himself among the chimps.

Instead of revising existing narratives, Cohn exploits them to legitimize a fantasy that is in fact the expression of a naturalistic fallacy, the fallacy that his humanness is something selectively valuable to an evolutionary future for the chimpanzees. Imagining himself as both one of the Old Testament patriarchs—at various times Adam, Noah, and Abraham—and as a kind of evolutionary father to a “new species” (165), he locates his “natural” desire to reproduce within culturally acceptable yet apocalyptically incompatible narratives. In doing so, he convinces himself that the “man-chimp child”

(165) he will produce with the only fertile female chimp on the island has nothing to do with competition for survival, sexual selection, or his dominance relationships with the male chimpanzees. Cohn's problem is not his desire to reproduce, his body, or his "instincts" but rather how he narrates them. Though he tries to explain evolution to the chimps, he gets it wrong, for he cannot imagine an evolutionary future for the descendants of the chimps without the injection of his own DNA. Assuming that humanness must be a part of this future, he tries to "monkey with evolution" (168), but only superficially is his transgression that of bestiality. Rather, Cohn misunderstands how evolutionary narratives of his "nature" as a member of the species *homo sapiens* complicate earlier narratives of the preeminence of "man" among the animals. Had he understood this better, Malamud suggests, he might have resigned himself to his fate and lived out his life as the last man on Earth in peace. Cohn's "homo ethicalis," gently if somewhat obscenely satirized within the text, represents a transhuman fantasy rather than a truly evolutionary and posthuman vision.

#### Trees of Knowledge, Trees of Life

*God's Grace* and the *Xenogenesis* trilogy share a central image rich with a history of myth and metaphor through which each text represents a path to the posthuman. Trees of knowledge and of life appear in the first chapters of Genesis and at the end of the fourth chapter of *The Origin of Species*, the chapter which begins with Darwin's definition of natural selection. In the novels, symbolic trees figure as the sites of intersecting stories, growing knots of narrative gnarled by the revisionary work of metaphor, which, as Gillian Beer reminds us, "is never fully stable. It initiates new

meaning but not permanent meaning” (*Darwin’s Plots* 85). One instance of how metaphor works to initiate new meaning, Beer observes, occurs in the way Darwin refigures the biblical tree of life, an extended metaphor he articulates in the long concluding paragraph of the chapter but which he sets up some twenty pages earlier with a diagram, vaguely resembling the branchings of a tree, a figure which illustrates, in the course of explanation and examples, how speciation occurs across thousands of generations. Beer explains, “Darwin’s problem in relation to the theology of his age is expressed in the image of two contrasted trees – life versus knowledge. In his argument and its expression he found a means of condensing this image so that the two opposed trees could prove to be one” (33). The trees, of course, even in Genesis, are not exactly oppositional, and in the novels, Cohn’s “schooltree” (128) and the Oankali “pseudotrees” (63) also bring together life and knowledge, not simply reiterating but reinterpreting Darwin’s “great Tree of Life” (*Origin of Species* 171), itself a reinterpretation of the tree of life that appears in Genesis 2.9, mysteriously disappears in the verses involving the tree of knowledge, and then reappears again in Genesis 3.22. Condensing these two juxtaposed (rather than opposed) images, so foundational to Judeo-Christian narratives of human identity, Darwin refigures them into a metaphor for how natural selection works. This figure, representing the generation of new life forms across time, expresses yet another measurement of the apocalyptic “nature” of evolutionary narrative as it is represented in the novels. Instead of forbidding access to a mythic “tree of life,” the price paid for the “human” knowledge of our mortality, Darwin’s metaphor reintegrates humanity among its branches.

In this section, I trace the development of the tree images that appear in the novels back to the language of Genesis and then through Darwin's refiguration of it. In Genesis, knowledge equals mortality—the price of getting it is “life” as we know it, mortal life. In this sense, the “Fall” is the discovery in any life that one is mortal (“animal”). Life ends. Out of this “knowledge” comes the need and desire for narrative, for a reconciling story. By tracing the refigurations of this original story, I seek to show how, from Genesis 3.24, where “Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every which way, to keep the way of the tree of life,” we arrive, via Darwin, in the Xenogenesis trilogy, at trees of life that are not forbidden but, quite literally, make life available, sustaining it through Oankali knowledge, and, perhaps most importantly, co-evolving with the Oankali and their “trade” partners, even sharing characteristics like the “hairlike, green, oxygen-producing tentacles” which “hung from the huge pseudotrees” (463). When Lilith first emerges from what she perceives as her prison,

she looked back a second time, the hole was closing and she could see that what she had come out of was actually a huge tree. Her room could not have taken more than a tiny fraction of its interior. The tree had grown from what appeared to be ordinary, pale-brown, sandy soil. Its lower limbs were heavily laden with fruit. The rest of it looked almost ordinary except for its size. The trunk was bigger around than some office buildings she remembered. (31)

The pseudotrees, as the Oankali explain, are in fact “part of the ship. They support its shape, provide necessities for us—food, oxygen, waste disposal, transport conduits, storage and living space, work areas, many things” (37). Without these trees of life, “their

flesh [...] the same as the rest of the ship's flesh" (448), the Oankali could neither survive in space nor evolve through their interstellar gene trade with other species. More accurately, the ships themselves "are like extensions of Oankali bodies" (117), though they are plant-like entities that begin as "seeds" which are "trained" to become "aware" and to grow "houses, grasses, shrubs" (283). These symbiotic entities, with their "great treelike structures" (448), symbolize on a smaller scale what the Oankali as a "multispecies" (63) represent more broadly—that is, through the defamiliarization of extraterrestrial life, a way of thinking about how evolution works through the coadaptive interrelationships between living organisms and between organisms and their living environments.

In *God's Grace*, Malamud treats the "schooltree" with more ambivalence. It is a literal tree, "a bushy-leaved, bark-peeled, hard-blue-acorned eucalyptus tree exuding a nose-opening aromatic odor" (128), where the chimps, on "spreading limbs of the blowsy tree, sitting alone or in two's [*sic*], chewing leaves or spitting them out" (129), spend much of their time listening to Cohn lecture "on a variety of topics, or inspired thoughts" (129). As they learn, listening to Cohn, they otherwise live life more or less as chimps, "cracking nuts they had brought along, and eating them out of their palms [...]; or they groomed themselves and their partners as he droned on. When the lectures got to be boring they would shake branches and throw nuts at him" (129). Addressing them from the ground where "He sat on a stool he had assembled at the foot" (129), Cohn—his subject position that of "man" in both the generally human and, especially later in the novel, specifically male sense—separates himself from the living and learning occurring in the tree, never climbing or even touching it. Although he "had become a fructivore"

(47) on the island and climbs other trees to collect fruit, bark, and leaves, and although no angels guard the way with flaming swords, this tree he never approaches. It is a tree of life, in a sense, only for the chimps, who spend their days among its branches. The future belongs to them. Cohn accepts this at first but establishes the tree as a “schooltree” (128), a kind of tree of knowledge upon which the chimps, through his lectures, might feed and someday “develop into a species something like man” (164).

In the context of Genesis, the relationship between the tree of knowledge and the tree of life is a strange one, open to differing interpretations of its outcome; in Malamud’s interpretation, Eden is not paradise lost but a prison Cohn cannot escape. The strangeness of the relationship in the original text arises, in part, from the privileging of knowledge over life, something Cohn carries over to his life among the chimps. In those famous early verses of Genesis, we learn that “out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil” (2.9). A few verses further along, God commands Adam, “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, though shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (2.16-17). Notably, God does not forbid Adam from eating from the tree of life but simply establishes a connection between the two trees, and every thoughtful reader of these lines has wondered: Why is death the price of knowledge? The tree of life itself disappears between Genesis 2.9, where the two trees are first introduced, and Genesis 3.22-23, where “man” learns, “lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever: Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken.”

Knowledge is sacred. Knowledge belongs to God. The price of knowledge is death. Yet why is life so freely given at first? And why is mere knowledge deemed in value exchangeable for life itself?

Late in *God's Grace*, when the chimps have abandoned the schooltree for the other trees of the island and Esau, "the Alpha Ape" (116), has displaced Cohn as the primary figure of authority, Cohn finds that "He himself wandered in Paradise, trying to exit, but all portals were locked" (202). Paradise becomes a prison when it no longer belongs to "man," and here, Buz, the first chimp who learns to speak, informs Cohn that God "preached to the chimps" (68). According to Cohn, life demands knowledge, as he instructs the chimps in the fourth of his seven "Admonitions" (171), "Lives as lives are equal in value but not in ideas. Attend the Schooltree" (171). As he privileges knowledge, he also privileges himself as the purveyor of it in a post-apocalyptic "Paradise" in which humanness, variously constructed, is not necessarily an asset—if it ever was. When Buz asks Cohn what it means to be human, Cohn tells him, "to be human was to be responsive to and protective of life and civilization" (70); Buz responds that "he would rather be a chimp" (70). Indeed, Cohn himself "felt sick horror and a retching contempt of the human race" (9) and yet wants the chimps to "develop into a species something like man" (164). Pondering what he feels as his failure in teaching them, he asks, "How can they survive if they do to fellow survivors what men did to each other?" (203). In the novel, the paradox is not that the price of knowledge is death but that knowledge, once acquired, does not prevent it.

By asking what behaviors contribute to survival, what constitutes "survival of the fittest," Cohn's seemingly moral question also has evolutionary dimensions. In

Malamud's reweaving together of the two accounts of human origins, evolution and creation, we are left wondering what evolutionary purpose the intelligence to acquire knowledge has served and whether that purpose has changed—and whether, indeed, intelligence would serve other animals, for better or worse, in the same ways it has served us. Darwin would probably answer no, since, although “naturalists have not defined to each other's satisfaction what is meant by an advance in organization” (160), “under the very simplest conditions of life a high organization would be of no service—possibly would be of actual disservice” (164). In other words, “advance[s]” like intelligence evolved in the human species because they provided an advantage specific to the conditions under which that species was living. In the Genesis account, the privileging of knowledge unequivocally brings about the Fall yet quintessentially characterizes “man.” In the evolutionary account, though evolutionists would agree that intelligence is a “human” trait, we cannot say for sure yet whether our characteristic intelligence will forestall or facilitate extinction. In the post-apocalyptic world of the novel, arguably, the conditions which favored the evolution of intelligence in *homo sapiens* have changed as the result of intelligence itself acting upon those conditions—acquired knowledge brings about the war; Cohn's privileging of knowledge brings about his own end.

Grappling with ambiguities and differing accounts of the relationship between the causes and consequences of intelligence, Cohn seeks an exit from “Paradise” by trying to teach the chimps a sense of moral responsibility—to become “human” by knowing good and evil—but finds that they, as another species, do not share his “human” definitions of those values. Once the chimps acquire language, definitions become a crucial part of the ongoing conflict which eventually undermines Cohn's authority. When Buz “began his

language studies” with Cohn “who read him selected pages in the dictionary” (67), he is bothered by the ways “Cohn redefined the definitions, not always to Buz’s satisfaction” (67). As Buz develops a sense of identity not as a man but as a chimpanzee, they grapple especially over definitions of the “human” and “animal,” Buz protesting that Cohn seems to define him as an inferior being without expressing any interest in Buz’s point-of-view. Telling the story of Abraham and Isaac, which Cohn includes as part of his attempt to educate and humanize Buz, Cohn concludes, “and a ram caught by his horns in a thicket was substituted as the burnt offering, in that way affirming the idea of an animal in the place of human sacrifice” (73). Realizing Buz might take offense at this valuing of human life over animal life, Cohn catches himself but only makes things worse, explaining, “I’m talking now about the time the story of Abraham and Isaac began to be told. It was probably a protest against the pagan sacrifice of human beings. That’s what I meant about man humanizing himself” (73). In repeated exchanges like this one, Cohn cannot seem to explain the value of human life—“what made him superior” to the chimps (68)—without devaluing the lives of other animals, a rhetorical move Buz perceives as hypocritical, as he asks Cohn, his pronunciation still imperfect, “Ond [*sic*] do you call murdering onimals a civilized act?” (73).

Buz does not claim chimpanzees are superior but simply that they are not hypocritical and, from a chimpanzee’s perspective, that humanness does not necessarily represent an ideal. Indeed, on the subject of killing other animals, in contrast to Cohn who has become a fructivore as a way of expressing his self-professed (and, to Buz, self-righteous and hypocritical) gratitude for all living creatures after the “Day of Devastation” (20), chimpanzees are omnivores, eating meat as a regular part of their

diets, although infrequently, and sometimes, according to primatologists, killing animals, including other primates, as a form of social display. These chimpanzees resent that Cohn prohibits them from killing and eating the baboons who, late in the novel, arrive on the island. In Esau's enraged words, "You busybody horse-ass, you stole my natural food out of my mouth" (201). The chimps find the imposition of Cohn's "human" values oppressive, for they clearly differ from him in how they perceive good and evil, right and wrong, fairness and injustice—different things matter to them. More than anything else, these differences contribute to Cohn's own sense of imprisonment on this tropical "Paradise." On "Cohn's Island" (29), Cohn finds himself a man trying to humanize a society of chimpanzees, a wayward notion at best, not because these chimps cannot acquire human traits (they have learned to talk, after all) but because Cohn views humanness as the model for a state of being to which other animals might aspire, not accepting the chimps for simply being chimps—not respecting nonhuman animals for their nonhumanness. Despite the novel's allegorical overtones, it is significant that these creatures really are not human nor are they necessarily becoming human, as Cohn assumes.<sup>11</sup>

Distanced from learning about how life will proceed in this post-apocalyptic Garden of Eden by narratives which construct "man" as both empowered by and at the mercy of God's grace, Calvin Cohn occupies a subject position even further complicated, as his name suggests, by a conflict between the Jewish belief in grace through Creation and the Covenant and the Calvinist belief in grace through predestined salvation. Unable to resolve this conflict, he "aimed his arrow at God" (135), demanding, "why should the Lord's imperfect creation have spoiled His originally extraordinary idea? Why hadn't He

created man equal to whom He had imagined?” (135). God, from “a Pillar of Fire descending the darkened sky” (134), answers by redirecting these questions back at Cohn himself, replying “ “I am the Lord Thy God/who created man/to perfect Himself” ” (137). The deifying capitalization of “Himself” in reference to “man” is significant because it recalls Genesis 3.22, where “the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil.” God’s reprimand should remind Cohn that, even as the last man alive, he still has some jurisdiction over how he chooses to spend the remainder of his life—a jurisdiction Cohn already practices in the custodial role he assumes through his cultivation of the island’s fruit trees, the well-swept domestic space he creates in his cave, and the cooperative community he tries to organize among the chimps. To his credit, Cohn does try to be a “good” man and feels understandably dissatisfied, like Job who “complained” (137), about what seems the injustice of his fate. Unlike Job, who “ ‘thereafter repented’ ” (137), Cohn finds himself pondering the ambiguity of God’s reply, evaluating how it might reveal what more he might do to change his fate: Should man work simply to “perfect” himself as an individual, as a member of a community, as Cohn has tried to do on the island? Or, should he work more deliberately to “perfect”—that is, to bring to life—God’s “originally extraordinary idea” of what “man” *as a species* ought to be? Although Cohn admits “Fooling around with evolution” is “a mad act for a hitherto responsible scientist” (167), it never occurs to him to question how he can possibly understand the scope of God’s “originally extraordinary idea” if he himself is still “imperfect”?

