

HUMANIZING CORPOREAL SPECTACLE

Humor and Resistance in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

Simon C. Estok
Sungkyunkwan University
estok@skku.edu

Abstract

This article examines Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* and the comments it makes about the long-term corporeal effects of environmental catastrophes. Sinha's choice of a first person narrative strategy strongly sharpens the visceral impact of the story. The narrator is a lovably unlovable misfit who has been deformed and crippled by an industrial disaster that claimed thousands of lives. While the effects of the disaster play out through the body of the narrator himself (he calls himself "Animal" because he is so deformed), they are more than merely bodily effects: they are psychological, social, economic, developmental, sexual, and so on. Animal is a spectacle, and his very existence calls into question the boundary between what is human and what is not. The story he tells reveals the effects of capitalist racism and greed and raises questions about environmental justice issues and corporate responsibility. These are important questions that are inseparable from the material facts of Animal's broken body. It is a deadly serious topic that Animal narrates, but he does it with humor (often self-deprecating), and it is precisely this humor that ultimately both humanizes him and intensifies the impact of the narrative itself.

Keywords

corporeal theory; monstrosity; disability studies; ecocriticism; narrative method

About the author

Dr. Simon C. Estok is a full professor and Senior Research Fellow at Sungkyunkwan University (South Korea's first and oldest university). He teaches literary theory, ecocriticism, and Shakespearean literature. His award-winning book *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia* appeared in 2011 (reprinted 2014), and he is co-editor of four books: *Mushroom Clouds: Ecocritical Approaches to Militarization and the Environment in East Asia* (Routledge, 2021), *Landscape, Seascape, and the Eco-Spatial Imagination* (Routledge, 2016), *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism* (Routledge, 2013), and *East Asian Ecocriticisms* (Macmillan, 2013). His latest book is the much anticipated *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (Routledge, 2018; reprinted 2021 with errata). Estok has published extensively on ecocriticism and Shakespeare in such journals as *PMLA*, *Mosaic*, *Configurations*, *English Studies in Canada*, and others.

One of the key lessons in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* is that though an environmental event may end, the long-term effects can be crippling, and how we deal with changes wrought to bodies must increasingly be a part of how we conceptualize our place in a world occupied by many, many agents. What defines "the human" is deeply problematized by this novel, not only because of the central protagonist's physical form but also because of his behavior. Set a mere day away from the 1984 Bhopal Union Carbide disaster, *Animal's People* is a fictionalized account of that real event and its effects on people. In many ways, this is a novel that calls for action, not words, since the wounds of the victims require real, material attention. However, if the suffering body is central to the literary activism of this important novel, then how do the optics of spectacle complicate the issues by keeping them at arm's length, when "Animal and his people are," as Andrew Mahlstedt insightfully argues, "'invisible' in the sense that, even when literally seen, they are only seen through the spectacle of 'third-world poverty' that structures seeing" (59)? The only way to bridge this divide—which Sinha does exquisitely—is to create an intimacy between the reader and the spectacle, to personalize and bring into proximity the monster, and to engender a sense of urgency that comes from such proximity. Given the horrific nature of the topic, humor seems the least appropriate or tenable vehicle here, but it is the very vehicle Sinha chooses, and, ultimately, perhaps, it is the best and only real choice.

On the night of December 2 and the morning of December 3 in 1984, more than 45 tons of methyl isocyanate gas leaked from the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, India. The Bhopal Disaster is, to this day, the world's worst industrial disaster in history. It has killed approximately 20,000 people to date and injured more than half a million people. Literary critic Rob Nixon gives some insightful background to the novel, explaining in his popular *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* that "the Union Carbide disaster was preceded by a long history of structural neglect and a reckless flouting of elementary safety measures" (59). Following the disaster, the neglect continued—and still does to this day.

Animal's People is a fictionalized re-working of the Bhopal disaster, narrated by a disaffected nineteen-year-old boy who has been severely disfigured by the gas leak. Compelled to walk on all fours because his spine has been twisted and deformed, Animal—as the boy is called—is the victim of global capitalism and the poisons it produces, as were the victims of the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal. The ubiquity of poison is part of the horror that the novel describes. One young mother explains as follows: "Our wells are full of poison. It's in the soil, water, in our blood, it's in our milk. Everything here is poisoned. If you stay here long enough, you will be [poisoned] too" (108). The poisons of the Kampani (what the characters in the novel call the company responsible for the disaster) "are in the wells, they're in people's blood, they're in mother's milk" (322). And there is no redemption or

spiritual salvation in the toxic garbage here—just pain and suffering, body and mind—and the disconnection from the body (in this case, Animal’s own psychic disconnection from his body that made him who he is and his disconnection from the larger metaphorical body of human society, a body from which he is removed—he is Animal, after all). Unable to receive compensation or remuneration because the Kampani is offshore and evades responsibility, the people suffer. The living victim of nonbiotic forces (global capitalism and lethal gases), Animal (and his people) must face the future without any kind of vaccine—no adequate treatment guaranteeing recovery from their ailments, and no consolation of justice from the Kampani. It is a novel about environmental injustice and a boy who loses everything, including his humanity. So changed is his body that his very membership in the human community becomes problematic.

