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"The Poor Remain": A Posthumanist Rethinking of Literary Humanitarianism in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

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In the opening pages of Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, the narrator recalls a journalist who solicited his story for inclusion in a book. The narrator greets the journalist, "Salaam Jarnalis, it's me, Animal" (3) and speaks directly to him for a few pages before shifting his address to the journalist's readership. In this article I read Animal's dialogue with this particular journalist as an intertextual address that puts Animal in conversation with a specific strain of contemporary literature that mines sites of political violence for stories of suffering and positions the reader as a concerned humanitarian.[1] Animal indicts the journalist he meets, admonishing him:

> You were like all the others, come to suck our stories from us, so strangers in far off countries can marvel there's so much pain in the world. Like vultures are you jarnaliss. Somewhere a bad thing happens, tears like rain in the wind, and look, here you come, drawn by the smell of blood. You have turned us Khaufpuris into storytellers, but always the same story. (5)

Animal notices that journalists pursue a story that casts him and his fellow Khaufpuris as suffering, subaltern victims. His criticism of a publishing industry that surveys the carnage of political battlefields for narratives of suffering and reinforces an uneven power dynamic between a privileged reader and an unfortunate victim-turned-storyteller[2] puts the project of literary testimony into question.

In drawing out the novel's challenge to stories that fetishize suffering in the name of literary testimony, this article is concerned with the intersection of several factors: that between text and reader, literature and contemporary political realities, and state government and the

international human rights community. It is at this nexus that *Animal's People* expresses the difficulties its characters face decades after a fictional industrial disaster similar to the 1984 Bhopal gas leak and subsequent toxic contamination that killed—and is still killing—thousands in the North Central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh.[3] I am particularly attentive to the way that the text configures its relationship to the reader, because it provides an opportunity to comment on conventions of literary humanitarianism. In his discussion of the literary and legal narratives of human rights, Joseph Slaughter introduces the term "literary humanitarianism" to describe "the Western desire for *Bildungsromane* of the non-Western other that is enacted through book markets" (314).[4] He notes it "may be the latest in a series of globalizing forces that encourages the technology-transfers of human rights and the *Bildungsroman*" (314). I expand this definition of literary humanitarianism beyond a discussion of the *Bildungsroman* and use this term to refer to literature that seeks to extend the scope of juridical power and the influence of human rights projects by way of a relationship between narrator and reader that treats literature as testimony. The literary humanitarianism to which I refer operates according to the conviction that one may engage in a humanitarian act by reading, and thereby witnessing, stories of trauma and suffering. It thereby approaches literature as testimony, figuring the narrator as one who testifies and the reader as witness to testimony. The way these subjects relate to each other reflects power dynamics between the state and the international community.

The literary humanitarian model, which structures the type of story Animal senses the journalist is after, presents accounts of mass suffering that are focalized through a narrator's experience as a witness to trauma. Often such literary testimony orients itself around the narrator's and reader's existential crisis (brought on by a confrontation with mass suffering) and how they deal with it by assuming the role of witness and, therein, supposedly relieving victims of an otherwise debilitating trauma. Approaching suffering primarily as an ethical concern is problematic because it depoliticizes suffering. The structure of literary testimony allows a privileged readership to contemplate suffering as evidence of a universal ethical crisis rather than a situated

political crisis,[5] and it casts the reader-witness as a literary humanitarian. The mechanics of this narrator-reader relationship reflect national-international power dynamics that define the politics of human rights. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak remarks, "'Human Rights' is not only about having or claiming a right or a set of rights, it is also about righting wrongs, about being the dispenser of these rights" (169). The human rights framework that structures literary testimony equates narrative voice with an agency that requires individuals to perform a particular subjectivity in order to access the right to have rights.[6] This conception of narrative voice and its relationship to subjectivity and the right to have rights excludes the subaltern from the rights infrastructure and reinforces the agency of those who endeavor to speak for him or her. The reader, in turn, is asked to validate the power of this narrative voice by acknowledging the Other's suffering and completing the literary staging of the cathartic process by acting as a witness to testimony.

One of the fundamental problems with literary humanitarianism is that it presents political violence as unspeakable trauma and then suggests the secondary narrative it provides will overcome this trauma by articulating suffering within a testifier-witness dialectic between narrator and reader. By approaching political violence as unspeakable and prescribing testimony to treat its symptoms, literary humanitarianism dislocates suffering from complex histories and politically and economically situated conflicts.[7] I read *Animal's People* for its critique of literary humanitarianism and its representation of a posthumanist approach to narrative. The posthumanist approach that I identify in *Animal's People* offers an effective way of rethinking the portrayal of political violence as trauma. It not only disrupts narratives of development that are grounded in humanist ideas about the formation of a "civilized" subject but also critiques limiting conceptions of the "universal" human that literary humanitarianism attempts to rescue. This posthumanist perspective is critical of the human rights discourse that often frames political violence, because within that framework, difference (and often subalternity) undermines an individual's humanity and forecloses the right to have rights.

