

THE ANIMALS IN OUR STORIES

THE ANIMALS IN OUR STORIES: READING HUMAN-ANIMAL HISTORY,
KINSHIP, AND INHERITANCE IN ASIAN DIASPORIC LITERATURE

By NANDINI THIYAGARAJAN B.A., M.A.

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LAY ABSTRACT

This project looks at animals in Asian North American novels. Whether they are symbolic, mythical, historical, or everyday companions, I argue that paying close attention to animals in stories that are otherwise about humans reveals how they shape our ideas about belonging, family, and inheritance. I focus specifically on three novels: Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, Madeleine Thien's *Dogs at the Perimeter*, and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*. Each novel represents animals in complex ways that are informed by various ways of knowing the world, such as religious (Hindu and Buddhist), scientific, or cultural knowledges. One central question that directs this dissertation is: what can literary animals teach us when we learn to pay attention to them?

ABSTRACT

This dissertation approaches literary animals in Asian diasporic novels through the concept of drawing close. I am interested in how literary animals can communicate an endeavour to draw animals close, and how literary representations of this closeness imagine normative human-animal relationships otherwise. I argue that even the most subtle literary animal can be read as a practice and expression of drawing animals close, and this closeness reveals itself most directly through each chapter in relation to belonging, family, and inheritance. This project centers around the question: what can stories offer animals?

I argue that the fields of literary animal studies, postcolonial studies, and Asian diasporic studies need to come together in order to attend not only to the multiple ways that animals inhabit Asian diasporic novels, but also to the particular relationships between postcolonial subjects and animals. I chose novels that navigate relationships to animals often informed by Hindu and Buddhist epistemologies as an intervention in the predominantly Western-focused field of animal studies that has prioritized Western religious traditions, philosophies, and literature. Each chapter of this dissertation examines the diverse ways that authors listen to and represent literary animals, at times acting as a reflection of the desire and efforts to fortify the human-animal boundary, and at other times significantly challenging human exceptionalism by advocating for compassion and interdependence between humans and animals.

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I dedicate this dissertation to the animals in my story. You are all a part of me in ways that escape the boundaries of my imagination.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction - The Animals in Our Stories	1
Prologue.....	1
Drawing Animals Close.....	8
Story and Inheritance.....	11
Framing the Literary Animal.....	20
On Discursive Colonization: The Politics of Critical & Literary Animal Studies.....	24
Orienting Animals in Hindu and Buddhist Epistemologies.....	37
Listening to the Animals in Our Stories.....	45
Chapter One - Forced Proximity and Enclosed Belonging: Animal Masks, Vermin Being, and Cannibalism in Monique Truong’s <i>The Book of Salt</i>	48
Pigeon Analogies and the Imperial History of Vietnam.....	58
Blood, Cannibalism, and a Different Way of Being Human.....	73
Uncomfortable Proximities.....	97
Chapter Two - “You’re part of us.”: Reading the Animal Shapes of Grief in Madeleine Thien’s <i>Dogs at the Perimeter</i>	100

Prologue.....	100
The Strings that Tie Us Together.....	105
Keeping Safe and Letting Go: Fractured, Disappearing, and Persevering Selves.....	112
The Afterlives of the Cambodian Genocide.....	116
The Tiger and the Deer: Seeing Family in Wild Animals.....	121
The Father and the Cat: Finding Family in Companion Animals.....	125
The Dog and the Wolf: Articulating Uncertainty.....	131
The Scientist Who Weeps for Sea Slugs.....	136
The Cat with a Nose like a Rabbit: Extending Kinship Beyond the Human.....	145
Chapter Three –A Buddhist Paradox for the Anthropocene: Inheriting Animal Histories in Ruth Ozeki’s <i>A Tale for the Time Being</i>.....	149
A Tale for the Anthropocene.....	156
A Bird’s-Eye View as Narrative Topography.....	173
Whale Histories and the Pacific Ocean’s Memory.....	181
On Wolves, Indigeneity, and Violent Histories of Human Homes.....	194
Inheriting Animal Histories.....	207
Conclusion - Navigating the Unknowability of Animal Stories.....	210
Works Cited.....	220

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INTRODUCTION

The Animals in Our Stories

Prologue

In so many ways, my dissertation started with a cat. When I met her, she was a very small kitten who, as we learned later, was still several weeks away from being old enough to leave her mother. Unlike her sister who played eagerly with us, bringing toys to our feet, happily swatting at a feather dangling from a wooden handle, and running too quickly for her little legs to keep up, this kitten didn't wake up during our entire visit. She stayed nestled into a well-worn groove on top of the black suede couch, her presence there given away only by her long white whiskers and white paws tucked neatly under her face. After playing with her sister for a long while, in a rare moment of decisiveness, I turned away from the kitten biting at my toes, pointed to the kitten still asleep on the couch, and said, "I'll take her." I can't tell you why I picked her. When forced, I may say that I couldn't resist her oversized whiskers or the little white paws that made her look like she was always wearing a pair of socks. If I'm feeling candid, I may even admit that it was a symptom of my attraction to detached, disinterested, aloof personalities. Maybe something visceral reached back to a memory of when I snuck a small black-and-white kitten into the basement of our house and played happily with her until my dad caught us and propelled the kitten out of the front door. Whichever story comes to the fore, there was something that drew us together, something that escapes naming, explanation,

theorizing. One thing I do know is that even as this moment changed my life, I will always regret leaving the other small kitten behind.

I carried the kitten I chose out of the house into the chilly spring air, carefully buttoned into my coat, and made a pillow for her with my scarf as we drove home. Pressed against my body, she didn't purr or meow, but I saw her eyes reflected in the car window darting from one sight to the next. When we reached my apartment, Jordan, my partner, and I realized that we didn't have anything we needed for her—no cat food, litter box, toys, or bed—and everything was closed for the night. Luckily, we decided we could coopt everything from my sister's dog Bunny, a tiny Chihuahua whose life was about to get turned upside down. Jordan hurried into the apartment to warn my sister and Bunny. I sat for a moment with this small kitten. I asked her if she was alright and reassured both of us that everything would be okay. Right at that moment, she looked up at me and promptly puked down the front of my coat. Neither of us was ready for the other.

She had been taken from her family too soon and into unprepared arms, and I was getting ready to move across the country to begin graduate school. It was Jordan's idea to get a cat. He stated, simply, "You won't be alone if you have a cat." A part of me believed him. I changed her name four times and only settled on "Mews" when she was six months old, after being greeted every day by her small "mew" when I came in the door. She wreaked havoc in every way she could. We battled over her climbing kitchen shelves and in protest of leash training she stubbornly flopped over as I dragged her tiny body through the grass for blocks. She pushed books off of a mantle onto my unsuspecting, sleeping face, and she would wait for Bunny to round a corner, then latch

onto his back, like a lion pouncing on an antelope, and ride him down the hallway. I tried to contain her in any way I could think of and these techniques got even more creative when we moved into a bachelor apartment together. She quickly figured out that the bathroom door did not latch, so I trapped her under laundry baskets weighed down by cat litter containers, in suitcases, in cardboard boxes with holes poked in the top, and even in kitchen cupboards. She found a way out of everything and emerged victorious on the other side of the containing device ready for the next power struggle.

But, in between our power struggles, this little cat and I got to know each other. I learned how to entice her into jumping up on the bed so that I could force-snuggle her, which toys were her favourites, how she liked to be held and petted, how much she loved water (but not baths), spinach, olives, smelly cheeses, avocados, broccoli, and cucumbers, and I reassured her after she made a traumatizing decision to drink coffee. I learned to sense her moods, including when she was feeling restless and moody—these moods were clearly communicated when she bolted out the apartment door and ran down several flights of stairs. I knew whether she was curious and happy, or when she seemed sad and lonely. I came to admire and loathe her unyielding defiance. She taught me that there are parts of small creatures that cannot be known or tamed and that sharing your life and home with an animal means learning how to let those parts breathe.

In turn, she learned about me. She often responded to my crankiness in kind, both of us escalating until she ended up in a box and I ended up sitting beside her, confused and at least distracted momentarily from my own grumpiness. She slept squarely in front of me when I was at my desk desperately trying to write during those twilight hours when

you're not sure if it is too late at night or too early in the morning. When she wasn't insisting on lying across the keyboard and contributing to my writing, watching her dream or feeling the rise and fall of her chest as she breathed made me feel less alone. When I cried or found myself at a breaking point, she showed up, positioned herself on top of my chest – with her face in my face, and purred, the rumbling from her body reverberating through mine.

There is a close bond that forms from being in a place where you only have each other. Mews arrived in my life, bringing other animals from my past with her, and we learned how to be close to each other. Unknowingly, Mews follows a lineage of animals who have been my family. As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be close to animals and I longed for a pet. I spent hours scouring the grass on our front lawn for snakes (foolishly led by my sister's insistence that exotic snakes lived in Northern Alberta), befriended a large wolf spider whom I named Charlotte, flipped directly to the animal profiles in National Geographic magazines, devoured animal fables in the Hindu comic books *Amar Chitra Katha*, and quickly fell in love with Disney's animal characters. I pleaded with my parents to let me have a pet and on the first occasion they caved, brought home a budgie named Blue who, to my disappointment, would not tolerate my grabby attempts to love him, and clearly favoured my mom instead. Thinking that I was not up to the task, my parents promised that they would get me a dog if I memorized all of the dog breeds detailed in a huge dog encyclopaedia. When I quickly memorized the entire book and decided that I would like to have a golden lab named Chip, they had no choice. So, Kodi arrived in my life. A confusing mix of golden lab,

cocker spaniel, beagle, and maybe German shepherd, Kodi had a golden barrel-shaped body with short legs and velvety soft ears that framed a mouth always turned up in a smile. He came along on my make-believe adventures as eagerly as he played fetch, went on hikes, and tore through my mom's strawberry patch.

Some people seek out animals and animal worlds because they want to disappear, to become anonymous. I wanted to be close to animals because I wanted to be seen. Kodi saw me. We celebrated and played together, protected, and took care of each other. He let me sit chest-to-chest with him and wrap my arms around his shoulders as my tears rolled down his fur; when I was small enough I snuck into his dog house to sleep with him because I worried that—like me—he too was scared to sleep alone; he even entertained my escape attempts and ran away with me after I assured him I had packed plenty of his food and treats. After a brief eight years with us, Kodi passed away in a quick and devastating blur of an illness that seemed like pancreatic cancer but could have easily been caused by poison, and I learned what grief was. Fourteen years later, my heart still aches when I think of him or when I visit my parents and look into their backyard to let myself imagine him running down his well-worn path towards me.

Before he died, Kodi opened the door for Bunny, although Kodi was confused by the presence of this weird mouse-type creature with oversized ears and buggy eyes who barked at him too much. Bunny and I went through our disgruntled teenage years together. I rebelled against my parents and Bunny rebelled against me by peeing on any piece of white clothing that I owned or sneaking chocolate bars off of the kitchen counter and stashing them to eat when he thought I wasn't watching. We grew together and apart

after I left Alberta and our connection fell prey to an increasingly stormy relationship with my family. During the last months of writing my dissertation, dementia took over Bunny's brain and body. I could not have asked for a better, longer, or fuller life for him, but it will take some time to come to terms with the facts that I will never feel the weight of his little body on my lap, or that Mews and I will never see him again. Bunny opened the door for Mews and in the first six months of her life, he taught her how to belong in our family. Over the years she has more or less graciously accepted two other cats, Penelope and Ferdinand, into our family. Our relationships are not perfect and there will always be parts of both our human worlds and their animal worlds that we cannot grasp, but we are all still figuring out how to know and be with each other well.

Today, as I near the end of my dissertation, I can see a lineage of animals who I have considered family, but this has not always been so clear to me. My academic interest in animals started slowly. During the first year that Mews and I spent in Hamilton, I took a course on critical animal studies. As my ways of knowing the world unravelled in the face of the often-unthinkable ways that humans use animals, I often looked to Mews to think through the stakes of our relationships with animals. I tried to build a life that fulfilled her physical and emotional needs, though I constantly worried that I had gotten everything wrong. I desperately wanted to communicate well with her and on a few occasions when she sat in front of me with her mouth slightly open I truly thought she was about to start talking to me! I agonized about the power I wielded over her body when I took her to get spayed, begging her to forgive me, but also deciding that I had a responsibility to give her the best quality of life possible. I have spent hours

feeling the warmth and weight of her body close to mine, wondering if there is anything that I can ever write or say that could sufficiently articulate this closeness.

What I learned in that animal studies course threw many of my largely accepted and unquestioned ways of knowing animals into relief. I learned that there was a place in academia to think critically and carefully not only about the violence done to animals, but also about how much they can mean to us. Even though I will always feel indebted to the knowledge I learned in that course, something didn't feel right when I returned to the critical animal studies seminar each week. Even as we worked against such ideas about animals and animality through continental philosophy, each seminar started from the premise that most people assume animals are not important or worth considering. While this work was evidently necessary and valuable for my colleagues, it felt redundant to me. I know that animals are important and I traced this knowledge back to my mother who taught me about Hinduism. Animals are significant in Hindu mythology, and the human-animal boundary the texts impart is fluid. I remember countless stories of gods and goddesses assuming animal forms to accomplish tasks that their human bodies could not. I have stared at so many beautiful, brightly coloured images of Ganesha, marvelling at his elephant head, and learning from him a deep love for elephants. The animal companions or steeds to each god or goddess became my favourite characters. I love the contrast between Ganesha and his mouse companion; the parallel between Saraswati and her swan; the strength of Parvati and her tiger; and wisdom and loyalty symbolised by Siva's companion Nandi, the cow. My mother's respect for animals was engrained and organic. She never made a big deal out of the fact that she has been a vegetarian for her

entire life. Interestingly, she raised myself and my siblings to eat meat, a fact that I have alternately been grateful for and felt cursed by at different times in my life. When she hasn't felt compelled by the stark contrast between the cultural politics of South India and Northern Alberta, my mother has lived with respect and care for all animals. Hers is a quiet animal politics, and I have learned from her that caring for animals does not always look or sound like loud vegan politics or animal rights activism.

I wanted to write a dissertation that reflected my own knowledge of animals and intervened in the absence of non-Western worldviews in the field of animal studies. I look to stories not only because I am a Humanities scholar, but also because I endeavour to better understand the mode through which I have learned so much about animals. I am not (often to my disappointment) an ethologist, biologist, or conservationist. But I do know stories well and as my mind turned towards animals in the world, I also started to notice an abundance of animals in the novels I was reading and I started to wonder, what can stories offer animals?

Drawing Animals Close

“If she wants to open her heart to animals, why can't she stay home and open it to her cats?”

--J.M. Coetzee

Animals weave themselves into our stories. From passing encounters, comparisons that assert species boundaries, and analogies written on animal bodies to robust characters who arrive with their own histories, lives, and stories in tow, animals live and die within and alongside human stories. They creep, slither, fly, bound, and

gallop to gather at the edges of the stories we tell. When we pay attention to them, they can force us to reconsider the narratives of isolation and superiority that human exceptionalism prescribes. This dissertation grows from a seemingly simple observation that sparked a series of questions: animals exist, in myriad ways, within human-centered novels that do not feature them as prominent characters and therefore cannot be considered amongst famously animal-centric novels like *Moby Dick*, *The Call of the Wild*, *The Jungle Book*, and/or *Animal Farm*. What purpose do literary animals serve for us, for animals, and for the narrative? Can a text that features literary animals be human-centered but not necessarily human exceptionalist? Going further, how might literary animals demonstrate that our understandings of history, memory, family, and kinship should extend beyond the human? What can literary animals teach us once we learn to listen to them?

In this dissertation, I approach such questions through the idea and action of drawing close. I am interested in how literary animals can communicate an endeavour to draw animals close, and how literary representations of this closeness imagine normative human-animal relationships otherwise. Closeness is an amalgamation of intimacy, proximity, belonging, and care that offers an open terrain to explore contradictory, imperfect, nuanced human-animal relations in literature. Closeness is intimacy insofar as it is “not something that can be measured by physical distance so much as the degree of involvement, engagement, concern, and attention one gives to it” (Stoler 15). It also exceeds the boundaries of intimacy because it is not always mutual, and can often be violent, oppressive, and indifferent. Drawing close can be physical, but is more intimate

than drawing beings into physical proximity because closeness expresses a relationship, an attachment, even love in certain instances. Drawing close can be an expression of or a search for belonging, though forms of belonging can be found in violence, oppression, or trauma. Since closeness can also be something that is not necessarily concerned equally with both the humans and the animals involved, it can happen in the absence of care.

Closeness, as I understand and employ it here, encompasses relationships across distance and time (the cat was close to me), familial relationships (close friends or relatives), and attentiveness (paying close attention). *Drawing* close indicates that closeness is active, purposeful, and cultivated for beings, whether human or more-than-human, who may be inappropriate, unaccepted, or controversial companions. I envision the connection between the word “close” and the Latin word for “enclosure” both within and beyond the connotations of closed, closed-in, or closed-off, in order to posit that drawing an animal close encloses beings in a relationship and solidifies a bond that exists in spite of the imperfect nature of that relationship. Sometimes human-animal closeness is an enclosure, where people are forced into proximity to the animal (or vice versa) and they have to negotiate a more violent and oppressive human-animal relationship that may be close, but not kind or voluntary. Drawing another being close demonstrates that humans do not exist in isolation, but rather that we come to know and be ourselves through close relationships to more-than-human animals.¹

¹ Throughout the dissertation, I use “animal” to portray a conventional understanding of animals, but I also use “more-than-human animals” to gesture to a more capacious view of animal life that can include trees, plants, insects, and a wider range of beings that are

Drawing animals close in literary contexts works on three levels: the author embeds intimate histories, memories, and stories into her literary animals; the literary characters themselves are directly drawn close to the animals in their stories; and the reader, through a practice of attentiveness to literary animals, feels herself drawn close to not only the animals on the page but also the ones in her own life and memory. Once we learn to pay attention to literary animals in all of their forms—in spite of the overwhelmingly anthropocentric apparatus of literary criticism—we may find ourselves opening up to the numerous roles that animals play in our own stories, as well as in the texts we love. I argue that even the most subtle literary animal can be read as a practice and expression of drawing animals close, and this closeness reveals itself most directly through each chapter in relation to belonging, family, and inheritance. For instance, a pigeon can represent a history of violent marginalization and open a kind of belonging for a queer, diasporic man; a cat can become a multifaceted family member by embodying cherished memories of lost loved ones and taking care of a child; and whales and wolves can bring their own histories and cultures onto the page with them in order to inspire us to contend with the animal histories that we inherit. As well as being embodiments of larger histories, literary animals are significant in their own right because they bring their own histories and stories onto the page with them. Therefore, listening carefully to literary animals reminds us that they originate in material reality and are not exclusively symbolic, that they are metonymic as well as metaphorical. The ways that authors represent literary animals in stories have ties to the material world in which we encounter, live with, and move alongside animals.

Story and Inheritance

“Life is full of stories. Or maybe life is only stories.”

--Ruth Ozeki

Stories shape the way we know the world. Stories allow several different epistemologies to both move together and challenge each other. We all have, tell, and inherit stories. I am interested in the stories that manifest in literature. The conventions of literature allow for creativity, imagination, and subjectivity that is not accepted in other fields that contribute to our understandings of animals, such as history and science, which are conventionally fixed to empirical facts and objective, evidence-based observations. Tomson Highway explains, “the difference between the historian and the poet/storyteller is that where the historian relates what happened, the storyteller tells us how it might have come about” (“Acknowledgements”). A storyteller can relate historical events, but also has the capacity and imagination to offer alternative outcomes or explanations, to muse about how things *might* have been, what *might* have happened, or what *might* happen. Within literature, narratives give structure to stories; the two overlap, but are not reducible to one another. The story fills in the narrative, and the narrative conventions put that story into action in a novel. I understand both story and narrative as critical parts of a novel. Therefore, I am concerned with both as they apply varyingly to the animals in the novels that I analyze throughout the dissertation. One of the most important aspects of stories is that they can “illuminate the complexities of human [and animal] lives” (Davis 90) from so many different perspectives. Stories are not neutral or innocent of putting forward ideologies, but their strength lies in the fact that, “unlike many other modes of giving an account, a story can allow multiple meanings to travel alongside one another; it

can hold open possibilities and interpretations and can refuse the kind of closure that prevents others from speaking or becoming” (van Dooren & Rose 85).

Ruth Ozeki tells us that, “life is only stories” (246), and I take this to mean that life is comprised of stories that we create as well as stories that we inherit. The stories that we inherit can take different forms: traditional, cultural, or familial stories passed down from ancestors, parents, and family members; children’s stories that shape early understandings of the world; religious stories that are meant to orient moral compasses; fictional stories that invite us to explore worlds imagined and real; narratives that drive various cultural texts; factual stories that spread news, histories, politics; stories that we tell ourselves, like secrets whispered into the dark. As Thomas King says, “the truth about stories is that’s all we are” (2). Stories comprise us, build us, push and pull us out of our comfort zones. Donna Haraway ties stories and inheritance together by proposing that we inherit the stories that we touch or are touched by—whether that touch comes in the form of care or something that troubles us, we are touched by stories simply by virtue of the proximity of shared histories and spaces. She urges us to ask, “What have I and others who touch or are touched by this story inherited?” (*Species* 37). As it revolves around species encounters, inheritance is essential for Haraway. Haraway resists inheritance as solely human by conceptualizing the “inherited categories of human or nonhuman, nature or culture;” biological or technological systems like vision or cameras; histories surrounding the animals that we encounter; genetic inheritance; and the histories and stories “we all inherit” about who animals are or can be (*Species* 26; 5; 97; 163; 232). “When species meet,” Haraway writes, “the question of how to inherit histories is

pressing, and how to get on together is at stake” (*Species* 35). Even though inheritance has been thought of as exclusively human, Haraway articulates how inheritance shapes human-animal relationships as well. To get along well with more-than-human beings, we must, according to Haraway, learn to inherit their histories. To build on Haraway’s connection between inheritance and stories, I argue that stories themselves are a form of inheritance that shape and are shaped by how we know the world.

Since our understandings of animals come largely from representations, animals are particularly susceptible to the stories that we tell about them; the stories that we inherit in relation to animals can have a significant impact on how we encounter them. Stories can pass down human exceptionalist, anthropocentric, or “biocentric” worldviews (Herman 136). Stories can expose a fault line between anthropocentric and biocentric perspectives with “perspectives positing a hierarchical separation between humans and other species, on the one hand, and perspectives assuming a fundamental continuity across human and nonhuman forms of life, on the other” (Herman 136). We can learn and enforce a strict separation between humans and animals through stories. Consider for a moment how you learned to think about a particular species of animal and how that thinking has shifted or stayed the same.