Clearly, one of the matters under investigation in this novel is the question about what it means to be human, and the characters themselves posit the body as central to any kind of understanding of what might qualify as answers to this question. We are confronted with Animal through his own voice in the opening lines of the novel: “I used to be human once. So I’m told. I don’t remember it myself, but people who knew me when I was small say I walked on two feet, just like a human being” (1). “My name is Animal,” he explains, clearly and repeatedly stating “I’m not a fucking human being, I’ve no wish to be one” (23). While none of this material is funny ha-ha, the profanity and earthy sarcasm of Animal add an inescapable sardonic humor to the narrative, but there are also genuinely funny scenes that thread throughout this narrative.

The body is primary in this narrative, and the behaviors that result from it are sometimes downright funny. Animal’s relationship with his penis is an example. After a lifetime of unrequited sexual desire and longing, he finally spends a night with a woman—a prostitute for whom he has paid. The problem is that he was stoned, and, sadly, he thinks that he has had sex, but the woman informs him otherwise: “don’t look at me like it’s my fault . . . you fell asleep” (240). After this revelation, he thinks that he controls his penis: “I’ve conquered, mastered that unruly thing, it cowered like a sulky dog all the while I was with the girl, no longer am I ruled by a fucking quéquette” (245), but moments later his “joy runs a straight road to despair,” and he wonders “why do I allow myself to be dominated by the thing between my legs? Is it my master? Have I sworn to obey it? Will it kill me if I tell it no?” (245). Most of the time, his penis seems to have its own agency, one that he apparently cannot control. An innocent hug can give him an uncontrollable erection. When Nisha (whom Animal fancies) hugs him, he recounts, “no girl had ever touched me till then, less hugged. It sent a thrill through me straight to my cock” (36). Even sitting between her and her boyfriend in the back seat of a car causes a reaction: “I am pressed tight between them feeling the warmth of her

thigh against my hip. Things start happening in my kakadu shorts” (50). At another point, he complains that “like a performing bear that thing of mine stands up to dance” (117). It is a thing beyond his control: “I dive a hand into my pocket to clamp the unruly beast against my leg . . . my unruly lund . . . immediately starts to rear and buck, damn that fucking thing. It has no respect” (124). Despite the horrors that are the subject of this novel, then, clearly there is also a lot of humor.

It is not that the audience is laughing at Animal in the way that school children bully and ridicule differently-abled kids; rather, what Sinha offers is a narrative that draws in the reader. Adele Holoch puts the case well: “In incorporating the humorous . . . the text . . . removes some of the conceptual space between us and the bodies portrayed in the text, involving us and implicating us in complex ways” (128). Indeed, narrative method is vital to the ways that the novel critiques corporate violations of environmental justice but without appearing as a preachy narrative: “Sinha’s text utilizes the profane to strip away the artifices separating the international readership the novel targets from the subaltern figures upon whom it centers” (Holoch 127). The centrality of humor is highlighted by Nixon when he explains that

[Animal’s] quest becomes an elaborate pun subverting any ethical correlation between moral and physical erectness. He is witheringly dismissive of the artistry with which humans—most notably those in power—perform spectacles of rectitude. From his vantage point on humanity, Homo looks neither *sapiens* nor *erectus*, but a morally debased species whose uprightness is mostly posturing. Animal’s bent posture, by contrast, embodies a crushing neoliberal, transnational economic relationship and also marks him as a literal “lowlife,” a social and anatomical outlier whose physical form externalizes the slow violence, the unhurried metastases coursing through the community. (56)

A large part of the success of such “an elaborate pun” has to do with the audience’s anxieties and nerves that Animal hits—one of which, obviously, is about the very definition of humanity.