As a “hitherto responsible scientist,” Cohn should also have a better understanding of how evolution works, displaying only a superficial and misguided grasp

in both his teachings to the chimps and in his plans to bring about “another step in their humanization” (169) through his “half-breed child” (201). Although a “paleologist” (3) who “knew more about fossils than anything else” (131), Cohn appears misinformed about natural selection—by which I do not mean the plot device of his interspecies partnering with Mary Madelyn, the “young lady chimp” (96). The plausibility of this device derives from the fictional premise of the novel, but real gaps in Cohn’s understanding, not supported by the context, surface in other ways. For example, he requires “the help, if not collaboration, of his one-volume encyclopedia” (131) in order to explain to the chimps “about the major things of the past” (131), specifically, the “Descent, Advent, Ascent of Man, as Darwin and Wallace had propounded the theory of the origin of species and natural selection” (132). Whether the fault of the encyclopedia he consults, with no doubt only a brief entry on the subject, or whether the fault of his own education and misreading, Cohn conflates generational “Descent” with progressive “Ascent,” a mistake many others have made before him—including social Darwinists and the Nazi eugenicists whose legacy for Jews Malamud has treated elsewhere. From an interview, we learn that Malamud has cast Cohn’s ignorance deliberately, having “researched the book by reading Jane Goodall on chimps, and evolutionary treatises from Darwin to Stephen Jay Gould” (“God” 113). Word searches of the electronic editions of both *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* reveal that Darwin himself never once uses the word “ascent” in either text, because, for Darwin, writing in *The Origin of Species*, “natural selection [...] does not necessarily include progressive development – it only takes advantage of such variations as arise and are beneficial to each creature under its complex relations of life.” (162). Thus, the relationship between “variations” and the

advantages they generate conditions man's "Ascent"—such as humanity's evolutionary history has been interpreted—upon a notion of improvement "progressive" only in a relative sense (human "variations" have benefited only *humans*) and a randomness which may or may not favor individuals. Naturalist writers a century ago grappled with the narrative implications through characters like Frank Norris's Vandover, McTeague, and Curtis Jadwin; Cohn is their modified descendant, not because, like them, his character is deterministically driven but because, as God's "miniscule error" (3) for having "escaped destruction" (3), he represents the role of chance.

Hence, Cohn is mistaken when he "had at one time theorized that evolution might produce a moral explosion via a gifted creature, homo ethicalis" (162). Although "man, as he was, had got there first with a different kind of explosion" (162), Cohn still insists "it seems entirely possible that chimpanzees, as they progress in their evolution may, if their unconscious minds insist, incite molecular changes that will sooner or later—sooner I hope—cause them to develop into a species something like man, perhaps better than man was" (163-64). Misappropriating evolutionary discourse, Cohn uses it to reinforce a fantasy of human exceptionalism already proven wrong once by the war—and which his own actions prove wrong again, resulting not in "a species of superior-sort-of-men" (164) but in his death at the hands of the chimps (223).<sup>12</sup> Even simple logic, without a sophisticated understanding of evolution, ought to prompt him to rethink the fate he projects onto the chimps, though "they were descended from a common ancestor, perhaps Ramapithecus, who lived about twenty million years ago" (162). As a scientist, he should recognize that species which diverged so long ago, though they "have a closer relationship than Darwin imagined" (162), have taken different evolutionary paths which,

as the result of the intervening variations, will not reunite but only further diverge. Since, in Darwin's words, "Natural selection acts exclusively by the preservation and accommodation of variations, which are beneficial under the organic and inorganic conditions to which each creature is exposed" (*Origin* 160), Cohn should not expect that whatever conditions caused a common ancestor "to improve his lot in life" (162) millions of years ago will recur, with or without Cohn's interventions. The evolution of "a species of adventurous chimps"(164), as his sacrifice at the end suggests, will belong to them, not to the posthuman descendants he imagines evolving by means of his own creatively self-deceptive manipulation of "natural" selection.

Thus, *God's Grace* represents evolution as apocalypse by first restoring access to the "tree of life"—returning "man" to a his place among the animals—through Cohn's re-imagining of humanity's descent from and close relationship to the apes and then, through the chimps' challenges to Cohn's evolutionary narrative, illustrating, in Darwin's words, how "From the first growth of the tree, many a limb and branch has decayed and dropped off; and these fallen branches of various sizes may represent whole orders, families and genera" (171). In the novel, Malamud provides Cohn with a means of conceiving of the future through an evolutionary narrative of the past but, through this same narrative, predicts the human species as one of "these fallen branches"—another kind of Fall but, this time, one not unique to "man." Cohn cannot claim even the distinction of his own extinction. Along with George the gorilla, whom Malamud "named slyly after one of the human precursors whose skeleton was discovered by Leakey" ("God" 113), readers mourn Cohn's death, and the novel concludes on a note of hopefulness because "there was something 'possible' about George" (131), an unrevealed

“something” which lies beyond the boundaries of the text. Yet George, like Cohn, remains within the text a solitary and “lonely ape” (109). Preferring his “upper branch” (156) of “a nearby cedar” (130) to the schooltree, George also “preferred to be by himself” (131), in his solitude and positioning almost as removed from an evolutionary tree of life, in terms of “ ‘possible’ ” descendants, as Cohn is.

If Cohn gets natural selection wrong, however, he hardly bears full responsibility for doing so. Darwin drew inspiration from the poets, and his language, though having a different purpose, retains some of the ambiguity which must have attracted him to theirs. As Gillian Beer observes,

here it becomes important to remember two books which accompanied [Darwin] on the voyage of the *Beagle*, when he was imaginatively at his most responsive. One of them was Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*. The other, which he says in his *Autobiography* was the one book he never left behind, taking it with him on the long land expeditions from the *Beagle*, was Milton’s poems. (*Darwin’s Plots* 29)

Which, in those early years, as his thinking evolved, offered a language more powerful, more intuitively and imaginatively generative, in the formulation of a means of expressing his own theory, Lyell or Milton? The answer seems obvious, yet what did Darwin find in Milton’s poetry that contributed to his own development as a writer of natural history? That answer, too, seems almost obvious. As Darwin wandered through the wilderness of the Galapagos Islands, thinking about how the creatures there had come to be, surely he found it provocative to read, in Milton’s verse, how

Satan had journied on, passive and slow,

But further way found none, so thick entwin'd,  
 As one continu'd brake, the undergrowth  
 Of shrubs and tangling bushes had perplext  
 All path of Man or Beast that past that way. (*Paradise Lost* 4.173-177)

Perhaps in his youth Darwin thought intuitively at first, in poetic figures rather than in facts, feeling for a “way” through the “undergrowth” of prehistory he sensed in the life surrounding him. Perhaps he took pleasure in Satan’s unsanctioned journey that brought knowledge to man, envisioning Satan’s view from “the Tree of Life,/The middle tree and highest there that grew” (*PL* 4.194-195).

And perhaps, marveling at the myriad varieties of tortoises, finches, and hawks, as he searched “passive and slow” for an explanation, questioning the belief that animals and plants and humans, too, had not changed since life began on the planet, perhaps he found affirmation in Milton’s characterization of Satan, who

Beneath him with new wonder now he views  
 To all delight of human sense expos'd  
 In narrow room Natures whole wealth, yea more,  
 A Heav'n on Earth. (*PL* 4.205-208)

On the Galapagos Islands, Darwin found his “narrow room,” found “Natures whole wealth” in the plants and animals he studied, and found the “new wonder” of a knowledge which, in Beer’s words, eventually would cause him “to rejoice in the overturning of the anthropocentric view of the universe which Milton represents” (32). Indeed, “wonder” is a key word for Darwin, appearing several times in his chapter in *The Origin of Species* on natural selection. For example, here, just before he concludes, he

encourages readers to reflect on the scope of his argument: “It is a truly wonderful fact—the wonder of which we are apt to overlook from familiarity—that all plants and all animals throughout all time and space should be related to each other” (170). Underlying Darwin’s sense of wonder, the real value of Milton for him was in the poet’s rendering of the Fall as *felix culpa* or “Fortunate Fall.”

Not everyone would rejoice in Darwin’s new knowledge or share his sense of wonder, something Darwin anticipated, waiting two and a half decades to publish the ideas that first occurred to him on the *Beagle* voyage. Milton’s poetry must have seemed doubly provocative because, in addition to the value of Satan’s point-of-view, expressed so engagingly, it also suggested, as Beer states,

how much could *survive*, how much could be held in common and in continuity from the past. Milton gave Darwin profound imaginative pleasure – which to Darwin was the means to understanding. (*Darwin’s Plots* 32)

From Milton’s retelling of the story Darwin himself would not merely retell but fundamentally revise, Darwin gained an appreciation for the use of language as a means of establishing cultural continuity. His theory represented a profoundly new and threatening kind of knowledge, and he needed an attractive means of conveying it that would not alienate readers too strongly from their prior bases of cultural understanding, a language that would incite debate but compel reflection. A more complex and captivating figure who reanimates the Old Testament original, the Satan of *Paradise Lost* does have his charms; in Milton, Darwin, like the poets of his age, must have embraced a cultural forbearer who made possible new understanding yet preserved contact with the old.

And so, as Darwin describes the “great Tree of Life” (171)—technically a “simile” (170) rather than a metaphor, which “largely speaks the truth” (170)—at the very end of his chapter on natural selection, the beauty of his language lies in its inexact, evocative, and enigmatic openness, for this “great tree” (170) invites interpretations that align “largely” but imperfectly with the extensive detail he provides in the preceding sixty-five pages leading up to it. Here we find, and I quote at length to preserve how the simile of a growing tree grows out of the prose itself,

The green and budding twigs may represent existing species, and those produced during former years may represent the long succession of extinct species. At each period of growth all the growing twigs have tried to branch out on all sides, and to overtop and kill the surrounding twigs and branches, in the same manner as species and groups of species have at all times overmastered other species in the great battle for life. The limbs divided into great branches, and these into lesser and lesser branches, were themselves once, when the tree was young, budding twigs, and this connection of the former and present buds by ramifying branches may well represent the classification of all extinct and living species in groups subordinate to groups. (170-171)

Careful in his rhetorical choices, Darwin could not have found a better way of bringing together the “tree” of knowledge and the “tree” of life than through these “ramifying branches,” for to ramify means both literally “Of a plant, polyp, blood vessel, etc.: to form branches” (*OED*) and figuratively, of ideas, implications, consequences, “To extend; to spread (in various directions); to grow in complexity or range” (*OED*). Starting

with the newest growth of the tree, he evokes the present as his vantage point. In the present, he suggests the upward growth—indeed, the progress or even “Ascent”—of new life as the “green and budding twigs” reach towards to the sunlight. Although he has emphasized earlier in the chapter that “natural selection, or the survival of the fittest, does not necessarily include progressive development” (162), growth here appears not only outwards and upwards but in competition “in the great battle for life.” There is a sense of agency and purpose—expressed in the “growing twigs” which “have tried”—not found in the initial description of a “Natural selection” which “acts only by the preservation and accumulation of small inherited modifications, each profitable to the preserved being” (127). Earlier, he describes how species evolve not by having “overmastered” other species but through variations *within* a species which favor individuals by improving their *individual* chances for survival without either individuals of the same species or whole coexisting species having to “overtop and kill” others. Along with these contradictions between the larger text of Darwin’s chapter and its concluding paragraph, the simile contains contradictions within itself, for even as “growing twigs have tried [...] to overtop and kill the surrounding twigs and branches,” this new growth remains “subordinate” to the rest of the tree.

In later editions of *The Origin of Species*, after its initial publication in 1859, a paragraph inserted after the first paragraph of Chapter IV (in which natural selection is introduced and defined) addresses Darwin’s critics. In it, Darwin answers not criticism of the theory of natural selection itself but criticism of his language. He acknowledges its potential ambiguities and defends his choices. We learn that “Several writers have

misapprehended or objected to the term Natural Selection” (109). Among other reasons, these “writers” (notably not naturalists, zoologists, or botanists) have

objected that the term selection implies conscious choice in the animals which become modified, and it has even been argued that, as plants have no volition, natural selection is not applicable to them! In the literal sense of the word, no doubt, natural selection is a false term; but who ever objected to chemists speaking of the elective affinities of the various elements? – and yet an acid cannot be strictly said to elect the base with which it in preference combines. It has been said that I speak of natural selection as an active power or Deity; but who objects to an author speaking of the attraction of gravity as ruling the movements of the planets? Every one knows what is meant by such metaphorical expressions; and they are almost necessary for brevity. (109)

It is the last sentence which is crucial, for Darwin concedes the imprecision of language but insists upon a consensus of readers’ experiences, values, and beliefs, a consensus belied by his critics, to ensure agreement of understanding. He wants, on the one hand, to make use of the communicative power of figurative language—it is “almost necessary”—to convey complex ideas and, on the other, to exercise control over the range of meanings. Given the arguments arising from *The Origin of Species* over the last hundred and fifty years, Darwin lost this dispute over authorial control, but his loss speaks to the enduring cultural significance of this scientific text.<sup>13</sup>

The last sentence of the paragraph describing the “great Tree of Life,” the last sentence of the chapter on natural selection, suggests in both its image and tone a source

for the speculative “possibilities” evoked by writers of critical dystopias who experiment through fiction with the “ramifications” (171) of evolutionary processes. Darwin concludes,

As buds give rise to fresh buds, and these, if vigorous, branch and overtop on all sides many a feebler branch, so by generation I believe it has been with the great Tree of Life, which fills with its dead and broken branches the crust of the earth, and covers the surface with its ever-branching and beautiful ramifications. (171).

From the earlier “ramifying branches,” Darwin arrives at “ever-branching and beautiful ramifications,” the trope having fully refigured the original idea, such that a literal tree’s branches become themselves ramifications, consequences of the process described.

Although the contradictions discussed above remain in this reiteration, the sentence expresses not mere hopefulness but the living promise of renewal through the balance between “generation” and extinction which brings about speciation. The immortal quality of this tree comes from its reintegration of the “dead,” which become a part of the earth’s “crust” and soil, living again by sustaining the “great tree” as it continues to grow. Thus, the simile expresses the “economy of nature” (110) animating Darwin’s natural philosophy and, indeed, rhetorically prefigures twentieth-century tropes for ecological wisdom by writers such as Rachel Carson, who reanimates the “great tree” yet again in her “web of life” (64).

Given how the openness of Darwin’s language has contributed to its reception and cultural absorption over the last century and a half, it should not be surprising that differences in how Butler and Malamud represent evolutionary narrative result from the

subject positions of their protagonists. In contrast to Cohn's identification with Old Testament patriarchs, Lilith's subject position offers Butler more revisionary potential, for she is namesake for the woman who, "in the Judaic tradition, was the first wife of Adam, created like him out of the dust of the earth" (Wood 88). The original trees of knowledge and life do not condition Lilith's identity in the ways they do Cohn's, and, through her, Butler interprets the implications of Darwin's "ramifying branches" for human descent with more freedom and flexibility.