The animal that comes to my mind is a cobra. I grew up with two stories that dominated my idea of who cobras are and how to treat them. One of the few stories that I inherited from my maternal grandmother detailed an encounter from several years ago when she looked out of the kitchen window to watch my grandfather playing under a neem tree with their first-born son. As she watched my grandfather lift the baby high into

the air, a quick movement from the tree caught her eye and she saw a cobra gliding through the branches over her son's head. She told me that she panicked, but instinct told her to pray to the cobra, to plead with him not to harm her child. As quickly as he had appeared, the cobra's once-menacing posture changed so that he swayed, hood open, over the baby's head for a moment and then disappeared back into the tree. My grandmother counts this story as a blessing for two reasons: that the cobra did not decide to sink his teeth into the small baby's body, but also that the final gesture of the cobra meant that he had lingered a moment to bless the baby himself. My dad told me the second story and when I was young, I eagerly confirmed it (though I was scolded for this) with each person who was involved. He described how, when he was just barely a teenager, his brother—my uncle—heard his mother and sister screaming. My dad and grandfather were living in Ethiopia at that time, so my uncle, who had stayed in their family home in India, was considered to be the head of the house. He ran to the kitchen and found his mother and sister screaming at a huge cobra that they unearthed and startled when they moved a few pots. My uncle grabbed a stick and beat the cobra to death. Even now, he is thought to be cursed because he killed this cobra as it screamed for its life in a voice that he thought was a threat.

When we inherit stories about animals, we inherit specific relationships to animals, and these relationships are informed by specific belief systems. Depending on where our stories come from, the belief systems that shape them can impart the kinds of human exceptionalism evident in Western religious traditions, like Christianity, or a more interdependent vision of human and animal life evident in major Asian religions, like

Hinduism or Buddhism, or in Indigenous cosmologies. Though they can be inconsistent and nuanced, certain belief systems communicate a strong boundary or *separation* between humans and animals, and others tend to create or emphasize human-animal *connections*. My experience of hearing the cobra stories from my family bumped up against the dominant view of cobras and snakes from the culture that I grew up with in Canada, but I also saw the complexity in each story. Cobras became revered, sacred beings to be respected, and this view tangled with an image of them as scary, slithering, lurking creatures who embodied an unyielding and incomprehensible threat to humans and the animals we love. Yet, my family's stories about cobras also articulate a complexity of the everyday where individuals are motivated by both fear and instinct alongside mythology, suggesting that Hinduism is not all encompassing, even for Hindus. Stories have the ability to attend to the complicated, interwoven knowledges that come together in our everyday lives and inform how we know and treat animals. The crux of my methodology centers on the ability of story and literary analysis to learn to let belief systems, discourses, or ideologies move and shift alongside each other while also uncovering the power relations that obscure, exalt, or diminish certain forms of knowledge over others.

I am a second-generation South Asian Canadian woman who grew up in Northern Alberta. I am diasporic because my parents' movement from India to Canada landed me in an in-between space. I have been followed around by this sense of in-betweenness, a feeling of being neither here nor there, an awareness of being too brown to belong here and yet too "white" to belong in India, and a way of knowing the world that pulls from so

many different streams. Although I am a settler in Canada on unceded Indigenous lands, I am also a postcolonial subject whose familial history ties directly back to the treatment of South Asians in Canada, as well as the legacies of colonial India and Africa. I carry histories, memories, and stories that cannot be reduced to one or even two concrete ways of knowing the world. I am interested in how my various positions in the world converge and conflict around animals. My way of being with animals is influenced by Hinduism, which imparted a blurry boundary between humans, animals, and gods or goddesses and established human-animal interconnectedness through belief in reincarnation, vegetarianism, and respect for more-than-human animals. Though certain teachings and traditions remain, religion lost its solidity for me in favor of literature due, partially, to literature's capacity to broaden, intervene in, and challenge religious doctrine. Stories allow us to remember some inheritances and not others, so I can (carefully) foreground my interest in a way of knowing animals that is informed by Hinduism without uncritically exalting religion and collapsing or subordinating all other forms of knowledge. The novels that I have chosen as the textual sites in which to explore human-animal closeness, Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, Madeleine Thien's *Dogs at the Perimeter*, and Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*, call forward—but do not directly reflect—the various kinds of beliefs and knowledge that come together in my own way of knowing animals.

Whether or not we align completely with the worldviews that teach us how we live in close proximity and in close connection to animals in the world, animals have moved throughout our histories and their lives have paralleled our own—by choice or by

force—in numerous ways. Animals are both resilient and vulnerable to our actions on this earth, making their lives not only precarious but also densely entangled with ours. The presence of animals within our stories demonstrates that on some level, in spite of anthropocentric concepts of the exceptional and isolated human, we know that animals play meaningful and irreplaceable roles in our lives. Despite my personal background, I did not stick to South Asian Canadian novels, but rather let my choice of novels be diffuse and diverse to more broadly include Asian North American stories set in varying geographical spaces and historical periods because I aim to demonstrate how drawing animals close can travel. Even as they diverge in many ways, each novel is diasporic, postcolonial, and informed by, but not limited to, worldviews shaped by Hinduism or Buddhism (sometimes this belief is overwritten by colonialism), and I bring them together around their treatment of animals and animality. Each novel is predominantly interested in human-centered stories, but their inclusion of animals and animality put forward a more capacious view of how animals inform our conceptions of human life. As I will detail in the next section, I chose novels that navigate postcolonial, diasporic relationships to animals often informed by Hindu and Buddhist epistemologies as an intervention in the predominantly Western-focused field of animal studies that has prioritized Western religious traditions, philosophies, and literature.

In short, “it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with,” and “it matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories” (Haraway “SF” 1). I pay close attention to literary animals because I want to understand what it means to find belonging with animals, to consider them family, how to learn to inherit animal stories, and “what,

if anything, is reciprocal?” (Fawcett 135). I am interested in exploring animals through literary analysis, representation, and story; I analyze depictions of literary animals “in terms of their imaginative import, not as evidence of anthropological truths about various peoples and cultures” (Wright 14). Stories are a form of inheritance, they reflect ways of knowing the world, and they move and affect us by transporting us into different worlds, but stories also have limits.

Leesa Fawcett puts forward a narrative ethics based on wanting to know, encounter, and appreciate the complexity of the more-than-human other. Working with Fawcett’s ideas about the capacities of narrative imagination and ethics, I also think it is important to resist drawing a straight and clear line between story, pedagogy, and direct action. In the analysis that follows, I do not aim to draw a straight line between story and animal rights or ethics. I hope that an analysis of literature that demonstrates how much animals shape the way we know the world may open up a respect for animals, but I am wary of overestimating the potential of story alone. To highlight what stories can do, Fawcett discusses the promise in three potentials or capacities of narrative imagination set out by the philosopher Richard Kearney: “1) *testimonial capacity* to bear witness to a forgotten past; 2) the *empathic capacity* to identify with those different to us (victims and exemplars alike); and 3) the *critical-utopian capacity* to challenge official stories with unofficial or dissenting ones which open up alternative ways of being” (142; original emphasis). Though Kearney is not explicitly concerned with animals, focusing on literary animals illuminates how his three capacities of narrative imagination extend beyond the human. Each novel that I take up in the following chapters demonstrates all three

capacities of literature and, in their own ways, they weave animals in and out of the story. I endeavour to highlight the critical-utopian capacity of each novel in relation to animals because, as Fawcett insists, “critical-utopian narratives can disrupt the dominant story of human omnipotence, [and] challenge the notion that humans are in the story all by themselves” (145). I read certain literary animals in my chosen novels as evidence that we know animals’ significance in our lives, conceptions of histories, and how we come to know our places on the earth.

Framing the Literary Animal

The fields of literary animal studies, postcolonial studies, and Asian diasporic studies orient my analysis throughout this dissertation. Each field has a tenuous relationship to the other, but recent work that crosses field boundaries is starting to chip away at the lines that hold the concerns of each field apart. In the year between July 1999 and July 2000, four conferences were held on the topic of animals in culture, which signaled “the beginning of a new interdisciplinary field of animal studies within the humanities” (Smith 293). It became clear very quickly that the emerging conversations in this field that sought to devote careful attention to textual animals had to navigate concerns about advocacy, animal rights, and ethics. Animal advocates, like Julie Ann Smith, are distressed “by the absence of an advocacy perspective, even the treatment of animal suffering and death with chilling detachment” within literary animal studies (294). Smith argues that the analysis coming from literary animal studies may show “impressive levels of expertise about the ways that animals are processed by culture” (294), but actual

animals are often absent or silent in ways that reaffirm anthropocentrism by consistently prioritizing the human and human exceptionalism. For those focused primarily on mobilizing the symbolic animal in their critique (who too often become the face of literary animal studies), and those who have little concern with the consequences of representation and analysis for living animals in the world, “the actual animal seem[s] almost an embarrassment, a disturbance to the symbolic field” (Smith 294). In response, scholars who are devoted to studying literary or cultural animals assert that though they may not consistently align with advocacy, what we can learn from textual animals is invaluable for the picture it paints of human and animal life. Increasingly, work within the field of literary animals is taking on this kind of embarrassment and confinement of the literary animal to symbolism in order to “frustrate mainstream advocacy arguments that nonhuman representational significance comes at the expense of the genuine/authentic/pure/real/etc. animal” (McHugh, “One or Several” 1). The tension between scholarly advocacy and scholarly detachment manifests not only in questions about the work of representation itself but also more specifically as a tension between representations of real and symbolic animals.

In relation to animals, representation can be understood in two ways, as “(a) presenting phenomena by means of words or images that act as symbols for the things they represent [...] and (b) acting as a proxy, or advocate for another, in the sense that lawyers represent their clients” (McKay 255). This can be understood as speaking about and speaking for, which has been the primary tool for animal rights advocates (McKay 255). In his work on Alice Walker’s use of literary animals, Robert McKay focuses on

the work of speaking for animals in literature, arguing that authors cultivate a sympathetic imagination by imagining themselves into the lives of people who never existed, and extending that to imagine themselves into the lives of animals. J.M. Coetzee in his foundational text *The Lives of Animals* inspired the discussion of the sympathetic imagination through his main character Elizabeth Costello's contention that, "if I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life" (35). McKay pushes Coetzee a bit further to argue that even the absence of life does not stand as a barrier to the sympathetic imagination (265). Several literary animal studies scholars take up Coetzee's conception of the sympathetic imagination as the pinnacle of ethical representation that speaks for "real" animals (Shapiro & Copeland, Fudge, McHugh), though I would argue that it is not the only meaningful or compelling way to represent literary animals.

Representation as speaking about may not endeavour to venture into the minds of animals, nor does it align consistently with advocacy work, but it does capture the multiple and flawed ways in which we coexist with animals. Occupying a space between animals as loved, respected, charismatic main characters and animals who are invoked flippantly in derogatory or passing remarks, the literary animals I study reveal that there is promise in the honesty of an imperfect representation. "The writer's pen is a microphone held up to the mouths of ancestors and even stones of long ago," Alice Walker writes, "the magic of this is not so much in the power of the microphone as in the ability of the nonhuman object or animal to *be* and the human animal to *perceive its*

being” (170; original emphasis). Speaking about operates in the realm of symbolic or metonymic animals and does not seek to imagine what it is like to be an animal, but rather to portray lives, relationships, and beings as the author perceives them or as the narrative necessitates. Walker articulates an approach that envisions representation itself as a kind of inheritance. Perceiving how things are or seem does not idealize human-animal relationships to fit normative conceptions or ethics, but rather reflects in part the ways of knowing the world that the author inherited. It is worth noting, as well, that real life and literary animals can confound our expectations, inviting us to rethink inherited ideas. Furthermore, conceiving of representation as a way of reflecting or echoing animals’ ways of being gives us space to grapple with what is unknowable about animal worlds. At its core, examining literary animals through the lens of drawing close gestures to the ways in which animals confound us.

Representation, whether speaking for or speaking about, collides with what is unknowable about animals. Animals continuously escape our attempts to definitively know them. When we learn to pay attention to them in ways that shed light on their capacities and potentials without forcing them into human understandings of consciousness, intellect, language, or emotion, we may see, for instance, that consciousness is not confined to humans alone; that even relatively “uncharismatic” animals like octopuses have complex communication systems and have often tried to communicate with humans; or that anthropomorphism has actually worked consistently and falsely to deny similarities between humans and animals (Low; Montgomery; de Waal). Vinciane Despret articulates a ground-breaking question for anyone who studies

animals from within any field when she asks, “what would animals say if we asked the right questions?” (1). Representation, whether speaking about or speaking for, becomes about asking questions that are interested in a more biocentric view of human life instead of subordinating all forms of life to the human. I propose that searching or listening for answers to the right questions will show us the multiple ways in which we seek closeness to animals and the imperfect mechanisms of this closeness at the same time as they demonstrate that there are entire animal worlds that evade the reach of our knowledge. Even literary animals will escape the confines of our imaginations, but we can work to understand how animals are entangled in our ways of knowing the world and what their presence in our stories can teach us about their importance in our lives.

On Discursive Colonization: The Politics of Critical & Literary Animal Studies

Literary texts often communicate a kind of messiness that makes them compelling places to look for identities, relationships, and worldviews that are not easily accounted for philosophically or scientifically. The kind of human-animal relationships that I am interested in appear in literature because of its ability to portray creative, nuanced, and difficult sides of our relationships with animals. Literature teems with animals and animality, but until relatively recently “only rarely have they been the focal point of systematic literary study” (McHugh, “Literary Animal” 487). “Historically,” Susan McHugh explains, “precious few literary critics have attempted to account systematically for the seemingly countless animal aspects of texts” (“Modern Animals” 363). Taking animals in literature seriously is one of the main goals of literary animal studies.

Credited with opening the door between animal studies and literary animal studies, as well as setting the tone for concerns within the field itself, Kenneth Shapiro and Marion Copeland present a formative “animal-based interpretative theory” (343). Shapiro and Copeland start from the broad assertion that, at least until 2005 when their study was published, animals existed in literary texts either as they appear in children’s books, prominently and towards the exclusion of humans; in fiction which occasionally gives them a titular role; or as minimal presences reduced to tired metaphors or absent referents (343). Raising consciousness about literary animals is the main goal that they set for literary animal studies. Following a conception of an animal-based interpretative theory as consciousness raising, Shapiro and Copeland outline the expected ways in which animals appear in fiction: as reductive and disrespectful representations that turn animals into instruments or resources for humans; as a more robust animal representation which may make animals main characters, but simultaneously reduces them dramatically to being “human[s] with fur”; and as the symbolic animal who has little to no meaning for or as itself (344). Shapiro and Copeland present a higher standard for animal representation, asserting that “an animal could appear as him or herself—as an individual with some measure of autonomy, agency, voice, character, and as a member of a species with a nature that has certain typical capabilities and limitations” (344). They too foreground the importance of Coetzee’s concept of the sympathetic imagination as ready and able to represent animals as themselves, ignoring the ways in which representation is always an interpretation of animal life. Erica Fudge offers a crucial counterpoint to the goal of representing animals as or for themselves when she asserts that “we lack a

language at present in which we can think about and represent animals to ourselves *as animals*, in ways that are not metaphorical” (*Animal* 12). What does it mean to seek animals as themselves in literature? Is it ever possible for humans to know animals without interpretation and representation? Challenging the idea that animal representation does not always occur at the expense of advocacy for real animals, as McHugh explains, “also elaborates how literary animals become significant as such through structural relationships, for example, by destabilizing distinctions between the real and the ideal” (“One or Several” 1).

The human-animal relationships I explore through close readings of literary animals are not always direct, loving, and intimate; sometimes people draw animals close in order to enact violence against them, sometimes they do so to exert power over them, and other times people bring animals close in meaningful but subconscious ways. I bring such aspects into view in order to show how drawing animals close can, but does not always, work in the interest of animals. Yet, writers like Ruth Ozeki (taken up in chapter three) draw animals close in reciprocal ways that encourage us to recognize the disavowed inheritance of animal histories. By focusing on novels that also feature animals in subtle ways—as analogies, narrative devices, minor characters—that are often overlooked or undervalued, I aim to complicate the binaries of animal rights advocacy that the fields of critical animal studies and literary animal studies reflect when they establish human-animal relationships as either good (advocating for animals) or bad (working against animal interests) and ignore relationships that lie in between. I will demonstrate that drawing animals close should not be understood only in relation to

practices of veganism, vegetarianism, or animal rights activism. Rather, the closeness I am trying to capture is an inconsistent, complicated, everyday relation that cannot be confined to any one meaning. If we can pull apart the binary between real and symbolic animals to see how “we have no access to animals in any other way: even if a real animal were before us it would be the object of interpretation” (Fudge, “Reading” 103), then we can start to think closely about the forces that shape interpretation, such as worldviews or belief systems. Not all worldviews have been given equal (or any) attention in critical or literary animal studies and that narrow focus is partially the result of a tenuous relationship to fields that take up identity categories or human subjectivity.

Raising consciousness about animals in literature is the main objective for Shapiro and Copeland as they claim that “no less than feminist, Marxist, post-colonial, structuralist, and formalist approaches, a literary criticism perspective on animal issues is a point of view, a form of consciousness, a way to read any work of fiction” (343). Susan McHugh echoes the equation between animality and identity categories like race, gender, sexuality, class, etc. when she remarks on “the striking absence [of animality] in the identity debates” (“Literary Animal” 489). While there is value in articulating an approach to literary animal studies as an intersectional practice of reading or a form of attentiveness, it is ironic for scholars to gain legitimacy or credibility for literary animal studies by aligning it with topics and conversations arising from identity categories that it, in practice, has until recently been resistant to considering. In many ways, literary animal studies followed the path set by the “often unmarked Euro-American focus” (Livingston & Puar 5) of animal studies, and so the endeavours of the field—as they

stand—point in that direction too. In their overwhelming focus on Western texts and eras, from Romanticism to contemporary American literature, the fields of critical animal studies and literary animal studies sought to claim equivalence in “the identity debates” without being in conversation with the knowledges that arose from fields formed around a direct undertaking of anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, anti-colonial projects.

Critical and, subsequently, literary animal studies come from and respond to ways of knowing animals largely dictated by Western epistemologies. The interdisciplinary field of critical animal studies is divided broadly into two strains or threads. One strain of critical animal studies originates from American philosophers such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan, who formulate an ethics for animal rights based on the recognition of the similarities between human and nonhuman animals. This area of animal studies is concerned with the acquisition of legal rights for animals and has largely been taken up by animal rights activists to aid in their work. Because the interests and goals of this strain of animal studies revolve around animals and animal rights in and under the law, there is a tendency to leave the force of the law unquestioned by trying to make the animal legible to current rules and regulations. Another key strain, originating in continental philosophy, consists of the work of philosophers such as Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Levinas, and Giorgio Agamben. Work within this strain contends that while recognition for animals both under the law and as subjects is necessary, it is insufficient because an ethics premised solely upon similarities cannot account for animal others who are very different. Additionally, for continental philosophers, the law reflects Western metaphysical traditions whose premises—including an elevation of rationality and a

subscription to essentialist categories of “self” and “other”—are untenable. This approach focuses on questions that interrogate the lines that we draw between humans and animals, how we might formulate an ethics towards non-human animals that does not leave the law unchallenged, and how to reformulate our thoughts not only about animals but also about “animality.” Ultimately, though, these two strains culminate in two structural questions: “one question concerns the being of animals, or ‘animality,’ and the other concerns the human-animal distinction” (Calarco 2). Especially as the turn to animal studies intensifies, we see that, “while there is no widely agreed upon definition of what precisely constitutes animal studies, it is clear that most authors and activists working in the field share the conviction that [Derrida’s] ‘question of the animal’ should be seen as one of the central issues in contemporary critical discourse” (Calarco 1).

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida conceptualizes the question of the animal along four main lines. First, by establishing the category of the animal as a question, Derrida challenges the inherently reductive and essentialist ways in which philosophers have traditionally written about animals. Second, similar to the critiques of essentialism posed by scholars within critical race, feminist, and queer theory, Derrida’s challenge to essentializing animals demonstrates how this essentialism reduces animals to a homogeneity that does not in fact exist. Third, the question of the animal also pursues an ethical understanding of and relationship with the animal. Finally, by calling into question humans’ ethical relationship with the animal, the question of the animal inevitably prompts us to rethink human existence itself. By posing the question of the animal, Derrida challenges the inherently reductive and essentialist ways in which

philosophers have traditionally written about animals. Derrida derives this question from Levinas's consideration of ethics towards the animal, inspired by his time spent in a concentration camp when he encountered a dog who—at a time when all others wouldn't—avowed his humanity, and “for him [the dog named Bobby], there was no doubt that we were men” (153). By calling into question humans' ethical relationship with the animal, the question of the animal inevitably prompts us to rethink human existence. The difficulty of thinking about the question of the animal is also “intended to pose the question of whether we know how to think about animals *at all*” (Calarco 5). But from—and according to—whose viewpoint are we asked to look at the question of the animal? Here we see the predominance of Western thought in animal studies that ranges from Western theology, “modern European philosophy” (Calarco 1), and the overshadowing voices of Euro- and Anglo-American philosophers.

Within Euro-American theology and philosophy, the distinction between humans and animals has been characterized as an irrecoverable rupture, an abyss into which we dare not look. For example, as Matthew Calarco puts it, Heidegger “highlight[s] the abyssal differences between human and animal relations to the world” and insists “there is no difference in degree or quantity between human and animal, [rather it is] a difference in kind, and this difference is meant to be understood in the most fundamental and radical way possible. The difference between the Being of human beings and that of animals marks a gap and a rupture that is utterly untraversable” (22). Dramatically marking the human-animal distinction as an abyss establishes a kind of unthinkability around the question of the animal, making it difficult to reconsider both the position of

animals and the relationships between humans and animals as anything other than distant, distinct, separated by lines drawn in religion, history, and philosophy. Work within animal studies and literary animal studies that has established a space to interrogate the orientations of the lines drawn between human and nonhuman animals has been useful to my project. At the same time, however, my analysis highlights how the fields of critical and literary animal studies suffer from a narrow focus on Euro-American theology and philosophy, and their insistence on irrecoverable ruptures between humans and animals, largely ignoring the intimacy present in non-Western ways of knowing and relating to animals. For instance, whereas Christianity established the animal as inferior and disposable, major Asian religions, like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, subscribe to forms of ahimsa (non-violence), reincarnation, and vegetarianism that emphasize respectful co-existence between humans and animals. I understand the relationship between Western and Asian epistemologies in critical and literary animal studies, through tools provided by postcolonial studies, as largely determined by power, the supposed mastery of Western ways of knowing animals, and evidence of an ongoing colonial practice of devaluing non-Western forms of knowledge.

The fields of critical animal studies and postcolonial studies are suspicious of each other, as animal studies often conflates race and species in problematic ways, and postcolonial theory tends to work against proximity to the animal in order to exert agency for postcolonial subjects. Given the way in which animalization and dehumanization have historically been wielded against racialized people as justification for their oppression, focusing on human-animal closeness is a particularly important but tense way to

conceptualize postcolonial identities.² Foundational postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon (1963) and Gayatri Spivak (1988) resist proximity to the animal and argue for agency by exerting distance and difference between postcolonial subjects and animals. However, as Neel Ahuja emphasizes, contemporary postcolonial scholarship “is being transformed by various projects that broaden its geographic, historical, and methodological scope” (556) and the animal is coming into view.