Part of the spectacle of the differently-abled to the fully-abled is perhaps the prospect that the body seems almost but not quite human. Rosemarie Garland-Thompson argues in the introduction to *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* that “by its very presence, the exceptional body seems to compel explanation, inspire representation, and incite regulation” (1), thus placing such bodies, I suggest, in an entirely different category of ethical and moral considerability than that to which the fully-abled is subject. Indeed, as Thompson continues, “the unexpected body fires rich, if anxious, narratives and practices that probe the contours and boundaries of what we take to be human” (1). Thompson

is careful to situate such probings historically, and her overall argument is that as Western cultures move into modernity, the differently-abled or differently-formed body changes from being a site/sight of wonder and marvel to one of fear and loathing: “as modernity develops in Western culture,” she argues, “freak discourse logs the change: the prodigious monster transforms into the pathological terata; what was once sought after as revelation becomes pursued as entertainment; what aroused awe now inspires horror; in brief, wonder becomes error” (3).¹ Building on this, we might even propose that bodies of difference become more and more intolerable and subject to disciplinary measures the further capitalism and industrialism develop. In a world of corporate, global capitalism where uniformity of production (and of the bodies that run or feed the machines) is absolutely essential, there is no place or sympathy for the differently-abled. *Tolerantia fugit*.

The novel indeed foregrounds questions about the degree to which an able-bodied majority can “tolerate anomalies, ambiguities, and borderline cases, marking the threshold, not of humanity in itself, but of acceptable, tolerable, knowable humanity,” to cite Elizabeth Grosz (56). Perhaps one of the questions that the novel implies is about the degree to which what is not acceptable, tolerable, or knowable humanity is cast beyond the threshold. And it is a threshold that is not entirely defined by the body, despite the obvious centrality of the body in this narrative.

Indeed, much of what informs discussions about monstrosity and freakery has to do with the body. Grosz discusses

some of the most severe and gross physical disorders afflicting those human beings who have been coarsely categorized as ‘freaks,’ ‘curiosities,’ ‘prodigies,’ and ‘monstrosities,’ poor suffering individuals with observably disturbing disorders, stunted limbs, distorted figures: Siamese twins, dwarfs, giants, hunchbacks, humans with parasitic or autositic attachments, so called legless or armless wonders, half-creatures, hermaphrodites, rubber men, and so on. (56)

Animal’s People in many ways seems at the narrative level to want rein in the spectacle precisely by having the deformed and disabled narrator speak for himself and by offering dark comedy. And indeed, in representing his experiences of being treated “like an animal” with deeply humanizing humor, he opens a fictional window on an imagined representational space. Animal, Nixon explains, is part of “a long line of picaros: canny, scheming social outliers governed by unruly appetites, potty-mouthed and scatologically obsessed, often orphaned outcasts who, drawn from polite society’s vast impoverished margins, survive by parasitism and by their wits” (55). Nixon explains further that

through Animal's immersed voice, Sinha is able to return to questions that have powered the picaresque from its beginnings. What does it mean to slow violence, neoliberalism, and the environmental picaresque be reduced to living in subhuman, bestial conditions? What chasms divide and what ties bind the wealthy and the destitute, the human and the animal? What does it mean, in the fused imperial language of temporal and spatial dismissal, to be written off as "backward"? (66-67)

Moreover, to what degree do the behaviors of a character such as Animal come to delineate the boundaries of the central protagonist's human status—or not?

When Farouq, one of Animal's friends, accuses him of pretending to be an animal to avoid the responsibilities of humans, behavior, not the body, is the central definitional axis: "You pretend to be an animal so you can escape the responsibility of being human," Farouq carries on. "No joke, yaar. You run wild, do crazy things and get away with it because you're always whining, I'm an animal, I'm an animal" (209). For Farouq, "to be accepted as a human being, you must behave like one" (209). His definition is behavioral, and it is a kind of identity politics based on performativity that Animal simply rejects. Animal here defers responsibility and claims that he is not an animal by choice but "because others named me Animal and treated me like one" (209). So his animality—here, at least—is not defined by corporeality. At other times, it is defined by corporeality—as when he dreams that "soon I shall walk like a human being" (247), rather than on all fours. Animal had explained much earlier that "never did I mention my yearning to walk upright. It was the start of that long argument between Zafar and me about what was an animal and what it meant to be human" (23-24). For Animal, to be compelled to walk, as he explains, "so that the highest part of me was my arse" (15) is a corporeal, not a behavioral, sign—the sign—of his identity. Constituted through his body, in his thinking, more so than through his behavior, Animal embraces his self-exile from humanity. He insists that he is beyond the threshold that Grosz describes, and he acts accordingly, admittedly with behaviors more befitting of animals than people, often producing the kinds of humor that result from such carnivalesque category confusions—but it is first his body in which this identity is drawn and housed. Although there is a lot at stake here with definitional categories, there are many instances of back-and-forth in the novel that reflect on whether these boundaries ultimately rest on behavioral or corporeal foundations.