In medieval Jewish myth, Lilith is the woman God first creates in Genesis 1.27, before Eve and equal to the man ("So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them"). According to this myth,

Refusing to be subservient to Adam (specifically she refused to lie under him during sex), Lilith used her magical powers to flee the Garden of Eden. Pursued by three angels of God, Lilith is given a choice: return to the Garden or one hundred of her demon children are to be killed every day. Choosing exile over subservience, Lilith is doomed to perpetually lose her children and also to become a figure of fear and hate. (Wood 89)

In the trilogy, Lilith's name symbolizes how Butler rereads the traditional anthropocentric relationship of God, "man," and nature through evolutionary narrative. Through Lilith, Butler re-imagines the "alien" nature of female empowerment as Lilith exercises it through her "selection" of both human and Oankali mates. According to one resister, "It was an unusual name loaded with bad connotations. She should have changed it" (285). Lilith informs him, "I'm the one who made it unpopular" (297); her cooperation with the Oankali plans for interspecies genesis leads some resisters to believe she "had

betrayed them” (297), that she is “a second Satan or Satan’s wife” (297). A figure cast out from accounts of humanity after the first chapter of Genesis, Lilith reenters Butler’s post-apocalyptic world of evolutionary narrative with a different burden of cultural inheritance from the one Cohn carries. She has more to gain than to lose in sacrificing the humanness of her children, their human “nature” constructed as much through fiction as through physiology. Expelled from human history before Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden, she represents a figure belonging rather to prehistory and posthistory, accepting not the “promise” of humanity Cohn faults God for betraying but, in Butler’s text, the evolutionary promise of posthumanity.

Through the defamiliarizing alienness of the Oankali, Lilith discovers an interplanetary “pseudotree” of life which grows in unruly yet “not hierarchical” (41) directions throughout the cosmos. As the Oankali “acquire new life—seek it, investigate it, sort it, use it” (41), they represent through their “divisions” (63), through their “multispecies history” (63), the “ramifying branches” of a non-progressive, nonlinear, nonteleological interpretation of descent through variation and modification. Although “powerfully acquisitive” (41), the Oankali exercise a degree of agency tempered—indeed, shaped by and dependant upon—the randomness of their encounters with other species. Since, for example, they cannot “*unfind*” (43) humanity, even though some Oankali find the human genetic make-up, with “so much life and so much death” (26), profoundly “disturbing” (26) to the extent “It hurt some of them” to touch a human being (26), they remain “committed to the trade” (42), only superficially controlling it.

As they acquire new life, they modify it in ways recalling Darwin, exploring how “Natural selection acts only by the preservation and accumulation of small inherited

modifications, each profitable to the preserved being” (*Origin* 127). Oankali “selection” occurs through “what you would call genetic engineering” (40), a conscious process of choices recalling the controversy Darwin dealt with over his own choice of the word “selection.” At the same time, they personify the inevitability of “selection” as a “natural” process—that is, one governed by the necessities of environment, circumstance, and chance rather than agency, as they tell Lilith, “We do it naturally. We *must* do it. It renews us, enables us to survive” (40). In their fictive and spectacularly alien (that is, not “small”) manner, the Oankali, for whom all “Life was treasure” (564), preserve, accumulate, and modify what they find in order to benefit their partner species as well as themselves. Finding Lilith has a “talent for cancer” (22), they modify her predisposition for it so that neither she nor her (and their) descendants will get it. They do the same for all the humans predisposed to cancer. But the Oankali also preserve cancer through their genetic and embodied knowledge of it, modifying it in “profitable” ways, too; eventually, Lilith informs resisters, “They can grow you a new leg if you lose one. They can even regenerate brain and nervous tissue. They learned that from us [...]. They learned by studying our cancers, of all things” (294). At the same time, although most of the time they know what will be “profitable to the preserved being,” they do not always know, and they illustrate how natural selection, again in Darwin’s words, “leads to much diversification of character and to much extinction of the less improved and intermediate forms of life” (169-170). In addition to the randomness of their encounters with potential species partners, apparent Oankali agency and control over nature is further bound by how the new life they “preserve, accumulate, and modify” sometimes modifies them in unexpected ways. In *Imago*, one of Lilith’s later children, Jodahs, the first individual to

transition from the “intermediate form” of a human-Oankali hybrid to “the premature adulthood of a new species” (742), finds that

my worst problem was uncontrolled, unnecessary cell division. Cancers. They began and grew very quickly—many, many times faster than they could have in a Human. I was supposed to be able to control and use them in myself and in others. Instead, I couldn’t even spot my own when they began. (570)

Although Jodahs eventually gets his problem under control, he depends on the confluence of a host of circumstantial, environmental, and interpersonal factors to do so. Even for the Oankali, who have an intuitive, embodied, and actively useful knowledge of genetics, the ramifications of mutation are unpredictable. Jodahs, the Oankali and Oankali-human constructs worry, may well represent impending extinction for this incipient branch of the Oankali “multispecies” (63).

Frequently interpreted by Butler’s critics as models of “posthuman” subjectivity, as I discussed in the first section of this chapter, the Oankali also represent what might be described more accurately as an evolutionary model for identity—that is, a model constructed on the basis of what we know about how natural selection works; species are unstable and suggest a pluralizing understanding of identity which resists the politics of either essentialist or anti-essentialist models.<sup>14</sup> Driven by a biological attraction to newness located “in a miniscule cell within a cell—a tiny organelle within every cell” of their bodies (41), the Oankali have evolved an identity as a species which, like the bodies of each new generation following a “division” involving another species (36), is itself

mutable. Not long after Lilith meets Nikanj, the ooloi child who will become her Oankali third-sex mate,

She sat down on the ground and leaned back against the pseudotree. After a moment, Nikanj sat down opposite her and began to speak. ‘Six divisions ago, on a white-sun water world, we lived in great shallow oceans,’ it said, ‘We were many-bodied and spoke with body lights and color patterns among ourself and among ourselves....’ (63)

Although the organelle is “the essence of ourselves, the origin of ourselves” (41), it essentializes only the branching process of becoming, the “ramifying” production of difference, rather than the differences of the creatures, who, through its functioning, come to be.

One of Butler’s most innovative refigurings of evolutionary discourse involves the phrase “survival of the fittest.” Of all Darwin’s rhetorical choices, the phrase “survival of the fittest” (*Origin* 105) has perhaps generated the most controversy because—indeed, based upon other ambiguities in his own prose as well as the predispositions of generations of readers—it carries the potential for so many conflicting interpretations. When we first read the phrase in context, it generates as much variety in its potential for signification as the multiple and infinitely varied species to which it refers. Darwin writes, “This preservation of favorable individual differences and variations, and the destruction of those which are injurious, I have called Natural Selection, or the Survival of the Fittest” (108). A definition of the term “fittest” in this context depends on “individual differences and variations,” as well as on which characteristics, of those possible, are “favorable” under given circumstances to a

particular “individual” within a particular species. In trying to articulate a general and widely applicable theory, Darwin runs into the problem of the specific, for though he insists “everyone knows what is meant” by such phrases, rarely has “everyone” agreed.

In many, especially earlier interpretations, the notion of “the fittest” has been distinctly gendered, understood in terms of masculine characteristics. In his well-known rephrasing of the “survival of the fittest” as the “the law of club and fang,” Jack London exemplifies how re-appropriations of Darwin’s language masculinized a definition of “the fittest” which not only positions individual against individual in a contest for resources and dominance but opposes “man” against women, nature, and other animals. In the renderings of London and other male literary naturalists, natural selection and sexual selection are conflated where maleness and humanness both come to signify the results of a process of “selection” for masculine traits; the problem with this discourse is that it reinforces the gendering of species—humanity as “man” takes on new meaning. “The fittest,” of course, could also mean many other things, as Darwin himself suggests: “In social animals [natural selection] will adapt the structures of each individual for the benefit of the whole community, if the community profits by the selected change” (115). Women writers of London’s own generation, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, were interpreting “selection” of “the fittest,” in very different ways, with an emphasis on “social” behaviors and the importance of a female role in sexual selection, the corollary of natural selection. New research on early feminist interpretations and appropriations of evolutionary discourse has a great deal of potential for a reevaluation of Darwin’s cultural influence and how that influence has been gendered.<sup>15</sup>

In the trilogy, as Butler speculates on the prospects for a humanity transitioning into posthumanity, she juxtaposes these gendered interpretations of “survival of the fittest,” ultimately undoing gender by representing the “fittest” traits as those which, regardless of sex, pro-socially function, in Darwin’s words, “for the benefit of the whole community.” Rather than feminizing the aliens, Butler alters the conceptual relationship between a cultural masculine and feminine through their presence, defamiliarizing culturally feminine qualities and repositioning them through the evolutionary discourse of the aliens so as to be more universally accessible, valuable, and viable as “the fittest” for the greater good of a community. In part as the result of their third-sex, the ooloi, Oankali appear to most humans at once masculine and feminine, both and neither; all of their voices are “androgynous” (97). Divided into three sexes with different reproductive functions, they nonetheless seem to lack gender. Yet resister men—because they conflate gender and species in the understanding of their own identity—perceive all three sexes of the Oankali, especially the ooloi, as at once masculine, emasculating, and dehumanizing. In the words of one resister, when partnered with the Oankali, a man is “not in control even of what his own body does and feels. He’s taken like a woman and.... [...] He knows the ooloi aren’t male. He knows all the sex that goes on is in his head. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t fucking matter! Someone else is pushing all his buttons. He can’t let them get away with that” (203). Resister men respond to this threat by exaggerating the display of their own masculinity in resister societies, where there are no Oankali, but the result—“Shoot the men. Steal the women. If you have nothing better to do, go raid your neighbors” (499)—hardly justifies resisters’ claims, from an evolutionary standpoint, that they deserve reproductive independence. By equating humanness with masculinity, the

resisters, both men and women, would rather “die” than “live” to coevolve with the Oankali (423). In this manner, they demonstrate “injurious” rather than “favorable” variations, and, through the resisters, Butler exposes the problem of equating “survival of the fittest” with survival of the most masculine.

Contrastingly, by displacing the feminine with the alien and the posthuman, Butler critiques the patriarchy from within an evolutionary discourse in which traits “favorable” to survival are more important than whether they appear masculine or feminine, whether their basis is biological or cultural. Human dualities split into Oankali triads and pentads, the three Oankali sexes and mating partnerships of five. Initially, “because of the way human genetics were expressed in culture” (111), some of the Oankali, confused by the human gendering of sex, believe that “a human male should be chosen to parent the first group” (111) of humans with whom they intend to begin the process of “rebirth” (43). Although they want a “parent” to be a leader, someone strong and capable, they also want someone nurturing, cooperative, and collaborative, someone androgynous like them who will act, in Darwin’s words, “for the benefit of the whole community.” Some Oankali, Lilith explains to one of the women in this group, “were interested in me” (130), testing her, “trying to decide whether I was fit” (131).

What makes Lilith “fit” is nothing about her basic humanness or femaleness—either as the Oankali apprehend it biologically or the resisters construct it culturally—but rather a set of “favorable individual differences.” When Lilith first learns of the Oankali plans, she tells Jdahya, “I wish your people had left me on Earth” (43). In response, he offers a “gift” (43) against his nature as an Oankali—that is, to sting her so that she will “die—very quickly and without pain” (43). She cannot bring herself to touch him. Trying

to “parent” the humans who will become resisters—the humans who attack her, question whether she is “a Human woman” (269), and kill her human lover—she discovers, “She had had time to get used to the idea that she must struggle not against nonhuman aliens, but against her own kind” (149). Before Lilith knows who and what the Oankali are, before she meets Jdahya, and while she remains within the womblike space of the pseudotree, the Oankali “put a child in with her—a small boy with long, straight black hair and smoky-brown skin, paler than her own” (10). Sharad does not speak English, but, together, they take comfort, teaching each other songs, each in the other’s unknown language. Grateful for his company, Lilith’s response to Sharad is that “Anything new was treasure” (10). For the Oankali, too, “Life was treasure. The only treasure” (564). Lilith is “fit” to “parent” the “new species” because, properly speaking, she has never been “human.”

Perhaps invoking the Hindu goddess Kali, goddess of destruction, time, and change, the Oankali, will “finish what the war began” (42), but in “the rich soil of the riverbank” (746), the revisionary seed Lilith’s children plant begins “the tiny positioning movements” (746) of a new tree, in the final words of the trilogy, “of independent life” (746). The original Lilith’s banishment from Eden led to the creation of a myth loosely governing human cultures and societies for the past several thousand years, a myth, Butler suggests, no longer viable for guiding (post)human descendants into the future. Reviving the ancient figure of Lilith, she employs evolutionary narrative as an apocalyptic discourse; in this text the future belongs to the descendants not of Adam and Eve but of Lilith and the Oankali.

## Posthumanities

Borghi's portrait of *Eve After the Fall* asks us to imagine Eve as an ape. The irony of this aesthetic statement lies in the fact that today it is no longer possible to envision the foremother of our foremothers as anything other than an ape. Evolutionary knowledge makes going back to the imaginative state which generated and sustained that earlier narrative impossible. Even the creationists must actively defend their story, and, as unwaveringly literal as their beliefs seem in public discourse, they must have nightmares about a grinning Ramapithecus. As a species, we are like Jdahya and the rest of the Oankali, who "couldn't go home—even if his home still existed. Whatever his people had been like when they left it, they must be very different by now" (43). If the ancient knowledge of mortality gave us a sense of our humanity, the more recent knowledge of our evolutionary descent through prehistory gives us a sense of the possibilities for a posthumanity. What happens, then, to the field of inquiry we call the humanities, as we look upon our culture with this new knowledge? We might perhaps look forward to the "beautiful ramifications" that await us, for although we cannot go back, either through nature or through narrative, to an earlier incarnation of identity, we, like the Oankali, continue to "build ourselves" (281). Unlike them, until the "great tree" branches out again, we continue to "build ourselves" with words.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

## Albee's Animals or, "Our Kind"

I went to the zoo to find out more about the way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other, and with people too. It probably wasn't a fair test, what with everyone separated by bars from everyone else, the animals for the most part from each other, and always the people from the animals. But, if it's a zoo, that's the way it is.  
 --Jerry in *The Zoo Story* (39-40)

"We Are Animals, Are We Not?"

Since *The Zoo Story* (1959), Edward Albee has dramatized human nature by exploring the inescapable but often simplified relationship between humanity and animality—the boundaries, intersections and continuities that complicate this relationship by both connecting us to and dividing us from our ancestors and cousins of other species. In a 1981 interview, responding to a question about taking risks by putting animals on stage in *Seascape* (1975), Albee remarks that "All of my plays have been filled with animals" (*Conversations* 170). Referring not just to the dog in *The Zoo Story* or the lizards in *Seascape*, he reflects that "the people wandering around in most of my plays are animals. We *are* animals, are we not? [...] I'm interested in the fact that so much of what I think is wrong with the world has to do with the fact that man's nature is so close to the bestial" (*Conversations* 170). Here, Albee suggests that in order to confront what is "wrong with the world," humanity must first confront animality. Likewise, in all three of his plays that involve nonhuman animals, *The Zoo Story*, *Seascape*, and *The Goat or, Who is Sylvia?* (*Notes toward a Definition of Tragedy*) (2003), the question of what it means to be animal underlies the question of what it means to belong—in a phrase that resonates throughout the two later plays—to "our own kind." In *Seascape* and *The Goat*, the primary texts for my discussion, Albee indeed takes risks by putting nonhuman animals onstage, for the presence, respectively, of the two lizards and the goat compel his

human characters to grapple with the very real uncertainties and often dangerous ambiguities of “our kind.” At stake is the definition of what it means to be human.