The scholars who have endeavored to bring postcolonial studies together with either ecocriticism or animal studies (the majority of work published so far focuses on ecocriticism) insist that there are distinct relationships between colonization, the land, animals, and postcolonial subjects.³ For instance, Val Plumwood was one of the earliest critics to point out the connections between species, patriarchy, and colonialism. Plumwood asserts that, “indeed as in the case of other empires, many humans—including women as well as those identified as less fully human—are the victims of [colonization’s] rational hierarchy, just as many humans are the victims rather than the beneficiaries of the assault on nature” (12). Complicating Plumwood’s work, Laura Wright’s *Wilderness into Civilized Shapes* insightfully brings together postcolonial studies and ecocriticism to examine how authors of fiction imaginatively represent “postcolonial landscapes and environmental issues” (1). Whether through histories of

² Some examples of the historical conflation or equation of people of color and animals can be seen in the Great Chain of Being, Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae*, and Blumenbach’s racial taxonomy.

³ See Val Plumwood’s *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*; Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin’s edited collection *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*; Laura Wright’s *Wilderness into Civilized Shapes*; Erin James’s *The Storyworld Accord*; Dana Mount & Susie O’Brien’s “Postcolonialism and the Environment” on the relationship between postcolonial studies and ecocriticism.

zoos, hunting, ecotourism, natural resource extraction, deforestation, species extinction, or habitat loss, we can see the disproportionate effects that past or ongoing colonial practices have had on people who live in close proximity (geographically or intimately) to animals and the land. Focusing primarily on gaining agency by separating humans and animals misses not only these unique relationships but also the ways in which postcolonial subjects gain agency and find communities by moving closer to animals. Many postcolonial subjects still hold worldviews that are informed by religious and spiritual practices that instil values of respect and qualified reciprocity between humans, animals, and nature, even though colonization and the spread of Christianity tore through these belief systems. This often leaves postcolonial subjects in a precarious position somewhere between gaining political agency and autonomy by asserting categorical human-animal distinctions, trying to hold onto controversial cultural practices involving animals, and wanting to sustain deeply-embedded and resilient teachings that emphasize human-animal interdependence.⁴ What can we learn from identities that arise, not from redrawing strict lines between humans and animals, but rather from coming into contact, or creating friction and intimacy with more-than-human animals?

In his essay about the postcolonial animal, Phillip Armstrong searches for ground on which postcolonial studies can build a relationship with animal studies. Postcolonial studies can significantly challenge animal studies because it asserts:

⁴ I am thinking here of moments when colonial or postcolonial subjects assert that they are not animals in order to gain agency (see Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* p.34-35); cultural practices that kill and use animals in ways that have been deemed unethical by Western society, such as the ban on shark fins, eating dogs and cats, bear bile farming, and seal hunting; and practices that explore respect and reciprocity with animals in many forms, from hunting and eating to spirit or totem animals and reincarnation.

(a) that ideas of an absolute difference between the human and the animal (and the superiority of the former over the latter) owe a great deal to the colonial legacies of European modernity and (b) that the indigenous cultural knowledges that imperialism has attempted to efface continue to pose radical challenges to the dominance of Western value systems. (Armstrong 414)

Seeking something more than “the equations between the treatment of animals and [certain] humans,” he argues that “an alliance between the two fields” must find common antagonists (414). Humanism, as it enabled civilizing missions and refused sentience to animals, seems like the perfect villain, but he follows this position with a focus on agency as it relates to both postcolonial subjects and animals. Armstrong lands, however, on proposing that “the most promising collaborations between postcolonial and animal studies lie in the production of sharp, politicized, culturally sensitive, and up-to-the-minute local histories of the roles that animals and their representations have played—or been made to play—in colonial and postcolonial transactions” (416). Armstrong sets out an optimistic vision of what work that crosses between postcolonial and animal studies can and should do. His approach may be limited, however, by an underestimation of the role that personal, cultural, systemic, and institutional bias plays in determining the conversation between postcolonial and animal studies. We cannot overlook or seamlessly overcome the forces that have kept these two fields apart without paying careful and painstaking attention to ongoing colonization and projects of decolonization that prioritize non-Western epistemologies and bring to the fore colonial histories of devaluing, diminishing, and obliterating cultural knowledge. My goal in bringing together animal studies and postcolonial studies is twofold: 1) to bring a vocabulary that has the capacity to talk about power in regards to race, epistemologies, colonialism, and

postcolonialism to bear on a field that is currently discursively colonized;⁵ and 2) to work against humanist ideals which assert that agency and legitimacy can only be found by distancing humans and animals and attend to some of the multitudes of ways of knowing and being with animals that do not align with Western humanism.

Whereas postcolonial studies has, until relatively recently, been hesitant to seriously consider animals because of the risk of trivializing or overlooking human concerns, postcolonial literature willingly takes this risk by representing the centrality of the environment and animals in stories of colonization and life in colonial and postcolonial worlds. Postcolonial literature is filled with animals whose representations are shaped by non-Western epistemologies. From Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, which portrays tigers and river dolphins alongside Indigenous peoples in the Sundarbans, to Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, which works through the aftermath of the Bhopal disaster by literalizing the animalization of people affected by the chemicals, several postcolonial novels resist asserting distance between animals and postcolonial subjects and instead dive into complex forms of human-animal intimacy. As I will demonstrate, although some authors have reproduced the contentious relationship between animals and postcolonial subjects, others have their eyes on the relationships that can grow in a space unmarked by the spurious distinction between humans and animals. By carefully and closely reading animals in postcolonial diasporic novels, I am keen to show that in many ways we owe the absolute separation between humans and animals to colonial practices

⁵ Chandra Talpade Mohanty established the term “discursive colonization” in her formative chapter “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.”

and that literary representations of animals that are informed by Asian epistemologies provide traces of human-animal communities that colonization could not erase.

Like postcolonial studies, works within the field of Asian diasporic studies are also slowly turning towards a consideration of the animal. Situated within political science, Claire Jean Kim's *Dangerous Crossings: Race, Species, and Nature in a Multicultural Age* (2015) and Timothy Pachirat's *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (2011) comprise the most direct engagements with Asian diasporas and animals. Kim's book moves beyond ideas of "cultural clashes," "double standards," "colorblindness," and "post-race" to offer perceptive readings of three instances when Asian American, African American, and Native American cultural practices that harm animals have sparked impassioned disputes: "the battle over the live markets in San Francisco's Chinatown, the uproar over the conviction of NFL superstar Michael Vick on dogfighting charges, and the firestorm over the Makah tribe's decision to resume whaling in the Pacific Northwest after a hiatus of more than seventy years" (i). Based on six months of fieldwork as a worker in a slaughterhouse, Timothy Pachirat's book is an insightful political ethnography of the killing of animals in slaughterhouses that is carried out largely by an immigrant workforce. Other works in Asian diaspora studies, such as Mel Y. Chen's book *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (2012) and Rachel C. Lee's *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (2014), query the lines between human and nonhuman life, drawing on the field of critical animal studies, but are

ultimately more concerned with biopolitical conceptions of the human, object-oriented ontology, and posthumanism than with the animal per se.

Asian diasporic studies and ecocriticism have been brought together in a collection titled, *Asian American Literature and the Environment* (2014) edited by Lorna Fitzsimmons, Youngsuk Chang, and Bella Adams, as well as Robert T. Hayashi's chapter "Beyond Walden Pond: Asian American Literature and the Limits of Ecocriticism" (2007). Within a Canadian context, in "Watersheds," Rita Wong's provocation to think about ourselves in relation to watersheds instead of cities directs attention towards the importance, precarity, and connectivity of water as it flows through the land, trees, plants, animals, and our bodies. In conversation with Dorothy Christian, a scholar from the Secwepemc and Syilx Nations of interior of BC, Rita Wong continues her focus on water in a new collection titled *Downstream: Reimagining Water*. Animals in Asian North American literature have not been given sustained attention, which is a bit perplexing given that Asian diasporic communities arrive in North America with rich belief systems—from Hinduism and Buddhism, for example—that include animals, a fact that is reflected in stories and literature. By focusing explicitly on animals in Asian diasporic literature, I hope to provide some groundwork for thinking through human-animal closeness in these novels, while also inspiring further engagement, conversations, and questions.

Orienting Literary Animals in Hindu and Buddhist Epistemologies

Hinduism and Buddhism convey elaborate and evolving traditions that incorporate animals as key figures in mythology, but also reach across mythology to establish an everyday ethics for living with animals. J.M. Coetzee compels us to consider the alternatives to a Western-focused interest in animals close to the end of *The Lives of Animals* when Elizabeth Costello, an aging English professor and author invited to give a series of prestigious lectures at Appleton College, debates with Thomas O’Hearne, a professor of philosophy. O’Hearne states that “the notion that we have an obligation to animals themselves to treat them compassionately—as opposed to an obligation to ourselves to do so—is very recent, very Western, and even very Anglo-Saxon” (Coetzee 60). Elizabeth Costello replies, “You are, of course, correct about the history. Kindness to animals has become a social norm only recently, in the last hundred and fifty or two hundred years, and in only part of the world” (Coetzee 60). “However,” she continues, “kindness to animals—and here I use the word *kindness* in its full sense, as an acceptance that we are all of one kind, one nature—has been more widespread than you imply” (Coetzee 61). Yet, when she provides examples of such kindness, she looks to pet-keeping and children’s attitudes towards animals that are untainted by anthropocentrism. The entire text, which Coetzee himself delivered as the Tanner Lectures at Princeton University, acts as a self-reflexive and endlessly provocative narrative that jostles us into and out of certain discourses and ways of thinking about animals. As such, I read this exchange as a provocation to seriously consider the comprehensiveness or even

accurateness of both O’Hearne’s and Costello’s claims about the position of Western animal rights discourse in relation to the rest of the world.

In an earlier exchange about meat-eating and vegetarianism, Costello argued that perhaps “we invented gods so that we could put the blame on them. They gave us permission to eat flesh. They gave us permission to play with unclean things. It’s not our fault, it’s theirs. [...] And God said: Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you” (Coetzee 41). Shortly after this, Costello discusses Gandhi and his vegetarianism, discounting the claim that vegetarianism is an exercise of power, but also not sufficiently tying the reasons for his dietary decisions to the teachings of Hinduism itself. Given the mention of Gandhi and the introduction of non-Western forms of animal kindness or compassion in this exchange, the debate between O’Hearne and Costello feels like a nudge to see if we are paying attention. Further, I read the lack of attention in Coetzee’s text to non-Western forms of compassion towards animals as a symptom of the heavy Western focus of the field of animal studies in general. Coetzee has his eye on this problem and I propose that in response to the debate, we are meant to ask: is that true? Aren’t there other traditions that consider—and have long histories of considering—our ethical obligations to animals? How would attending to Asian epistemologies about animals change the conversation?

My interest in religion for this project is not uncritical or comprehensive. I analyze human-animal relationships that arise from, but are not wholly accountable or reducible to, Asian epistemologies informed by Hinduism and Buddhism. While religious and spiritual traditions shape the way that we think about animal life, I am not arguing

that they establish perfectly ethical human-animal relationships that exist in isolation from power, politics, or anthropocentrism. The belief systems that position one's orientation towards animals matter, but I look to religious discourses as an orientation and not an end-point; the complexity of the human-animal relationships that I consider can be articulated through—but are not reducible to—Hindu and Buddhist epistemologies. To that end, I am interested in Hindu epistemologies of animals since they shaped my own approach to and understanding of animals, but also because Buddhist beliefs (which figure in each chapter, but most prominently in chapters two and three) originated from Hindu origins. Buddhism figures more prominently than Hinduism in the novels that I take up; my interest in Hinduism connects to this Buddhist influence and is a kind of homage to the ways that I learned to think about animals. Sometimes, as is the case with *The Book of Salt*, religion falls out of the picture as the focus shifts more pointedly to colonialism and postcolonialism, and sometimes religion comes to the fore, as is the case with *Dogs at the Perimeter* and *A Tale for the Time Being*. I contend that it is crucial to work against discursive colonization by not allowing entire fields to focus their attention solely on Western histories, texts, religions, and philosophies, ignoring the myriad ways of knowing animals that arise from other cultures.

Hinduism and Buddhism share common gods, histories, and teachings, but their relationship is not entirely straightforward. Hindu views of Buddha and Buddhism oscillate between negative, positive, ambivalent, and conciliatory. Buddha himself is an avatar or incarnate of the Hindu god Vishnu, and some scholars argue that Buddhism was created to amend contradictions and unethical teachings within Hinduism, such as the

caste system and animal sacrifice. By doing away with the caste system, Buddhism also became a safer religion for lower caste people to follow. In 1965, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, an Indian social reformist who began the Dalit Buddhist Movement, converted to Buddhism and inspired numerous other Dalit people to convert in order to escape from caste-based oppression. Buddhism also advocates for a more ethical relationship with animals by challenging animal sacrifice. Two foundational texts by Kshemendra and Jayadeva say that Vishnu became the Buddha “out of compassion for animals, to end bloody sacrifices” (Doniger 484). The relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism can be summarized into three stages. In the first stage, as depicted in the Upanishads, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata, Buddhism was assimilated into Hinduism and everyone, from gods to humans, lived in harmony. The second stage saw a more tenuous relationship emerge as Buddhism became more powerful and was perceived as a threat to Hinduism. Hinduism, in this stage, “fought a pitched battle against Buddhism, Jainism, and other heresies” (Doniger 485). The third stage is the most relevant to the contexts of Cambodia, which figures prominently in *Dogs at the Perimeter*. In this stage, as Buddhism continued to hold a significant but waning role in India, Hindu and Buddhist texts developed a more “conciliatory attitude” (Doniger 485). Hindus acknowledged their admiration for Buddhism, but this admiration comes with an attempt to “Hinduize” Buddhism. Seen most clearly in the actions of a Kashmiri King from the tenth century who made a magnificent frame for an image of a revered Buddha figure, Hinduizing Buddhism was meant to show how Hinduism “frames” Buddhist traditions.

Animals factor heavily within Hindu mythology, playing crucial roles “in the Hindu religious imaginary, both as actual living creatures” and as representations or symbols of the human world (Doniger 40). Animals are everywhere, not only within Hindu mythology, but also in visual representations of gods and goddesses, in fables, and the “yogic postures (*asanas*) and sexual positions, as well as theological schools, [that] are named after animals” (Doniger 40). The Hindu religious imaginary is not content to leave the human-animal distinction intact; rather, these representations work to blur the line between humans, animals, and gods. Animals play a similarly significant role in Buddhism as well. The fundamental Buddhist teaching of impermanence positions our obligations to the more-than-human world as central to what it means to be human; “impermanence also means interdependence” (Nhat Hanh 46). Interdependence teaches that humans do not exist in isolation, so our actions ripple through an entire world of beings.

Though Hinduism and Buddhism establish ways of knowing and being with animals that conceive of human life as connected, close to, and interwoven with more-than-human animals, I am acutely aware that subscribing uncritically or apolitically to any religious discourse is dangerous. It is irresponsible, for example, to follow the common conceptions of Hinduism as a gentle religion fused together “with so much that is seen to be kind and good—[like] mysticism, spiritualism, non-violence, tolerance, vegetarianism, Gandhi, yoga, backpackers, The Beatles” (Roy 22). The danger of seeing only the “good” and “kind” aspects of Hinduism is that we risk overlooking what is required to build these allegedly gentle practices. Even when looking to Asian

epistemologies to resist the hold of discursive colonization by the West, we must ask, who gets sacrificed, oppressed, marginalized in the interest of these belief systems? For instance, although they may prescribe ethical and robust visions of animal life, Hindu philosophy and practice often exalt animals over Dalit, Indigenous, and Muslim people. Dalits are relegated to working with hides to make leather, to perform “dirty” jobs that would not be appropriate for the higher castes. More than this, in an interesting and disturbing encounter, Ambedkar describes an event from 1927 when Dalits tried to assert their right to use a water tank, but were met with violence. After Dalits successfully drew water from the tank, not only was the tank “purified” with cow dung, urine, milk, and curds, but Dr. Ambedkar describes how people in the town had no problem sharing the water with various animals: “nor do the caste Hindus of Mahad prevent members of species considered lower than humans, such as birds and beasts, from drinking at the lake. Moreover, they freely permit beasts kept by Untouchables to drink at the lake” (108). Hinduism's reliance on the caste system is certainly no small issue to tackle, but it starts to come undone even through consideration of animals within Hinduism. Not only do these events and teachings illuminate the complicated position of animals in Hinduism, but they also shed light on some of the more problematic teachings of Hindu philosophy that violently subjugate people based on birth and exalt animals into a sacred status. In light of the current rise of Hindu nationalism, the need to interrogate Hinduism becomes even more pressing.⁶

⁶ The Hindu nationalism movement adheres to the motto “Hindu, Hindi, Hindustan” (Jaffrelot), which encapsulates the pro-Hindu, conservative, anti-secular ideology of the group. The “Hindu nationalist movement started to monopolize the front pages of Indian

Is it, as Ambedkar says, that those who believe in the teachings of Hinduism, even the “best of the Hindus” (qtd. in Roy 37) are fooling themselves if they think they can escape the oppressive, violent, discriminatory practices and teachings of Hinduism? The first step towards engaging with Hinduism responsibly is to understand and acknowledge the realities of how it is and has been mobilized politically. The second step my project takes is to resist following Hindu epistemologies dogmatically, but rather to understand them in conversation with a whole host of discourses and worldviews that inform how we think about our relationship to animals. The third step moves in tandem with Anna Tsing’s methodology from her book *Friction* where she writes that the point in understanding cultural encounters or tensions “is not to homogenize perspectives, but rather to appreciate how we can use diversity as well as possible” (x). Tsing tells us that, “as a metaphorical image, friction reminds us that heterogenous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power” (*Friction* 5). Inspired by Tsing’s vision of friction, armed with a resolve to resist discursive colonization, and a determination to pay close and careful attention to ways of knowing animals that do not conform to Western epistemologies, perhaps what remains to do is to step vulnerably into the fray.

newspapers in the 1990’s when the political party, BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) rose to power” (Jaffrelot 1). From there, they grew to occupy two seats in the lower house of the Indian parliament, then increased steadily to our current moment where the BJP holds a confident majority in parliament. India’s beef ban is one ongoing example of how animals continue to be leveraged against certain populations of people, such as Dalit and other low-caste people, as well as Muslims, and Christians. See: Krishnadev Calamur (2015); Michael Safi (2017); Manil Suri (2015).

Listening to the Animals in Our Stories

Reading and attentiveness are invaluable to understanding the idea of drawing animals close. Stories, both in how they are written and how they are read, can be conceptualized as a form of listening. I put forward a way of learning how to listen to animals when they show up on a page and the readings in each of the following chapters models a way of listening to the beings that we encounter in stories. Stories can imagine and “represent the animal not as an object under investigation, but as a being who inhabits the world” (Singh 479). Though Julietta Singh focuses on poetry in her critical work, it is easily translatable to literature and story, especially in light of her argument about the need to “fracture disciplinarity in order to foster new modes of thinking-feeling which aim toward world dynamics that refuse not only the supremacy of certain humans over others, but the thinking of supremacy as such” (481). Though they may be silent or they may speak in tongues that are unfamiliar to us, listening to literary animals can open up animal worlds we did not realize existed in seemingly human-centered novels. Animals arrive on the page with their own histories and stories to tell, and whether or not authors explicitly include those stories, it can be our responsibility as readers to approach literary animals generously and with curiosity about the worlds they can bring into view.

Each chapter of this dissertation examines the diverse ways that authors listen to and represent literary animals, at times acting as a reflection of the desire and efforts to fortify the human-animal boundary, and at other times significantly challenging human exceptionalism by advocating for compassion and interdependence between humans and animals. Three chapters comprise my dissertation and each one looks to a range of

critical and cultural texts to analyze the novel in question. The first chapter examines Monique Truong's novel *The Book of Salt*. Amidst the predominantly anthropocentric concerns of the novel—from postcoloniality, race, and diaspora, to queerness, historicism, and European modernity—the subtle but persistent presence of pigeons compels me to consider how animals and animality are intricately woven into these larger themes. Looking to the histories of pestiferousness that are attached to pigeons, I analyze Truong's novel through Neel Ahuja's concept of the animal mask and Clapperton Mavhunga's concept of vermin being. This analysis reveals how literary animals often become entangled in complicated histories of colonization and imperialism, as well as confluences between race, sexuality, and species. The second chapter is organized around an exploration of Madeleine Thien's novel *Dogs at the Perimeter*, which begins by looking closely at the loss that arises from surviving the Cambodian Genocide and moves to rethinking the beings to whom we hold tight. Whether wild, domestic, mythic, or symbolic, animals offer an outlet for peoples' grief and love by embodying a connection to lost loved ones. Reading animals in *Dogs at the Perimeter* through interwoven epistemologies of Buddhism, Hinduism, and science opens up an exploration of loss that reveals how animals can become family members in ways that challenge traditional kinship structures. This chapter explores how much literary animals can mean and how the characters' relationships with animals save them in small but necessary ways, while also gesturing to what we might owe them in return. The third chapter unpacks the Buddhist concepts of interbeing and time being in Ruth Ozeki's novel *A Tale for the Time Being*. I am interested in how Ozeki's various discussions of environmental issues,

alongside mythic, everyday, and historical animals demonstrate that she is not interested in portraying humans and their stories as exceptional or isolated. More specifically, I argue that the novel attends to the animal histories that shape the places we call home and conveys the importance of learning how to inherit those histories. I uncover how Ozeki represents the animals in her novel as beings who arrive with their own histories and stories instead of as passive or blank slates for human history. By examining both the animals in the novel and Ozeki's representations of the ocean, this chapter leads towards the idea of unknowability and epistemological humility. The conclusion develops the idea of unknowability in relation to what we can and cannot hope to know about animals. By thinking about good animal stories as they stretch across the boundaries of representation as speaking for and the sympathetic imagination, I offer a vision of what might open up when we embrace uncertainty and humility.

CHAPTER ONE

Forced Proximity and Enclosed Belonging: Animal Masks, Vermin Being, and Cannibalism in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*

“Yesterday, awakening to the world, I saw the sky turn upon itself utterly and wholly. I wanted to rise, but the disemboweled silence fell back upon me, its wings paralyzed.

Without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep.”

--Frantz Fanon

Near the end of Monique Truong's novel *The Book of Salt*, the protagonist, Binh, walks through the streets of Paris in February, struggling against the cold, but delighted to find “a winter garden[, which] is a gift that this city has given [him], honey in a hive, corals in a raging sea” (216). While he watches families playing in the garden, Binh notices a small group of children huddled around a dying pigeon with a broken wing: “A pigeon, an ordinary, city-gray pigeon, stumbles between the girl's black boots and tries to spread its wings. The right one opens to its full span, a flourish of white. The left one collapses halfway, a crush of gray” (218). Amidst the predominantly anthropocentric concerns of the novel—from postcoloniality, race, and diaspora, to queerness, historicism, and European modernity—the pigeon's presence compels me to consider how animals and animality are intricately woven into the construction and articulation of Binh's identity and subjectivity as a racialized and queer diasporic person. I argue that, although *The Book of Salt* establishes belonging for Binh as something to come, something always deferred, Truong portrays the space he occupies as being in close proximity to animals, a space caught between humans—implicitly defined as white, heterosexual men—and animals. In-betweenness encompasses *The Book of Salt*, as it interrogates the boundary between history and literature, colonial labour and European

modernity, racialized and queer bodies, and Binh's perpetual state of waiting that defies modernity's "homogenous march from before to after" (Eng 1488). By analyzing the pigeons in the novel, I demonstrate that in-betweenness also extends to the space between humans and animals that Binh is forced to occupy. Animals consistently fall outside the scope of commentary on Truong's novel; by focusing on the presence of animals in *The Book of Salt*, I foreground the beings who have been overlooked in the interest of upholding a vision of literature, history, and postcolonialism as exclusively human domains.