There is no doubt, however, that what is at stake in representing *monstrosity* is the very question of boundaries: what does it mean to be human? Judith Butler has argued compellingly as follows:

It is not enough to claim that human subjects are constructed, for the construction of the human is a differential operation that produces the more and the less "human," the

inhuman, the humanly unthinkable. These excluded sites come to bound the “human” as its constitutive outside, and to haunt those boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and rearticulation. (8)

The haunting of the boundaries about which Butler speaks recurs along several different indices—sometimes intersecting, sometimes confluent. Throughout history, there have indeed been many indices offering imagined boundaries of the human: sexuality, race, gender, diet, deformity, disability, behavior, and so on. More often than not, various regimes for various reasons have designated these indices as *natural* formations. Writing monstrosity imagines unpredictability and agency in nature and opens a space for a variety of discursive disciplinary ecophobic actions against such imagined unpredictability and agency. Control defies monstrosity, as monstrosity defies control. The body, then, is a very important site of control and is always subject to threats of pain, disability, and death.

Perhaps next to death, pain and disability are the greatest threats to our sense of corporeal integrity—and the three of them (pain, disability, and death) are potent reminders both of what, as embodied creatures, we share with the rest of the natural world and of the sheer comedy of human hubris and our sense of entitlement and exceptionalism. No wonder then that monsters are as often the humorous playthings of small children as they are the subject of horror films and thrillers—but, in either case, one thing is certain: monstrous bodies are bodies of resistance, bodies out of control. Georgia Brown has written eloquently about the doubt and skepticism monsters engender: “Monsters deal in doubt and the difficulties of articulating doubt . . . —doubt about anxieties, about what is natural or unnatural in humans, about what we know and do not know, about the efficacy of language” (57). Although this argument is convincing as far as it goes, it is perhaps more than simply doubt that monsters evoke: they present the horrifying aspect of an agential nature² that helps codify and organize rituals of scapegoating on the one hand and the parameters of exploitation on the other, while at the same time feeding a craving for wonder. Freaks on display—dead or alive—feed this craving.

Khã-in-the-Jar in the novel is a preserved specimen on display, a monstrous product of industrial colonialism gone awry, “an ugly little monster,” glaring from inside a jar, with “a second head . . . growing out the side of his neck” (57). Khã is a special kind of freak—dead but not dead. He has a voice and agency: “his hands are stretched out, he has a wicked look on his face, as if he’s just picked your pocket and is planning to piss on your shoe” (57), and he is constantly talking to Animal (or so he believes). He is the source of much of the soft humor in the novel, but he is also the very epitome of the horrors of “that night”—indeed, of horror itself. Suspended in a slimy preservative, Khã-in-the-Jar is also conceptually suspended between life and death, accorded agency and voice in Animal’s imagination.

Fascination with resurrections (in general) and with the living dead (in particular) have a very long history in Western literature.³ Zombie theory explains that a part of the fascination with the living dead has to do with the ambivalence that such figures present. While on the one hand, Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry note that “fascination with the zombie [...] is a celebration of its immortality” (396), on the other hand, “there is terror that comes from an identification of oneself with the zombie” (397). Khã-in-the-Jar is not quite a zombie. The zombie is “unconscious but animate flesh” (397) whereas Khã-in-the-Jar is clearly conscious (in Animal’s mind), humorously directing, educating, and taunting Animal. An undead monster, his “two heads glug fluid” (337): Khã-in-the-Jar, like the slime in which he floats,⁴ flaunts boundaries, and subverts the processes of nature by not dying dead. While David Abram is certainly correct to claim that “it is very difficult to discern, at any moment, precisely where [the] living body begins and where it ends” (46-47), Khã-in-the-Jar is of an entirely different category than the fingernails and toenails and hair that continue to grow after people die. Khã-in-the-Jar is a horrific reminder of the corporeal effects of the disruption and perversion of nature’s agency, of what happens when its order is shattered, and its habitability ruptured. The dead refuse to die, and the living struggle to live.