*Seascape* and *The Goat* differ structurally from *The Zoo Story* in that unlike the dog in *The Zoo Story*, the lizards and the goat function in these plays not just as narrative elements but as actual characters, thus altering the scope and representational possibilities of the relationship between the human animal and other creatures.<sup>1</sup> In *The Zoo Story*, Jerry's relationship with the dog, the "black monster of a beast" (30), happens offstage; the only relationship Peter and the audience have with the dog is through Jerry's narrative. This story serves as a framework for understanding his relationship with Peter, but the dog itself remains outside the action of the play. Consequently, neither Peter nor the audience experiences the direct contact between the human animal and other animals so central to the other two plays. In contrast, Sarah and Leslie, the lizards in *Seascape*, after emerging from the sea, spend the entire second act onstage, speaking English, and interacting with Nancy and Charlie, linking their own destiny, by the end of the play, with that of Nancy and Charlie. In *The Goat*, while Sylvia, Martin's beloved goat makes her only appearance onstage dead at the end of the play, Martin's relationship with her drives the play's action, profoundly and devastatingly transforming his relationships with his wife, his son, and his best friend. In *Seascape* and *The Goat*, then, through literal representations of relationships between humans and other animals, Albee compels his audience to examine the fundamental paradox of the human animal by dramatizing how the best in our nature is so often disturbingly inseparable from the beast—how the capacity to learn, to grow, to think, to communicate, to evolve, and perhaps most

importantly, to love is inseparable from the "monster," the "goat-fucker," and the scaly, green, reptilian ancestor who once crawled up from the slime.

Yet, to express the relationship between humanity and animality in these terms, which implicitly impose an artificial hierarchy in which the best qualities are always superior, "human" ones and the worst are always inferior, "bestial," and hence, "animal" ones, is to indulge in what Joan Dunayer has termed "speciesism," and thereby to evade the potential challenges of Albee's more characteristic tendency to prod and unsettle the complacencies of his audience. Speciesism, in Dunayer's words, refers to "the assumption that other animals are inferior to humans and do not warrant equal consideration and respect" (11). Anthropocentric and culturally pervasive, speciesism has roots in the hierarchical mind/body dichotomy defined by Descartes, and which, according to Kay Anderson, forms a boundary that, over the last few centuries, has only become "increasingly chauvinistically drawn within the larger Cartesian framework of Western dualistic thought" (30). Speciesism places humans in a special category, separate from and superior to all other living creatures, not because other animals are "different," to use Leslie's terminology when describing his contempt for the fish, but because, supposedly possessing body without mind and soul, they are "stupid" (42). Leslie's slanted, speciesist, and marvelously human assertion, however, illustrates a primary flaw in speciesist thinking, namely, the conflation of difference with stupidity and inferiority—a line of reasoning that humans have used throughout history not only to devalue other animals but also to support socially, culturally, and politically oppressive hegemonies by identifying the "other" with the animal. In raising the question of human/animal boundaries in these plays, Albee brings the problem of speciesist reasoning

uncomfortably close to the surface, destabilizing the very language commonly used to justify, explain, and exploit difference.

Indeed, even Albee's own discourse precariously negotiates the complex instabilities of speciesist reasoning. In the interview quoted earlier, he says, employing speciesist language, that "what [he] think[s] is wrong with the world has to do with the fact that man's nature is so close to the bestial," but his plays dislocate the idea of the bestial from a term for the merely animal to a label for the barbarous creature that only a human being can become. In *Seascape*, and especially in *The Goat*, it is the humans, in spite of their minds, who exhibit stupid behavior and some of the worst qualities—betrayal, duplicity, dishonesty, anger, aggression, idleness; it is the other animals who teach them about what it means to think, to learn, to communicate, to understand, to grow, to evolve, and to love. Not surprisingly, even language, perhaps the most "human" of human qualities, often fails, as the idea of the beast comes to suggest not a human lacking *human* qualities, but a human lacking *animal* qualities.

In stating that the characters in *Seascape* "exist on the boundaries of land and sea, past and future, pre-history and history, event and emotion" (*A Critical Introduction* 318), Christopher Bigsby neglects an additional, more significant set of boundaries—that between the human and the animal. Confronting this boundary in these plays means confronting the limitations of the merely human by peering, momentarily, across the dizzying, multidimensional, interspecies spectrum of continuities and discontinuities that both unites and divides. Without discounting all that unquestionably does separate the human from other species, Jacques Derrida argues that discussion of this boundary really only

becomes interesting once, instead of asking whether or not there is a discontinuous limit, one attempts to think what a limit becomes once it is abyssal, once the frontier no longer forms a single indivisible line but more than one internally divided line, once, as a result, it can no longer be traced, objectified, or counted as single and indivisible. (“The Animal” 399)

In these plays, Albee takes his audience on a journey to this disconcertingly abyssal frontier, where language itself, perhaps the most obviously distinguishable human difference, breaks down, and the characters, human and nonhuman alike, must confront each other on equally animal terms; ultimately, Nancy and Charlie, Martin and Stevie find out more about what it means to be human by learning more about what it means to be animal from two evolving lizards and a tragically loving goat.

#### “Goat Level”

Such a suggestion, however, that a human, like Martin, might learn something profound about the very nature of his being from a goat, has provoked disapproving reviews accusing Albee of crossing the limits of audience tolerance with *The Goat*.<sup>2</sup> While Albee himself has admitted deliberately attempting to test such limits, the kind of tolerance he aims for seems less the tolerance of what makes Martin an “animal” for having sex with a goat than the tolerance of what makes it so difficult for Martin to differentiate in his love between Sylvia, the goat, and Stevie, his wife. In other words, the tolerance being tested here involves less the problem of Martin's bestiality than the more universally problematic ambiguities Albee reveals about human animality and the

consequent undermining of basic, speciesist assumptions about what it means to be a human being. By the end of the play, Albee wants his audience to ask not only the question in the title, "Who is Sylvia?" but also, by extension, "Who are we?" Similarly, by the end of *Seascape*, Nancy's repeated question upon first seeing the lizards, "What are they?" also implicitly resonates with a reflexive quality, as the boundaries dividing human beings, respectively, from goat and lizards become less and less clear.

Answering these questions in both plays develops into a problem of language, or as Leslie would say, defining one's terms, and indeed, the problems of human language as an inexact and even dangerously flawed means of communication figure centrally in how both plays approach the question of the animal. In *Seascape*, language repeatedly fails to express for Sarah and Leslie essential meanings that Nancy and Charlie previously have taken for granted; in *The Goat*, language breaks down entirely as the argument Martin and Stevie have about Martin's "affair" disintegrates into an existential dispute over pronoun reference, about she-ness and it-ness, who-ness and what-ness. Before and beyond language, however, characters first enter the interspecies abyss without words, through looking, feeling, and acting on a primal, nonverbal level. Here, on a liminal plane that Stevie, "with quiet loathing," mockingly and bitterly scoffs at as "goat level" (39), humanity and animality converge, and the speciesist hierarchy collapses, as human characters meet nonhuman characters not as *mere* animals but as *merely other* animals.

In his book, *About Looking*, John Berger writes that "the animal has secrets [...] specifically addressed to man," that "man becomes aware of himself" through the apprehension of these secrets by "returning the look [of the animal]" (3). These "secrets," Berger explains, have to do with human/animal boundaries, with "animals as an

*intercession* between man and his origin" (4), and such wordless exchanges of looking, through which the other animals in these plays pass on their "secrets" to the human characters, are silently but psychologically transformative. Settings in the plays dramatize the liminality of these exchanges as the experiences of human and other animal characters intersect in locations that evoke the frontier, border, and abyss. At the edge of the sea where Nancy and Charlie meet Sarah and Leslie in *Seascape*, from the crest of a hill where Martin first sets eyes upon Sylvia in *The Goat*, contact becomes a perceptual process in which the human characters cross a dangerous threshold of understanding, a point of no return from the discovery of the "secrets" of the animal.

The locations of these encounters recall the entrance hall in *The Zoo Story*, a place as Jerry says, "where better to make a beginning...to understand and just possibly be understood" (35). In *The Zoo Story*, though, that understanding never really happens; while initially dangerous for both Jerry and the dog, the entrance hall becomes a place where both human and dog finally pass freely, through "feign[ed] indifference," because though they "had made many attempts at contact," they ultimately "had failed" (35). The danger, Albee implies, lies in the very exchange of that silent understanding, and both Jerry and the dog feign indifference to avoid it. The doorway, too, represents a less risky, less absolute threshold, because it suggests a potential for motion in both directions absent from the edge of the sea and the crest of a hill. In a way, the encounters fail because Jerry always avoids the dog rather than meeting him on an even plane, at "dog level." The dog is always just a dog, a mere animal, a "black monster of a beast," rather than *another* animal. As Jerry passes by the dog, he distracts him in order to avoid the dangers of really connecting with him. In contrast, the two later plays develop the

possibilities of what happens when contact, like that which failed for Jerry and the dog, becomes an uncertainly optimistic experiment in *Seascape* and a catastrophically successful consummation in *The Goat*. Unlike Jerry, who recognizes the dangers of real understanding, the characters in *Seascape* and *The Goat* unwittingly, fatefully, fall into the abyss of secrets and find themselves at new and inexpressibly liminal levels of self-awareness.

In *Seascape*, initially encountering the lizards stuns Nancy and Charlie into inarticulate awe as well as silent submission to the animal both without and within. When the lizards, Sarah and Leslie, appear from behind the dune, Charlie's first reaction is instinctively physical and aggressively defensive. He commands Nancy to "get [him] a stick" (22), tensely fearing, "they're going to come at us" (22). Nancy reluctantly complies, though the small stick she finds, especially in comparison to the much larger one Leslie brandishes, illustrates the irony of this kind of response, in addition to its ridiculousness. Both Charlie and Leslie behave, in speciesist terms, like "animals." Unable or unwilling to accept something so far beyond his framework of comprehension, after the unsatisfactory stick waving, Charlie responds next by insisting that he and Nancy have been poisoned by spoiled liver paste, are dead, and have encountered some sort of postmortem hallucination. Yet, while Charlie tries to block and rationalize the presence of the lizards, Nancy responds only with a sense of overwhelming wonder, exclaiming as she hands Charlie the stick, "they're magnificent! [...] I think they're absolutely beautiful! What *are* they?" (23). Nancy's reaction suggests a recognition of something the lizards bring that does not entirely transfer to the substance and solidity of words, certainly not in a way she can translate for Charlie. Both "beautiful" and

"terrifying" (28) to the human characters, the appearance of the lizards suggests an experience almost of the sublime; finally, Charlie has no choice but to submit to it. In other words, he has no choice but to surrender to the "animal"—literally, to the inspection and mercy of Leslie and Sarah but also to the recognition of his and Nancy's own animality. Nancy observes, "We may be dead already, Charlie, but I think we're going to die again. Here they come!" (25), and Act I ends with Nancy and Charlie in a "submission pose," vulnerable to the whims of the lizards and transformed in an attempt to communicate through their bodies with the lizards as other animals.

In *The Goat*, when Martin first encounters Sylvia, his feelings of wonder and awe, like Nancy's, are overwhelming and transformative but untranslatable. He tells Ross, his friend, that "it wasn't like anything I'd felt before; it was...so...amazing, so...extraordinary!" (21). In repeating his description of the encounter to Stevie, Martin expresses an even more exaggerated sense of awe and wonder, explaining that he felt as if "an alien came out of whatever it was, and it...took me with it, and it was...an ecstasy and a purity, and a...love of a...(dogmatic) un-i-mag-in-able kind" (39). Ultimately, it was "an understanding so natural, so intense, that [Martin] will *never* forget it" (40). In fact, he can only describe the ecstasy of first looking into Sylvia's eyes in orgasmic terms, "as intense as the night [Stevie] and I came at the same time" (40). Looking into Sylvia's eyes, Martin experiences an epiphany. Some fundamental truth beyond anything he has ever thought overcomes him, but his experience can only be felt, never fully articulated or explained. Just as Nancy and Charlie at the end of Act I have no choice but to get into submission pose and abandon themselves to the scrutiny of Sarah and Leslie, so Martin finds himself incapable of anything but surrender to Sylvia's gaze, to "those eyes of hers"

and to all the inexpressible, secret, sublime, transformative, "animal" truth her eyes convey (21).

#### “Define Your Terms”

Once the characters establish this "beginning" or "understanding," as Jerry calls it, on a nonverbal level, grappling with the experience, translating it, and making sense of its implications for defining the relationship between human being and animal being become problems of language. Albee has said, "the fact that our tails have fallen off and that we have developed metaphor strikes me as part of the evolutionary process" (*Conversations* 159), and while Leslie is still "extremely proud of his tail" (52), *Seascape* is in many ways a dramatization of this process—a play about the function of language as a step in evolutionary development. Both lizards and humans, by the end of the play, realize that language, the ability to talk, "you know, English" (31), offers them extraordinary possibilities in the shaping of their own destinies by providing the words (or at least the potential to find the words) to shape thought and define experience. But Albee's idea of evolution does not necessarily support progressive development towards something better, for he has also questioned the notion that "we're on top of the pile" just because "we're the most recent animal" (*Conversations* 117). The possibilities for language, even in *Seascape*, are precarious and hardly inevitable, and while *Seascape* concludes with a reserved hopefulness, the failures of language in *The Goat* represent almost a reversal of the evolutionary process, as characters lose the power to affirm their own humanity by losing the power words have always offered to define self and experience. Discovery of the inexpressible "secrets" of the animal exposes in both plays the limitations of human

language as a means of defining experience and thus of clearly mapping a boundary between humanity and animality. Even though language itself has so often been considered one of the most obvious characteristics of human difference, Albee here explores language in ways that fractalize that line of difference and evoke what Derrida, in the passage quoted earlier, calls an abyss of not "a single indivisible line but more than one internally divided line," ("The Animal" 399). In these plays, instead of offering an answer to the question of the animal, language, in its frustrating imprecision, merely serves to complicate it.

Early in Act II, when the human and nonhuman characters in *Seascape* learn that they all speak English, language, simply enough, affords a reasonably stable, reliable medium. After Nancy and Charlie fall into their submission poses, Leslie and Sarah first establish physical, "animal" contact with some preliminary poking and sniffing. Then, when Leslie speaks to the humans, Nancy responds, but Charlie refuses, explaining that if he spoke to "it" (meaning Leslie), he would "have to accept it" (29). In other words, answering Leslie—admitting him into language—would be an acknowledgement that the giant, talking lizard is real; Charlie fears that an exchange of language, mere words, will give substance to what he feels cannot be real.