It is crucial to note that a posthumanist reorientation, such as the one that *Animal's People* encourages, does not imagine that people are no longer human. Rather it interrogates the discursive and ideological structures that allow for the supposed dehumanization of individuals, like Sinha's Animal, who do not perform a normative human subjectivity. As Bart Simon clarifies, "the posthuman is figured not as a radical break from humanism, in the form of neither transcendence nor rejection, but rather as implicated in the ongoing critique of what it means to be human" (8). *Animal's People* is critical of the discursive framing that positions some humans as agents of human rights and others as perpetually dependent on humanitarianism. In the novel, Animal chooses not to be human in the normative way that literary humanitarianism would require him to be. He narrates his struggle to figure out what it means to be a human animal after the industrial disaster that he calls the "Apokalis" (Sinha 366), which, if one were to deploy the language of human rights, has "dehumanized" his people. The novel ultimately calls this "dehumanization" into question and challenges a narrative structure that would allow a literary humanitarian reader to rescue these "dehumanized" victims.

The posthumanist perspective that the novel offers calls into question the very possibility of dehumanization and is in fact very much focused on what it means to be human and what it means to be implicated as a dehumanized figure in a literary humanitarian narrative structure. The novel stages the type of posthumanism for which Neil Badmington calls when he advises, "The 'post-' of posthumanism does not—and, moreover, cannot,—mark or make an absolute break from the legacy of humanism. . . . The writing of the posthumanist condition should . . . take the form of a critical practice that occurs *inside* humanism, and should consist not of the wake but the working-through of anthropocentric discourse" (121; emphasis in original). Animal's post-apocalyptic story critiques the way that inequitable conceptions of the human have activated the possibility for the "Apokalis" and continue to allow for the mistreatment of "the people of the Apokalis" (366) via their "dehumanization." The novel allows for a "working-through" of the "anthropocentric discourse" (Badmington 121) of human rights by

satirizing the literary humanitarian narrative structure and challenging the way it converts situated political violence into "dehumanizing" trauma.

Whereas literary humanitarianism calls on the reader to bear witness to testimonies of violence and trauma, *Animal's People* complicates attempts to reclassify violence as trauma and to transcribe the corporeal experience of trauma into story. The many narrative and paratextual layers of Sinha's novel illuminate the way stories are constructed according to the political circumstances in which they are told and who might be listening. The novel not only attempts to cultivate a particular relationship to the reader but also presents a model of reading within its narrative. Paying particular attention to tropes of the senses (particularly seeing and hearing), I track how the novel interrogates literary humanitarian attempts to translate suffering via sensory descriptions that focus on overcoming crises of the imagination rather than addressing situated sociopolitcal and economic conflicts. I analyze how Sinha problematizes this exchange with the reader by mixing the metaphors of seeing and hearing. Though the type of literary humanitarianism that the novel critiques encourages readers to respond to suffering, it maintains a problematic testifier-witness dialectic as a way to manage complex economic and political crises. *Animal's People* stands out for the way it challenges literary humanitarianism and demonstrates the utility of a posthumanist orientation.

Though *Animal's People* is a work of fiction, its setting—a fabricated city called Khaufpur ("Khauf" meaning "terror" and "pur" a suffix meaning "city" in Urdu)—is modeled after Bhopal where the effects of a massive industrial disaster are still being felt and where Sinha's efforts as an activist are focused. As Hilary Thompson recognizes, "Sinha firmly chooses the path of invention" (349) in order "[t]o make visible the city that the world doesn't see . . . as though the speaker has to reconstruct the city's world before a viewer's eyes" (348). The narrator is part of the underclass of Khaufpur, and because of a spinal deformation resulting from exposure to the poisonous chemicals to which he is exposed, he walks on all fours and goes by the name Animal. Animal responds to the way in which the task of "reconstruct[ing] the city's world before a

viewer's eyes" (Thompson 348) relegates him to a particularly demeaning subjectivity. He initially rejects the journalist's proposition for his story, refusing to provide a standard account of trauma and an appeal for human rights, but he eventually decides to tell the story that makes up the novel in order to deliberate on his existence and decide whether or not to have an operation, made possible by humanitarian aid, to straighten his spine. As his narrative proceeds, he gradually cultivates a posthumanist perspective through which he denaturalizes many of the assumptions of human rights discourse.