If the subjects of monstrosity and freakery within the narrative grow out of and feed cravings for wonder, then no less does narrative as a literary structure in and of itself comply to and feed such cravings. Stories about freaks and monsters and about the events that cause them are compelling, and people pursue them vigorously. At one point, Animal complains to an imagined journalist listener that “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” (5). Animal strongly resists this kind of thing. In response to the news that a journalist is actually coming, Animal has sharp words indeed:

What? Does he think he’s the first outsider ever to visit this fucking city? People bend to touch his feet, sir, please sir, your help sir, sir my son, sir my wife, sir my wretched life. Oh how the prick loves this! Sultan among slaves he’s, listens with what lofty pity, pretends to give a fuck but the truth is he’ll go away and forget them, every last one. For his sort we are not really people. We don’t have names. We flit in crowds at the corner of his eye. Extras we’re, in his movie. (9)

Again, while not funny ha-ha, the quick wit and profanity engender a smile in the reader. The form is humorous, but the content is not: the point of contention in the quote is that it is the *story* and not the person that is the concern. In an enlightening chapter on *Animal’s People* in *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-crip Theory*, Anita Mannur explains that

in this environmental and humanitarian crisis characters like Animal are prized for the dramatic value they bring to stories about human suffering. People like Animal are photographed for magazines and news stories, but there is no deep transformative understanding of what this disability means. Rather there is a perverse kind of visual pleasure and pain in seeing the horror of the disabled children. (392)

Mannur is describing here how Animal seems like an object for spectacle-mongering, not a meaningful subject who is differently-abled and in need of moral or ethical considerability. The novel does foreground, to a degree, rather than marginalize the differently-abled character, and the implications here are tremendous. The body besieged *does* become spectacle. How different is Animal from the “disabled literary characters” that Rosemarie Garland-Thompson describes, who “usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting response from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability’s cultural resonance” (9)? Is Animal no different, except that he provides a running self-description to the spectacle that the narrative offers? Mannur explains that “with the character of Animal, Sinha creates an unsettling narrative precisely because of the novel’s refusal to see Animal as a hapless victim or an empowered subject who wishes to hide his disability in order to guarantee the comfort of others around him” (390). Voicing his own narrative does not, however, liberate him from object status or exculpate the novel itself from accusations of spectacle-mongering.⁵

Yet, even as Animal resists spectacle at one point, more often than not, he uses spectacle *itself* as resistance. To see only spectacle in spectacle, therefore, is to miss a main point of this novel. The comedy in this complicated novel subsides and gives way to very serious matters. Délice Williams explains that “Animal’s abject body belies the fact that he is not completely powerless, and that he can exploit the dynamics of spectacle in order to manipulate various kinds of encounters to suit his own ends” (591). Hardly an object fashioned by others or lacking control of his destiny, he is able to self-fashion, and this is a profound species of resistance and agency: “Animal’s conversion of himself into a grotesque object constitutes an act of self-fashioning that also indicts his readers, whom he constructs and dismisses as privileged onlookers, eager consumers of the spectacle of other people’s pain” (592). Nor is it only Animal, for Williams, who uses spectacle as resistance: “the hunger strikers, who refuse water and food for almost a week in order to force representatives of the corporation to present themselves in court, stage their own abjection as spectacle, a sign of their insurgent resistance to corporate domination” (588).

Such may work within the narrative on the fictional characters, but the effect is less potent on the readers. Zafar, Farouq, and the hunger strikers are not as central

to the narrative, after all, as Animal, and they simply lack the substance that would elicit deep audience empathy. Even so, the narrative as a whole is a call to action.

While the psychological suffering wrought by “that night” is immense, the physical wounds are borne through the body, and this material suffering requires action: “it’s not with words that you treat such wounds. The people ache, their bodies are bottles into which fresh pain is poured every day. Their flesh is melting, coming off their bodies in flakes of fire, their bones are burning” (100). We know that “these people are full of pain, can’t breathe, are burning with fevers, . . . the flesh is melting from their bones in flakes of fire” (136) and that the “people continue to feel intense fear, violent dread, because they don’t know what horrors might yet emerge in their bodies” (283). The pre-trauma⁶ and anxiety are palpable. Animal has nightmares from “that night.” Often this suffering is entangled with questions about being human:

It warns me that ulcers will eat my flesh with white and weeping sores . . . Whips, like scorpion stings, will flay my body and drive me out of human society. Never again will I share food or drink with human beings. I’ll be an outcast. For me, there’ll be no sanctuary, no relief, no end to suffering. No one will shelter me. I’ll end up friendless, despised by all, and then, worn away by endless pain. (274)

While Rob Nixon is right to invoke Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject and how Animal faces “those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal” (Kristeva 12, as cited in Nixon 55), perhaps a caveat is in order here, since everything about Animal and about this novel screams disability rights, recognition of the agency of the downtrodden, and the importance of social embeddedness in environmental justice issues.