Soon, though, all of the characters begin to connect at the level of language. Leslie speaks to the human pair several times, prompting Nancy to respond, and finally, after much whispered prodding from Nancy, Charlie, too, says, "Hello" (29-30). Both Sarah and Nancy are overjoyed that a conversation has begun, and after a few more lines of dialogue, Charlie and Nancy reassure Leslie, more or less, that they are not "unfriendly" (30). Charlie tries to illustrate his and Nancy's relative friendliness by telling

the lizards, "we don't eat our own kind" (31), which seems an odd statement, certainly dubious to Leslie, given that Charlie and Nancy are humans and Leslie and Sarah lizards. By "our own kind," though, Charlie explains, significantly, that he means "kind" as determined not by species but by use of language: "we don't eat anything that ... well, anything that *talks*; you know, English" (31). Leslie remains doubtful, answering Charlie with the obvious, "You see...you're *not* our kind, so you can understand the apprehension" (31), but the continuation of the conversation somewhat subdues him as language becomes a tool, though by no means a perfect one, for bridging the abyss. It mitigates suspicion and makes possible communication in spite of real difference. At least temporarily, language suspends speciesist conceit over the human/animal divide long enough for Nancy and Charlie to begin to get acquainted with Sarah and Leslie.

For a while, the ability to "talk English" works well enough to maintain common ground. As long as words correspond to objects, the humans can communicate relatively well with the lizards, though they nonetheless find themselves in the unusual position of having to explain relationships between words and referents that they have never before questioned. For example, the lizards call all of their limbs "legs," vexing Nancy and Charlie with the question of why, as Leslie asks, they "differentiate" in their terminology between arms and legs. Charlie's "quietly hysterical" (according to stage directions) though comically logical answer, that arms are "the ones with the hands on them" (32), satisfies the lizards sufficiently for the discussion to move on to "clothes," which receive a similarly straightforward explanation. When the conversation moves on to "breasts," the lizards require visual aid and analogy, but even though they do not know what breasts are, after Nancy shows hers to Sarah, they catch on by way of likening what Sarah sees to

whale anatomy, something they have observed before. In essence, as long as talk revolves around the relatively empirical territory of "animal" comparisons—bodies, mating habits, breeding, other animals—language, though disconcertingly challenged, grounds their relationship, ironically, not by articulating any sort of relative "humanity" but by reinforcing their common animality.

Even more ironically, perhaps, language fails Nancy and Charlie almost entirely when they try to define "human" qualities like love and the emotions that they suppose Sarah and Leslie to possess. Almost as soon as all four humans and sea creatures accept each other on the basis of their shared language, the reliability of that same language begins to erode. Innocently enough, while discussing the raising of children, Nancy tells Sarah that the reason humans keep their children at home for eighteen or twenty years, in addition to the necessity of preparing them for the world, is that "we *love* them" (38). In the ensuing conversation, confounding difficulties arise when words are disconnected from experience and lack the obvious referents that "arms," "clothes" and "breasts" have:

LESLIE.       (*Turns to Charlie and sits on his haunches.*) Explain.

CHARLIE.     What?

LESLIE.       What you said.

CHARLIE.     We said we love them.

LESLIE.       Yes; explain.

CHARLIE.     (*Incredulous.*) What *love* means!?

NANCY.       (*To Sarah.*) Love? Love is one of the emotions. (*They look at her, waiting.*) One of the *emotions*, Sarah.

SARAH.       (*After a tme pause.*) But, what *are* they?!

NANCY.       (*Becoming impatient.*) Well you *must* have them. You *must* have emotions.

LESLIE.       (*Sits. Quite impatient.*) We may, or we may not, but we'll never know until you define your terms.                               (38)

The problem for Nancy and Charlie, of course, is how to define terms that rely for their meaning only on "human" experience. At its best, language does hardly more than mediate such experience.

Ways of speaking, Nancy tells Charlie in Act I, are really ways of thinking and feeling, and Charlie finally communicates "love" and "emotion" to Sarah not by explaining them as terms—not by defining them—but by making her experience them, asking her what she would do "if Leslie went away...for a long time" and "was never coming back" (54). Sarah becomes distraught, almost as if Leslie really has gone away, though she can hardly find words for what she feels, stammering, "I'd ...cry, I'd...cry! I'd...I'd cry my eyes out! Oh...Leslie!" (54). What happens to her recalls the experiences of inexpressible feeling that overwhelm human characters in both plays, as well as Charlie's argument with Leslie a few pages earlier about Descartes, in which Leslie ponders his own version of, "I think therefore I am." Beneath the surface of language, adrift somewhere in the interspecies abyss, thinking and feeling, more so than speaking, are what define "our kind."

Yet, perhaps most ironic of all, Charlie's use of language creates an illusion that provokes *real* feeling. Thus, while words, as Nancy says, "are lies" (20), in fact, they hardly fail Charlie in defining "emotion" and "love" for Sarah, because his words produce her genuine experience and hence her understanding. Significantly, in this play, language

mediates experience in more than one way. Characters use it to describe features of their common animality—arms, legs, breasts—but more importantly, to determine, to generate, to induce experiences that more precisely define what it means to belong to "our kind" among all the other animals.

Like Descartes, Albee does make a distinction in *Seascape* between "our kind" and the "brute beast" (54). In contrast, however, Albee's distinction, obscures a clear human/animal dichotomy based exclusively upon species, because being of "our kind" does not depend, as it does for Cartesian speciesists, upon devaluing the "animal" body—the part that, in Nancy's words, simply "eat[s] carrots" (53). Nancy explains that she is "not one of these people says I'm better than a ...rabbit; just that I'm more interesting: I use tools, I make art...(*Turning introspective*)...and I'm aware of my own mortality" (53). In Act I, when Charlie insists that he is "happy...doing...nothing" (7) and speaks of having "had" a good life in the past tense as if his life is already over (18-19), he embodies his own subsequent description of the "brute beast," behaving as a creature "not even aware it's alive much less it's going to die!" (54). Charlie is a "brute beast" in Act I not for being an animal, but for forfeiting, in terms of both thought and language, what makes him different from a rabbit—the same thing that makes Leslie and Sarah different from the fish. Through their exasperating questions, the lizards compel him to the (re)discover that difference by compelling him to find words to communicate across the abyss the "beautiful" and "terrifying" experience of what it does mean to live as "our kind." Not merely the ability to think, or to talk "you know, English," but the interrelationship of experience, thought, and language in this play is what determines "our kind." Through their efforts to pack words with meaning, characters in *Seascape*

redefine evolution as much, if not more, by the process of growing in understanding as by that of losing tails and growing arms.

The implications for human destiny are extraordinary. By embracing the "animal" and at the same time relocating the evolutionary process to the mind itself, Albee proposes that the process may yet be ongoing. Such an idea shifts the destiny of "our kind" from fate and finality to self-determination and a continuing development based in our own unfulfilled potential for understanding and communication. While we may know something about what we are, Albee suggests, we do not know yet what we may be. Appropriately, the play ends with the word "Begin."

“You Don't Understand”

This process, though, as Leslie remarks towards the end of Act II, is "rather dangerous" (55), for in part, the same capacity that enables the discovery of meaning also makes possible the destruction of it. While *Seascape* dramatizes the possibilities of packing words such as "love" and "emotion" with meaning, *The Goat* develops the tragic, nightmarish consequences of unpacking words—the process of destroying lives by destroying language. In *The Goat*, the "conceptual matters" (43) characters discuss in *Seascape* become volatile personal matters. Nancy and Charlie compare their animality to that of Sarah and Leslie at the relatively safe distance of conversation, but Martin's behavior causes similar comparisons to intrude crudely upon the intimacy of his marriage. Exploring the enigma of what it means to belong to "our kind" mutates, in this play, from the earnest attempts to answer the lizards' question in *Seascape* about the meaning of love into a speciesist nightmare born at the nexus of love and sex, where the

most "human" experience is inseparable from the most animal. Under these circumstances, the only language available to make sense of human difference gets twisted and lost in the abyss.

As Martin endeavors to explain to Stevie and Ross what has happened to him, the speciesist boundary he has crossed in falling in love with Sylvia approaches a liminality nearly impossible to articulate—even more beyond words than the first moment he saw her. For all practical purposes, from his perspective, the boundary disappears entirely, and as it does, relationships between words and familiar meanings begin to disintegrate. Further, as the distinctions between she-ness and it-ness, who-ness and what-ness—between "fucking [an animal]" and "being an animal" (42)—becomes distressingly unclear, human relationships begin to fall apart, too. The boundary he crosses goes far beyond bestiality; his words are as transgressive, if not more transgressive, than his behavior, because it is the way he understands and communicates the nature of his relationship that destroys his world, more so than what he actually does with Sylvia in the barn.

Martin's series of attempts to find the language to express what "can't have happened" but "did" (39-40), structures the play. Like Nancy and Charlie, who must "define their terms" in order to communicate something outside the experience of the lizards, Martin must find the right language to convey to the other people in his life the essence of an experience that "relates to nothing" else (39). He confesses his relationship with Sylvia three times during the course of the play, his tone shifting progressively from dry irony, to earnest confidentiality, to inexorable, heartbreaking honesty; in addition, Ross narrates the story a fourth time in a letter to Stevie, which she reads aloud back to

Martin. In each telling and retelling, the question, "Who is Sylvia?" arises. By the end of their argument in Scene Two, when Stevie finally understands and accepts how Martin answers that question, instead of illuminating their lives, the "truth" of his feelings empties the years of meaning from their marriage, at least for Stevie. By the end of the play, Martin has succeeded in convincing Stevie of Sylvia's "she-ness," and because he has succeeded in this, Stevie kills Sylvia, because "She loved you...*you say* [italics mine]. As much as *I* do" (54). Martin's words, what he says alone, make real for Stevie something that "can't have happened," as Charlie's words in *Seascape* make the lizards real for him and "love" real for the lizards. The difference in this play, at least from a speciesist perspective, is the insidious nature of what becomes "real." If language normally civilizes and humanizes, here it uncivilizes, dehumanizes, and "animalizes." What leads to the tableau of silence at the end of the play is not Martin's experience itself but the "*honest*" language with which he insists on making it real for other people (10). Attempt after attempt, he demands the precision of a grammarian but lacks the skill of a rhetorician.

Early in Scene One, Martin reveals his "affair" with Sylvia for the first time amidst some half serious banter about whether he is seeing another woman, but the context is so farcical that Stevie laughs and dismisses his confession as a joke. After she notices an odd smell on Martin and a mysterious woman's business card among the contents of his pocket (the woman, Martin later admits, belongs to the support group he has secretly attended for people who share his peculiar problem), a dialogue ensues, as the stage directions indicate, "in a greatly exaggerated Noel Coward play manner," with "English accents" and "flamboyant gestures" that discloses everything and nothing (9). In

this exchange, Martin tells Stevie that, though he "fought hard" against it, he has "fallen in love" and that "Her name is Sylvia." In response to Stevie's inevitable question, "Sylvia? Who is Sylvia?," Martin goes even further:

MARTIN. She's a goat; Sylvia is a goat! (*Acting manner dropped; normal tone now; serious, flat.*) She's a goat.

STEVIE (*Long pause; she stares, finally smiles. Giggles, chortles, moves toward the hall; normal tone.*) You're too much! (9-10)

Stevie interprets Martin's saying that Sylvia is a goat as simply his way of ridiculing her own suspicion. Through a gesture of what Stevie perceives as a kind of mocking, linguistic substitution, the replacement of a supposed other woman with a goat, Martin renders absurd the very idea that he would be having *any* sort of affair, much less one with an actual goat. Even Martin's return to a serious tone when he repeats, "She's a goat," merely reinforces the preposterousness of the statement for Stevie.

In contrast to this quick *reductio ad absurdum*, when Martin next discloses his "affair," this time to his longtime friend, Ross, it takes six pages from the time they first broach the subject of an affair for Martin to communicate Sylvia's identity, because before he can describe who she is, Ross's own schemas about what an affair *must* be repeatedly interfere, as in the following exchange:

MARTIN. [...] And I was getting back in the car, about to get back in the car, all my loot -- vegetables and stuff... (*change of tone to quiet wonder.*) And it was then that I saw her. (*Sees it.*) Just... just looking at me.

ROSS            Daisy Mae! Blond hair to her shoulders, big tits in the calico blouse, bare midriff, blond down at the navel, piece a straw in her teeth...

MARTIN.        (*Gentle, admonishing smile.*) You don't understand. (21)

Ross, of course, could not be further from the truth, and only after another two pages of talking in circles, Martin thinking one thing and Ross construing something else, does he discover it. What happens in those two pages and just after emphasizes even more not only Martin's problems with language, but also both Ross's inability to understand and, indeed, the very limitations of language itself to convey meaning. As Ross, still thinking Martin is having an affair with a woman, tries to help him tell his story, words incongruously attach to meanings:

MARTIN.        [...] I can't *talk* about it.

ROSS.            All right; let me help you. You're seeing her.

MARTIN.        (*Sad laugh.*) Yes; oh, yes; I'm *seeing* her.

ROSS.            You're having an affair with her.

MARTIN.        (*Confused*) A what? Having a what? (21)

While Ross continues to prompt, Martin continues to respond with a mixture of acknowledgement and confusion. He cannot settle on words to describe the situation, though in Ross's mind, everything is perfectly clear—until the inevitable question, "Who is Sylvia?" When Martin responds by bashfully, almost innocently showing Ross a picture, Ross's schemas immediately shift. Martin is no longer "seeing" someone, no longer "in love" with someone, but simply "fucking a goat" and "in very serious trouble" (22-23). Martin cannot explain what happened to him, but neither can Ross. That Martin

resorts to a picture underscores the failure of language for both of them. The fundamental interrelationship normally connecting experience, language, and meanings short circuits, because what has happened "relates to nothing," and the only language Martin can use, short of hinting, sidestepping, or saying nothing, is the wrong language.

Once Ross learns Martin's secret, he decides to inform Stevie of it in a letter, ostensibly to warn her of Martin's situation and the potential fallout. However, the letter, of course, expresses only how Ross conceives the situation, as merely a "crisis" of perverse behavior potentially dangerous to "Martin's public image" (24), but Martin's situation is so far beyond what Ross's letter conveys that Stevie must work through several more misreadings before she and Martin can even begin to confront the impossible reality. Initially, when she reads the beginning of the letter, "Martin is having an affair with a certain Sylvia," she responds as Ross does, and thinks there is another woman, "glad at least it's someone [she doesn't] know" (27). When she reads all the way through the letter, her next reaction is to laugh, again thinking the story is a joke, this time Ross's "grim joke but a funny one" (28). Finally, however, reflecting that "'It's not funny when you come right down to it, Ross" (28), she confronts what amount to the rudimentary facts—facts which even Martin makes no attempt to dispute. Grasping that he has been consorting with a goat, that he fancies himself in love, and that he imagines "it" loves him back, Stevie feels as if she has "fallen off a building" (28). The analogy is apt, because Martin, too, experiences a kind of free fall that he compels Stevie to share. He can neither deny nor refute the "wrong" language other people use to talk about his situation, but neither can he find the "right" language to represent it.