Animal's People challenges textual engagements that reduce political violence to universal trauma, and it exposes how such narratives employ the discourse of human rights as they sustain inequitable power dynamics. The novel is about life in Khaufpur following an industrial disaster, but the text has many layers: there is a frame narrative within which Animal speaks into a series of tapes about himself and his people, and these are preceded by an editor's note, appended by a glossary, and expanded upon at the website www.khaufpur.com. The editor's note, itself part of the fictional narrative, refers to Animal not by his name but condescendingly as "a nineteen-year-old boy" (Sinha n.p.) and guarantees the authenticity of his narrative, which it insists is provided in his words, though they have admittedly been transcribed from tapes and translated from Hindi to English. The "Khaufpuri Glossary" and the website promises to provide further information on the fictional city and offers to further contextualize a narrative that the tongue-in-cheek editor's note implies is supplied by a "native informant." Ironically, on the website Animal voices his perturbation concerning the final publication of his story.[8] Additionally, as the website advertises an upcoming special reading of Dominique Lapierre's *City of Joy* (a novel that attempts to resolve real world suffering in the Calcutta slum Anand Nagar—translated as City of Joy—by focusing on the joys of survival), it draws further attention to Sinha's choice to set *Animal's People* in Khaufpur—city of terror. Although fetishizing terror can just as easily distract from the sources of suffering as fetishizing joy can, by including Animal's critique of Sinha's novel and drawing further attention to Sinha's narrative

choices, the website encourages the kind of critical reading for which the novel itself calls.

Many critics have overlooked the nuanced ways in which this many-layered text parodies a testimonial narrative structure in order to challenge literary humanitarian reading practices. For instance, in the frame narrative in which Animal talks into the tape recorder, he questions the likelihood that the tapes onto which he records his story will be accurately transcribed and properly understood by his readership. He continually challenges the reader not only to critically examine his or her expectations for a testimonial narrative of suffering but also to acknowledge how the act of telling a story is continually mediated. Yet some critics read the epistolary format as a weakness of the novel rather than as a productive formal vehicle for satirical critique. One reviewer describes the format as "an irritating framing device" that "is quickly forgotten until its unwelcome return in the final pages" (Jordison). Rather than consider why this format might be "irritating" to a reader who is not interested in questioning the politics of storytelling, the reviewer willfully forgets the framing device. Another reviewer expresses disappointment with the scenes in which "Animal suddenly becomes the messianic commentator for a mass movement, speaking in long, biblical sentences and wandering through a hallucinatory jungle" (Mahajan), because, this reviewer determines, "This makes for a muddled read" and is "impossible to reconcile with the conceit that Animal is recording his thoughts on tape" (Mahajan). Certainly the direct narration of Animal's hallucinations cannot be reconciled with the conceit of the frame narrative, but this is a purposeful way to reveal to the reader how literary testimony is always a many-layered narrative construct. Such frustration with the novel's framing device reflects a desire to receive the story as if it is a direct communication between a testifying narrator and a reader-witness. The text problematizes that fantasy and shows how the relationship between a subaltern narrator and a global reader is structured by socioeconomic inequalities and consumerist desires. Because of an inattention to the subversiveness of the frame narrative, the novel has been misinterpreted as either a story of "uplift" in which "hope surges

in all" after "an American arrives in Khaufpur in order to open a clinic" (O'Brien), or, at the other extreme, it has been grouped into a "subgenre of disaster seekers" along with "ambulance chasers and headline hunters" (Doctor). Yet it is these very types of narratives that the novel critiques.[9]

From the start, Animal expresses aggravation with journalists who categorize him within the normative human rights story as a suffering body in need. As the novel opens, he challenges the journalist who solicits his story by arguing, "many books have been written about this place, not one has changed anything for the better, how will yours be different? You will bleat like all the rest. You'll talk of *rights, law, justice*. Those words sound the same in my mouth as in yours but they don't mean the same" (3; emphasis in original). The implication is that the many books that have been written about Khaufpur all tell the same human rights story citing "*rights, law,* [and] *justice*" to support an ethical argument against suffering. Perhaps these words have not made a difference because they do not correspond to particular political action, policy, or legislation. More significantly, such words do not mean the same thing when Animal says them because, as a subaltern subject, he cannot speak on his own accord and is without the right to have rights. Within the human rights framework he is only allowed to speak "the same story" (5); he is unable to access the "universal" tenets of "*rights, law,* [and] *justice*" without assimilating to the idea the journalist has of him and applying to the journalist for humanitarian intervention. There is, however, yet another, more compelling reason these words mean something different when Animal uses them: rather than endorsing them as solutions to politically situated violence, he attempts to articulate them from a post-humanist perspective.