This is a novel about hope. There is tragedy, to be sure, but there is also a clear sense that things will get better: “The Kampani don’t know what they’re up against, people who have nothing have nothing to lose, we will never give up, out of nothing comes a power that’s impossible to resist. It may take long, but we will win” (111). For Animal and his people, “having nothing means you have nothing to lose” (54). This is not a resignation to tragedy, not the kind of bleakness that we find, for instance, in *King Lear*, one of the greatest tragedies ever written, where “nothing comes of nothing.” Sinha offers a far more productive and hopeful vision where out of nothing grows infinite possibilities for healing, regeneration, and life.

In some ways, this novel addresses the issue of disability in a representationally very satisfying way. Anita Mannur explains that “because the central character possesses an extraordinary ability to speak about his disability the novel is perhaps unique in setting itself up as one that will seriously undertake the problem of

understanding disability instead of merely presenting disability solely as a discourse to create empathy for wronged persons through a lens of pity” (390). Animal takes initiatives in maintaining control over his life and does not shuffle his destiny off to chance or dubious divinities. He explains as follows: “Whoever I talk to, seems the main reason for having a religion is to cheat death and live again, here or in heaven, wherever” (207), and he thus totally rejects religion. He identifies with no religion, proclaiming that “neither Christian am I nor Hindu nor Muslim, not Brahmin nor Sufi nor saint” (313). Animal knows that people are suffering and rejects the idea of a divine being who will help because “to deny what you do see and believe in things you don’t, that you could call crazy” (12). With his rejection of god “began the long process of learning how to heal . . . broken bodies and minds” (203), of learning how to take rather than defer the agency required to address real material issues.

However, this “central character [who] possesses an extraordinary ability to speak about his disability” is still a fictional construct, not a differently-abled person representing himself, and, as such, despite the degree to which this narrative figures “the body as a dynamic location of biological and intellectual processes” and humor through the feisty self-narrator, the novel also clearly “figures it as an ocular phenomenon or a feature of the physical environment” (Yorke 269). In other words, offering spectacle is clearly obvious to and inextricable from the narrative strategy of this novel.

The narrative strategy of the novel is to produce a visceral effect, a sense of a “fevered immediacy that governs the society of the catastrophe-as-spectacle” (Nixon 64). Reading *Animal’s People* during and after the COVID-19 pandemic are different than reading it pre-COVID-19. The pandemic has been a strong equalizing force. One thing COVID-19 revealed early is that as humans, are all susceptible to becoming very scared—like frightened animals. A flock of birds will take flight at danger and will stay away until it is safe to return. Mudskippers will vanish into the sand when threats appear and will stay away until it is safe to return. And we too disappear into our homes when facing corporeal (perhaps mortal) danger, and we stay there until it is safe to return (if we’re smart). We respond to things that threaten our abled-ness and our lives as do other living things, and we flatter ourselves to think that we are different from other animals in this.

Reading *Animal’s People* after COVID-19 puts the reader in the unique position of understanding the kind of threat that is played out through the disabled body of the novel’s humorous main character. Yorke seems to capture accurately the tropical function of the disabled body when she argues that it is “an amorphous symbol, which has a polysemous representative capacity to embody the traits and fears of normal individuals as well as those of entire demographics” (272). In a very real sense, Animal is precisely that polysemous trope, the representative for

the unbridled fear bridled—and fear of what? Of precisely the corporeal threats that non-biotic agencies are so eminently capable of presenting and that we need to start taking a bit more seriously preemptively, ahead of the curve rather than behind it.

The temporal and geographical proximities of the corporeal threats in *Animal's People*, however, are very localized, unlike with COVID-19, whose threats to the body are global. Discussion of real and imagined nonbiotic corporeal threats (viruses and things such as potential industrial disasters) have too frequently been stifled under the banner of wanting to avoid “doom and gloom” predictions, and one of the reasons that this has been possible is that nonbiotic threats inhabit a zone of abstraction more so than do, say, Nazis or terrorists. Because nonbiotic threats, including climate change itself, are abstractions more than is a lion running toward you at full tilt, they are also more easily brushed aside precisely as “doom and gloom” apocalypticism. The complicated relationships between biotic and nonbiotic communities need considerably more sustained and serious attention, as the agencies posed by nonbiotic materials are formidable, and the illness and disabling effects profound. Grosz explains that “environmental illness offers a particularly potent example of trans-corporeal space, in which the body can never be disentangled from the material world, a world composed of emergent, entangled biological creatures as well as a multitude of xenobiotic, humanly made substances” (24).