In the passion of her anger over these "facts" of Martin's behavior, Stevie overturns furniture and smashes crockery, but her passion soon finds an equally aggressive outlet in reason, pressing Martin's issues to their logical extreme. The argument distills into a vicious tug-of-war over pronouns and their relationship to personhood. Martin has been recalling his ventures to the country to look for a new house and how in the course of these ventures he came to find Sylvia, when Stevie forces the issue of human/animal boundaries that Martin has been avoiding. She poses the question of the animal in terms of pronouns:

STEVIE.     [...] Now get on to the *goat!*

MARTIN.     I'm getting there. I'm getting to her.

STEVIE.     Stop calling it *her!*

MARTIN.     (*Defending.*) That is what she is! It is a *she!* She is a *she!*

(32)

This kind of haggling over "it-ness" and "she-ness" punctuates the entire argument. A bit later, as Martin once more tries to describe his moment of epiphany at the "crest" of the hill, Stevie pushes him further, again insisting upon addressing the issue in the rawness of pronouns:

MARTIN.     [...] And it was then that I saw her.

STEVIE.     (*Grotesque incomprehension*) *Who!?*

MARTIN.     (*Deeply sad.*) Oh, Stevie...

STEVIE.     (*Heavy irony.*) *Who!?* *Who* could you have seen!?

What seems to bother her about his use of "she" and "who" is the undifferentiated linkage between female human body and female goat body. She asks Martin, "How the hell did

you know it was a she—was a female? Bag of nipples dragging in the dung?" (31), in contrast to herself: "I have only two breasts; I walk upright; I give milk only on special occasions" (25). If these bodies are equivalent, Stevie seems to be asking, where does one draw the line between the human and the animal? How does one know the difference between a woman and a goat?

When they get directly to the subject of love and sex, the question of personhood reaches a crisis, because, again, as Martin has claimed more than once, what can't have happened has happened, and he simply does not have the language to make sense of it, to define it. The only way to define it is in already available terms, and defining it in those terms, for Stevie, "SHATTERS THE GLASS!" (44), because it dissolves the human/animal boundary that, within the speciesist community they both belong to, defines the parameters of a "human" self. Crossing that boundary by "fucking a goat" is one thing; dissolving the boundary by insisting desperately and passionately that the goat has a soul, that the relationship "isn't about fucking," and that Martin "love[s]" Stevie "and an animal—both of us!—equally" (43), for Stevie, dissolves the self, as well. The way Martin "defines his terms" is incompatible with the way Stevie understands her own humanity, and Martin's failure to understand this essential conflict destroys Stevie, Sylvia, and himself.

#### "Our Kind"

Most dramatically at stake for Stevie, but likewise at stake for all of the characters in both plays is what it means to belong to "our kind," and if language offers one means to mediate the uncertainties between "our kind" and the rest of animalkind, civilization

offers another. Civilization interrupts the fantasy of *Seascape* only intermittently, as an occasional jet plane roars overhead and momentarily drowns out conversation. Characters freely explore human/animal interrelationships with little fear but a fleeting apprehensiveness of one another. Here, Nancy and Sarah can even contrast the relative similarities and differences of the human body to the bodies of other animals outside of the speciesist taboos of civilization. These are important comparisons, for to understand what it means to belong to "our kind" means to recognize and accept that "we are all animals," as Albee asserts and Martin echoes. Yet the isolation of the setting of *Seascape*—the very disconnection from civilization that makes possible the freedom of the fantasy—renders irrelevant the kinds of anxieties Stevie has about the difference between a female goat body and a female human body. Unlike Stevie, Nancy can relate her body to the body of another animal, a whale, without sacrificing any of her humanity. Even here, however, the sound of civilization is ominous, and in *The Goat*, its metaphoric roar becomes inescapable. In spite of the illuminating, evolutionary possibilities Nancy, Charlie, Sarah, and Leslie discover about "our kind" at the edge of civilization, such discoveries in *The Goat* unavoidably threaten the speciesist underpinnings of the civilization to which Martin and Stevie belong.

In this context, Stevie has more at stake than her relationship with Martin. Her obsession with pronouns and personhood stems from a prevailing speciesist and sexist "notion that woman is [...] closer to animals than man, and that this woman-animal continuity forms a major barrier for social equality between the sexes" (Noske 106). Martin can gaze blissfully into Sylvia's eyes and assert innocently that "we [are] all animals" (42), but within a civilization defined by a variety of intertwined speciesist and

sexist constructions, Stevie, in facing Martin's simple-minded insistence that Sylvia is "someone just like you," that she is "As bright; as resourceful; as intrepid;...merely...new" (9), must also face the reality that "Discrimination has occurred," and continues to occur, "on the basis of a woman's body, her sexuality, her sex hormones, her reproductive function. She has even been discriminated against on account of her (allegedly) greater emotionality, indeed, on account of anything which can also be detected in animals" (Noske 107). Martin, in his infatuation, foolishly and culpably fails to recognize that, within the society he and Stevie share, Sylvia *cannot* be "just like" Stevie, for Stevie, as a woman, cannot freely and willingly accept an identity equally human and animal without significant consequences. To contend that she is both, that there is no difference, given the constructs that bound their world, rather than humanizing Sylvia, dehumanizes Stevie.

Guilty as he is, however, Martin also has something at stake as important as Stevie's humanity. Though she has little choice, Stevie is mistaken in the absoluteness with which she rejects her own animality. Joan Dunayer writes that "Women who avoid acknowledging that they are animals closely resemble men who prefer to ignore that women are human" (19), for both are denying fundamental truths about the nature of the human animal. Martin overlooks Stevie's humanity—overlooks what makes her different from Sylvia for the sake of what makes her, in his eyes, "just like." He ignores the "human" part of what defines "our kind." Yet, he also recognizes what Stevie can only accept at the expense of everything else that she has come to understand about herself. In essence, Martin recognizes that the "Animal encompasses [the] human" (Dunayer 23). Looking into Sylvia's eyes, Martin experiences a revelation about the essential "animal"

truth of what defines "our kind," translatable for him only as love, for it implies a profound connection between humanity and all the rest of living creation that human beings have actively and aggressively denied throughout time in order to preserve and exploit their own preeminence, privilege, and power. At stake for Martin is his understanding of this truth about his own humanity.

Nonetheless, whatever other secrets they may hold, it is no secret that rabbits do not mate with goats, nor lizards with fish. Since in *The Goat* characters risk more by venturing into the abyss than characters in *Seascape*, addressing the question of the animal in this play demands with greater urgency a response to problems of boundaries related to species difference. Characters in *Seascape* base their understanding of "our kind" in matters of mind and emotion, rejecting speciesism but at the same time accepting species difference as a given, without much questioning of bodies and physical boundaries beyond mutual comparisons. In *The Goat*, by insisting that "we are all animals," Martin challenges the same speciesist arguments that characters in *Seascape* do; however, in his challenge of the supposed speciesist hierarchies, Martin forgets entirely about species difference. In the context of this play, in contrast to that of *Seascape*, species difference is paramount to finding out what it means to belong to "our kind." Animal rights activist Lorri Bauston writes of how her sheep, Hilda, similar to what Martin ascribes to Sylvia, develops a strong attachment to her husband. Following him around their farm, trotting up beside him, even leaning against him, Hilda apparently adores Gene Bauston the way Sylvia seems to Martin to adore him—until something occurs to them that Martin has missed. One day, Lorri and Gene "officially turned from 'city slickers' into 'farmers.' Hilda wasn't in love. She was in heat" (193). Sylvia, like

Hilda, belongs to a different species, not one necessarily lesser or greater—just different. Of whatever consequence, obvious traits mark a distinction between goats and humans. Goats and humans may share equally in animality, but being in love is not the same as being in heat. While Leslie at least thinks about difference, albeit somewhat hypocritically given his feelings towards the fish, reflecting that "Being different is...interesting; there's nothing implicitly inferior or superior to it" (42-43), a large part of Martin's problem stems from his inability to see any difference at all. Stevie's assertion that "We stay with our own kind" (42) baffles him.

Martin himself realizes that he has a serious problem with boundaries, admitting that he is "deeply troubled" and "greatly divided" (42), but the play suggests that he may have found a way to resolve his issues had Ross not interfered. Indeed, on the verge of tears, he insists to Ross that he "could have worked it out" (52). Martin's relationship with his son, Billy, and the undercurrents of tension surrounding Billy's homosexuality draw attention to an underlying imperative of civilization to establish boundaries, even among members of "our own kind." Martin's relationship with his son towards the end of the play indicates that he does have some sense of such boundaries in restraining the expression of an extraordinary and almost overpowering capacity to love. When Martin embraces Billy to comfort him in the midst of the crisis, Ross enters and senses sexual overtones that he perceives as "sick" (51). Martin challenges Ross's conception of boundaries, recklessly wondering, "[what] if it...clicks over and becomes—what?—sexual for...just a moment...so what?" (50). Significantly, in his slippage from the emotional to the physical—in speciesist terms, from the human to the animal—the transgression is momentary. In the story Martin later recounts about becoming aroused by

the baby in his lap, he describes being overcome by shame, thinking "he would die; his pulse was going a mile a minute; his ears were ringing" (51). Martin knows that love and sex dangerously converge in the abyss, and he knows that he needs to "work out" where to draw the line with Sylvia. He also knows a boundless love, though tragically confused, beyond anything that Ross, in his shallowness, duplicity, and concern for appearances, will ever experience. If Martin's transgressions make him an "animal," Ross's lack of kindness and understanding make him the kind of beast that only a human being can become.

Ultimately, in the progression that begins with *The Zoo Story*, evolves through *Seascape*, and culminates in *The Goat*, Albee reveals more ambiguities about "our kind" than he resolves. The very qualities that make us, in Nancy's words, "interesting" and different from the rest of animalkind are both "beautiful" and "terrifying," for they are the same qualities that, in their absence or inverse, transform us from the human animal into the human beast. The most striking difference here distinguishing "our kind" from the rest of animalkind lives in the "civilized" and undeniably human mind that has created the jet planes that disturb the serenity in *Seascape* and the skyscrapers that will likely fill Martin's World City—a combination that, as we know since September 11th, is appallingly more than "rather dangerous." In an interview, Albee has mused that perhaps the next evolutionary step for our species will move us past "being one of the two or three animals that kills its own kind" (*Conversations* 117). What would we become? Would we still be human? Would it matter? Our destiny, Albee suggests in these two plays, whether through human survival or posthuman transformation, depends upon yet untapped resources of language, understanding, and love.

## CONCLUSION

The year before I started graduate school, my father died. Diagnosed with Parkinson's disease several years earlier, he did not die suddenly. With complications from other ailments, he spent the last full year of his life immobilized on a hospital bed in the living room of my parents' house near Chicago. One night in January, my mother telephoned and told me he had stopped eating and drinking. "Come home," she said. I was teaching high school at the time and had not seen him since the summer break. I caught an early flight the next morning and spent most of that day at his bedside. He did not recognize me and did not respond to my voice or my touch. As the day passed into evening and the evening into night, I just sat and watched him breathe. His breath was slow and difficult but seemed regular. Around midnight, I went upstairs to my old room and tried to sleep. Later in the night, my mother woke me. "He's gone," she said, her voice abrupt and too loud in the stillness, and then more quietly, "I think he's gone." Downstairs again, seeing the body, the mouth gaping and still, I gasped for breath. I grasped the wall. I stumbled into the kitchen, almost fainting, my vision blurring, finding a chair, gulping air. I felt death come and go, and then I found my own breath again and began the process of letting go.

Several years later, around the time I started this project, I had an old brown tabby cat who kept me company. He sat on the couch while I read, jumped in my lap while I tried to write, and slipped out the door whenever he could. Cancer took him through a long, slow year. He lost weight, coughed blood, and eventually stopped eating and drinking. When he started having trouble breathing, I brought him to the vet where he died in my arms. I loved this cat, my friend and companion, but, as I felt his breath

subside, he did not take my own breath away with him as my father had. I like to think he spared me that experience, profound though it was, as a parting gift. Like any cat, he always kept something of himself mysterious and aloof. Death came and went and, this time, politely passed me by.

The utter incommensurability of these two lives is stunning. One spent his years teaching fifth graders spelling and fractions, reading them stories, singing them songs. The other spent his days sleeping in the sun. One had children. The other, through no fault of his own, could not. One dreamed of being a writer. The other dreamed of chasing mice. Both loved ice cream. Both had many friends. Both suffered in the end, although one, I am fairly certain, had no conscious “human” knowledge of his mortality in those last hours. The other looked me in the eye as he felt the prick of a needle in his hind leg. Human and animal, animal and human—the words revolve one around the other, meeting and parting, mirroring and distorting. Of what purpose are these accountings of sameness and difference? Why should comparisons of different middles matter when the beginnings and endings are all the same? Like my father, I chase words, but who can say my cat was not happier than either of us chasing his mice?

Evolutionary narratives are narratives without true beginnings or endings. One species varies and becomes another—and another and another, although a person will never become a cat nor a cat a person. Even Darwin’s singular usage of “origin” signifies the plurality of terrestrial existences. Extinction is an ending, the death of a variety or species, but only a temporary one. Bodies return to the earth, decomposing into the earth’s simplest elements, digested by its “lowest forms,” by creatures themselves surviving, selecting, generating, inheriting, varying, mutating, transforming—always

evolving. Through these new narratives, we reconcile ourselves not to the old forbidden knowledge of mortality, which divides as it unites, but to the newer, stranger knowledge of an earthly immortality, richer in the multiplicities it promises of interspecies lives



## NOTES

## CHAPTER ONE

<sup>1</sup> Natural selection is what David Quammen rightly calls “[Darwin’s] biggest idea, bigger than mere evolution” (13). Darwin states, “[The] preservation of favorable individual differences and variations, and the destruction of those which are injurious, I have called Natural Selection” (*Origin of Species* 108). Quammen explains, “Impersonal, blind to the future, [natural selection] has no goals, only results. Its sole standards of valuation are survival and reproductive success” (13). Quammen defends *The Origin of Species* as “one of the most influential books ever written” (175) that “provoked the most cataclysmic change in human thinking within the past four hundred years” (181). For a discussion of how Norris engages directly with Darwin, see Bert Bender’s chapter on Norris in *Evolution and “the Sex Problem”: American Narratives during the Eclipse of Darwinism*.

<sup>2</sup> Though published posthumously, *Vandover and the Brute* is considered Norris’s first novel. Joseph McElrath dates early drafts to 1894 and 1895 when Norris, a student in creative writing classes at Harvard(141).

<sup>3</sup> In “Evolutions: Natural Selection, Phenomenology, and Psychoanalysis,” Akira Lippit comments on Darwin’s impact on humanist culture: “Not only did Darwin challenge the foundations of religious orthodoxy (among many controversial extrapolations, Darwin’s findings pointed toward the historical inaccuracy of Biblical creation, the essential relationship between human beings and primates, and the dynamism of species), [his findings] also assailed many of the tenets of metaphysics, not least of which insisted upon a rigid distinction between humanity and animal” (75).