The novel suggests that Animal offers a different story, not just the human rights narrative that journalists tell of Khaufpur. Animal is telling his story in an attempt to both express his outrage at a political situation and resolve a related personal quandary, but he insists that justice in Khaufpur should not be dependent on his narrating himself or other Khaufpuris as suffering victims. After having initially refused to tell the journalist his story within the parameters the journalist set for

it, Animal now decides he will tell his story his own way, insisting it will be a different sort of story. Acknowledging his first refusal, he reflects,

> What's changed? Everything. As to what happened, well, there are many versions going round, every newspaper had a different story, not one knows the truth, but I'm not talking to this tape for truth or fifty rupees or Chunaram's fucking kebabs. I've a choice to make, let's say it's between heaven and hell, my problem is knowing which is which. (11)

Animal specifically says he's not talking "for truth," meaning his goal is not to testify about the events that have occurred or the conditions in which he and his fellow Khaufpuris live. His intent is not to record a particular truth to prove his worth as a person and establish his right to have rights. The ethical framework of human rights is an ineffective way for Animal to navigate his situation, and thus he tells this story to explore other possibilities. At the end of the text, he reveals the dilemma that he faced when a letter arrived from the US informing him his surgery would be paid for. Here he remembers that he decided to tell his story in order to determine if he should have the surgery or not, recalling, "I will tell this story, I thought and that way I'll find out what the end should be. I'll know what to do" (365). Because it is initially unclear to Animal what justice that is not constricted by a humanist framework might look like, he tells his story without knowing how it will end. Animal sets out to tell a story to which he does not know the ending in order to contemplate what should come next in a narrative that refuses a normative humanist teleology.

Once he has decided to tell his story, Animal begins to contemplate the prospect of addressing the readership the journalist had assured him would be interested in it. Recalling the journalist's assertion that thousands would be able to see Animal through the book the journalist plans to write, Animal balks, "I think of this awful idea. Your eyes full of eyes. Thousands staring at me through the holes in your head. Their curiosity feels like acid on my skin" (7). Animal is sickened by the thought of becoming the object of the kind of spectatorship in which literary humanitarianism enables the reader-witness to engage: he does

not want to become the object of the reader's sensory experience so that this reader might be able to witness the traumatic effects of the chemical disaster in Khaufpur. Animal imagines, "What I say becomes a picture and the eyes settle on it like flies" (13). Animal objects to creating such a sensory experience for the reader and suggests that telling a story that appeals for human rights renders him and the Khaufpuris about whom he writes objects of decay. Creating a picture that draws readers "like flies" (13) does not allow him and his fellow Khaufpuris to be dynamic, multifaceted individuals whose existence transcends the disaster (and its mishandling) that they have endured.

Identifying the reader of Animal's narrative as an outsider who inhabits a radically different socioeconomic position, the text problematizes the relationship between Animal and the reader and details Animal's struggle to redefine it. Animal draws attention to the absurd gap between himself and his readership, raging, "What am I to tell these eyes? . . . What can I say that they will understand? Have these thousands of eyes slept even one night in a place like this? Do these eyes shit on railway tracks? When was the last time these eyes had nothing to eat? These cuntish eyes, what do they know of our lives?" (7–8). Literary humanitarianism encourages these eyes to gaze at Animal without allowing him to gaze back at them (on the other hand, Sinha's many-layered text calls attention to the fact that Animal can speak to the eyes only via an intermediary). Animal challenges this framework by showing that these eyes are unable to see him and that they instead project an image of universal suffering onto him. He thus undermines the authority of these eyes and also emphasizes that he does not tell his story for these eyes. However, he finds that the normative humanist framework within which the contemporary publishing industry packages his story joins him in a dialectic with a readership that does not understand even the most fundamental elements of his life.[10]

Animal alludes to the chasm between the reader and himself, noting the difficulty of communicating his story in the presence of socioeconomic, linguistic, and spatial differences. At one point he muses, "You don't answer. I keep forgetting you do not hear me. The things I say, by the time they reach you they'll have been changed out of

Hindi, made into Inglis et français pourquoi pas pareille quelques autres langues? For you they're just words written on a page. Never can you hear my voice, nor can I ever know what pictures you see" (21). The very structure of the story—delivered as a series of tape recordings compiled by an unnamed editor—draws attention to the way that the publishing industry transcribes, translates, and transforms stories for a distant reader. Rather than portray a direct communication from Animal to the reader, the text highlights the many layers through which his story is filtered before it gets to the reader. Animal observes the instability of a reader with whom he shares neither personal space, common experience, nor language and whom he will most likely never meet nor be able to communicate with directly. Animal's anger at the socioeconomic gap between his readership and himself and his consideration of the possibility for miscommunication undermine the premise of literary humanitarianism—that the reader may act as a witness to resolve the conflict about which the narrator testifies.

One way in which Animal attempts to realign the power dynamic between himself and his readership is to identify and address his reader as an individual rather than as "[t]housands" (7) of eyes "like flies" (13), devouring his story as decaying matter. He calls out to this reader, "In this crowd of eyes I am trying to recognize yours. I've been waiting for you to appear, to know you from all the others" (13), and then he speaks frankly to this individual reader: "You are reading my words, you are that person. I've no name for you so I will call you Eyes. My job is to talk, yours is to listen. So now listen" (14). Animal imagines the interaction between narrator and reader anew, attempting to circumvent preconceived ideas and hegemonic discursive structures that render the narrator-reader relationship unequal. He confronts and names the individual reader according to this person's basic relationship to the text as a set of eyes. Asserting himself as the narrator whose job it is to talk and assigning his reader the job of listening, he positions himself as the expert and instructs the individual, whose eyes register his words, to listen rather than devour. As this metaphor of listening eyes mixes two different sensory experiences, the novel alerts the reader to the shallowness of his or her sensory experience as a reader-witness. By

destabilizing the authority of sensory descriptions, the text reminds the reader that such simulations do not enable the reader to experience, and in turn heal, the suffering described.