A considerable body of criticism has been published on *The Book of Salt*. Scholars have attended to how the novel handles queer diaspora, historical catachresis, and in-betweenness (Eng); power, authority, and postcolonial collaborative autobiography (Troeng); labour, Vietnamese symbolism, and queer diasporic community (Peek); queer desire and livability (Wesling); melancholia, ghostliness, and resistant temporalities (Edwards); identity, culinary immiscibility, and food (Cruz); food, eating, and colonialism (Xu); and blood, species lines, and queerness (LeMay). Analyses of *The Book of Salt* represent the concerns of the novel as exclusively human and, with the exception of LeMay, no attention has been paid to animals within the criticism to date. I build on and depart from earlier criticism by attending to animals *as well as* postcolonialism, race, diaspora, and history in order to assert that these concerns are not exclusively human, but rather entangled with and constructed in close proximity to animals.

To think of animals in *The Book of Salt* most commonly leads to the dominant presence of Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas's dogs, Basket and Pepe. LeMay offers an analysis of the dogs as they "are lavished with human-like clothing accessories" and treated to luxuries that are strictly denied to Binh (11). Coincidentally, in "The End(s) of Race" David Eng includes a photograph of Stein, Toklas, and their photographer George Platt in Bilignin, France that captures their beloved poodle standing at Toklas's side. In the novel, the dogs are more deliberately aligned with Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas in ways that often highlight the women's misplaced care and affection for them instead of Binh. The alignment of the women with the dogs resembles not only the ways in which dogs have been positioned against or in competition with racialized people, but also the (specifically white) female-dog companion species relationships that inspire Donna Haraway's foundational work in *When Species Meet* that begins with a meditation on the multitude of histories and meanings arising from the question: "whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog?" (3). In addition to dogs and what they reveal about the treatment of racialized humans in the novel, pigeons play a significant role, illuminating themes of consumption, pestiferousness, and the postcolonial subject. Unlike dogs, who are clearly positioned in competition with Binh, the pigeons in the novel reflect a proximity not only between racialized humans and animals, but more specifically between postcolonial subjects and animals considered as vermin.

By aligning Binh with pigeons, Truong summons and complicates a history of wielding animality and animalization against racialized, postcolonial subjects. Drawing on the work of Alexander Weheliye, I understand "race, racialization, and racial identities

as ongoing sets of political relations that require, through constant perpetuation via institutions, discourses, practices, desires, infrastructures, languages, technologies, sciences, economies, dreams, and cultural artifacts, the barring of nonwhite subjects from the category of the human as it is performed in the modern west” (Weheliye 2). Barring racialized people from the category of the human does not leave them in a solely liminal space, but rather forces them into a closer proximity to the animal. Sometimes, as I will explore in the following chapters, such proximity to animals can lead to a particularly close connection, forms of intimacy, as well as the creation of families and kinships between humans and animals. In *The Book of Salt*, however, closeness to animals feels more like an enclosure. Although Binh identifies with the pigeon in the park, he ultimately asserts his (not-fully) humanness violently over the bodies of animals in ways that also diminish his own bodily integrity.

Set mostly in Paris in the early 1930s, *The Book of Salt* tells the story of a young Vietnamese man named Binh who becomes Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas’s live-in cook. Throughout the novel, Binh interacts with several historical figures, but Truong’s character is a fictionalized representation of two Vietnamese cooks named Trac and Nguyen, found in a section of the *Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* (1954) titled “Servants in France.” David Eng reminds us that, “though richly imagined, [Binh] is ultimately an unverifiable presence, conjured forth by American desire, by the call for hired help that Toklas places in the local newspaper: ‘Two American ladies wish . . .’” (1481). In the novel, Binh cultivates a love of cooking passed onto him from his mother, who struggles to maintain her Buddhist beliefs against Binh’s father, an abusive, patriarchal, colonial

subject who has converted to Catholicism imposed by the French in Vietnam. Caught between Buddhism and Catholicism, Binh cultivates a suspicion of religious beliefs in general, explaining how, “in my twenty years of life, I had been exceedingly careful about all matters of faith. I had been meticulous, vigilant, clear-eyed, even cold-hearted” (248). Caught between the kind of cooking passed down – from his mother, and his father’s ambitions for him to be a proper colonial subject, Binh initially aspires to be “the first Vietnamese *chef de cuisine* in the Governor-General’s house” (Truong 14). While engaged in this pursuit, he has an illicit affair with the current *chef de cuisine*, and the expression and exposure of his queerness leads to his being both expelled from his job and exiled from his home.

After being driven from Vietnam by his father because of his sexual identification as a queer man, Binh crosses the ocean, labouring as a ship’s cook, and eventually finds himself impoverished and out-of-place in Paris. Drawing on the histories of colonization in Vietnam, Truong’s text encapsulates the racism permeating Binh’s experiences in France by uncovering an alienating curiosity about why his body looks so different. As their live-in cook, Binh becomes entangled in both the domestic and literary lives of Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas, and it becomes clear they are interested in consuming not only his cooking, but also his life story. His relationship with “the Steins” (Truong 150) circulates around labour, servitude, and intimacy tinged with racism and colonial ideologies. Weaving an intricate story about Binh’s life through his encounters with important historical figures like Ho Chi Minh and Paul Robeson, and with the conditions

of postcolonialism, diaspora, race, and queerness, *The Book of Salt* forces readers to reconsider whose bodies and lives get consumed in the interest of history or a good story.

In fact, the novel itself centers on Truong's endeavor to give a particular voice to the stories and histories of Trac and Nguyen, the men who laboured in the Stein's kitchen, and were relegated to brief notes in Toklas's cookbook.⁷ Truong forces us to contend with Trac and Nguyen's histories by bringing forward Binh's service in the Stein's kitchen, held alongside the debates about Toklas's contributions to Stein's writing (Troeng 116), and giving Binh a story that evokes queer desire and plays with the conventions of historicism by "forcing a crisis in historicism, in the idea of history as 'the way it really was'" (Eng 1483). *The Book of Salt* pushes us to rethink dominant conceptions of history, to ask who else's stories drove, contributed to, shaped, and/or serviced the stories of popular or dominant historical figures; more specifically, the novel draws "insistent attention to who and what must be forgotten so that the high modernism exemplified by Stein and Toklas might come to be affirmed" (Eng 1481). Eng ties the impetus to erase racialized bodies and colonial labour from the history of European modernity (as discussed, for example, in Lisa Lowe's *The Intimacies of Four Continents*) to the current era of "post-race" politics and "color-blindness" in the US (1480). He

⁷ Toklas explains, "When it was evident that connections in the quarter were no longer able to find a servant for us, it was necessary to go to the employment office. That was indeed a humiliating experience, from which I withdrew not certain whether it was more so for me or for the applicants. It was then that we commenced our insecure, unstable, unreliable but thoroughly enjoyable experiences with the Indo-Chinese" (186). David Eng describes how although Toklas writes that a "succession" of Vietnamese cooks were employed in their kitchen, "Toklas writes mainly about two men, Trac and Nguyen, the former without his surname and the latter without his given name" (1492).

understands *The Book of Salt* as an “archive of traces” that inspires an investigation into “the dialectic of affirmation (of freedom) and forgetting (of race)” (Eng 1480). Lisa Lowe sparked attention to the dialectic of affirmation and forgetting by highlighting the ways in which “the affirmation of the desire for freedom is so inhabited by the forgetting of its conditions of possibility, that every narrative articulation of freedom is haunted by its burial, by the violence of forgetting” (206). By considering queer diasporas in *The Book of Salt*, as they cause a crisis of historicism, Eng shines a light on “who must be forgotten and what must be passed over, homogenized, and discarded in order for history to appear in the present as a stable object of contemplation” (1483). Truong does not write “a history of affirmation but a history of disappearance, a history of ghosts” (Eng 1491), which demonstrates the ability of literature to contend with history’s unknown and the unknowable.

I would like to extend Eng’s discussion to consider animals as both traces and unknowable historical subjects. I wonder not only who must be forgotten to establish history as stable and consistent but also who and what must be forgotten for history to appear consistently human? Aligned with Truong’s endeavor to compile an archive of traces and build a story that gives life and history to an otherwise overlooked presence, my aim in this chapter is to investigate the traces of animals and animality scattered throughout the pages of *The Book of Salt*. To be clear, I am not equating Binh’s story or the histories of colonialism, race, diaspora, and queerness with animals and animality. Rather, I posit that examining literary animals in the novel will provide a more robust understanding of the nonhuman dimensions of postcolonialism, race, diaspora, and

queerness. Paying close attention to animals—and particularly the pestiferousness of pigeons—in *The Book of Salt* uncovers not only a better understanding of the distance between humans and animals, but also how postcolonial subjects navigate a forced proximity or closeness to animals.

In the present chapter, I frame my analysis of *The Book of Salt* with Neel Ahuja's concept of the animal mask, Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga's concept of vermin being, and Kristen Guest's, Peter Hulme's, Maggie Kilgour's, and Gananath Obeyeskere's theories of cannibalism. In his article "Postcolonial Critique in a Multispecies World," Ahuja outlines the process of animalization, which compares animals and racialized subjects. Such comparisons have not only legitimized claims that racialized subjects belong to subspecies, but also validated practices like colonialism, genocide, and eugenics. Animalization has not lost its teeth in our postcolonial or neocolonial moment, but racialized subjects have found strategies to challenge the conflation of race and species. Ahuja calls one such strategy the "animal mask" (558). Take, for instance, the passage in Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* where he describes the process of animalization under colonial rule, which, "to speak plainly, turned [the colonized] into an animal" (34):

The terms the settler uses when he mentions the native are zoological terms. He speaks of the yellow man's reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of spawn, of gesticulations. When the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms he constantly refers to the bestiary. [...] The native knows all this, and roars with laughter every time he spots an allusion to the animal world in the other's words. For he knows that he is not an animal. (34-35)

When the colonized subject “roars with laughter” (*Wretched* 34) he or she puts on an animal mask, provisionally or ironically embracing animality in order to disentangle race and species precisely by attending to the racial, colonial, and ecological legacies that conflated these two categories in the first place (558). While the animal mask often serves anthropocentric interests by leveraging animals to engage with discourses of race and postcoloniality, it also communicates a certain proximity to the animal, and it can become a jumping-off point into an understanding of the closeness involved in human-animal relations.

As is the case in *The Book of Salt*, the animal mask does not always involve an alliance with nonhuman animals, “but it always points to the historical conjunctions of social difference and species discourse. It may also, on occasion, envision alternative multispecies relationships” (Ahuja 558). In this chapter, I demonstrate how the animals in *The Book of Salt* can be understood and illuminated through the two dimensions of Neel Ahuja’s concept of animal masks. I look to Mavhunga’s concept of “vermin being” to refine Ahuja’s general focus on animals by revealing the distinct connection between colonized humans and pestiferous animals. I analyze both the literal and literary cannibalism of Truong’s text, in order to demonstrate how Binh carves out some agency for himself by appropriating the terms of cannibalism, but I also illuminate how the animal gets lost, subsumed, and devoured by the narrative.

I organize the main sections in the chapter according to two encounters between Binh and pigeons that happen in different contexts. The first section of the chapter looks closely at the analogy embodied by the pigeon Binh encounters in the garden in order to

“unveil a historical logic of animalization inherent in processes of racial subjection” (Ahuja 558). Derrida’s work on analogy is key in this section because he urges us to think about analogy as a “place of a question rather than an answer” (*Beast* 14); analogies should not be left untouched, but rather interrogated and unpacked. I push the pigeon analogy in Truong’s novel to reveal how literary animals often become entangled in complicated histories of colonization and imperialism, confluences between race and species, as their bodies come to encapsulate the trauma of postcolonial subjects. Though animal analogies in *The Book of Salt* do little for animals themselves due to the predominantly humanist nature of Truong’s narrative, they necessitate a consideration of the space that Binh occupies between human and animal worlds where he learns to exert agency and find a sense of complicated and often violent belonging alongside the bodies of animals. Following David Eng, I read in-betweenness as “having a logical consistency” (1488) and also as something that represents an incomplete, in-progress way of being in the world that does not adhere to clean identity categories. As I will demonstrate, in-betweenness in the novel “gives way not only to alternative ways of knowing, but also, and equally important, to alternative ways of being, indeed of becoming in the world” (Eng 1488). The analysis in this section coalesces around the specific mode of being offered by Mavhunga’s discussion of pestiferousness and vermin being, in order to communicate how Binh is positioned (both by history and the novel) within a specific relationship with animals who have been considered pests, vermin, bodies in need of eradication.

In the second section, I parse Binh's encounter with pigeons in the Steins' kitchen, and focus on Binh's habit of adding his blood to the food that he serves, reveling in "the satisfaction that could be drawn from it. Saucing the meat, fortifying the soup, enriching a batch of blood orange sorbet, the possible uses are endless, undetectable" (Truong 64). Outlining this practice through the significance of blood, then in relation to studies of historical and literary representations of cannibalism, I argue that Binh articulates a different way of being or becoming human, as he painstakingly sketches out forms of resistance to the animalization he endures. By invoking the terms of cannibalism, I reflect on how "the function of criticism is best served when we reflect on the ways that the absorption and digestion of texts and theories shape our own identities as interpreters" (Guest 8). My analysis is inspired by two overarching questions: How do authors use or consume animals for the purpose of humanist stories? And, "how does the animal's lack of voice relate to the ways in which we, as readers and critics, make texts speak" (Singh 472)?

Pigeon Analogies and the Imperial History of Vietnam

"Everybody is interested in pigeons."
--Whitwell Elwrin⁸

In *The Book of Salt*, pigeons highlight the porousness of the distinctions drawn between human and animal worlds simply by occupying both wild and urban spaces.

⁸ Elwrin was Charles Darwin's editor and tried to convince Darwin to write a short book about pigeons, considered one of the most important birds in Darwin's studies. Quoted in: Stephen J. Bodio's "Darwin's Other Bird—The Domestic Pigeon." <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/darwins-other-bird-the-domestic-pigeon/>

They live and make homes on cliffs, roam the streets, huddle in parks, and are offered up in meals. Truong uses pigeons as an analogy for Binh's experience of diaspora because, like Binh, "pigeons are divided between ideas of homing and homelessness" (LeMay 12). As he sits in the garden, Binh continues to watch the pigeon who is refusing "to die a soft, concerted death, an act thought willful and ungrateful by those assembled" (Truong 220). Truong describes how the pigeon "tries to spread its wings. The right one opens to its full span, a flourish of white. The left one collapses halfway, a crush of gray. The bird pitches forward and falls on this sloping left wing" (218). Truong punctuates each description and section of this encounter with the words "a flourish of white, a crush of gray" (218), repeating the words almost obsessively. Read in context, this sentence gestures toward the ways in which the color white offers a kind of freedom, whereas gray represents a crushing debilitation. While whiteness offers freedom, grayness—and note here the in-betweenness of gray as a color—holds this pigeon back; the pigeon lurches forward propelled by "a flourish of white," but is held back, disabled, by "a crush of gray" (Truong 218).

Binh's encounter with the pigeon acts as an analogy for discussions of race and diaspora in the novel. Through this analogy, *The Book of Salt* offers a comparison between Binh's experience in Paris as a Vietnamese man and the experience of Marcus Lattimore or Sweet Sunday Man (with whom Binh enjoys a short but destructive love affair) as a person with a mixed-race background who passes as white. In a way that harmonizes with Ahuja's account of the animal mask, *The Book of Salt* also connects the racial prejudice Binh endures as an "asiatique" and a colonial labourer to a history of

conflating race and species, with the pigeon analogy embodying the colonial condition of Vietnam caught between France and America. In relation to race and in-betweenness, the analogy can apply—though it does not fully explain or encapsulate him—to Lattimore, who “takes full advantage of the blank sheet of paper that is [his] skin” (Truong 151) by disavowing the legacy of mixedness passed down from his mother in “that drop of blood” (Truong 112). Whereas Binh describes the visibility of his race, saying “I hide my body in the back rooms of every house that I have ever been in. You [Sweet Sunday Man] hide away inside your own. Yours is a near replica of your father’s, and you are grateful for what it allows you to do, unmolested, for where it allows you to go, undetected. This you tell yourself is the definition of *freedom*” (Truong 151; emphasis added). The “invisibility” or disavowal of Lattimore’s race, which allows him to pass as white in the salons of Paris, echoes the freedom offered to the pigeon by the whiteness of the one wing that is not broken.

Lattimore’s freedom comes at a cost that can be understood in relation to Eng’s ideas about the affirmation of freedom contingent on the disappearance of race. Lattimore may pass as white, but his freedom results from a mother who “forfeited [his] father’s name for a lifetime of income” (Truong 112). Binh offers an exchange between himself and Lattimore that describes his vision of freedom: “a southern man without his father’s surname is a man freed [...]. A man with a healthy income from his mother is also a freed man, you add, with a laugh that falls to the ground, exhausted and sad” (112). Lattimore does not embody someone who is fully freed by the promise of whiteness, but rather someone who is best described by in-betweenness. Although Sweet Sunday Man is

someone who takes “full advantage of the blank sheet of paper that is [his] skin [...someone who would] shy from the permanence of ink, a darkness that would linger on the surface of the page and the skin” (151), there are, as Binh recounts, rooms “in this city that we in truth can share, your body becomes more like mine. And as you know, mine marks me, announces my weakness, displays it as yellow skin” (152). As Binh explains, the visibility of his race “flagrantly tells my story, or a compacted, distorted version of it, to passersby curious enough to cast their eyes my way. It stunts their creativity, dictates to them the limited list of who I could be. Foreigner, *asiatique*” (152). Binh endures prying questions into his history and his sad stories, but the questions about his body reveal with particular clarity the dynamic of animalization in which he has been entangled.

Lattimore does not escape a similar kind of questioning, as his character is inspired by a troubling interaction between Gertrude Stein and the African American singer, actor, and member of the Civil Rights Movement, Paul Robeson. As Y-Dang Troeung details, Stein was openly racist towards Robeson. Truong reproduces an encounter between Stein and Robeson in *The Book of Salt* that makes Stein question Lattimore’s race and identity, prompting her to send Binh to appease her “perverse curiosity” (Troeung 121). Binh knows that the question, “‘Is Lattimore a Negro?’ is what they, in the end, want to know. My Mesdames tell me that they just want to be absolutely sure” (189). Truong reveals the fragility of the paper white skin that Lattimore tries to hide behind, as she makes it clear that he too is subject to interrogative questions about his race.

During Binh's trip to Gertrude Stein's house in Bilignin, a rural village in southeastern France, Binh craves the comfort of belonging, the pleasure derived from being able to "see a face that looks like [his]" (Truong 141). However, in Bilignin he is "the asiatique, the sideshow freak. The farmers there are childlike in their fascination and in their unadorned cruelty" (Truong 142). He endures invasive questions about his body and difference. They ask, "did you know how to use a fork and a knife before coming to France?" [...] 'Will you marry three or four *asiatique* wives?' [...] 'Are you circumcised?'" (143). In response, Binh wonders, "Why do they always ask *this* question" (143)? He thinks that the farmers' questions, particularly their fascination with his genitals, "is a by-product of their close association with animal husbandry. Castrating too many sheep could make a man clinical and somewhat abrupt about these things" (143). Here, the novel connects Binh's experience as a racialized man in France to the disciplinary practices to which farm animals are subject, and which situate Binh's experiences as a foreign labourer within a species discourse. This aspect of Binh's story also raises the question of whose bodies get scrutinized and consumed in a given culture, and how.

Under the curious, interrogative gaze of the farmers, Binh slides into a space located between human and animal worlds. More generally, this in-between space enfolds other characters and incidents included in Binh's narration. Binh tells of his experience as a visibly racialized man in Paris, but also how his racialization produces a paradoxical invisibility; he explains, "I walk the streets of this city, [and] I am just that. I am an Indochinese labourer, generalized and indiscriminate, easily spotted and readily

identifiable all the same” (152). In Vietnam, however, “it is this curious mixture of careless disregard and notoriety that makes [Binh] long to take [his] body into a busy Saigon marketplace and lose it in the *crush*” (152; emphasis added). Here, the crush offers potential for Binh. The relationship that Truong establishes between Paris and Saigon, where the whiteness of Paris is no longer freeing in the same sense as it is for the pigeon and the crush is no longer deadeningly gray, resonates with the description of the pigeon as an animal caught between “a flourish of white, [and] a crush of gray” (218). Likewise, Lattimore’s ability to pass links him with the freeing whiteness of the inside feathers on the pigeon’s wing. Yet, as a result of his “freedom,” he lives a life “in which [he has] severed the links between blood and body, scraped away at what binds the two together”; Sweet Sunday Man is “in the end a gray sketch of life” (151). Another way to understand the in-betweenness occupied by Binh and Lattimore is through Alexander Weheliye’s argument that racialization is neither biological nor exclusively culturally constructed, but a “conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and non-humans” (2). An analogy written on the wings of a dying pigeon brings forward Binh and Lattimore’s complicated relationship to race, racialization, and animality, while portraying how they both navigate their positions as in-between full, not-quite, and non-human.

Truong also weaves an awareness of diaspora or exile into the pigeon encounter, since the conflict between “a flourish of white, a crush of gray” can once more be mapped onto the difference and distance between Paris and Saigon (218). The pigeon analogy inspires a discussion about the historical contexts of Paris and Saigon in the early

1930's. While the Parisian children and their parents who first encounter the dying pigeon are careful to "keep a wide ring of stone between themselves and the bird," (218) an American woman who does not speak French and whose clothes are "far too practical" to be Parisian takes off her gloves and cups the pigeon in her hands; "the gesture stops time" (Truong 219). Given the historical context of the novel and the presence of a young Ho Chi Minh in *The Book of Salt*, the pigeon's death can be read as an allegory for the historical situation of Vietnam, caught and refusing to die a soft death between the colonial powers of France and America. European interest in Vietnam began as early as the fourteenth century and was driven by an interest in acquiring "Asian treasures," like gold, jewels, silk, and—most importantly—spices, as well as a vested religious interest that sought to convert people to Catholicism (Karnow 55). French imperialism in Vietnam started slowly, but took off in 1664 when "French religious leaders and their business backers formed the Society of Foreign Missions to advance Christianity in Asia. In the same year, by no coincidence, French business leaders and their religious backers created the East India Company to increase trade" (Karnow 60). French imperialism in Vietnam rose and the Opium War of 1841 increased pressure for a stronger French presence in Asia. Though Vietnamese nationalism also solidified and resisted French imperialism, direct French rule took over Vietnam, and in 1925 five thousand French officials attempted to manage the Vietnamese population as they took hold of the country's economy, culture, religion, and national identity. The man who would lead Vietnam to independence in 1954, Ho Chi Minh, was born in 1890 and in 1911 he signed

on to work aboard a French freighter and did not return to Vietnam for thirty years. In Truong's novel we meet Ho Chi Minh during one of his visits to Paris.