<sup>4</sup> Norris’s sphinxes lack gender, and it is therefore impossible to know exactly whether he intends to reference the Egyptian sphinx, a male creature with the body of a lion and the head of a man, or the Greek sphinx, a female creature with the winged body of a lion and the head of a woman. The Greek sphinx is the one who asks the famous question. She is also a “demon of death and destruction and bad luck,” in contrast to the Egyptian sphinx’s connection to Egyptian royalty and the brighter power of the sun (Lindemans). Norris probably had the Greek sphinx in mind.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida calls the language that constructs this dichotomy a “wrong” that “was committed long ago and with long-term consequences” (“The Animal” 400). Instead of a clearly defined divide, he describes “an abyssal rupture” with a “multiple and heterogeneous border” (“The Animal” 399). One can only begin to appreciate the “consequences” he warns against when repeating the “wrong” at the same time one is disavowing it for the lack of a language otherwise to speak accurately of the literary representation of these relationships between “those who call themselves men and what so-called men [...] call the animal” (399).

<sup>6</sup> “Internal caesurae” (12): Agamben’s term for division of the subject that results from the cultural “opposition of man/animal, human/inhuman” (37).

<sup>7</sup> Norris’s exclusion of “savage” from the category of “Man” underscores his reliance on a cultural index of humanness disconnected from species. One finds many examples of disturbing connections between race and the “savage.” See “The Third Circle,” the battle scene on the beach in *Moran of the Lady Letty*, and many other instances of individual character “types.”

<sup>8</sup> Spencer, a popular figure in the evolution debates, coined the phrase “survival of the fittest,” which Darwin borrowed (Quammen 179), and was responsible for starting “the intellectual movement misleadingly known as Social Darwinism” (Quammen 220).

<sup>9</sup> Though LeConte’s position on human uniqueness is appealing, evidence accruing over the last century and a half in the biosciences verifies the existence of these attributes and emotions in other species. For examples, see Frans de Waal’s books, especially *Animal Social Complexity: Intelligence, Culture, and Individualized Societies* (2003), *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex among Apes* (2000), and *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (1996). Darwin was right to observe, as he does in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, that the difference is of degree rather than kind—that the expression of a human emotion such as love has origins in mating and parenting behaviors among animals (*Expression* 245). Derrida points out, “there is no interest to be found in a discussion of supposed discontinuity, rupture, or even abyss [...]. Everybody agrees on this” (*The Animal* 399). However, “The discussion becomes interesting once, instead of asking whether or not there is a discontinuous limit, one attempts to think what a limit becomes once it is abyssal, once the frontier no longer forms a single indivisible line but more than one internally divided line, once, as a result, it can no longer be traced, objectified, or counted as single and indivisible” (399). Darwin, like no one before him, brings us into this abyss. Arguments like LeConte’s search for a way out. Norris, in his own way, searches for a way out. No one has found one yet.

<sup>10</sup> To the list of flaws critics traditionally have found in Norris’s work, Donald Pizer adds Norris’s “masculine-feminine ethic,” according to which the woman is always “self-sacrificing helpmate to a man of action.” It is a quality of Norris’s fiction that “weakens whatever it touches” (178). Pizer is correct in this assessment. Certain scenes in *Moran of the Lady Letty* and *A Man’s Woman* are truly offensive to the twenty-first century reader. However, Pizer too readily dismisses it as a fault not worthy of discussion. In my opinion, the “masculine/feminine ethic” requires attention because it is essential to an understanding of Norris’s broader vision of the human condition. Ultimately, it self-de(con)structs and disrupts resolution and closure at the end of *The Pit*.

<sup>11</sup> It is tangentially amusing to note Corthell’s similarity to the persona of Franz Liszt himself, the 19<sup>th</sup> century composer and virtuoso pianist who had a notorious reputation for causing women to swoon at his concerts. Liszt died in 1886, and Norris would never have had the opportunity to have seen him onstage. However, at the turn of the century, anyone with even a layman’s knowledge of music history would have heard rumors of his rockstar-like appearances throughout Europe. Before a performance, Liszt would walk to the edge of the stage, remove a pair of silk gloves, and toss them into the audience, where women would fight over them, often tearing them to shreds. Liszt’s music is incredibly difficult to play because it requires pianists to stretch their hands to unnatural lengths, and musicians speculate that these technical qualities, as well as the fetishizing of his hands, may have been the result of his missing the webbing between his fingers, a rare but not unheard of abnormality that gave him “long, slim hands,” not unlike Corthell’s own (*The Pit* 237).

<sup>12</sup> Sexual selection is Darwin’s subtheory of natural selection. It operates, in Darwin’s words, “through the advantage which certain individuals have over others of the same sex and species solely in respect of reproduction. [...] those individuals which generated or nourished their offspring best would leave [...] the greatest number to inherit their superiority; whilst those which generated or nourished their offspring badly, would leave but few to inherit their weaker powers

(*Descent of Man* 243). Darwin's theory of sexual selection supports the notion that Corthell, not Curtis Jadwin, would make the better mate for Laura.

<sup>13</sup> This review and another are included in the University of Nebraska Press edition of the novel. It was originally published in July 1907. *Before Adam* itself was first published in serialization between October 1906 and February 1907 in *Everybody's Magazine*.

<sup>14</sup> Spencer thought it did, though, and he, not Darwin, is responsible for the reprehensible philosophy of Social Darwinism. See Quammen 219-220.

## CHAPTER TWO

<sup>1</sup> I borrow the term "metanaturalist" from Alex Vernon, who uses it to designate how Faulkner's naturalism differs from American literary naturalism during its classic phase. While earlier naturalists employ animal metaphors and often express a deterministic philosophy, "A few decades after that movement's heyday, armed with historical perspective on his literary forbears, William Faulkner extended this range to what we might call the metanaturalism of his 1936 novel *Absalom, Absalom!*, which pushes beyond the conventions of naturalism by invoking a more thoroughly Darwinian aesthetic" (116). Vernon reads Faulkner's "Darwinian aesthetic" in terms of the expression of specific concepts, such as sexual selection, noting, "Even more than the original naturalist novelists, a number of whom had never read Darwin, Faulkner could talk the talk" (116). I find convincing Vernon's reading of Faulkner's fiction "as a kind of narrative miscegenation that unsettles the South's erroneous yet fundamental insistence on strict black-white speciation" (117). But I also extend usage of the term "metanaturalism" to include twentieth and twenty-first century fiction that registers the cultural impact of evolutionary theory with more historical perspective than that earlier naturalists. Such writing, like Morrison's, may not overtly represent specific Darwinian concepts but only the effects of those concepts on the broader cultural understanding of what it means to be "human."

<sup>2</sup> According to historian John Haller, anthropometrists categorized people based on "measurements of skull shape, hair pile, skin color, temperament, and political belief" (7). In America, "The Civil War [...] stands as a watershed in nineteenth-century anthropometric developments. Body measurements [of soldiers] collected during the war years marked the culmination of efforts to measure the various "races" or "species" of man" (Haller 19). Ultimately, "The war marks a watershed not so much because its conclusions were new but because nearly all subsequent late nineteenth-century institutionalized attitudes of racial inferiority focused upon war anthropometry as the basis for their beliefs. Ironically, the war which freed the slaves also helped to justify racial attitudes of nineteenth-century society" (Haller 19-20).

<sup>3</sup> Gail Mortimer writes, "Faulkner's awareness of the issues raised by the [Scopes] trial is evident throughout the Snopes novels; they offer abundant material that reflects Faulkner's pervasive imaginative fascination with evolutionary theory and its implications.; they chronicle his lingering emotional commitments to the Old South's archaic self-image; and they express his artistic reconciliation of the tensions between feelings and intellect of a Southerner early in this century" (188).

<sup>4</sup> Both Morrison's and Faulkner's novels register the tensions between these conflicting sets of stories, but for a thoughtful discussion of how Darwin's language was distorted and exploited by literary artists and others, see the introduction by Lois A. Cuddy and Claire M. Roche to their

collection entitled *Evolution and Eugenics in American Literature and Culture, 1880-1940* (2003). Cuddy and Roche demonstrate well how “Western belief in evolution’s long history of gradual modification and progress justified long-ingrained attitudes of superiority in the white, educated, and well-to-do Anglo-Americans,” and, likewise, how “American literature [...] was shaped by the scientific theories that generated support for the social ideologies and political policies of the age” (17). However, Cuddy and Roche, I believe, place excessive blame for institutionalized racism on Darwin himself, writing, “Darwin’s texts, both their evidence and their language, became the scientific authority for that Anglo-Saxon preeminence” (17). Citing well-known examples of racist and sexist language in these texts, Cuddy and Roche, not unlike the Social Darwinists they criticize, misread the implications of a broader rhetorical strategy that works against these localized examples. In addition to Gillian Beer’s *Darwin’s Plots*, see *Darwin’s Sacred Cause: How a Hatred of Slavery Shaped Darwin’s Views on Human Evolution* (2009), an exhaustively researched new biography of Darwin by Adrian Desmond and James Moore.

<sup>5</sup> In 1937, Faulkner “discussed Darwin with Mac, who had now begun reading in biology and anthropology under the spur of his stepfather’s interest” (Blotner 389).

<sup>6</sup> The Civil War, Haller contends, affected how *The Origin of Species* was received in the United States. Although the book was published in England in 1859 and available in the U.S. in 1860, Haller maintains that “The political climate around the Negro in America during and after the Civil War [...] brought the origins controversy to a temporary halt among American naturalists” (79). Instead, “A political and military solution, implemented by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments [...] had answered the Negro question and had established through law his position in the order of American society” before science and popular culture could catch up (79). Since, in the United States, “Evolutionary vocabulary reflected the country that bred it and, in reflecting it, wore the prejudices of the land that gave it birth” (94), evolutionary theory and its implications were distorted by the competing interests of various parties following the war. Indeed, “The South was too fundamentalist and New England too moralistic to meet on scientific terms that were unbiblical and unemotional” (78). Though earlier literary naturalists, like their scientific counterparts, often uncritically represent these distortions, metanaturalists like Faulkner and Morrison begin to work through them.

<sup>7</sup> By looking at the end of Faulkner’s career, Diane Roberts argues that his approach to women changes in the later works. Discussing Eula’s daughter, Linda, in *The Mansion*, Roberts maintains, “Her quacking (Faulkner’s description an attempt to link her, however grotesquely, to some residual animal quality), her “mannishness,” so unlike her ultrafeminine mother, and her intelligence overturn all the inscribed feminine of Faulkner’s earlier works” (175). Linda is an anomaly among Faulkner’s women, but I wouldn’t go so far as to say she “overturns” the relationship between women and nature in his earlier work—certainly not in a positive or inclusive way. As Roberts herself puts it, “Linda gets away with murder” (176).

<sup>8</sup> David Quammen writes, “Historians of biology have found intimations of evolutionary thinking in the works of philosophers and scientists long before Darwin. Books have been written tracking the concept back as far as Aristotle” (67). Darwin’s original contribution was the concept of natural selection, but even this was something his contemporary, Alfred Russel Wallace, was pursuing at the same time (Quammen 122).

<sup>9</sup> The Fourteenth Amendment, of course, grants the rights of personhood to men only. Women had to wait considerably longer.

<sup>10</sup> Lippit's definition of "animetaphor":

One might posit provisionally that the animal functions not only as an exemplary metaphor but, within the scope of rhetorical language, as an originary metaphor. One finds a fantastic transversality at work between the animal and the metaphor—the animal is already a metaphor, the metaphor an animal. Together they transport into language, breathe into language, the vitality of another life, another expression: animal and metaphor, a metaphor made flesh, a living metaphor that is by definition not a metaphor, antimetaphor—animetaphor. (165)

<sup>11</sup> Carol Adams notes Upton Sinclair as one of the first to connect the oppression of slaughterhouse workers with the animals being slaughtered, deploying "the slaughterhouse as a metaphor for the workers in capitalism" (51). She argues that workers, like the animals, are victims of the same system: "One of the basic things that must happen on the disassembly line of a slaughterhouse is that the animal must be treated as an inert object, not as a living, breathing being. Similarly the worker [...] becomes treated as an inert, unthinking object, whose creative, bodily, emotional needs are ignored" (52-53). Workers "must accept on a grand scale the double annihilation of self: they are not only going to have to deny themselves, but they are going to have to accept the cultural absent referencing of animals as well. They must view the living animal as the meat that everyone outside the slaughterhouse accepts it as, while the animal is still alive" (53). It is no surprise that today poor, unskilled, immigrant, and often undocumented workers are the only ones desperate enough, like the former slaves in Morrison's novel, to accept, in addition, the low wages and high risks of slaughterhouse employment. In an interview for the PBS series *Frontline*, Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*, claims the industry suffers from a "high, high turnover rate among workers at these plants. The industry averages anywhere from 75 percent to 100 percent a year."

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Hardy's description of pig slaughter in *Jude the Obscure*: "Jude, rope in hand, got into the sty, and noosed the affrighted animal, who, beginning with a squeak of surprise, rose to repeated cries of rage" (68). As Jude and his wife "bound him down, looping the cord over his legs to keep him from struggling" (68), his "note changed its quality. It was not now rage but the cry of despair; long-drawn, slow and hopeless" (68).

<sup>13</sup> Linda Wagner-Martin phrases this idea more graciously by locating the ambivalence in the material itself. Perhaps she is right to do so: "With immense range, *Go Down, Moses* engages the turbulent issues of American history, alludes to the discovery of an already tainted promise in the New World, and appropriates the Biblical story of dispossession from Eden for its thematic purpose. Perhaps no other novel articulates the themes of American history so precisely" (149).

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Buell, though not much concerned with the "question of the animal" per se (and much more forgiving than Scholtmeijer), also notices a paradox, contending that "The Bear" illustrates

the phenomenon of environmental doublethink by setting up an ironic distinction between the spiritual teleology (Old Ben's death means end of wilderness) and the propertarian teleology (Major de Spain's sale means death of wilderness) without resolving the issue of whether the former is a mystification of the latter or whether the former produces the latter. [...]. Who can cavil at Faulkner's

inability to reach closure on the ethical issues, or even at his inability to keep the issue of Southern environmental degradation consistently in focus, when the same failures continue to plague us a half century alter? (16-17)

<sup>15</sup> Darwin's book is by no means the first attempt to catalogue expression of the emotions. Beginning at least as far back as the Renaissance, books on this subject begin appearing. Two such examples are *Characters of Vertues and Vices: In Two Bookes* by Joseph Halle, Bishop of Exeter, published in 1608, and Francis Bacon's 1625 collection, *Essays or Councels Civill and Morall*. Darwin himself, citing *Hamlet* II.ii., alludes to the history of his subject and its relationship to the literary arts, commenting, "Even the simulation of an emotion tends to arouse it in our minds. Shakespeare [...] from his wonderful knowledge of the human mind ought to be an excellent judge" (369). What makes his book different—and relevant to a discussion about representation of race in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America—is the way evolutionary concepts inform the argument. No earlier book brings up the issue of racial similarity.