Animal continues to complicate the metaphor of witnessing through the senses as he indicates that his story requires the reader to actively listen because he tells it in a way that will disorient those who see the world from a normative perspective and expect to hear a standard human rights narrative. Remarking to the reader that "[t]he world of humans is meant to be viewed from eye level. Your eyes" (2), he acknowledges his reader's normative way of perceiving the world. Not only does Animal literally see things from a different level (as he says, "Lift my head I'm staring at someone's crotch. Whole nother world it's below the waist" [2]) but he also sees things from his perspective as a human who is treated as inhuman and who defensively self-identifies as an animal. In doing so, he undermines the discursive framework of human rights: he warns the reader, "If you want my story, you'll have to put up with how I tell it" (2). Because he does not fit within the rigid categories of a humanist framework, he attempts to tell his story and establish a relationship with the reader from a posthumanist vantage point that he develops over the course of the narrative. A closer analysis will detail how Animal cultivates this perspective as his narrative progresses. Rather than enabling him to exist outside of or beyond the humanist moment within which he lives, a posthumanist perspective allows Animal to denaturalize humanist assumptions and apply a critical lens to the human rights discourse that frames the corporate violence in Khaufpur.

Animal demonstrates how the "Kampani" (the name the characters in the novel use to refer to the company responsible for the industrial disaster)[11] and those governments that enable and protect it treat him and his people as less than human even as they prescribe humanitarian aid as a way to absolve themselves from legal responsibility for the deaths and injuries of thousands of Khaufpuris. After abandoning their factory and eluding a trial for nearly two decades, the Kampani sends a team of lawyers to Khaufpur to negotiate a deal dismissing allegations against themselves.[12] One of the Kampani's lawyers, nicknamed "The buffalo," proclaims to a crowd that has gathered in protest, "We're here

to offer generous humanitarian aid to the people of Khaufpur" (306). In turn, Gargi, an old woman whose back is almost as bent as Animal's responds, "Mr. Lawyer, we lived in the shadow of your factory, you told us you were making medicine for the fields. You were making poisons to kill insects, but you killed us instead. I would like to ask, was there ever much difference, to you?" (306). Gargi's question suggests that the Kampani treats the people who live around their factory in the same manner as the insects their chemicals were designed to exterminate.[13] Ignorant of Gargi's insight and under the impression that she is simply asking for money rather than calling for the Kampani to stand trial and compensate for its offenses, "[t]he buffalo reaches in his red-lined coat, gets out his wallet. 'Buy yourself something nice,' he says. Old Gargi's standing there with five hundred rupees [approximately ten US dollars] in her hand" (307).The lawyer's patronizing reply to Gargi's demand that the Kampani take legal and financial responsibility for the crimes it has committed against Khaufpuris illustrates how humanitarian aid is offered as a way to defuse legitimate anger and distract attention from the much costlier and often irreparable damage that victims of corporate violence sustain.

As one of these victims, Animal is offered humanitarian aid to have an operation in the US that will repair his severely bent spine so that he can walk upright. Elli, an American doctor who has opened a medical clinic in Khaufpur and sustained a tumultuous friendship with Animal, has arranged for the operation. As Animal tells this story to decide whether or not he should undergo the surgery, he deliberates about his place on the spectrum between humans and other animals, and he increasingly challenges the humanist logic that constructs humanity as a distinct category. However, in the beginning of his narrative he still judges himself against a humanist standard. Animal's first words to the reader are, "I used to be human once. So I'm told" (1). Rather than opening his account of himself by declaring his humanity as the standard literary humanitarian narrative demands, the novel immediately pokes fun at the idea that Animal could be human at one point in time and not human at another. Furthermore, the fact that Animal's status as a former human is a product of hearsay suggests that the identification of "the

human" is dependent on the cumulative judgments of others. Though he has no personal recollection of it, Animal was indeed born a regularly functioning human, but just days after the chemical disaster occurred at the factory in Khaufpur, its poison attacked his body, and, left untreated, he eventually could not walk upright. In the language of human rights, the Kampani's negligence and refusal to compensate the people they poisoned or properly clean up the contaminated area to prevent further devastation have undermined his and his people's humanity.