In *The Book of Salt* we can speculate about Binh meeting Ho Chi Minh first on the ship he travels on to France, but Binh also spends an entire evening with him (we know him as the man on the bridge) later in the story. David Eng, Y-Dang Troeung, and Meg Wesling have dealt extensively with the man on the bridge in Truong's novel. Eng argues that through the interruption of queer desire between Binh and Ho Chi Minh, "Truong thus stages the emergence of an alternative historical time and space discontinuous with the sanctioned historical development, conventional historical narratives, and authorized representations of this hallowed revolutionary hero" (1491). Troeung and Wesling both build on Eng's argument, with Troeung contending that the scene between Binh and Ho Chi Minh "functions to link the Paris axis of colonialism in Indochina to American imperialism in that region" (120), and Wesling reading the queer desire in the encounter as "the harbinger of the disruption of the colonial order, the successful anti-colonial revolution" (142). Wesling elaborates, claiming that the "scene of intimacy and desire with the man on the bridge suggests the possibility of connection and affiliation beyond the racialized social order of the French colonial system and its cosmopolitan frame. In so doing, Truong connects Binh to a new political future of Vietnam" (142). However, not only does an overestimation of queer desire threaten to blur the history between Binh's evening with the man on the bridge and Vietnamese independence, it also moves against Eng's idea that by refusing to name Ho Chi Minh,

Truong asks us to consider what it means to respond to forgetting and disappearance without creating new narratives of affirmation, subversion, and presence (1484).

Although I am wary of overestimating the subversive potential of queer desire in the interaction between Binh and the man on the bridge, I do, however, think that a link between Binh and Ho Chi Minh that ties Binh to anti-colonial struggles opens up a reading of Binh as a resistant, anti-colonial character and not only an invisible “melancholic ghost” (Edwards 167). Regarding animals, I posit that Binh’s actions that I detail in the next section can be read as an anti-colonial pursuit, though they are violently enacted on animal bodies and also occur at the cost of his own bodily integrity. Still, they represent Binh’s attempt to work against colonial impositions by confronting the Steins with both his humanity and their desire to consume him. In a full circle, Truong leads us back to the historical context of the relationship between Vietnam, France, and America that the pigeon analogy points to. In keeping with Ahuja’s ideas, the pigeon analogy—an animal mask in itself—encompasses the historical conjunctions between race and species, as well as the historical conditions that these conjunctions enabled.

Perhaps the most direct connections between humans and animals surface in the novel's comparison between the dying pigeon and Binh’s mother. After Binh shoos everyone away from the pigeon, he sits alone on the bench where he can “hear the pigeon thrashing its body against a mound of snow. With each attempt, its wings become heavier, ice crystals fastening themselves, unwanted jewels, winter’s barnacles. The faint crunch of snow is making [him] cry. [He] will sit here until it stops” (221). Immediately after these lines, Binh thinks, “I know you are in your best *áo dài*. You bought it when

you were just eighteen. Gray is not a color for a young woman. Gray is the color you wanted because you were practical even then, knew that gray is a color you would grow into, still wear when your hair turned white” (221). Binh's account reinforces the analogy when he continues, “you step out into the street, and you are a sudden crush of gray” (221). Again, Truong complicates the meaning of “a crush of gray” by relating it to a moment in which Binh's mother takes back her freedom so that she may die outside the walls of her husband's house (218), a husband who is a convert to French Catholicism. Similar to how the pigeon refused to die a soft, easy death in the American woman's hands or even on the steps where she places its body out of sight, in a final attempt to resist her servitude, Binh's mother leaves her husband's home because she “swore not to die on the kitchen floor. [She] swore not to die under the eaves of his house” (221). Only a few pages after Binh watches the pigeon die, he explains how his mother, “in the hopes of easing my sorrow, had taken the form of a pigeon, a city-worn bird who was passing away. Death, believe me, never comes to us first in words” (230). By both escaping her husband's home to die in the street and by coming to Binh as a dying pigeon, the representations of Binh's mother complicate “the realm of similitude, that is, the treatment of certain *people like animals* toward the treatment of certain *people as animals*” (Mavhunga 153; original emphasis). She does not necessarily die like a pigeon; she dies *as* a pigeon.

The use of animal masks in *The Book of Salt* thus affords a means for representing otherwise inexpressible trauma, while also revealing the complicated histories that conflate race and species. As the pigeon analogy suggests, however, such masks do not

necessarily express identification with nonhuman animals. Animal analogies generally work on the premise of non-identity between humans and animals and that is where they derive their force as a literary device. Binh's encounter with the pigeon is fascinating precisely because of the way it details a complicated discourse about race, diaspora, colonization, and trauma while largely leaving the body of the animal behind. Like "words printed on skin" (Truong 145), the novel encompasses these complicated discourses by writing them onto the body of a dying pigeon.

The pigeon is not, however, an empty signifier. Regardless of whether or not Truong uses pigeons strictly for analogical purposes, pigeons themselves bring their own histories onto the page. In *The Global Pigeon*, Colin Jerolmack writes an ethnographic and sociological study of pigeons predominantly in New York City, but extended briefly to Berlin, London, Venice, and Sun City in South Africa. For Jerolmack, pigeons are not only important for the histories, cultures, and ways of being that they offer, but also because of how their presence affects people's experiences of urban spaces. Jerolmack's overall project takes a detailed look at how interactions with pigeons "animate people's social worlds and their experience of the city" (5). I am interested in outlining a short history of pigeons and their slide from "rock doves" (*Columba livia*) to "rats with wings" (Jerolmack 7) because it relates directly to the pigeons we meet in *The Book of Salt*.

Until relatively (that is, within the last century), people used to associate rock pigeons, a name derived from rock dove, more closely with doves than rats. They were domesticated around 5,000 years ago for specific uses as messengers or to harvest for their flesh and feces. When pigeons slowly and partially domesticated themselves,

attracted by agricultural grains and produce as well human dwellings because they provided suitable and similar spaces as the cliffs and rocks they naturally inhabited, “rather than viewing these Avian interlopers as pests, humans saw them as a source of food, and they discovered that pigeon guano made excellent fertilizer” (Jerolmack 9).

The pigeons we encounter mulling around on sidewalks and cooing, resting in flocks around busy urban centers, or waddling and flapping just quickly enough to avoid close calls with vehicles, are a colonial product in their own way. As Jerolmack explains, “their origin is usually traced to North Africa, parts of Mediterranean Europe, the Indian Subcontinent, and central Asia; but commerce brought them around the world” (9). The urban pigeons that we are familiar with in cities did not exist in the wild. Rather, “they are descendants of escaped domesticated pigeons that were imported to the United States, Europe, and elsewhere centuries ago” (Jerolmack 10). In fact, the pigeons that Binh encounters in kitchens are colonial products that represent the history of French settlers introducing the rock dove to North America in the 1600s primarily as a food source.

Pigeons’ personality traits like docility and gregariousness made them symbols of peace, in contrast to their predators, like hawks and eagles, who were symbols of aggression, and “humans took advantage of pigeons’ adaptability and submissiveness, building houses called dovecotes that lured birds into semidomesticity” (Jerolmack 9). As their societal usefulness slowly dwindled because cheaper and more efficient technologies and other animals replaced them, the traits of pigeons that were once prized made them formidable pests. Their “reproductive magic” (Jerolmack 9), along with the docility and submissiveness that made them easy to keep for food, their homing instincts,

and their ability to produce approximately 25 pounds of feces per year which previously made excellent fertilizer, all became compounding problems to manage.

Pigeons are at home in cities. They have cultivated their own cultural capital that makes the experience of photographing, feeding, or navigating their small but deliberate bodies on the sidewalks a quintessential experience of visiting major urban centers. For those who seek to control pigeon populations within cities, they are unbeatable pests. With an estimated \$1.1 billion in the US going annually towards repairing pigeon-related property damage, pigeons have become nuisance animals (Jerolmack 9). Cities like New York have instituted several ineffective devices aimed at pigeon control: “plastic owls on rooftops; spikes on ledges and over doors; speakers blaring recordings of birds of prey from the cornices of Union Square, Times Square, and JFK airport; and the ubiquitous green ‘Do Not Feed the Pigeons’ signs” (Jerolmack 8). The relative ineffectiveness of these tactics should prove that contrary to popular opinion, pigeons are smart, capable, adept animals, but people keep returning to their biological processes as the thing that frustrates eradication attempts. For instance, pigeons will breed in proportion to their food source, and there is certainly no shortage of food sources in cities, whether they come from foraging or intentional feeding.

Though the threat they pose to property is substantial, campaigns aimed at pigeon eradication and hatred are more commonly the result of their perceived threat to human health. The public health risks of street pigeons have, however, been consistently deemed very low even for people who work in direct contact with pigeons and their nesting sites (Jerolmack 8). Pigeons thrive by being close to humans and we have played a pivotal role

in the current “pigeon problem” because they have adapted to our habitats. Jerolmack is quick to remind us that “these nonnative, feral birds—neither purely wild or domestic—now confront humans as our own historical detritus” (11). The fact that pigeons, an animal that humans consider pests, are thriving while several species of charismatic animals whom we claim to love are rapidly disappearing should mirror back to us the kind of world that human activity supports. Pigeons are “what biologists call synanthropes (literally, ‘together with man’), preferring to live among people in the built environments” (Jerolmack 11), whether we love or hate them.

People who are seen to either support pigeon populations, like pigeon flyers, feeders, and keepers, as well as homeless people who are too proximate to the pigeon problem, feel the effects of classifying pigeons as pests. Spikes set up on sidewalks or spaces where homeless people sleep or sit are modeled after spikes placed on ledges and over doors to deter pigeons from landing. The discourses around pigeons should feel familiar. The fear of unwanted and uncontrollable hordes, the threat of supposedly toxic bodies, unstoppable reproductive vigor, and the nonnative “alien” who moves within cities can easily be transferred to any “unwanted” human population and in fact has been used to describe Asian “yellow peril.” Clapperton Chakenetsa Mavhunga’s concept of vermin being establishes a category of pestiferousness that applies to animals and reaches across to certain (racialized and colonized) humans. Mavhunga works within an ontology of pesthood to consider how colonial practices turn human beings into vermin beings in order to justify and legitimate their eradication. He examines “how people get reduced to ‘trees walking,’ ‘wild animals infesting,’ ‘local flora and fauna,’ ‘infra-human,’ ‘human

game,’ and ‘vermin to be exterminated’ whose lands are ‘eminent domain’” (152).

Though Mavhunga focuses on the colonization of Africa, specifically Rhodesia starting in 1889, he clarifies that the analysis he offers in the article and the mechanisms that render humans as pests can “apply to people considered subaltern species the world over” (152).

Though the contexts differ, vermin being can illuminate parts of Truong’s vision of a queer Vietnamese man navigating life, loss, and labour in 1930s Paris. Mavhunga explicates how colonization and the desire for land, economic power, and natural resources do not broadly turn humans into animals; colonization reduces human life to the status of vermin being and “blurs the division in weapons required to police people and to police nature” (Mavhunga 152). Colonialism can be understood as pesticide with Mavhunga arguing that the term pesticide “might be innovatively used to encompass not only the substances used to kill pests but also the theory and practice of killing them” (152). Historically, the most powerful weaponization of pesticides used to eradicate countless people and animals are chemical and biological weapons. In discussions of weaponized pesticides, Mavhunga insists that it is vital to “connect the wars against human and nonhuman species as arising from the same ontology of pesthood” because it forces us to see how weapons used against humans were tested and refined against animals first (152). Eradication brings human and animal pests together within the concept of vermin being.

In the conclusion of his article, Mavhunga gestures towards the staying power of vermin being as it continues to affect life for people after Rhodesia’s Independence Day

in 1980. I am interested in how vermin being persists, travels across continents, generations, and histories, manifests in literature, and affects people who live in times that are not defined directly by war and eradication in the way that life and death for people in colonial Rhodesia was. Vermin being is one part of Binh's identity as it exists in-between humans and animals. Reading the relationship between Binh and the pigeons through the concept of vermin being refines the animal mask by establishing a language to talk about the specifically pestilent animals with whom Binh is pulled into a relationship. Unlike Fanon, Binh's animal does not take the form of a lion who roars, but instead pigeons who refuse to die soft deaths. Truong's choice of the pigeon demonstrates the relevance of vermin being. To see Binh in relation to pigeons narrows in on a specific species of animal that has its own cultural histories. By understanding vermin being as a part of Binh's identity, I bring forward, not only how pestiferousness pulls people into particular relationships with "pest" animals, but also what kinds of human-animal relationships can arise within vermin being.

Blood, Cannibalism, and A Different Way of Being Human

"You want your blood to count."
--Lawrence Hill

In *The Book of Salt*, the connections between human lives and animal deaths are most explicitly articulated in the space of the kitchen. Kitchens encompass power dynamics, hierarchies of life, and struggles to assert humanness or animalness through lines already drawn and redrawn in the skin, and this space offers an opportunity to

understand a different facet of human-animal relationships. Near the beginning of the novel, Binh describes himself as

a man whose voice is a harsh whisper in a city that favours a song. No longer able to trust the sound of my own voice, I carry a small speckled mirror that shows me my face, my hands, and assures me that I am still here. Becoming more like an animal with each displaced day, I scramble to seek shelter in the kitchens of those who will take me. Every kitchen is a homecoming, a respite, where I am the village elder, sage and revered. (Truong 19)

Kitchens act as temporary safe havens for Binh; they are places where he regains his humanity, but it comes with conditions and does not last for long. He explains how “every kitchen is a familiar story that I can embellish with saffron, cardamom, bay laurel, and lavender. In their heat and in their steam, I allow myself to believe that it is the sheer speed of my hands, the flawless measurement of my eyes, the science of my tongue, that is rewarded” (Truong 19). In these kitchens, “during these restorative intervals, [Binh is] no longer the mute who begs at this city’s steps. Three times a day, [he] orchestrate[s], and they sit with slackened jaws, silenced” (Truong 19). Given the emphasis Truong places on meat in this novel, kitchens require the work of killing animals, which allows Binh to redraw the lines between himself and pigeons by providing an opportunity to serve their bodies in place of his own. “There is a fine line between a cook and a murderer,” Binh explains, “and that line is held steady by the men of my trade” (67). Binh is absorbed in the killing required to cook, “the wringing of feathered necks, the smothering of throats still filled with animal sounds, the examples are endless” (67).

When he first starts his apprenticeship with the Steins, Miss Toklas teaches him how to prepare smothered pigeons. ““Press here,” she directs Binh, “showing [him] the

precise point on the neck before quickly looking away. The pigeon squirms under [his] fingers, its blood pumping harder, pressing through. ‘Harder! Binh you are letting it suffer.’ How does she know? [he] wonder[s]” (67). Binh’s relationship to pigeons shifts in the context of the kitchen. Now he is responsible for their deaths and they are not quick deaths with a swift stroke of a knife, like he would prefer. Miss Toklas justifies strangling or smothering the pigeons because “‘If you cut off their necks, you will lose all the blood. Done *this* way, those birds will come out of the oven plumper and tastier than you can ever imagine. Exquisite! [...] Trust me.’” (Truong 67-68). Binh muses that perhaps many of Toklas’ former cooks “left of their own accord after Miss Toklas showed them her recipe for smothered pigeons. She insists upon the technique for the preparation of all the other varieties of birds that can be purchased live from the Paris markets” (68). The difference in how the dishes turn out, he admits, “is spectacular, but the required act is unforgivable” (68). The violence involved in Binh’s relationship with animals reveals itself clearly when he cooks. Killing, cooking, eating, and the form of Binh’s resistance to the fetishizing and dehumanizing dynamics he encounters in his employers’ homes revolve around blood kept in the body or spilled into dishes.

Blood is the reason why Toklas insists on an unforgiveable technique of killing. The pigeon enters the dish with all of its blood because that creates a more desirable dish. But, handling blood is not a problem for Binh. He goes on, at length, about his experience with cutting birds’ necks. He first became familiar with killing birds by watching his mother slit their throats or partially cut their heads off to prepare them for a meal. Binh’s mother kills chickens rather than pigeons to cook and eat, but it is interesting that in death

she becomes a bird, an animal over whom she once asserted her human dominance.

Continuing, Binh describes how, “even before I pulled the first [neck] back, aiming for that slight curve that forces the down to part and the skin to peek through, I had already watched my mother put a blade to many a chicken’s neck. She would never cut it clean off. Her reasoning, unlike Miss Toklas’s, was economical” (68). Going further into details that emphasize the flow of blood, Binh remembers how “first, my mother would nick the skin until the blood flowed. If the knife was inserted deep enough, there is a red arc that falls neatly from the notch to the awaiting bowl. A hesitant pair of hands would cause trickling and sputtering, a final messy insult to a body already sacrificed” (68).

Binh’s mother was more economical in her concern for blood because she used the blood to make “congealed blood soup” (68), so blood wasted or spilled meant less soup. Binh prefers his mother’s method of killing so he can relegate the act of killing to an object:

“with a knife, the blade is the surrogate executioner. It has no feelings and so cannot empathize with the slipping away of a life” (69-70). His fingers, however, can feel the blood coursing and fighting to keep the bird alive; “the fingers feel it all, the quickening of blood through the veins and arteries at the start, the faint fluttering at the end. Worse, they can register the slight drop in temperature that accompanies the eventual calm” (70).

Blood “reflects your very life,” the novelist Lawrence Hill writes, “as both substance and symbol, blood reveals us, divides us, and unites us. We care about blood, because it spills literally and figuratively into every significant corner of our lives” (7). In *The Book of Salt*, blood carries Binh’s histories, memories, and identity.

Blood is a potent symbol of Bìn̄h’s humanity and he uses it to articulate a difficult relationship with both animals and humans. Bìn̄h’s memories of blood spilled in his mother’s kitchen and his experience of killing birds both bloodlessly and otherwise lead to his habit of cutting his fingers and adding his own blood to the dishes he serves. Truong discusses Bìn̄h’s habit directly after his description of the remorse and sadness caused by feeling his fingers squeeze the life out of the birds. He explains, “I began with my habit. I said that it gives me proof that I am alive, but I have shared nothing but the details of the many small deaths that I have inflicted, of how many of them are required for a truly good meal” (70). While I will return in more detail to the feeling of aliveness that Bìn̄h seeks through his habit, in this passage he articulates how his feelings of being alive and being human are entangled in the many small deaths of the birds he kills for each meal. If, when he encountered the dying pigeon in the park, it symbolized both himself and his mother, who is Bìn̄h serving when he serves pigeons to the Steins? How do the details of the pigeon’s blood, killing, cooking, and eating shift if they symbolize Bìn̄h, Bìn̄h’s mother, and his experience of being a queer Vietnamese man in Paris? I would like to consider how Bìn̄h adds his blood to dishes as an offering, a kind of sacrifice that compromises his bodily integrity, served both alongside the bodies of birds he has killed and in vegetarian dishes, but because “blood is meant to reflect your humanity” (Hill 63) it would be shortsighted to fail to see it as simultaneously a form of resistance.

Truong quickly establishes that kitchens do not offer a perfect respite for Bìn̄h, who explains, “I do not willingly depart these havens. I am content to grow old in them,

calling the stove my lover, calling the copper pans my children. But collectors are never satiated by my cooking. They are ravenous” (19). Instead of his cooking, people crave the tortuous stories of Bìn’s life, they crave the pathology of his race; thus “they have no true interest in where [he has] been or what [he has] seen. They crave the fruits of exile, the bitter juices, and the heavy hearts. They yearn for a taste of the pure, sea-salt sadness of the outcast whom they have brought into their homes” (19). They specifically want the bitter, sad stories of exile so that they can collect him like so many other “wounded trophies who have preceded [him]” (Truong 19); Truong makes it painfully clear that “the honey that they covet lies inside [Bìn’s] scars” (19). This fetishizing of Bìn’s traumatic past, and the consequent prying questions work to objectify and animalize Bìn word-by-word. In fact, the reference to “wounded trophies” (Truong 19) suggests that he is equivalent to a hunted animal displayed as a trophy on the wall.

Initially the process of animalization is careful; his interlocutors' tactics are subtle: “a question slipped in with the money for the weekly food budget, a follow-up twisted inside a compliment for last night’s dessert, three others disguised as curiosity about the recipe for yesterday’s soup” (Truong 19). This line of questioning, seen in the beginning of the novel and more pointedly during Bìn’s trip to Gertrude Stein’s house in Bilignin, makes Bìn crave the comfort of belonging, and the pleasure derived from being able to “see a face that looks like [his]” (Truong 141). To be clear, I read this fetishization and questioning as animalization because Truong—echoing Fanon—writes about how these encounters make Bìn desire to simply be “a man among other men” (Fanon, *Black Skin* 112) instead of a man who is “becoming more like an animal with each displaced day”

(Truong 19). Binh recounts what happens when he passes a fellow “*asiatique*” who does not stare or even acknowledge his presence. This gives Binh the feeling of anonymity and humanness that he longs for; as he says, “if we do not acknowledge each other, it is not out of a lack of kindness. The opposite [...] To walk by without blinking an eye is to say to each other that we are human, whole, a man or a woman like any other, two lungfuls of air, a heart pumping blood, a stomach hungry for home-cooked food, a body in constant search for the warmth of the sun” (Truong 142). The recognition that Binh seeks slides between descriptions of humans and descriptions of a life that sound oddly animal. The slide specifically between racialized people acknowledging each other as humans and the desire to be bodies in search of the warm sun demonstrates the shifting sense of human-animal in-betweenness that Binh occupies, though it carries a sense of freedom when it occurs without the colonial, white gaze.

Binh’s desire to assert his humanity does not involve a straightforward move from animality to humanity. Truong reveals how Binh comes to desire the questions, how he actually desires to fulfill the cravings for the honey in his scars. He divulges how, “under their gentle guidance, their velvet questions, even I can disgorge enough pathos and cheap souvenir tragedies to sustain them” (Truong 20). He critiques the desire to hear his sad stories and answers their questions in a sarcastic tone, but Binh also reveals that, “after so many weeks of having that soft, steady light shined at me, I begin to forget the barbed-wire rules of such engagements. I forget that there will be days when it is I who will have the craving, the red, raw need to expose all my neglected, unkempt days” (20). Truong portrays the process of animalization as a process of interrogation by highlighting

the “soft, steady light,” “the barbed-wire rules,” and the “red, raw need to expose” Binh’s stories (20). If Binh comes to crave dehumanizing engagements and encounters, I would argue that his desire is a result of being forced, interrogated, or even tortured to the point of wanting to be or identify with the animal. Truong employs war metaphors that bring histories of war, interrogation, and torture together with the process of animalization, showing that they often work together. Her use of barbed wire is particularly interesting. Barbed wire was initially used as agricultural fencing to enclose farm animals and it became a symbol of the WWI battlefield as “soldiers laid out wire to defend their trenches, but also to create areas where the enemy could be trapped for slaughter” (Sloat). The reference to farm animals in relation to racialized, postcolonial subjects productively complicates Mavhunga’s concept of vermin being because it brings a relationship that circulates around labouring humans and animals instead of just pestiferousness and eradication into view. Binh is brought into proximity to farm animals indirectly with the reference to barbed wire and directly by the farmers in Bilignin who asked him intrusive questions about his body. Labour, as it stretches between Binh’s labour in the Stein’s kitchen, the labour of pigeons used as food animals, and the labour of postcolonial storytelling develops a different aspect of the colonial relationship between humans and animals and perhaps moves towards a concept of labouring beings, as well as vermin being. Colonialism does not only turn humans into animals in order to eradicate them. In varying contexts, colonizers want human (and animal) labour, which moves away from the pest but remains in the realm of animalization.