We learn that in *Animal's People*, “the dead in their hundreds are sprawled in the roads, they are leaning half upright in the doorways, their mouths are open and they are singing, out of their throats the death raga pours in green gusts, it swirls round them and flies in your face, in that green burning fog your world is lost” (Sinha 274). It is image so horrendous that it could simply be blocked by our numbness to such things—they are in the news enough to numb our perceptions. The image here, however, becomes palpable through *Animal*. We have laughed with him and at him. He has taken us on his journey, and we have each become one of his people. We have seen the silent spring he describes: “Listen, how quiet it’s. No bird song. No hoppers in the grass. No bee hum. Insects can’t survive here. Wonderful poisons the Kampani made, so good it’s impossible to get rid of them, after all these years they’re still doing their work” (29). The factory here is no longer in use, but the things it produced still have agency after all these years.

It is an apocalyptic world that stands in very sharp contrast with the apocalypsetinged COVID-19 era in which there is silence, but not the kind Carson or Sinha describe. With the shutdowns and the silencing of the skies, with almost no jets roaring overhead, with the skies suddenly clearer and bluer, with less thundering traffic on the ground, less people on the streets, on our campuses, and so on, the

bodies of birds and wildlife have become less threatened, stressed, and disabled by our activities. Their voices have become more audible, their presence more visible, their future more hopeful. We have seen the powerful agency of nature as it reclaims what has been abandoned: “Look inside, you see something strange, a forest is growing, tall grasses, bushes, trees, creepers that shoot sprays of flowers like fireworks” (29). Indeed,

throughout this place a silent war is being waged. Mother Nature’s trying to take back the land. Wild sandalwood trees have arrived, who knows how, must be their seeds were shat by overflying birds. That herb scent, it’s ajwain, you catch it drifting in gusts, at such moments the forest is beautiful, you forget it’s poisoned and haunted. Under the poison-house trees are growing up through the pipework. Creepers, brown and thick as my wrist, have climbed all the way to the top, tightly they’ve wrapped wooden knuckles round pipes and ladders, like they want to rip down everything the Kampani made. (31)

Reclamation of land in Khaufpur/Bhopal, as in Chernobyl or Fukushima Daiichi, is itself terrifying, fueling the morbid fantasies of the burgeoning “world without us” genre. The fact is that the world *will* go on; we, however, may *not*.

Animal’s People is a warning from a young man and his community about the suffering that results from a system that simply fails to recognize, deal with, and remedy the effects—corporeal, psychological, social, economic, and so on—of corporate racism and greed, a warning made poignant and accessible through the humor and cheekiness of the narrator himself. A wide-ranging narrative that highlights environmental justice issues and corporate responsibility, *Animal’s People* poses important questions about what defines the “human” and what the “animal,” questions in which the suffering body takes the spotlight. As deeply engaged with questioning as with employing spectacle, this is a novel about resistance to unsustainable practices that threaten human and nonhuman bodies alike. As I write, the corporeal well-being of people across the globe is being threatened by a pandemic that has been sourced to unsustainable food practices, and so it is not only *Animal’s* humor and Sinha’s skill at narrative that bring this novel powerfully to its target: our material realities, too, make this novel timelier than ever before.

Notes

1. Perhaps “terror” is a better word here than “error.”
2. Again, I want to avoid absolute statements here, since imagined agency in nature is a notion that children clearly treasure—talking dogs, moving trees, and animated landscapes are all sources of humor and entertainment for children (and for adults sometimes, too). At one point in the novel, Animal “cannot sleep,” he explains, “for fear of the trees which will devour me if I sleep” (345). We learn that the trees are “joining branch to branch . . . dancing in a ring, each leaping to the next quicker than the eye can follow” (345) and that they are menacing Animal and saying to him “you don’t scare us” (345). This is not a clinical description of a pathological agoraphobia or dendrophobia but a darkly humorous dip into the mind of an extremely frustrated but resourceful and intelligent young man.
3. Laura Wright explains that “zombies [...] are undead figures with a lengthy lineage who have functioned to highlight, satirize, and provide commentary on various social institutions over time, particularly with regard to blind consumerism” (69).
4. As entangled with ecophobic fears of nonhuman biological agency as it is with nonbiotic agencies, slime is the unrecognized elemental intruder, the border-crosser *par excellence* whose space is as ambivalent as can be. For Shakespearean Daniel Brayton, “slime occupies the conceptual space where the human imagination begins to grasp, tentatively and tenuously, the materiality of life itself” and is “a material condition that is neither chemical nor biological in nature, but fundamentally liminal and marginal—between solid and liquid, inert and alive” (Brayton 81). It is a dangerous transcorporeal matter that threatens the very boundaries that it traverses. Kelly Hurley elaborates usefully here:

Nothing illustrates the Thing-ness of matter so admirably as slime. Nor can anything illustrate the Thing-ness of the human body so well as its sliminess, or propensity to become-slime. Slimy substances—excreta, sexual fluids, saliva, mucus—seep from the borders of the body, calling attention to the body’s gross materiality. [T. H.] Huxley’s description of protoplasm indicates that sliminess is the very essence of the body, and is not just exiled to its borders. Within an evolutionist narrative, human existence has its remote origins in the “primordial slime” from which all life was said to arise. (34)

Slime, what Sartre playfully called “the agony of water” (607), seeps from but is not exiled to borders, slips beyond our command but is at the source of all life, and perhaps, like Frankenstein’s wretch, will be with us on our wedding night (gay or straight); it is a matter of profound disgust and horror but “does not have the permanence within change that water has but on the contrary represents an accomplished break in a change of state. This fixed instability in the slimy discourages possession” (607). It is beyond possession or control but is one of “the realities of gross corporeality” that Hurley describes (3), a reality enmeshed not only with a fear of nature but with a fear of women, women’s bodies, and female sexuality (the monster in *Alien* dripping slime from her mouth like a common mutt is female, as is her opponent Lt. Ripley).

5. Being voiced via “its own perceptions of, and through, its own flesh” rather than through the “perceptions of an observer” (Yorke 269), however, does not guarantee an authenticity of “self” representation by any stretch of the imagination, since, as Stephanie Yorke explains, “a discussion of the materiality or immateriality of fictive bodies is . . . a contradiction in terms: the represented body is by nature not a biological or material ‘thing,’ but is discursively posited” (269). Self-representation cannot escape ideology, and, as Yorke reminds us, revisiting Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingstone, real material bodies are always discursively constituted. Animal’s case, obviously, is complicated by the fact that his is not really self-representation, but rather a fictional self-representation. The point here that we should not lose sight of in all of this theoretical complexity is that Sinha writes Animal as being acutely aware of his own value as spectacle to narrative, and although Animal resists this in the fictional world, he enacts it in the real world as a commodity of Sinha’s pen.
6. E. Ann Kaplan coins the term “pretrauma” to describe a condition in which “people unconsciously suffer from an immobilizing anticipatory anxiety about the future” (xix).

Works Cited

- Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. Vintage, 1996.
- Brayton, Dan. "Shakespeare and Slime: Notes on the Anthropocene." *Ecological Approaches to Early Modern English Texts: A Field Guide to Reading and Teaching*, edited by Jennifer Munroe, Edward J. Geisweidt, and Lynne Bruckner. Ashgate, 2015, pp. 81-88.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* Routledge, 1993.
- Garland-Thompson, Rosemarie. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*. NYU, 1996.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power*. Duke UP, 2005.
- Halberstam, Judith, and Ira Livingston. Introduction. *Posthuman Bodies*, edited by Halberstam and Livingston, Indiana UP, 1995, pp. 1-22.
- Holoch, Adel. "Profanity and the Grotesque in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*." *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2015, pp. 127-142. *Taylor and Francis Online*, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1369801X.2014.1001420>.
- Hurley, Kelly. *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle*. 1996. Cambridge UP, 2004.
- Kaplan, E. Ann. *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction*. Rutgers UP, 2016.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia UP, 1982.
- Lauro, Sarah Juliet, and Karen Embry. "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism." *Zombie Theory: A Reader*, edited by Sarah Juliet Lauro, U of Minnesota P, 2017, pp. 395-412.
- Mahlstedt, Andrew. "Animal's Eyes: Spectacular Invisibility and the Terms of Recognition in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2013, pp. 59-74. *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mos.2013.0034>.
- Mannur, Anita. "'That Night': Seeing Bhopal through the Lens of Disability and Environmental Justice Studies." *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-crip Theory*, edited by Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara. U of Nebraska P, 2017, pp. 381-401.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard UP, 2011.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. 1943. Translated and with an Introduction by Hazel E. Barnes, First Pocket Books, 1996.
- Sinha, Indra. *Animal's People*. Simon and Schuster, 2007.
- Williams, Délice. "Spectacular Subjects: Abjection, Agency, and Embodiment in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*." *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2018, pp. 586-603. *Taylor and Francis Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2018.1487315>.

- Wright, Laura. "Vegan Zombies of the Apocalypse: McCarthy's *The Road* and Atwood's *The Year of the Flood*." *The Vegan Studies Project: Food, Animals, and Gender in the Age of Terror*. U of Georgia P, 2015, pp. 68-88.
- Yorke, Stephanie. "Realism and the Immaterial Disabled Body in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* and *A Fine Balance*." *South Asian Review*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2011, pp. 267-284. *Taylor and Francis Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2011.11932823>.