Animal, who has a particularly visible physical deformity and has known no other way of being, reacts by outwardly embracing the persona of a non-human animal and shocking those around him into keeping their distance from him while he secretly wishes he were able to walk on two feet. Thus, he introduces himself growling, "My name is Animal. . . . I'm not a fucking human being, I've no wish to be one" (23). He explains to the reader, "This was my mantra, what I told everyone. Never did I mention my yearning to walk upright" (23). Animal at first expresses contempt for human beings and resists being associated with those who have treated him as a lesser form of life. Yet at the same time he covets the human capabilities that elude him.

Animal is human, but he struggles to figure out a posthumanist way of understanding his existence and his relationship to others. He at first accepts the normative understanding of what it means to be human and rationalizes, "if I agree to be a human being, I'll also have to agree that I'm wrong-shaped and abnormal. But let me be a quatre pattes animal, four-footed and free, then I am whole, my own proper shape, just a different kind of animal from say Jara, or a cow, or a camel" (208).[14] Being a human who is "wrong-shaped and abnormal" would define Animal's existence as defective and debilitating, and it would render him a body in perpetual need. Refusing to occupy the subject position of the victim who is compelled to parade his differences as marks of trauma to prove his humanity and appeal for the right to have rights, he initially portrays himself as a non-human animal. He at first suggests that by classifying himself as a non-human animal he frees himself from a state of inferiority. Yet this actually reinforces the strict categorization of the human, upholding the idea of the normative human and supporting a

distinction between humans and animals. What I wish to call attention to is the way in which Animal comes to realize that being human and being an animal are not mutually exclusive. This is important to recognize because, as Badmington suggests, "Posthumanist cultural criticism must, I think, learn to listen out for the deconstruction of the binary opposition between the human and the inhuman that is forever happening *within* humanism itself. Turning the world upside down will no longer do. The other is always already within. Humanism is merely pretending otherwise" (151). Through Animal, Sinha's novel deconstructs the binary between the "human" and "inhuman" that defines the "universal" subject of human rights.

As the narrative progresses and Animal tells his story, his discussion of the human and the animal changes, becoming more nuanced. Whereas early in his story Animal upholds a distinction between the human and the inhuman animal, toward the end he defies this false binary. Ultimately deciding against the operation that would straighten his spine, Animal imagines a different possibility for himself than what the narrative trajectory of literary humanitarianism would allow. Rather than seeing an operation made possible by generous humanitarian aid as the thing (and the only possible thing) that will rescue him from his suffering, he realizes that conforming to a normative conception of the human may not actually be a suitable solution for him at all. He explains:

> See, Eyes, I reckon that if I have this operation, I will be upright, true, but to walk I will need the help of sticks. I might have a wheelchair, but how far will that get me in the gullis of Khaufpur? Right now I can run and hop and carry kids on my back, I can climb hard trees, I've gone up mountains, roamed in jungles. Is life so bad? If I'm an upright human, I would be one of millions, not even a healthy one at that. Stay four-foot, I'm the one and only Animal. (366)

Animal recognizes that the surgery may not provide the relief it promises and that it may actually make his life more difficult. He instead embraces himself as a four-footed human animal with the understanding that his

humanity does not elevate him above other animals, human or non-human. He thus embraces his moniker of "Animal" not as a metaphor for human deprivation but as a reminder of the animality of all humans, and acknowledging this animality enables him to think about what it means to be human in another way. Using a modifier in the phrase "upright human" (366), he nuances traditional definitions, decoupling what it means to be human from its normative discursive framing. He implies that because there are many ways of being human, difference should not undermine an individual's humanity, and one should not have to prove this humanity. His name at once points to the fact that all humans are animals while identifying him as an individual as any other proper name would. As a four-footed human animal, he accepts his uniqueness ("the one and only Animal" [366]) rather than attempts to become another iteration of "universal" humanity.

Even as he accepts himself, however, Animal does not pretend to solve the political problems that the text confronts. After telling his personal story, he concludes, "Eyes, I'm done. Khuda hafez. Go well. Remember me. All things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us" (366). With this brusque dismissal of his reader, Animal makes it known that by listening to this story the reader does not change the circumstances within which Khaufpuris (or the victims of the Bhopal disaster) live. Telling this story to the reader does not metaphorically release Animal's people from the toxic conditions within which they suffer. The stilted series of farewells that Animal delivers replace the happily-ever-after resolution that the humanitarian reader seeks and give way to the fact that "the poor remain" (366). The text refuses to establish a relationship between a subaltern narrator and a comparatively socioeconomically privileged reader that would enable the reader to engage in literary humanitarianism. It reminds the reader that "the people of the Apokalis" (366), the poor people the reader does not usually see who are impacted by politically situated, corporate violence will not fade into oblivion beneath the chemical vapour from which they emerged in this narrative.