Binh is eventually forced into such a close proximity to animals that he forgets how to assert his humanity over their bodies. He forgets “how long to braise the ribs of beef, whether chicken is best steamed over wine or broth, where to buy the sweetest trout” (Truong 20), and it is significant that what he forgets relates directly to how he has learned to prepare, serve, and buy the bodies of animals. He specifically forgets how to perform the skills he needs in his more human-centered pursuit of wanting to be “the village elder, sage and revered” (Truong 19). What does it mean to desire animalization? Binh’s longing for animalization exposes the “wounded attachment” (Brown 390) of racial identities that is again written on the bodies of animals. Like the city-worn pigeon, pulled forward by “a flourish of white” and held back by “a crush of gray” (Truong 218), Binh also flies straight into the barbed-wire tangles of this complicated relationship between the self and the other, the colonizer and the colonized, the human and the animal.

The violent entanglement of desire, humanization, and animalization culminates in Binh serving his blood in dishes alongside animal flesh. Remembering the moment when a lack of acknowledgment offered by someone with “a face that looks like [his]” made him feel human, Binh explains that, “the only way I knew how to hold onto that moment of dispensation, that without-blinking-an-eye exchange, to keep it warm in my hands, was by threading silver through them. Blood makes me a man. No one can take that away from me” (Truong 141-142). Cutting presents a way for Binh to feel pain and release the blood in his body. Yet, he does not release his blood aimlessly. Rather, he adds his blood to food and serves it to those he cooks for. Megan Molenda LeMay

conceptualizes the Steins' kitchen as a borderland and configures Binh's blood-letting as a method of crossing borders. LeMay reads *The Book of Salt* together with Sherman Alexie's short story collection *The Toughest Indian in the World* in order to discuss "how colonialist anxieties around bloodlines, miscegenation, and the human/animal border circulating early-twentieth-century eugenics remain ensconced in twenty-first-century gains in genetic science" (1). LeMay focuses on an important history of blood mixing and circulating through eugenics and genetic science and by focusing specifically on consumption and reading cannibalism as a potentially resistant and anti-colonial force, I extend this reading by thinking about another side of "bleeding over species lines" (LeMay 7).

Read through the lens of consumption, Binh's actions suggest an attempt to reframe or resist the various ways that the people he cooks for otherwise devour him by making their consumptive desires literal. To specifically engage Binh's cutting through the trope of cannibalism reveals it as having a dense and complicated history, as well as being a tool of postcolonial subversion. I read the consumption of Binh's blood as a form of cannibalism because it facilitates a human consumption of parts of a human body. What is more, Binh's adding his blood to the food is very much like wearing an "animal mask" (Ahuja 558) because he makes himself an object of consumption, thereby donning or approximating a kind of animality in order to resist dehumanization. Is this saucing, fortifying, and enriching "merely a bad habit or a purposeful violation? The answer depends on their relationship" (Truong 64). As mentioned previously, his questioners figuratively consume Binh by prompting him to reveal his trauma and sad stories. Such

consumption may seem less threatening because the interlocutors only desire his stories, his histories, and his metaphorical body. Truong uses the desire to figuratively consume Binh to foreshadow a corporeal consumption, but interestingly she shifts the terms of this latter “exchange” by placing the control in Binh’s hands. Binh’s need to put his blood in the food does not occur because people ask him to. Unlike the embellishments he adds to his stories, which please his listeners, he thinks the blood is undetectable, even though Alice Toklas makes it clear that she, in fact, “had tasted the aftermath” (71). By coupling the consumption of Binh’s stories with a physical consumption of his blood, the novel reminds us that the physical body is always at stake in encounters with the other.

More than just to fulfill his desires to feel pain and remind himself that he is alive, Binh runs knives through his fingers in an attempt to revisit the first time that it happened:

I am nine and I am cutting scallions into little O’s, green tips meeting the blade, sending it swiftly toward the pale rooted ends. There are five bunches to go. My fingers, face, hair, stinking of raw scallions, all in exchange for my mother humming a tune that has no ending. I think this is an even trade. [...] She is humming, and I think that I am hearing birds. I look up just to be sure, and I thread silver into my fingertips for the first time. (72)

Truong aestheticizes the knife by referring to it only as the beautiful color of silver, although in the next passage we see that Binh’s mother is worried about rust on the blade. The shift from the knife as an executioner who slits birds’ throats to a beautiful aestheticized object minimizes or differentiates between the initially accidental violence that Binh does to himself and the violence that takes birds’ lives. Further, the above scene introduces an identification between Binh’s mother and birds when she hums and he thinks that he is “hearing birds” (Truong 72). When Binh’s mother notices that he is

bleeding, she rushes to him, takes a lime from her family altar, and holds him tightly while squeezing lime juice across his fingers to still the threat of rust on the blade.

“Blood, she knows, changes everything. I see there on my fingertips a landscape that would become as familiar to me as the way home” (Truong 73). In this originary moment, Binh treasures the events that follow the cutting, the acts of love and affection from his mother, not necessarily the act of cutting itself. In the present, however, he pursues the pleasure derived from “the throbbing of flesh compromised, meeting and mending” (Truong 74). Only when he cuts deep enough can he feel “an ache that fools [his] heart. Tricks it into a false memory of love lost to a wide, open sea” (74).

Of course, another crucial difference between the originary moment of cutting and the habit that Binh cultivates later in life is that it is not human intimacy or love that now follows the act, but rather a kind of willed cannibalism. First, it is important to attend to the cannibalism invoked in these cutting and cooking scenes. Cannibalism as a historical and current practice, as well as a literary trope, has captured the attention of historians, anthropologists, psychoanalysts, and literary critics alike. In general, cannibalism fascinates because it tests the limits of how we understand persistent binaries of self/other, inside/outside, identity/difference, civilized/savage, mind/body, nature/culture. Following the popular sayings “you are what you eat” and “eat or be eaten,” cannibalism has been theorized as a way of recognizing—by being confronted with—the corporeal similarity of the other (much to the eater’s horror), and as a metaphor of colonial discourse that (out of fear of the other’s “appetite” or desires) seeks to incorporate the other.

Cannibalism has also been critiqued as “a product of European imagination, a tool of Empire” (Hulme 4), and so, as Gananath Obeyeskere argues, representations of cannibalism often reveal more about the desires of the colonizers than the real cultural practices of those deemed “savage,” and “isolates the Other as an alien” (Obeyeskere 2). Yet, others have shown that cannibalism can be an effective tool of postcolonial subversion that “represents the fear of the colonizer when confronted with the emptiness of his own identity” (Guest 7). Because it exists in cultural modes that do not fit into European colonial imaginings, but rather as important cultural practices that embody a kind of sacredness involved in human sacrifice (Obeyeskere 2), cannibalism evades an easy, direct understanding, and can stand for something far beyond the colonial imaginations of savagery. I am interested in how cannibalism in *The Book of Salt* both acts as a metaphor for incorporation, a way for Binh to return home, and a move away from eternal homelessness (Kilgour, *Communion* 11). It is also a sharp mode of subversion that Binh uses to confront the Steins with his own corporeal similarity (he is just a man amongst humans) and brings them face-to-face with their own cannibalistic desires to consume and subsume him—though Truong does not explicitly reveal whether or not Binh’s actions confront the Steins with the emptiness of their identities. As I will demonstrate, when used this way, the trope of cannibalism can “give voice to the diverse marginal groups it is supposed to silence, and question the dominant ideologies it is evoked to support” (Guest 3). In *The Book of Salt*, we can look to cannibalism “to help us understand the anxieties that haunt the apparently stable center of western culture” (Guest 3). In the broader strokes of this analysis, however, I am interested in how cannibalism in

the novel makes room for a different way of being human, as well as how it confronts us as readers and literary critics with our own cannibalistic, carnivorous desires for certain kinds of stories.

Incorporation, whether metaphorical in the sense of inclusion and belonging or literal in the sense of consuming or eating, is a key aspect of cannibalism. “The idea of incorporation,” Maggie Kilgour explains, “depends upon and enforces an absolute division between inside and outside; but in the act itself opposition disappears, dissolving the structure it appears to produce” (*Communion* 4). In terms of the corporeal body, the inside/outside dialectic is based on the experience of what lies inside the body and what exists outside of it. It is, according to Freud, the most basic and infantile opposition, but it also sets the stage for conceptualizing identity. He explains that this most basic formulation of the inside/outside dialectic can be characterized thus: “‘I should like to eat that, or I should like to spit it out’; or, carried a stage further: ‘I should like to take this into me and keep that out of me’” (qtd. in Kilgour, *Communion* 4). In its crude establishment of the dialectic, what is “good” is inside the body, and what is “bad” is everything that is external to it, but also, what is inside the body, and therefore superior, is coherent, stable, and always defined by what is outside of it (what can’t be incorporated). This creates a hierarchy between the inside and outside, and makes identity something that is reinforced by what is similar and threatened by anything “alien” or other.

Not contained only by corporeal definitions, the inside/outside dialectic underlies colonial discourses that determine who is civilized or savage; each group of people

outside the colonizing body can be deemed other because their practices are outside of “normative” understanding or logic. Even further, though the colonizing body’s existence depends on colonized bodies, they seek not only to incorporate in some cases, but also to eradicate everything that is pestilent, external, outside, different. Born from the muddled hierarchy between the inside and the outside, historically this construction has tried to predetermine the identities of racialized people with an “inside” that perpetually overdetermines their conduct (Fanon, *Black* 115). Whiteness, “all this whiteness that burns” (Fanon, *Black* 114), bodies forth this inside, and every other racialized body is measured against how similar or threatening he or she is to the center. Fanon pushes the dialectics further to show how they are not confined to relationships and encounters between bodies, but rather can “create a real dialectic between my body and the world” (*Black* 113). The inside/outside relationship moves from the individual corporeal body, to encounters between “corporate bodies” (Kilgour, *Communion* 4), and at its limit, to a relationship between marginalized people and a world that considers them as others, trying always to classify and categorize them into small, immovable identities (Fanon, *Black* 113).

Incorporation effectively disturbs the inside/outside dialectic. The need for food itself “exposes the vulnerability of individual identity” (Kilgour, *Communion* 6) that must take in what is external to it in order to survive. Particular foods become associated with particular bodies in ways that echo an inside/outside dynamic, so that we eat what is most familiar and categorize what is different or exotic based on palatability, morality, and disgust, and those people who are subsequently “marked in such a way come to embody

the foods and corresponding values and meanings attached to them” (Ku et al. 2). To define people based solely on the food they eat is narrow, uncritical, racially motivated, and often leads to charges of (in)authenticity wherein the controversy becomes “about determining who is a ‘real’ American [Canadian, European, etc.] and who is not, what sort of cultural practice is ‘mainstream’ and what is exotic, and what sort of food is disgusting and what is palatable” (Ku et al. 2). Food and culinary studies is particularly important for Asian American scholars who have intervened in the field to assert their “refusal to yield to a superficial multiculturalism that naively celebrates difference and reconciliation simply or primarily through the pleasures of food and eating” (Ku et al. 3). Instead, scholars capture the links between Asian people and food in a way that highlights the cross-articulation of race, ethnicity, class, gender, labour, taste, globalization, and colonization in our historical and current relationships to the culinary.

“Food pornography” in Asian American novels can pander to mainstream audiences who want to reaffirm a solid and stable connection between Asian communities and their exotic foods. This is not always the case, as Asian American authors also use “the culinary to unsettle the normative and limiting dynamics of citizenship, diaspora, identity, community, and globalization. Their efforts question the connections between Asian bodies and food and the dynamics of knowing and consuming the Asian other” (Cruz 355-356). Like Truong, these authors pronounce the “importance of food in Asian American novels not as trope or metaphor but as a means of exploring processes critical to identity, subject, and community formations” (Cruz 356). In a chapter that focuses specifically on the role of food in *The Book of Salt*, Denise Cruz

explores how Truong combines the culinary and the literary to produce immiscibilities or parts (of identity, subjectivity, citizenship, race, queerness) that don't mix cleanly, rather than neat connections and fusions that create a whole, unified picture. "Ultimately," Cruz argues, "*The Book of Salt* highlights how food does and does not stand in for authenticity, how language can and cannot represent objects or people, and how queer desire both fuels and is fueled by Asian bodies" (355). Additionally, as Julietta Singh asks, "how do animals and texts get similarly formulated as 'objects' of consumption? What is the relation between eating an animal and devouring a text" (472)?

When thinking about cannibalism in *The Book of Salt*, it is important to recognize that the terms are different from traditional representations of the cannibal because Binh feeds himself—but only his blood—to his employers, quite literally inviting them to "eat the other" (hooks 374). Wenying Xu's chapter on *The Book of Salt* emphasizes the interconnectedness of food, sexuality, race, and language in the novel. Unlike Cruz, Xu discusses the trope of cannibalism in the novel as an allegory "for the colonized vulnerable to the cannibalistic practices of colonialism—practices that nourish the Self by consuming the Other" (141). She understands Binh's cutting through the lenses of mourning and melancholia, psychological definitions and theories of self-mutilation, and David Eng's conceptualization of male hysteria and racial hysteria. Xu theorizes Binh's cutting as a form of "symbolic suicide" and a "hysterical habit" (145); her focus on this act as the tragic epitome of both Binh's helplessness and powerlessness is where my analysis departs from hers. Binh, I would argue, does not feed himself to his employers in order to mark his helplessness or powerlessness. The act represents a rare moment in the

novel where he has control over himself and his body, where he decides to do something that sustains him, and confronts those who seek to consume him. It is significant, however, that one of the few agential moments that Bìn h has in the novel involves self-injury. When he explains why he adds his blood to the food, it becomes clear that this is a calculated, careful habit:

I never do it for them. I would never waste myself in such a way. [...] The extreme cold or the usual bouts of loneliness will trigger it. I want to say it is automatic, but it is not. I have to think about it each time, consider the alternatives, decide that there are none. I want to say it brings me happiness or satisfaction, but it does not. I want to say that it is more complicated than this, but it is not. (Truong 65)

In this act, Bìn h finds a feeling “as familiar to [him] as the way home” (Truong 73) by watching the blood run through the lines of his fingerprints and tracing the landscape.

While cannibalism in the novel can represent colonial consumption and devouring of the colonized other, a reading of Bìn h’s cutting must shift to recognize that the terms of helplessness and powerlessness change when the colonized *chooses* to feed themselves to the colonizer in a way that does not irreplaceably carve flesh out of their bodies, but rather is predominantly done to sustain themselves or as resistance to various other forms of consumption. Bìn h clarifies that, though it is certainly violent, the act of cutting is also nostalgic for him, a reminder of what love felt like, a way to return home, and going further, adding his blood to the food that he serves is a resistant act that departs from his original memory. Toklas was disturbed to have tasted blood in her food. She asks, “‘Bin, have you been drinking? [...] Have I not given you enough time? GertrudeStein [sic] and I do not mind waiting an additional quarter of an hour or so for our meals.’ Yes, I nodded. It seemed appropriate for me to affirm even though Miss Toklas and I both knew

that that statement was, in fact, not true” (70). Then Toklas says, ““GertrudeStein and I tasted—”” (70) as she inspects Bìn’s hands, holding them, feeling the “blood pumping through” (71). Instead of only reinforcing the colonizer/colonized hierarchy, I posit that by feeding them his physical body, Bìn’s habit confronts the Steins with their “savage” desires to consume his labour, his story, and his body—both physically and metaphorically. Toklas’s inability to articulate the act, or to say the word “cannibalism” communicates that she recognizes not only the power dynamic, but also what they have consumed. Following the three expressions of the inside/outside dialectic that I have drawn attention to within discussions of incorporation and cannibalism, through his act of cutting, Bìn moves from acting for himself, to exposing the consuming and subsuming dynamic of his relationship with the Steins, and in the end articulates a different way of being in the world.

The relationship between Bìn and the Steins is curious, and although it is enabled and fuelled by strict hierarchies of race and class, Truong refuses “to present a completely schematic division between Bìn and his two employers” (Troeng 129). On one hand, the power dynamics between Bìn and the Steins are clear. Bìn explains, “My Madame and Madame sustain me. They pay my wage, house my body, and I feed them. That is the nature of our relationship. Simple, you may think. Replaceable, even” (209). Economically, the Steins easily wield their privilege over Bìn, requiring his domestic and culinary labour to navigate French markets for groceries, and routinely cook each meal. He must also travel when they travel (separately, of course), and they dictate when his labour can be bought and sold by others on request, like Sweet Sunday Man. The

Steins do not try to mask their racism, as they call Binh their “Little Indochinese” (142). Binh does not willingly accept this designation, “*her* Little Indochinese.” Instead, he scolds, “Madame, we Indochinese belong to the French. You two may live in France, but you are still Americans, after all. Little Indochinese, indeed” (142). Binh and the Steins’ relationship “subtly evoke[s] American racial politics, despite the Paris setting” (Troeng 124). He is always marginal, held outside the privileged circles that the Steins encompass. On the other hand, this relationship also institutes a queer, domestic, intimate relationship “in place of a traditional diaspora ordered by heteronormativity” (Troeng 123-124) though the Steins’ relationship can also lean towards “queer liberalism” (Eng 1491). Of particular interest is how Binh explains what is extraordinary and intimate about his relationship with the Steins. Binh explains that it is not solely divisive and oppressive because, “every day, my Mesdames and I dine, if not together, then back-to-back. Of course, there is always a wall between us” (209). The wall reifies the contradictions in their relationship where intimacy arising from sharing food is extraordinary only because it crosses otherwise violently reinforced categories and boundaries, race and class. And still, sharing food means something significant to Binh:

When I place that first bite of *boeuf Adrienne* in my mouth and I am brought to my knees—figuratively speaking, of course, as I reserve that posture for love and prayers—by the white wine, cognac, laurel, thyme, and red currants, that elusive final ingredient that ends all of their compliments with a question mark, I know that my Mesdames are on their knees as well, saying a word of thanks for two heady days of marinating and one hour of steady basting. (209)

Truong frames the pleasure shared here as sensual, sexual, transcendent; this shared pleasure, “pleasure refined into a singular scent, almost animal, addictive, a lover’s body coming toward yours in a moonless night. Even this my Mesdames have shared with me”

(Truong 210). Because so much importance and emphasis is placed on food in the novel, the intimacy of sharing food represents a rare moment in which Binh feels like he can briefly transcend the confines of his relationship with the Steins.

Though Truong refuses to structure Binh and the Steins' relationship in clear terms either as oppressive or subversive, acts of consumption—both physical and metaphorical—work to tip the scales. Regardless of the intimacy that Binh derives from working in the Steins' kitchen, their attempt to write his story is unforgivable. Through a form of literary carnivorousness, Truong uses the Steins' attempted theft to critique Western writers “who exploit and capitalize on the past and present suffering of their racialized counterparts” (Troeng 127). One such instance of consuming or collecting occurs when Sweet Sunday Man convinces Binh to steal one of Gertrude Stein's notebooks, and he inadvertently discovers a notebook titled simply “Bin”. Binh rails against such a violation, asserting, “I did not give you my permission, Madame, to treat me in this way. I am here to feed you, not to serve as your fodder” (215). Here, he establishes the stakes of his relationship to the Steins by differentiating between tolerable and intolerable consumptions, or the labour that his body does for them, and his willingness to give them his body—he did make himself their fodder—framed against his unwillingness to give them his story and subjectivity. As Y-Dang Troeng writes, the novel frames Stein and Toklas “as ‘collectors’ who are indifferent to the hardships of the subjects they employ and who approach these racial subjects as cultural objects and sources of exotic information” (127). I would add to this observation by positing that Binh begins to resist his colonial objectification through a form of willed cannibalism.

Reading Binh's habit through theories of cannibalism reveals that it is not an act of powerlessness. Rather, the act of cannibalism offers a place "where self and other, love and aggression meet, where the body becomes symbolic, and at the same time, the human is reduced to mere matter" (Kilgour, "Foreword" vii). By becoming both symbolic and mere matter, Binh's body and blood have the potential to resist the Steins' attempts to consume him. He takes a certain kind of control into his hands, threading silver through his fingertips, adding the blood to the dishes, and when the Steins taste his blood in the food, they are disgusted by the "purposeful violation" (Truong 64), the taboo in their dishes. I push this instance further to argue that the Steins are also, subconsciously, disgusted by the fact of being brought face-to-face with their desires to consume Binh. One way in which cannibalism can be a resistant act is through its ability to confront the self/colonizer/eater with the corporeal similarity of the other/colonized/eaten. It is precisely this confrontation that takes place when the Steins' ability to taste Binh's blood gives away something dangerous about their appetites. Tasting human blood in their food—though it is unclear whether or not they taste his blood in dishes with meat—elicits such a visceral reaction because it activates the Steins' horror of consuming an other who is like themselves (Guest 3). Further, by forcing a recognition of corporeal similarity between the self and the other, cannibalism draws our attention "to the relatedness of bodies that lie beneath the ideas they express" (Guest 3). Ultimately, Binh enacts the terms of cannibalism and confronts the Steins' desire to consume him in order to assert a fundamental truth that he is, in fact, a human.

Binh's humanity is not simple. It is sustained by a form of fragmented corporeal consumption that is never complete because the body both heals cuts and replenishes blood. He finds a way to "humanize" himself, but his sense of humanity is precarious and contingent upon the Steins' recognition that his blood tastes like theirs. Through an animal mask that provisionally inhabits animality, Binh momentarily aligns himself with bodies that are more acceptably consumed by the Steins. The animal mask provides a way for Binh to formulate an identity that results from contact and a forced, violent closeness to animals, instead of a strict human/nonhuman binary, and this allows him to momentarily find comfort in a space between the self/other, inside/outside, colonizer/colonized dialectics. Binh's relationship to agency, animals, and in-betweenness is tenuous, fleeting, and difficult to pin down. At certain moments he identifies with a pigeon he encounters in a garden and in other moments he resists an objectifying relationship to the Steins by asserting his humanity over animal bodies. He becomes, in the end, a different kind of human who exists in a painfully etched out relationship to the world. Like Fanon in "The Fact of Blackness," Binh slowly composes his "self as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world" (*Black* 111). Binh struggles to comprehend and inhabit an existence that is always predetermined by colonial history and structures racialized bodies into a particular relationship with the inside/outside, self/other, insisting on forcing them into acceptable, categorical relationships to the world itself. Such structuring, as Fanon reminds us, "creates a real dialectic between my body and the world" (*Black* 111). But, as Binh demonstrates in *The Book of Salt*, racialized people can eke out a life that does not adhere to the

predetermined dialectic. Instead, through lines cut in skin, and alongside bodies served in elaborate dishes, Bìn̄h establishes a different way of being not-quite human. His vision of humanity is twofold: the trope of cannibalism in the novel asserts Bìn̄h’s humanness, but it also pieces together a violent proximity to animals that enables him to be and become in a world that would otherwise just consume him.