<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the large body of criticism addressing "The Bear" as the focalizing chapter, Linda Wagner-Martin argues, "in Faulkner's first conception of the book, and in his later implementation of his plan, the central story is not the Ike McCaslin material [...]. It is rather 'Pantaloone in Black,' the narrative of the great loss that strikes Rider and leaves him dumbfounded, able to conceptualize only death" (137).

<sup>17</sup> I credit Marti Kheel's critique of hunters' discourse for influencing my reading of Faulkner's treatment of the hunter. In addition to her concept of the "holy hunter," that is, someone for whom "hunting is not a means of recreation" but "a religious or spiritual experience" (99), I borrow use of the term "decoy" from her. She writes, "hunters employ ethical discourse as a means of shielding the hunter from the actual experience of the animal he kills, and as a means of renouncing personal responsibility" (110). Hunters' ethical discourse thus "functions as a 'decoy,' focusing attention not on the state of the animal who is about to be killed, but rather on the hunter" (110).

<sup>18</sup> I borrow the phrase "a meeting with Old Ben" from an article by Bart H. Welling entitled "A Meeting with Old Ben: Seeing and Writing Nature in Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*." Welling assigns Faulkner's bear "a spot in a long genealogy of self-referential literary beasts—from Coleridge's albatross to Keats's 'Immortal Bird,' to Melville's *Whale* (Old Ben's father in some ways) to Lawrence's 'Snake' [...] to Frost's 'great buck' in 'The Most of It,' to name just a handful—that merit study not only for their mythic and totemic aspects, or for what they can tell us about natural history or the history of various environmental crises, but for the insights they yield about the textual condition of environmental writing" (481). I find Welling's argument compelling and complementary to my own, but, writing from a Darwinian perspective myself, I am most interested in how Faulkner's bear, and, more broadly speaking, these other literary animals, permit readers to engage with the *discourses* of "natural history," rather than with the "conditions"—textual, social, or biographical—that produced them, although, of course, as I have tried to show, these discourses have an important relationship to their historical and social contexts.

<sup>19</sup> To read Morrison's novels in terms of self and community is not new. A decade of criticism reveals how *Beloved* and other novels challenge the tradition of American literary works in which "society and individual are placed in opposition" and "characters acquire consistency through

their distinction from the larger group” (Harding and Martin, 88). In contrast, “Morrison’s work consistently shows that identity and place are found in the community and in the communal experience, and not in the transcendence of society or in the search for a single, private self” (Bryce vii). Others have contextualized this argument in terms of race and gender, noting, in reference to the later novel, *Paradise*, that Morrison “depicts women characters acting collaboratively on the basis of particular, temporary, intersecting subject positions connected to a common history of oppression in order to resist and/or move beyond specific forms of injustice perpetuated by an exploitative racist and sexist American culture” (Comier 646). As I have already shown, hierarchies of race and gender intersect with those of “humanity” and “animality.” At stake for Morrison is not just an ideal of “communal experience” or resistance to “specific forms of injustice” but also, and more importantly, a revision of underlying problems with the ways that human beings articulate their identities and relate to each other that undermine communal experience and perpetuate many forms of injustice.

<sup>20</sup> This last paragraph is a revision of the last paragraph of an essay I wrote for English 631, perhaps where this project began.

### CHAPTER THREE

<sup>1</sup> This painting, along with several other paintings by Borghi depicting apes as the characters in Biblical scenes, was featured as part of the *Home & Beast* exhibition from October 2006 through September 2007 at the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore. The digital image reproduced here was provided through e-mail at my request by Sarah Templin, the exhibition curator. I was unable to find specific information about the date of *Eve After the Fall*, other than this passing comment about Borghi, who suffers from schizophrenia, in a 2006 art magazine: “Vastly itinerant and institutionalized, Borghi and the paintings have been hidden away for the past 30 years” (Klobe).

<sup>2</sup> Donna Haraway’s analysis of the “figure” is insightful: “Figures are not representations or didactic illustrations, but rather material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings co-shape one another. For me figures have always been where the biological and literary or artistic come together with all the force of lived reality” (4).

<sup>3</sup> Derrida sheds light on the complexity of this question by asking not “What comes after the human?” but “What comes after the animal?” To ask the former, if one embraces both Darwin and Derrida, one must also ask the latter. Punning on the French phrase *Je suis*, which means both “I am” (first-person present conjugation of *être*, to be) and “I follow” (first-person present conjugation of *suivre*, to follow), Derrida inquires, “In what sense [...] should I say that I am close or next to the animal, and that I am (following) it, and in what type or order of pressure? Being with it in the sense of being-close-to-it? Being-alongside-it? Being-after-it? *Being-after-it* in the sense of the hunt, training, or taming, or *being-after-it* in the sense of a succession or inheritance?” (*The Animal* 10). Malamud and Butler pose similar questions about the relationship between the human and posthuman.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Ruse summarizes Thomas Kuhn’s notion of the scientific paradigm as “a work or body of work which captures the scientific imagination—which commands allegiance from a group of workers and provides tasks for them to undertake” (21). As Ruse argues, Darwin created a paradigm which has influenced not only the scientific imagination but the cultural imagination as well.

<sup>5</sup> Humanities scholars and natural scientists, when they approach this question, do not often meet on common ground. Jared Diamond, a self-described evolutionary historian, may be an exception. His 2005 book *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* argues for a kind of environmental determinism. Unlike sociobiologists (who base their study of human society on evolutionary biology and psychology and, as a result, tend to treat human society reductively), Diamond addresses quite literally the unequal “terrain” upon which human societies arose. According to Diamond, by around 40,000 B.C., our prehistoric ancestors were essentially physiologically “modern” *homo sapiens* and equal in tool use and social organization among their communities. However, as groups began to migrate around the globe, they encountered profoundly different environments (in terms of climate, vegetation, and animal life) which complicated the development of agriculture and the domestication of animals, which, in turn, had an impact on how civilizations developed around the world—and how some came to dominate others. Diamond’s argument, which emphasizes the evolutionary “plot” of adaptation rather than competition, leaves open the possibility for social change.

<sup>6</sup> Wegner explains the similarities between naturalism and dystopia more fully as follows: “most of the dystopian fictions remembered best today come from authors who understood their politics to be left of center, if not explicitly socialist—something equally the case, as Jameson’s discussion of Gissing makes evident (Emile Zola and Theodore Dreiser also come to mind), for the nineteenth-century practitioners of literary naturalism. In all of these cases, we see emerging a fundamental and often irresolvable contradiction between the author’s or the text’s explicit political orientation and what Jameson calls the ‘ideology of form’ ” (170). My chapter on Frank Norris addresses this aspect of formal contradiction not in terms of political ideology (Jameson was not a source for that chapter) but in terms of Norris’s representation of an internally conflicting response to evolutionary narrative.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Freese offers this contrasting reading of apocalypse in *God’s Grace*: “Malamud’s concern is not with the final bang in a scientific sense” (410). Rather, “What he is interested in is the apocalypse in the Judeo-Christian sense of a moral challenge, of the end of one and the concomitant beginning of another phase of history and of the cosmic unfolding of a divine plan. Not a scientist’s dire prediction of the inevitable consequences of nuclear armament but a humanist’s impassioned plea for a deluded mankind to come to its senses, *God’s Grace* is concerned with such issues as responsibility and guilt, atonement and redemption” (411). Freese’s reading does not necessarily conflict with my own reading of evolution as apocalypse, but emphasizing Malamud’s thematically central use of evolutionary narrative complicates how we think about the issues Freese raises.

<sup>8</sup> A general consensus exists among Butler’s critics to interpret her posthuman—i.e. biologically evolved—characters as, in some way, representations of “post-humanist” subjectivity. In addition to the article by Naomi Jacobs cited in the next endnote, Donna Haraway discusses Butler’s posthumans in terms of a blurring of boundaries of many kinds: In the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, “The contending shapes of sameness and difference in any possible future are at stake in the unfinished narrative of traffic across specific cultural, biotechnical, and political boundaries that separate and link animal, human, and machine in a contemporary global world where survival is at stake” (*Simians* 229). For Goss and Riquelme, “The pervasive challenge to absolutes in *Xenogenesis* arises from alternatives to the hierarchical implications of binary structures” (440), whereas Ackerman considers “how Butler explores a specifically erotic pleasure [...] integral for such a shift in subjectivity to begin” (25). As far as I know, no one has discussed Malamud’s novel in terms of the posthuman.

<sup>9</sup> This is a reading similar to the argument Naomi Jacobs makes in “Posthuman Bodies and Agency in Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis*.” She writes, “Butler’s critical dystopia suggests a resource for hope in [...] the evolution of the human toward a posthuman body, posthuman subjectivity, and posthuman form of agency” (91). My reading of Butler is in agreement with Jacobs but differs in emphasis. Jacobs invokes the term “posthuman” as largely a synonym for the postmodern. Jacobs states, “the issues at play in her *Xenogenesis* trilogy are essentially those of the postmodern critique of the humanist subject: the critique of the individual as a rationally self-determining, self-defining being, and of individual identity as the source of agency” (91), whereas I am more interested in how evolutionary narrative functions within works of fiction—narratives of survival, adaptation, selection, mutation, transformation—to create the imaginary posthuman in the first place, whether understood as a futuristic possibility, a “postmodern” metaphor for subjectivity, a trope for present social change, or some combination of all three.

<sup>10</sup> Baba Brinkman performed at a conference I attended November 20-22, 2009 at San Diego State University entitled *150 Years of Evolution: Darwin’s Impact on the Humanities and Social Sciences*. Both entertaining and educational, Baba’s work also makes a provocative argument for the evolutionary function of art. His lyrics have been proofread for scientific accuracy by University of Birmingham microbiologist Dr. Mark Pallen. Reviews and additional information can be found at <[www.babasword.com](http://www.babasword.com)>.

<sup>11</sup> Malamud explains how he uses animals in this novel in an interview: “I thought why not go ahead with a novel with animals as major characters” (“God” 112). It is “the ultimate imaginative act to create a creature—no wait, there’s a better word—a living being who is not human and yet who can talk” (“God” 112). Of course, we don’t have to take Malamud entirely at his word. There is a strongly allegorical dimension to this text, but the chimpanzees (and the gorilla and the baboons) are not just stand-ins for human characters. They function, in a major way, to suggest a contrast to humanness as the only—or the best—way of being in the world.

<sup>12</sup> I like Freese’s interpretation of Cohn’s death: “in contrast to the senseless massacre of the thermonuclear war which left Cohn as the sole human survivor upon earth, his voluntarily accepted sacrifice by the apes might be a meaningful death” (416). Cohn’s death is meaningful, according to my reading, because it represents Cohn’s acceptance of his evolutionary fate—not a deterministic fate, because Cohn could have behaved differently in ways that would have let him live out his life in peace, but a sacrifice which suggests he finally understands his mistakes both in action and in the evolutionary “theory” which supported it. He finally accepts that an evolutionary future does not belong to “man” and dies with grace.

<sup>13</sup> Beer corroborates my reading of this paragraph, adding more broadly, “Different readers can find their hopes and fears confirmed by extending the implications of Darwin’s thought in one direction or another; and, it would later prove those readers might be individualists, Fascists, Marxists, imperialists, or anarchists—or indeed, quietists. There is something fascinating and perturbing in a text that, while pursuing, in Darwin’s words, ‘one long argument,’ ballasted by multiple evidences, can generate such a variety of ideological potentialities” (“Introduction” viii).

<sup>14</sup> See Walter Benn Michaels in “Political Science Fictions.” If I am understanding him correctly, he is arguing for a replacement of identity politics with ideology—as he puts it, “the recommendation of indifference to difference” (662), not in order to value sameness but because “valuing difference and valuing sameness are just two different ways of doing the same thing”

(662). From this position, which I find somewhat persuasive, he arrives at a reading of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy I find less persuasive, contending that Butler replaces “ideology by bodies and cultures” and “makes it inevitable that the only relevant question be the question of survival” (654). I think he is right to bring up “the question of survival” but reads reductively here: “The ‘humanist discourse’ is the discourse of those humans who fear difference and who thus refuse to mate with aliens; its replacement is the discourse of those humans who embrace difference by embracing aliens” (657). As I have been trying to argue, I don’t believe there is a direct correlation in this novel between an anti-essentialist identity politics and “embracing difference by embracing aliens.” Darwinism is not exactly an ideology, but thinking about evolutionary models of identity seems at least a plausible way of approaching the problems with identity politics Michaels raises, because it allows us to frame questions of identity in terms of change, growth, mutation, and transformation, rather than simply sameness or difference.

<sup>15</sup> At a recent conference I attended, Erin McKenna and Kimberly Hamlin presented papers, respectively entitled “Charlotte Perkins Gilman: How Gender Alters the Story of Evolution” and “How Women Incorporated Darwin into American Feminist Thought,” which suggest a promising direction for further research. Hamlin has a forthcoming book on the subject. The conference, *150 Years of Evolution: Darwin’s Impact on the Humanities and Social Sciences*, was hosted by San Diego State University, November 20-22, 2009.

#### CHAPTER FOUR

<sup>1</sup> Despite Albee’s insistence that Sarah and Leslie are not symbols, that *Seascape* is “a completely realistic play, absolutely naturalistic. It is just that two of the characters are lizards” (qtd. in *Modern American Drama* 144), Christopher Bigsby and others have persisted in seeing the play in terms of metaphor and symbol, at the expense, perhaps, of dealing with the play’s more radical questions about the nature of the human animal. Bigsby, for example, writes that the characters *Seascape* are “Deployed as patent symbols,” and “never become much more than ciphers and hence their recommitment to the struggle never much more than a rhetorical gesture” (*A Critical Introduction* 317). Reading the characters in *Seascape* as empty symbols leads to Bigsby’s assessment that Albee’s “apocalypticism [...] is laid aside in favor of whimsy and callow optimism” (*A Critical Introduction* 318). In another reading, Liam Purdon claims that “*Seascape* functions in the tradition of the medieval morality play with its more clearly defined figures serving as emblems for the distinct parts of the human consciousness” (119). Purdon reads the play favorably, while Bigsby sees little more than “callow optimism,” but both ignore Albee’s own insistence that the characters in this play are real people and real lizards and decidedly not just figurative devices. To read them as such sidesteps what I argue as the play’s central concern with the inseparability and very real interrelationship between the human and the animal.

<sup>2</sup> Like the more developed critical discussions of *Seascape*, recent reviews of *The Goat* tend to evade Albee’s more radical questions about the boundaries between the human and the animal. Because of its newness, *The Goat* has yet to receive the kind of critical treatment given to *Seascape*, but production reviews frequently consider spectacle rather than substance. David Finkle, for example, writes that in *The Goat*, Albee “lands on an ambiguous and far-fetched premise [bestiality] with which he attempts to demonstrate the shocking depth of society’s ills but, at the end of the day (or play), the result is pretentious and ineffective.” Though Linda Winer acknowledges that *The Goat* “raises big questions,” she also faults it for “exploit[ing] one of the last remaining taboos for a bit of fun and a lot of attention,” and Elysa Gardner rejects it as a “self-indulgent mess, in which the cynical, distasteful view of family life that has informed some

of Albee's more eloquent works reaches its nauseating nadir." Ben Brantley deems the play "beyond a joke."

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