Just as Animal refuses to assimilate to normative human subjectivity, the text reminds the reader that justice is not dependent on Animal

proving his personhood and thereby establishing his and his people's right to have rights. Indeed, the text defies a possible repetition of the humanist framework by refusing to project Animal as a posthumanist hero who embodies a universal "ethical" solution (this would merely expand the boundaries of the human rights framework without radically changing its logic). In many ways Animal's behaviour is highly unethical: he poisons a fellow activist named Zafar out of jealousy of Zafar's relationship with Nisha, a friend whom he secretly loves; he spies on and sexually objectifies Elli; and he may even have burned down the ruins of the factory, causing the second night of terror that reproduces the initial industrial disaster in Khaufpur. Animal certainly does not model a perfect posthumanist ethics (such a model would after all only be a reincarnation of humanism by another name), and this is perhaps part of the point: justice should not depend on Animal exhibiting an attention-grabbing level of suffering and ethical correctness to prove he is worthy of rights. Neither should justice depend on Animal accepting humanitarian aid to have an operation to remove visual evidence of a toxic past that remains perceptible in his crooked back.

Animal asks the Eyes to listen to what he has to say about the Kampani rather than see him as the embodiment of a toxic past and consume his suffering according to the delusion that this will somehow relieve him of it. He represents his people's suffering not to signify their worthiness of humanitarian aid but to demand accountability from the Kampani. The point Animal is trying to make to the Eyes—to his readership—is that justice should involve the Kampani facing trial. As *Animal's People* encourages the reader to question the power dynamic between the poor people of the Apokalis and the privileged readers who devour their stories, it exposes systemic inequalities, calls for legal action, and challenges the logic of human rights and humanitarian aid from a posthumanist perspective.

I have argued that by portraying conflicts involving corporate violence as a human rights concern and informing the reader about such situations by narrativizing the traumatic experiences of "native informants," literary humanitarianism detracts attention from the people who are responsible for such violence and from the power structures within which they

operate. While the intentions of the journalist who pursues Animal's story exemplify the way in which literary humanitarianism attempts to engage the reader as a witness in order to rescue the suffering bodies of those who have been victimized in national and international conflicts, *Animal's People* interrupts the dialectic between the narrator-testifier and the reader-witness. Animal tells his story from a posthumanist perspective, distinguishing between his own non-normative personhood and the Kampani's legal responsibility for contaminating Khaufpur with toxic chemicals. Moreover, he emphasizes that his story does not resolve the transnational power struggle within which his people are victimized. Instead, his story unsettles "the human" that literary humanitarianism sets out to rescue and calls attention to the way literary humanitarianism effaces economic and political realities. The novel suggests that neoliberal economic policies and national-international power dynamics, which allowed for corporate violence against Animal's people and continue to produce systemic inequalities in Bhopal and elsewhere around the world, should be of primary concern to readers.

While literary humanitarianism attempts to negotiate competing national and international factions by appealing to human rights as apolitical and universal, *Animal's People* shows that humanitarianism is not neutral.[15] The novel challenges the way that national and international sovereignties interact by taking issue with a transnational company that refuses to recognize national authority and a state that compromises the well-being of its people in order to serve its own financial interests. *Animal's People* thus problematizes the discourse of human rights that literary humanitarianism deploys to negotiate contradictory sovereignties.

Not only does *Animal's People* challenge the project of literary humanitarianism, it also proposes another function for literature. Rather than concluding that literature is irrelevant to those who experience deep-rooted, systemic inequality, pervasive economic instability, physical brutality, or other forms of political violence, we should recall Animal's storytelling technique. Animal's way of beginning to tell a story without knowing its end demonstrates that stories do not have to be oriented around an end result. Thus, literature may function as a space

within which to rethink the developmental narrative of human rights. Acknowledging that literature may transgress a humanist teleology and tell a story without knowing what comes next may be the first step in imagining ways of thinking that are not so limiting as current discursive frameworks.

Notes

1 This growing body of work includes such texts as Gourevitch's *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will be Killed with Our Families* (1998); Krog's *Country of My Skull* (1998, 1999); Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003); Mortenson and Relin's *Three Cups of Tea* (2006); and Eggers' *What Is the What* (2007). Gourevitch and Krog are also both journalists.

2 Snell notices how the novel, "draws attention precisely to the uneven relations of power that persist between postcolonial texts and their readers at a moment when culturally-diverse commodities circulate widely in global markets" (1). She elaborates, "Reproducing the global circuits of exchange in which it is caught up, *Animal's People* dramatizes the unevenness of power frequently embedded in relations between storytellers, story collectors such as the journalist, and their consumers" (5–6).

3 According to the Bhopal Medical Appeal, "Half a million people were exposed to the gas and 20,000 have died to date as a result of their exposure. More than 120,000 people still suffer from ailments caused by the accident and the subsequent pollution at the plant site."