The trope of cannibalism “establishes connections among objects in different contexts: between eating human flesh and relations of kinship and alliance, as well as notions of identity and difference, savagery, animality, the excessive use of power, and the operations of the law” (Lindenbaum 483). In *The Book of Salt*, cannibalism is nostalgic because it reanimates memories of love and returns Bìn̄h home. It is also resistant in the sense that Bìn̄h harnesses it to resist and expose the ways in which the Steins seek to consume him. Focusing only on cannibalism to unpack Bìn̄h’s habit opens up possibilities of understanding different ways of being human, but it also has its limitations because it is a practice that compromises Bìn̄h’s bodily integrity and it does not encourage an in-depth focus on the animal. To fully understand the complexity of Bìn̄h’s habit, it is necessary to see the functions of animals and animality in his acts of willed cannibalism. Truong makes it clear that the Steins, either as collectors or consumers, seek to devour every part of Bìn̄h, even though he asserts, “my story, Madame, is mine. I alone am qualified to tell it, to embellish, or to withhold” (215). I would like to extend this to a reflection of how history, literature, and we, as readers, consume the bodies and stories of others. If Bìn̄h can confront the Steins with their cannibalistic desires, then it is also crucial to become aware of how we devour bodies and

lives in order to read and tell stories. When we pay attention to them, the material histories of pigeons can spill onto the page in spite of how the pigeon becomes symbolic or metaphorical for the purpose of the story. Attentiveness seems to stand between allowing literary animals to be fodder for humanist stories and recognizing that they come with their own histories, stories, and ways of being. Depending on how they are told, however, stories can resist devouring animals. Truong's novel is an example of anthropocentric storytelling.

Uncomfortable Proximities

Is it possible to reclaim animalization as not only forced, violent, and destructive but also enabling at certain times and in certain ways? Do racialized subjects put on animal masks because there is something desirable that comes from excluding themselves from (some forms or arrangements of) human life and moving closer to animal life? If one were to read *The Book of Salt* as mapping out a straightforward trajectory from animality to humanity that leaves the category of the human intact and ignores the ways in which humanity is allocated unequally, then Binh should not embrace a method of resistance that brings him closer to the animal. However, by serving his blood both alongside the bodies of animals, as well as in vegetarian dishes, perhaps Binh expresses the desire for an intimacy with animals that evokes Ahuja's concept of the animal mask. Along with asserting a different kind of humanness, Binh's practice of threading silver through his fingers and adding his blood to food appropriates terms of animality in order to resist animalization. Any kind of human-animal closeness that Binh finds comes at a

cost, though, as Truong does not mix human lives and animal lives, but specifically brings together human lives and animal deaths.

Some scholars argue that *The Book of Salt* “calls attention to the contradiction that to be human or humane is nonetheless to kill. One only becomes human through a disavowal of the animal within—a disavowal that justifies violence against others” (LeMay 13). Violence is certainly a key component of human-animal relations in *The Book of Salt* and it functions as a symptom of the novel's overarching anthropocentrism. However, I contend that the encounters with animals and animality in the novel do not necessarily represent a *disavowal* of the animal within, but rather an acknowledgement of the uncomfortable and difficult close proximity between racialized humans and animals. As Sundhya Walther aptly explains, to draw and redraw “an always changeable boundary between those who can be counted as human and those who cannot” (581) tends to leave intact hierarchical structures that facilitate ongoing colonialisms. I posit that Binh’s struggle in *The Book of Salt* is not a struggle to become (fully) human, but rather an attempt to sketch out a way of inhabiting a position in-between humans and animals.

In Truong's *The Book of Salt* the animal mask takes the form of animal analogies as well as Binh’s culinary crossings of human and animal; the text thus highlights historical contexts that conflate race and species, as well as cultural and social practices enabled by such confluences, even as it gives us fodder to envision complex and difficult human-animal relationships. Attending to these aspects of the novel confirms the benefits of rereading and interrogating the uses of animals in literature, as described by Ahuja: “when literary critics reduce nonhuman characters to symbols, they may foreclose

transspecies relations underlying representation” (559). The human-animal relationships in *The Book of Salt* are violent and often involve the sacrifice of the animal, revealing a potent anthropocentrism in Truong's discourse. The human-animal closeness in the novel is structured by violence and does not often carry many of the positive associations of human-animal relationships, like love, companionship, or reciprocity. Binh's closeness to pigeons is expressed through flows and circulations of human and animal blood. Though this kind of human-animal intimacy is not fuzzy or warm, it represents a way of being in close proximity to animals that is borne from the dehumanization and animalization inherent in colonialism. Ultimately, Truong uses animals to articulate concerns about the precarious position of Binh, who is a postcolonial, racialized, queer, diasporic subject trying to navigate life in Paris. At the end of *The Book of Salt*, Binh struggles to decide not only whether to settle in Vietnam, Paris or America, but also where he belongs in the space located between human worlds and animal worlds, as a voice asks him, “What keeps you here?” (Truong 261).

CHAPTER TWO

“You’re part of us.”: Reading the Animal Shapes of Grief in Madeleine Thien’s *Dogs at the Perimeter*

Prologue

Prashanth was the oldest of five cousins who grew up together in Canada and I am the youngest. My naïve and stubborn love for him never really developed past how a child loves. Whenever I think of him my mind transforms him into a coyote, a curious but cunning trickster. I can still see him standing in the dark in the kitchen opening my cat-shaped purse, which I had trustingly left on the table. He found the small allowance my Mom had given me to buy something at the Disney store (a favorite treat of mine when we visited Calgary), and quickly pocketed it. When he saw me watching him, he smiled wide and held his finger to his lips to whisper, “sshh,” turning this into our secret for the night. When we stayed at their house I snuck out of my room in the middle of the night after I heard him come home and turn on the TV. He would smile, put his arms out, and let me snuggle into his side, ready to watch movies that my parents had forbidden. I saw the best in him when everyone was trying to warn me of the worst. In losing him I have lost someone whom I loved but never really knew.

On August 17, 2015 I stood at the front of a funeral chapel filled with over 400 people waiting with my cousin, Anji, trying to get my head around what could only feel like a cruel joke. Prashanth had been diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma seven years ago, but I had only found out a few months before his funeral when my brother called to ask, “Do you have any plans for this weekend?” even though he knew that I

could not travel 3000 km back to see Prashanth without any notice. Sometimes I can respect Prashanth's decision to be so private about his illness and I know that death does not always require or gain anything from closeness. At other times I know that my regret and guilt will always follow me like a shadow. I stubbornly refused to see Prashanth's body during the family viewing hour, but as I stood up there in awe of the fact that the chapel just could not accommodate the number of people who came to show their final respects, I caught a glimpse of his face. All of a sudden everything became clear to me. Seeing how cancer had ravaged his body showed me why he had kept me at a distance from his struggle and how much he protected me from by not letting me have any memories of his illness. Instead, my memories of him are full of mischief and joy. I remember his face, his hands that could close around both of mine at the same time, his long fingers held up against mine, his laugh; I remember him at his prime. He let me do things that would have got us both into trouble. We read *Archie Comics*, watched *The Simpsons*, and ate burgers, fries, and milkshakes right before we had to sit in front of elaborate dinners prepared by our mothers. He loved having me around even when everyone else was too busy or too cool to notice me. Seeing his body jolted me into the reality that he faced for the last seven years of his life and it threatened to tear apart my memories of him. I don't know if Anji saw the look on my face or if she was just comforting herself by telling me stories, but right at that moment she asked, "Did anyone tell you about the bobcat?" Suddenly, as she started telling the story, I was pulled back into my mind and body, back—very briefly—into my academic brain.

“I was sitting with Prashanth on Wednesday after the hospice nurses had told us that he was going to go at any minute. I was holding his hand, resting my head on his bed, crying and struggling to think of how I was going to let him go. I lifted my head to look out the window and there was a bobcat sitting there looking at me! I thought I was hallucinating so I asked my mother-in-law, who was in the room with me, if she could also see this bobcat sitting there. She looked up and said, ‘yeah there is a cat there,’ but looking closer she was shocked to see the large pointed ears, oversized, round paws, short stubby tail, and the distinct spots across his fur. ‘Oh! That is a bobcat!’ So I held Prashanth’s hand and we watched the cat who sat there for a long while and then walked away. Later I looked up the spiritual significance or what bobcats mean as totem animals and they were totally the same as Prashanth! Some Native tribes think of them as being mischievous and resistant to social rules and order. But others revere them because they are also intensely curious, creative, and protectors. I like to think that Prashanth was showing me that I would not completely lose him when he died. But maybe the bobcat brought him some energy because the next morning, Prashanth rallied and came back to give us one last day with him. I got to tell him about the bobcat and he was so happy! He thought it was the best thing.”

My mind raced to make connections, to hold onto something, to hold on to the spark of an idea that started to grow. I remembered an article titled “Wild Messengers” that I had read in *The New York Times* a while ago. In it, Jennifer S. Holland describes an encounter with bald eagles on the day that her mother died after a long battle with brain cancer. On that day, searching for a few last bits of strength, Holland went for a drive to

give her some relief from her thoughts that were “boxed in tight and spinning. It took a while to banish my circular thinking with deep breaths, and feel unbound” (1). Suddenly, a movement caught her eye and she saw a bald eagle perched on a tree branch: “it was a splendid creature, and not an animal I was privy to seeing often in my usual suburban world. It alone would have lifted my spirits. But then, I saw a second one. And a third. It seemed for a while that every time I looked up from the road (I’d slowed to a near crawl by then), a bald eagle appeared” (1). In total, Holland saw nine bald eagles on one stretch of road, and it was the ninth of February, which made Holland wonder if that was “a little nudge to see if I was paying attention” (2). Or maybe, Holland reflects, “those birds were nature’s messenger, sharing what was coming. Perhaps even telling me that final exhale was a good thing, powerful and beautiful in its lasting quiet” (2). I don’t know how to make sense out of the numerous accounts of people who have had chance encounters with wild animals during times of grief. Since Prashanth passed away, I have found more stories about these kinds of encounters than I can count. I do know that when we mourn, we miss that person’s textures, their presence, but we also long for a specific, irreplaceable feeling we associated with that person. When they pass, we grieve for this loss: we fear that we will never feel the same way again, that the memory of that feeling will now bring us sadness, or perhaps that our memories will fade and that may or may not bring us any relief.

When I think of the last moments of Prashanth’s life, my mind leads me to Trouble, the cat who still lives at the hospice where Prashanth died. She is a black and white tuxedo cat who roams the hallways of the hospice. For comfort and a little

mischievous, people would smuggle her into their rooms where she would bat little paper balls around the floor or press her body into theirs and let them trace their fingers through her fur. Prashanth spotted her scuttling down the hallway on the day that he checked himself into the hospice. He liked cats and he liked Trouble especially because she looked like Mews who was also in need of what he called “a dietary adjustment.” Most of the friends and family who visited Prashanth in the hospice either never caught a glimpse of Trouble or they thought she was a nuisance. They were irritated. Who knows what kind of germs she carries around? What if her fur irritates Prashanth’s sinuses? Why should we share this space with a cat? But whenever he had a chance to be alone, Prashanth snuck out of his room to find Trouble. My sister lured the cat to him when he couldn’t get out of bed anymore, and she slept curled like a seashell at his side. On the day that Prashanth passed away, Trouble was pushy about wanting to be in his room. She waited around the corner, ran, squeezed herself through quickly closing doors, and jumped onto his bed, unleashing irritated meows each time she was escorted out. In the afternoon most of our family left the hospice, exhausted by the weight of grief and the back-and-forth that comes with seeing a loved one linger for too long on the edge of life. They left in search of a shower and some sandwiches. My dad and uncle, the two least cat-friendly people in my family, were in the room when Prashanth died. They watched him take his last breaths and assured him that to stop fighting was a good thing, something that resembled a blessing after so much pain. Somehow, Trouble also made her way into the room and was resting against his feet when he passed. Something about her presence felt reassuring to them. For a moment, they let themselves believe, as some

people do, that cats accompany peoples' souls beyond this life. When I let myself think of Prashanth leaving this world, walking beside a small cat, the raw lines of pain in my chest smooth over for a while.

The Strings that Tie Us Together

“A novel is a mirror walking down a road.”

--Michael Ondaatje

“Once again, I had tried to escape emotional difficulty by filling my mind with a living creature. It was a failure, a mistake that revealed in retrospect the deepest lesson that animals have taught me: how easily and unconsciously we see other lives as mirrors of our own.”

--Helen Macdonald

Psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott once described the case of a boy who was obsessed with string. The boy used string to tie chairs to tables, cushions to a fireplace, and, worryingly, he even tied string around his sister's neck. After looking into the family's history, Winnicott discovered that the boy's mother struggled with severe bouts of depression that both physically and emotionally separated her from her son. Winnicott determined that the boy looked to string as a way to keep objects and bodies tied together not as a response to, but rather as a *denial* of separation from his mother. Eventually the boy adopted a number of his teddy bears, refusing to think of them as toys, meticulously sewing clothing for them, and remaining fiercely loyal to them. A fear of abandonment moved the boy to use string as a “wordless communication, a symbolic means of joining,” and it gave him a way of “*holding tight*” to the people he refused to lose (Macdonald 49; original emphasis). In Madeleine Thien's novel *Dogs at the Perimeter*, the protagonist, Janie, loses her parents and brother at the hands of the Khmer Rouge

during the Cambodian Genocide, and we meet her as she sifts through the aftermath of her trauma and tries to build and sustain a family in Montreal. For Janie, intimacy remains haunted by trauma and she struggles to hold tight to the ones she loves without having those relationships bear the violent traces of her history. Even though she loves her husband and son deeply, she cannot shake the fear that she will lose them, as she has already lost the rest of her family. She explains, “I wanted to tie my son’s wrist to mine with a piece of string and in this way save us both” (Thien 38). In an attempt to preserve the memory of her family and her history, she looks to her pet cat, Jambavan, to carry her ties to the family she lost into the family she is on the brink of losing because she is struggling to cope with her painful history. The following chapter is oriented around the question: to whom do we tie ourselves and to where do we turn when those ties come undone?

The strings that we use to tie ourselves to history, memory, and both present and lost loved ones can take many shapes. Sometimes the strings are tangible or literal, as in the case of the string used by the boy who was Winnicott’s patient or the string that Janie’s brother, Sopham, used to save her life by tying her arm to a piece of floating wood save her life after the ship that was supposed to carry them to safety was attacked by pirates. Sometimes the strings are symbolic or metaphorical. Stories can act as strings that tie us together as they are passed down through generations from parents to children and inherited from ancestors or those who are still living. Stories can orient our relationships to our family members, our histories, and ourselves. They can be precious, held tightly, and carried into the different phases of our lives, but they can also be the

parts of us that we try desperately to hide from or get rid of. Animals, whether they are mythological, literary, or inspired by real life encounters or relationships, can play significant roles in our stories. From the bobcat, eagles, and Trouble to the animals in *Dogs at the Perimeter*, Jambavan the cat, a tiger and a deer, as well as Aplysia (a sea slug), I shed light on the symbolic, mythological, and “real” animals who inhabit stories of loss and, going further, I explore these animals as instances when grief takes an animal shape. The animal encounters with which I began the chapter, as well as those represented in *Dogs at the Perimeter*, demonstrate how grief can inspire us to draw animals close in a way that ties a part of ourselves, our histories, or our stories to them.

Representations of the connections between grief and animals travel across generations, countries, and contexts and there are many different stories from around the world about people who have found solace by encountering a wild animal, spending time with a companion animal, or envisioning nature as a place of comfort. Interestingly, people do not find solace in the appearance of just any animal during times of grief, but they give meaning to particular animals who they think represent similar parts of their loved one’s energy. A bobcat, with its mischievous reputation, embodied Prashanth, a tiger and a deer embody Janie’s mother in *Dogs at the Perimeter*, and Holland discusses how, “given a list of possible messengers, I can certainly imagine my mom, a true animal lover, choosing majestic birds” (1). When we grieve, instead of living with an intimate connection to that person, “we are left with a hole that the energy that powered the person through life once filled” (Holland 2-3). Sometimes, animals help to fill the spaces left behind. As much as such encounters fit into common conceptions of human-animal

relationships—we are in awe of some animals more than others, animals never stand for themselves, we always impose anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism onto them—they can also challenge us to question why grief orients us towards animals or why loss leads to animals and what kinds of human-animal relationships can arise from here.

Holland explains that she needed to feel unbound and suspend disbelief in order to think that her encounter with the bald eagles was a message from her mother. “I am not a religious person,” she writes, “not even a particularly spiritual one, though I often turn to the natural world to ease stress and quiet the mind” (1). To ground her experience, Holland charts traditions that envision a close relationship between humans and animals. Tracing Hindu beliefs in reincarnation, the deification of cats in Egyptian culture, St. Francis of Assisi’s communication with animals, and totem animals in Indigenous cultures, Holland reveals the multiple ways that we “look to animals to embody what we can’t see but want to believe is there” (3). Animals’ presences can be unexpected gifts in times of need when comfort is fleeting; to see “something that’s beautiful and that breathes, there for a moment, then gone” can provide a world of wonder in an otherwise dark time (Holland 4).

For Holland, such encounters require a belief in the unbelievable; she explains, “when I suspended my disbelief, it made perfect sense” (2). She needed to shed acculturated views of animal life, kinship, and family in order to believe that eagles could represent a connection to her mother. For Janie, however, finding meaning in and through animals after loss is not about feeling unbound, but rather a result of following and eventually moving beyond the stories and traditions of thinking closely about animals

that she inherited from her parents. Instead of requiring the suspension of disbelief, grief leads Janie back to familiar ways of knowing animals through stories. Stories can also bring familiar or inherited ways of knowing animals together with new or learned epistemologies. In *Dogs at the Perimeter*, Thien demonstrates various ways of knowing animals, from religious and cultural to scientific epistemologies, without prescribing a teleological progression from one to the other.

The novel narrates a tension between religious and scientific epistemologies through its portrayal of the epistemological dialogue necessary to, as Y-Dang Troeung argues, responsibly understand health and healing after trauma (“Witnessing” 157). In her article “Witnessing Cambodia’s Disappeared,” Troeung argues for *Dogs at the Perimeter* and Kim Echlin’s novel *The Disappeared* as novels that take seriously the work of literary responsibility to contribute to a “testimonial archive of the atrocities committed by Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge regime while simultaneously deconstructing the foreignness of this historical trauma in relation to Canada’s past” (“Witnessing” 150). Troeung is specifically interested in the ways that Thien challenges psychoanalysis and the Western biomedical gaze by orienting an understanding of health and healing towards Khmer Buddhist epistemologies (“Witnessing” 157). She also foregrounds the tension between religious and scientific epistemologies as it relates to “the incommensurability between Janie’s experience of *sramay* (ghost haunting) and her work as a brain research neurologist” (“Witnessing” 161). Troeung does not present the epistemological tension in *Dogs at the Perimeter* as something that can easily be overcome by rejecting one in favor of the other. As one of the few articles to take up *Dogs at the Perimeter*, Troeung

develops a strong analysis of the novel that sees the value and ability of stories to bear “witness to truths beyond what are empirically verified” and understands the complexity of health and healing from trauma as something that demands “epistemological humility” (“Witnessing” 164).⁹ Building on Troeung’s essay, I take her arguments in a new direction by focusing on epistemological humility as it relates to animals in Thien’s novel. I argue that, when animals are read through the different epistemologies that Thien offers, what arises is an idea of family that extends beyond the human to include how animals have been inherited and passed down through generations in stories that, in the novel, translate to material ways of knowing and being with them. By setting out this argument, I am interested in pursuing the question(s): What does it mean to think about animals as family, both for our thinking about animals and for our thinking about what family is and does in its own multiple ways of being fractured, lost, and dysfunctional?

This chapter is organized around four main representations of animals in *Dogs at the Perimeter*, representations that illuminate different ways of knowing animals. First, Thien describes Janie’s encounter with a tiger and a deer that resembles the encounters with wild animals that bring lost loved ones closer. The tiger and the deer appear shortly after Janie’s mother dies and she thinks that these animals, who “were the most beautiful

⁹ Guy Beauregard’s article “Interwoven Temporalities: Reading Madeleine Thien’s *Dogs at the Perimeter*” focuses on how the novel has been received critically in order to put forward an argument that the novel’s interwoven temporalities and handling of loss can inspire a rethinking of a critical language need to read difficult histories (Beauregard 1). Tania Aguila-Way’s article, titled “Uncertain Landscapes: Risk, Trauma, and Neuroscientific Language in Madeleine Thien’s *Certainty* and *Dogs at the Perimeter*,” brings together the concerns of contemporary risk culture with scientific discourses in the novels in order to work through “how diasporic communities might productively engage with the sciences in order to negotiate the many sources of uncertainty that shape their lives” (“Uncertain” Section I).

creatures [she] had ever seen in the world” (125), embody her mother who has returned to offer her forgiveness. Second, I turn to Jambavan the cat in order to trace the lineage of her name back to Hindu mythology and stories passed down by Janie’s father. Jambavan is a powerful example of how much history, memory, and story the small bodies of literary animals can carry. Third, I look to the favourite saying of Janie’s mentor Hiroji: “*entre chien et loup*[...]: that quality of light when we confuse the dog and the wolf, the beloved and the feared” (Thien 143). The saying brings forward the importance of uncertainty and I foreground it as a frame for reading literary animals in the novel and in general because it asks us to tarry with the unknowable. Fourth, Aplysia, a sea slug that Janie experiments on in her research lab, shifts the focus away from understanding the fluidity of human and animal lives through religious epistemology to seeing the fluidity of transcorporeality that challenges scientific views of human exceptionalism. Aplysia mediates Janie’s search for answers about the human brain, and knowledge about the inner-workings of Aplysia’s body (though derived from often violent scientific experimentation) becomes the basis of a language passed down between Janie and her son Kiri. Though the first three animal representations address animals as fleeting and wondrous bodies, beings steeped in meanings that exist outside of themselves, and symbols that serve anthropocentric interests, through Aplysia, Thien brings together religious and cultural epistemologies of animals with scientific epistemologies and gestures towards a kind of remorse for the ways in which we use animals for our own interests. Thien’s representation of Aplysia casts a different light on human-animal relations that inspires me to consider how embracing animals means changing our notions

of kinship, family, and inheritance in ways that adhering strictly to specific epistemologies (of any kind) won't enable.