4 Literary humanitarianism is a function of postcoloniality, which, Huggan explains, "pertains to a system of symbolic, as well as material, exchange in which even the language of resistance may be manipulated and consumed" (6). Huggan's distinction between postcoloniality and postcolonialism—the latter of which "posits itself as anti-colonial, and that works toward the dissolution of imperial epistemologies and institutional structures" (28)—is useful in reading *Animal's People*. As Sinha's novel critiques postcoloniality in the form of literary humanitarianism, it stages the complicated way in which postcoloniality and postcolonialism are "mutually entangled" (Huggan 6).

5 As Badiou explains, "According to the way it is generally used today, the term 'ethics' relates above all to the domain of human rights, 'the rights of man' – or, by derivation, the rights of living beings. . . . We are supposed to assume the existence of a universally recognizable human subject possessing 'rights' that are in some sense natural. . . . 'Ethics' is a matter of busying ourselves with these rights, of making sure that they are respected" (4). However, "Rather then link the word [ethics] to abstract categories (Man or Human, Right or Law, the Other . . .), it should be referred back to particular *situations*. Rather than reduce it to an aspect of pity for victims, it should become the enduring maxim of *singular*

processes. Rather than make of it merely the province of conservatism with a good conscience, it should concern the destiny of *truths*, in the plural" (3; emphases in original). *Animal's People* engages in a project to redirect 'ethical' concerns to the political and economic "*situations*" and "*singular processes*" that continue to victimize Animal and his people.

6 Since human rights are not inherent, the human being must develop a legal personality by way of the state in order to establish what Arendt calls the "right to have rights" (294). Arendt elaborates:

> The paradox involved in the loss of human rights is that such loss coincides with the instant when a person becomes a human being in general – without a profession, without a citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself – *and* different in general, representing nothing but his own absolutely unique individuality which, deprived of expression within and action upon a common world, loses its significance. (297–8; emphasis in original)

7 The distinction I make between attending to historically situated circumstances and testifying about suffering as a function of trauma indicates a historical difference between a human rights tradition that emerged in the 1970s in order to create a record of political violence and the humanitarian movement that has grown since the 1990s. For more on this historical trajectory see Moyn.

8 For further analysis of www.khaufpur.com, see Snell who suggests, "In using Khaupfur's website to humorously implicate himself in the series of exploitative acts Animal imagines to have occurred in the production of the book, Sinha at once highlights the need for authorial accountability and places in check the pleasure some readers might take in consuming, and subsequently exotifying, the tragic and ostensibly true account of a traumatized young man living in the so called 'Third World'" (3).

9 Nixon also reads *Animal's People* as a parody, interpreting it as "an exposé of . . . neoliberal double standards" (446). While he argues that Animal challenges neoliberal globalization as a picaro figure, he focuses on Animal's body as an "image of a body politic literally bent double beneath the weight of Khaufpur's foreign load" (450). In contrast, I argue that the novel critiques the testimonial narrative structure that allows Animal's body to be read as a symbol of suffering.

10 Part of the reason that a US readership might not understand the circumstances in which Animal lives is because US reporting on international corporate violence like that in Bhopal may be slanted to protect the financial interests of US companies. For a comparison of US and Indian media responses to the Bhopal chemical leak see Mukherjee (136–38).

11 The Kampani remains otherwise unnamed in the novel. But just as Khaufpur is generally understood as a fictional Bhopal, the Kampani is representative of Union Carbide India, Ltd. (now Dow), the corporation responsible for the toxic contamination of Bhopal in December 1984. For over two decades no trial

took place, and it was only in June 2010 that Union Carbide India, Ltd., along with seven of its former senior employees, was convicted of death by negligence. These employees were sentenced to two years each in jail. Neither the company nor the Indian government has cleaned up the toxic chemicals at the plant.

12 For commentary on the legal disputes following the Bhopal chemical disaster see Mukherjee (134, 139–43).

13 Gargi's question to the lawyer if there was ever much difference to him between the Khaufpuris who were poisoned and the insects that the poison was designed to exterminate (306) unwittingly re-inscribes the separation between humans and animals that supposedly protects humans from such unjust extermination. Rather than read this as an attempt to redraw the lines between humans and non-humans though, I suggest this is another moment in which the text highlights the inherent injustice of the humanist ideology that allows for the thoughtless extermination of some forms of life (human or non-human) for the perceived benefit of humankind.

14 For more on Animal's relationship with the dog Jara, as well as further analysis of other animals in the text, see Desblache (60). Additionally, see Mukherjee for a discussion of the way in which "Animal is able to mediate not merely between humans of various kinds but also between non-humans and humans" (152).

15 For further critique of the supposed political neutrality of humanitarianism see Brown. Brown argues that although humanitarian activism "presents itself as something of an antipolitics" (453) and "casts subjects as yearning to be free of politics" (456), "there is no such thing as *mere* reduction of suffering or protection from abuse – the nature of the reduction or protection is itself productive of political subjects and political possibilities" (460; emphasis in original).

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