Keeping Safe and Letting Go: Fractured, Disappearing, and Persevering Selves

At the heart of *Dogs at the Perimeter* lies a question about the self that Thien navigates not only through the trauma of surviving genocide and losing one's entire family, but also through an exploration of dementia that slowly chips away at the brain. Janie's need to find ways to reconcile the self who lived through the genocide with the self who wants to live in the present leads her to the position at Montreal's Brain Research Center where she works with Hiroji, himself a refugee who survived the US fire bombing of Japan in WWII. Together, Janie and Hiroji pursue questions about selves that grapple with trauma and loss until Hiroji leaves suddenly to find his brother "James Matsui [who] had vanished in 1975" (Thien 18). During Janie and Hiroji's early work together, one of their patients, a man in the early stages of Alzheimer's, inquires about the essence of our selves or what might be called a soul:

I have been wondering, the man wrote, how to measure what I will lose. How much circuitry, how many cells have to become damaged before I, before the person my children know, is gone? Is there a self buried in the amygdala or the hippocampus? Is there one burst of electricity that stays constant all my life? I would like to know which part of the mind remains untouched, barricaded, if there is any part of me that lasts, that is incorruptible, that absolute center of who I am. (Thien 16 original emphasis)

In the passage just before this quotation, Janie recalls when Hiroji spoke about consciousness during a lecture. When he imagined consciousness, "he said that he imagined the brain as a hundred billion pinballs, where the ringing of sound, in all its

amplitude and velocity, contained every thought and impulse, all our desires spoken and unspoken, self-serving, survivalist, and contradictory” (15-16). “Maybe what exists beneath (tissue and bone and cells),” he continues, “and what exists above (ourselves, memory, love) can be reconciled and understood as one thing, maybe it’s all the same, the mind is the brain, the mind is the soul, the soul is the brain, etc.” (16). Though Hiroji appears to posit an indivisible mind/body connection, he simultaneously cautions against attempting to understand the brain, body, or self as just one thing. Attempting to reduce consciousness to one thing “is like watching a hand cut open another hand, remove the skin, and examine the tissue and bone. All it wants is to understand itself. The hand might become self-aware, but won’t it be limited still?” (Thien 16). Hiroji cautions against the dangers of peeling back layers in order to become self-aware perhaps because the self should not be understood as just one thing. The point may be to leave open the complexity that surrounds us and to understand that one’s self is not an entire whole, but rather many selves might exist within us whether or not we have reconciled ourselves to them. The abrupt shift between their patient’s questions about an essential self marked simply by the word “[end]” (Thien 16) signals Thien’s own uncertainty and desire to leave the question open.

Thien further complicates the search for an essential self by presenting us with characters who want to shed their selves because sometimes people “no longer wish to be themselves, to be associated with their abandoned identities. They go to great lengths in the hopes that they will never be found” (Thien 2). The novel is consumed by loss, whether the unwilling loss of loved ones or the willed loss of the self; “the living had to

become the disappeared: in the novel, the unnamed protagonist becomes Mei, and later becomes Janie; Sopham becomes Rithy; and [Hiroji's brother] James becomes Kwan" (Troeung, "Witnessing" 163). As Troeung suggests, the characters' loss of identity is not the "liberating free play of identity celebrated by postmodernism," nor can it be explained by a diagnosis of dissociation identity disorder; rather, "it is, Thien's novel suggests, a spiritual rupture in which one's soul, the '*pralung*' (165), has disappeared from the body, awaiting the time when it can be called back" ("Witnessing" 163). Troeung elaborates: "*Dogs at the Perimeter* illustrates how public acts of disappearance are mirrored in or initiate private acts of disappearance, how parts of the self are stolen or hidden away, whether in response to the need to present trauma or as a self-protective measure to allow for the possibility of future selves" ("Witnessing" 163). It would be too easy to assume that Thien is trying to tell us that nothing about histories or ourselves lasts. Instead, perhaps everything—no matter how painful or traumatic—from memory, history, experience and the body, mind, or soul can exist together in one body, so that the parts of one's self that last are comprised of all of these things simultaneously pinging off each other like pinballs.

Wholeness is not the key to survival and sometimes that central part of a person that might last needs to be torn apart; sometimes you have to know "how to cleave [your] soul" (Thien 106). Sopham describes this process when he discusses each of his identities, the part of him that lived before the genocide and the version of him that was forced to join the Khmer Rouge, who was named Rithy. "What is Sopham? he asked himself. He is a seed in the dirt, belonging to no one. Rithy will survive for a little while,

and then he, too, will disintegrate” (Thien 106). He wishes that he could have passed on this knowledge that the self can be malleable, that the soul can be hewn into pieces, to his father because it might “have protected him; our father had not known how to cleave his soul” (Thien 106). Thien’s repeated use of the term “cleave” here is interestingly ambivalent, as it can mean both to split and to embrace. Thien hints at a meaning beyond Sopham’s use of the term “cleave,” as she signals towards the simultaneous actions of splitting and sticking closely to that may occur when he and Janie force parts of themselves to disappear. Perhaps the parts of their souls that have been forced to disappear are gone, but not released or disavowed; to cleave one’s soul under duress may mean to embrace the part that was forced to leave, to wait until it can return. Thien’s use of the word “cleave” may also connect to an understanding of the self put forward by scientific epistemologies. “Neurologically,” Hiroji explained to Janie, “it was possible for the world outside to fragment, to splinter, and yet for the self to remain intact” (Thien 145). The soul can cleave to protect itself, identities can arise anew, and along with the loved ones that she carries, each of her own selves exists inside Janie, waiting for her to breathe life into them.

In an approach to Thien’s question of whether there is something lasting at the absolute center of who we are, I would like to propose that stories—here I focus on the role of stories centered around animals—comprise a part of this center. Stories can teach us how to think about our place in the world and it is significant that one part of Janie that remains consistent throughout her life is attached to the story of animals in the Ramayana passed on by her father. This story follows her as she shifts from her unnamed self who

lived before the genocide, to Mei during the Khmer Rouge regime, and finally to Janie who we meet as she is trying to come to terms with her past. In turn, by naming her cat Jambavan, Janie follows the story back and brings it into her present life in ways that both connect her past and present families and invites Jambavan into her family. Further, a focus on animals in the novel works to maintain the tension between keeping something safe and letting it go, cleaving the soul, carrying loved ones, and letting parts of oneself disappear.

The Afterlives of the Cambodian Genocide

Dogs at the Perimeter begins with a glimpse of Janie's life about 30 years after the Cambodian Genocide. Initially set in Montreal, the novel follows the histories of a few characters as they lead back to Japan, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. The US bombing and subsequent abandonment of Cambodia from 1969-1973 set the stage for the rise of the Khmer Rouge. In what would become Pol Pot's Cambodia, between 1975 and 1979, approximately 2.2 million people were killed, countless people were disappeared, and numerous others sought refuge in different countries. The Khmer Rouge's aim was to "transform Cambodia into a rural, classless society in which there were no rich people, no poor people, and no exploitation" (Dy 2). "To keep you is no benefit, to destroy you is no loss" became a popular phrase for the Khmer Rouge. This history of terror was under-recognized internationally, swept up in a flood of atrocities stemming from the Vietnam War. The Khmer Rouge even held onto its UN seat, with considerable international support, until 1993. During the Cambodian Genocide, "Angkar turned the world upside

down” (Thien 104), and “in this ‘world upside down’—[which was] a product of generations of colonialism, poverty, corruption, and imperialism—new identities were created” (Troeng, *Intimate* 82).¹⁰ Thien outlines specific events from the Cambodian Genocide through Janie’s eyes, as she shifts in each section of the novel from an unnamed girl to Mei and eventually to Janie. Janie witnesses the disappearance, murder, rape, and torture of countless people both loved and unknown. The story takes place “thirty years later and still [she] remember[s] everything” (Thien 154).

Following the events of the Cambodian Genocide, *Dogs at the Perimeter* unravels Janie’s psychological trauma. Though psychological trauma as a consequence of historical trauma is considered a “hidden scar” (Van Schaak 1), something that is often overlooked and misunderstood, the past decade has seen a concerted effort to contend with the psychological effects of the genocide in Cambodia on survivors. The Cambodian Genocide involved an “intentionally psychological component. The Khmer Rouge mission to obliterate Khmer culture and start anew made the mass psychology of the Khmer people a target for the regime” (Van Schaak 8). Pol Pot’s horrible vision was intent on attacking “the soul of a culture” (Reicherter 7); the Khmer Rouge targeted important cultural and religious icons, but they also went further and sought to dismantle familial relationships, trying to make love and intimacy things of the past. In *Dogs at the Perimeter*, Janie describes how “belongings were slid away, then family and loved ones, and then finally our loyalties and ourselves. Worthless or precious, indifferent or loved, all of our treasures had been treated the same” (39). From sex to friendship and familial

¹⁰ Angkar is the name of the Communist Party of Kampuchea, which Pol Pot led, and its followers were known as Khmer Rouge.

love, the Khmer Rouge sought to control and exploit various forms of love and intimacy because they “were threatened by all expressions of love—between husbands and wives, parents and children, friends and colleagues. Everyone had to renounce personal intimacies” (Becker 224). Mourning too was strictly forbidden: “to pray, to grieve the missing, to long for the old life, all these were forms of betrayal” (Thien 79).

Thien focuses on the lasting psychological impact of the Khmer Rouge regime, and she demonstrates how Janie’s familial relationships with her husband and son bear the brunt of her history. Janie trudges through periods of depression and isolation. On her worst days she quickly becomes disoriented and scattered, conditions that on a few occasions lead to aggression against her son and an inability to soothe him. On other, seemingly clear, days her memories of Cambodia, her father, and brother flow into her everyday life. While running errands or riding the bus, she might see someone or something and seamlessly the narrative returns us to a time either before or during the genocide and to people who have since passed away. For instance, Janie describes, “I begin walking, unsure where to go. I smell coffee from a nearby bakery, I see my little brother and myself, and the smell of bread permeates the air. We are caught outside when the air raid sirens begin. I try to pull him away” (61). This was “last night’s memory,” Janie explains, “when mortar fire started and the rockets began to fall, the middle of the hot season, the beginning of the last Khmer Rouge offensive” (61). Janie’s history is never far away from her, as it somehow manages to both haunt her and simply be present at all times. In another moment, after hearing a woman tell her child, “*we are safe as houses,*” Janie sees her father “in the shape of another person, walking up ahead. I see the

suit of clothes he used to wear, the haircut he had, his briefcase and his scuffed, worn-down shoes” (63; original emphasis). Janie’s experiences could be diagnosed as a clear case of PTSD or she could also have a chronic and more severe form of PTSD called Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) (Troeng “Witnessing” 163).

It is important to note that Thien does not lean solely on psychology in her novel. Instead, she troubles “easy” psychological diagnoses and “questions whether such biomedical discourse can adequately account for the traumatic experience of specific cultural groups such as Cambodian Genocide survivors” (Troeng, *Intimate* 72). Through Thien’s representation of the afterlives of trauma, Troeng uncovers significant connections between psychological diagnoses and ethnic stereotypes, the role of religion and conversion, as well as the clear notion that trauma cannot be analyzed, compartmentalized, and made sense of through psychological discourses alone (“Witnessing” 162). Instead, through story Thien confronts “the limits of a scientific epistemological framework for understanding the traumas induced in socially—and historically—situated contexts such as the Cambodian genocide” (Troeng, *Intimate* 73-74). Thien affirms the role of Buddhist epistemology for dealing with grief and trauma, and in doing so, Troeng contends that she makes “a move away from a vision of haunting as a negative form of possession and illness to haunting as an enabling form of carrying the dead” (Troeng, “Witnessing” 164). It becomes clear that in the aftermath of the Cambodian genocide, history, memory, and lost loved ones collide in the present in ways that are not easy to sort through. I would argue that Thien doesn’t stop with a troubling of psychological discourses and their inability to interact sufficiently with other

epistemologies. From the beginning, Thien centers her focus on a broader relationship between permanence and impermanence, things that last and don't last. The novel demonstrates how belief systems come together and fall apart in the face of loss. My methodology attends to the contribution of each belief or grappling with identity—psychology, biology, and Buddhism, for instance—and then works to see how meaning arises when they are all woven together. I also highlight the ways in which story can confront the limits of how epistemologies put forward particular understandings of animals by having multiple ways of knowing animals move alongside and extend each other.

Before she leaves Cambodia, Meng, a man she met on the boat and remains close friends with, says a prayer to Janie's family as a form of Buddhist ancestor worship. Meng's character represents "what Cambodians would call a *Krou Khmer*, 'spiritual healers who could divine the cause of a person's illness or misfortune and provide treatment through prayers, blessings, or meditation with spirits'" (Troeng, "Witnessing" 164). Meng's prayer calls on Janie's lost loved ones: "'Your daughter is leaving now,' he had said, addressing my ghosts. 'Your sister has found a new home. You, too, must walk to your own destiny'" (Thien 140). Even as Janie's ancestors must walk their own paths, Janie's mother also taught her that she must carry them with her. Ancient stories passed from Janie's mother's grandmother's grandmother tell her that, "when a child is born, threads are tied around the infant's wrists to bind her soul to her body. The soul is a slippery thing" (253). A child must be tied to his or her own soul because a soul can be sent running or lured away from the body, "but in darkness, unpursued, the soul, the

pralung, can climb back through an open window, it can be returned” (Thien 253). Most importantly, her mother explains that the point of this life is not to live in isolation; “we did not come in solitude [...]. Inside us, from the beginning, we were entrusted with many lives. From the first morning to the last, we try to carry them until the end” (253). Throughout the novel Janie remains caught between a desire to release her ghosts, to let their souls move into their own futures, and the need to carry them with her. Interestingly, through her representation of a tiger and a deer, as well as Jambavan the cat, Thien brings animals into the narrative at this point between wanting loved ones’ souls to move into their own futures and wanting to carry them along, wanting to let them go and keep them safe. Animals give Janie a way of envisioning another life for her mother and father and they present a way for her to carry her loved ones with her through her life.

The Tiger and the Deer: Seeing Family in Wild Animals

During the years that Janie was forced to work in agricultural labour camps, her brother was enlisted into the Khmer Rouge, and her mother became ill and was taken to an infirmary. Janie found a way to visit her shortly before she died. The first night with her mother “passed slowly. The infirmary was never still. People called to ghosts who were not there, living ones or lost ones, names that no one answered to. The words filled the space like an incantation” (Thien 118). Her mother hallucinated in her state between life and death and Janie explains how, “all too clearly, I could see the images in her mind, our white kitchen, her silvery pots, her family. I lay beside her and tried to disappear into my mother’s world, to become her, to keep her near and lose myself instead. I begged her

to be strong, to come back. I could not bear to survive alone” (119). On the third day at the infirmary, Janie was informed that she had to leave.

Instead of staying with her mother while she passed, Janie recalls how she left. “I stood, weeping, trying to will myself to return. Go back, I told myself. She needs you. She’ll die without you” (120-121). After she left, Janie slipped into a space of grief stripped bare of history, memory, intimacy, and momentarily let herself come undone. But she found comfort in her friend Bopha and she explains how “my thoughts, my memories, my body, were separating but she held me tightly, she tried to keep me from coming apart” (121). Bopha tells Janie a story her grandmother had told her about a book that held the answer to everything. She dreamed of finding it, of reading it, of walking “into a temple, it would be vast and rich as a palace, I would turn all the pages, I would see everything that had ever happened, everything that was coming” (Thien 124). Instead, Janie remembers that “she looked at me as if she could see straight into my heart, into the center of who I was. ‘But I know now,’ she said softly. ‘I’ve looked and looked, but there’s no answer for me.’” (Thien 124). Grief and a foreboding sense of nothingness permeate this section of the novel, which slowly works to make Janie feel like she is coming undone.

In this space of grief and loneliness, when Janie’s memories of her loved ones have been enveloped by darkness, she finds something to hold onto. She sees something wondrous:

I remember birds sliding upwards into the ruby night. Once, while gathering kindling in the forest, I saw a tiger stalking a deer. I stood very still, thinking of my mother, believing that she had come now, she had forgiven me. Instead, the

tiger vanished and the deer with him. They were the most beautiful creatures I had ever seen in the world. (Thien 125)

Janie's encounter with the tiger and the deer feels familiar and even formulaic. Like the bobcat and the eagles, the tiger and deer fit a formula for wild animal encounters during times of grief. Each encounter is comprised of four main mechanisms. First, they all happen within the specific context of grief when people feel empty, bare or engulfed by nothingness. Second, the animals encountered and given meaning are charismatic, rare, beautiful, wild creatures. As I mentioned earlier, the animals that people attribute meaning to, like bobcats, eagles, or a tiger stalking a deer are animals that can be positively associated with lost loved ones. Unlike an association with less wondrous animals or insects whose resemblance may be less complimentary, encounters with charismatic animals act as a way to pay homage to the dead. Third, the encounters are intensely meaningful, but fleeting. Not usually reciprocal or reciprocated, such encounters are quick; the animal is there for a moment and then gone. The animal does not appear specifically to interact directly with us, but has usually been glimpsed while roaming, hunting, or heading somewhere. Fourth, the vagueness of these encounters is ripe for our own interpretations. The unknown and unknowable aspects of the animals, who are especially wild and relatively mysterious, provide an openness for humans to interpret them as "nature's messengers" (Holland 2).

Is it that an animal's otherness feels more familiar or familial in grief when the connections that we need are also the connections we are afraid of? Or, is the otherness of the animal precisely what enables such a connection in the first place? I do not think that the encounters here are examples of the ways in which animals become open signifiers

for human desires. Rather, ephemeral, wondrous encounters with animals are enabled by an otherness that holds us apart, so we cannot ask the animal why they have appeared, they cannot explain their presence, and we cannot tell them about our grief. We just feel their presence as something unexpected, there briefly, and they become a way to give loss meaning. Though the encounters I take up here are not reciprocal and do not necessarily act in the interest of animals, I posit that they perform a kind of reaching out to animals. These moments take wild beings and create a kind of kinship by seeing family members or loved ones reflected in their presence, not for who they actually are, but for who they come to represent. Still, they become family for a fleeting moment and this, I would argue, represents a desire—in our lowest and loneliest times—to want to believe that the more-than-human world is listening to us.

In the novel, Janie encounters the tiger and deer at a time when she feels like a space opened around her and consumed the memories of her family. The tiger and the deer show up when Janie thinks that she has pushed her family into the dark and forgotten them. I am not claiming that this encounter saved her from the devastation she faced during the genocide, but I maintain that the encounter reveals the cracks in the space around Janie that show she has not entirely let go of her family and that there is something about family that lasts even when they are gone. Specifically, the tiger and the deer carry traces of her mother. The tiger and deer inspired Janie to think of her mother and what it might feel like to have her forgiveness, although they disappear instead of offering this to her. Even though they vanish instead of offering Janie forgiveness, the appearance of the animals, which Janie describes as “the most beautiful creatures I had

ever seen in the world” (125), at a time when she felt consumed by nothingness encapsulates the simultaneous meaninglessness and meaningfulness of these wild animal encounters. To feel her mother coming to her as a tiger and a deer demonstrates that Janie still feels her in the world, though her grief has taken an animal shape by bringing her to Janie in the form of a tiger and a deer.

The Father and The Cat: Finding Family in Companion Animals

There is a cat who roams the pages of *Dogs at the Perimeter*. Her presence is subtle and she could be someone who is easy to overlook, but to read her through the Hindu and Buddhist epistemologies in the novel reveals an intricate relation between her and Janie’s father. In the midst of Janie’s struggle to both escape and understand her past, this cat provides a way to hold onto her loved ones without carrying them by herself. This cat is the first character we meet in the novel: “there is a cat who finds the puddles of sunshine. She was small when the boy was small, but then she grew up and left him behind. Still, at night, she hunkers down on Kiri’s bed, proprietorial. They were born just a few weeks apart, but now he is seven and she is forty-four. My son is the beginning, the middle, and the end” (5). Janie’s relationship with Jambavan brings intentionality to the ways in which animals help her carry grief. Unlike the tiger and the deer whose presence was fleeting, Janie purposely brings Jambavan closer, representing a kind of lineage passed down from the tiger and deer encounter to Jambavan. The closeness between Janie and Jambavan is premised on her position as a companion animal. Kiri and his cat also share a close bond. In the same way as she is proprietorial towards him, she is also often

described as “Kiri’s cat,” and these lines of ownership point to the way in which Janie wants them to belong to each other. Though she is Kiri’s cat, Janie also cares deeply for her. The cat witnesses the first time that Janie’s overwhelmed and disoriented state deteriorates into forgetting her son at daycare, and then a complete inability to interact with or comfort him. Janie watches as Kiri “picked up his cat and buried his face in her fur” (37) while she struggles to make him dinner and put it on the table. Janie eventually locks herself in her bedroom where she finds that

Jambavan was lying on my pillow. Kiri’s cat watched me lazily. I liked her company. I remembered the day we brought her home, this tiny kitten who loved to nestle inside Kiri’s sock drawer. Around the apartment, my son would crawl like a maniac, sputtering, “Jambajambajamba.” Navin said, “Sounds like a Latin dance.” The name had been my idea, Jambavan, the king of bears, a hero of the Ramayana, the epic that, in Cambodia, we called the Reamker. (Thien 37-38)

It was her father who first introduced Janie to the Ramayana and Jambavan through his stories when she was a child. “Tonight, he says, we will travel the world with Jambavan, the king of bears. My father can recite all the shiny strands of the Ramayana” (Thien 64). Janie’s father is the only one of her family members whose life or death during the genocide remains unknown. He represents “what it was to have the missing live on, unending, within us. They grow so large, and we so empty, that even the coldest winter nights won’t swallow them” (Thien 9). Thien weaves several threads through Jambavan and the cat becomes a narrative device that ties Janie to her history, her father, and Cambodia, as well as to her son. The depth of Jambavan’s character becomes clear, however, only when we look into the role of *The Ramayana* in the novel.

The Ramayana is a foundational Hindu text that chronicles an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, prince Rama, on his quest to kill a powerful ogre named Ravana. After Rama's father puts his younger brother on the throne, Rama, his wife Sita, and his brother Lakshmana go into exile in the jungle. Eventually Ravana abducts Sita and holds her captive on his island for many years. "With the help of an army of monkeys and bears," Wendy Doniger explains, "in particular the monkey Hanuman, who leaped across to Lanka and then built a causeway for the armies to cross over, Rama killed Ravana and brought Sita home with him" (221). With his leap across oceans, and his unfaltering devotion to Rama, Hanuman plays an invaluable role in *The Ramayana*. But, Hanuman was very hesitant about his ability to complete the jump, and it was Jambavan, the King of the Bears, who convinced him that he could do it. Even though the characters in the novel predominantly follow Buddhist traditions, by calling on *The Ramayana*, Thien picks up on the interconnectedness of Hinduism and Buddhism, as well as the intricate history of Hinduism in Cambodia.

Initial contact between India and Cambodia happened in order to facilitate trading in goods, spices, animal products (ivory, feathers, horns), and natural resources between India and China. The influence of India in Cambodia is described by David Chandler as a process of "Indianization" (12). Everything from clothing and eating practices to musical instruments and animal husbandry were inflected with Indianness. The *Ramayana*, or the *Reamker*, continues to be one of the most prominent and influential mythic texts in Cambodia. In a counter-balance to the forces of Hinduizing and Indianization, the Cambodian version of *The Ramayana* does not simply copy the Indian version, "for the

Reamker reshapes the form and content of the original text to suit Khmer-Buddhist themes and indigenous Khmer elements” (Troeung, “Iterations” 102). Though the philosophical nature of the texts, to teach lessons about justice, fidelity, loyalty, and the struggle between good and evil, remains an essential part of each version, the supernatural and divine elements are always at the forefront (Troeung, “Iterations” 102). I emphasize the connections between Hinduism, Buddhism, India and Cambodia to show how Thien’s representation of Jambavan and the threads that lead back to *The Ramayana* embeds an Indian-seeming quality of Cambodia into *Dogs at the Perimeter*.

Within Hindu mythology and in “the Hindu religious imaginary” animals play crucial roles “both as actual living creatures” and as representations or symbols of the human world (Doniger 40). Everything from yogic postures and sexual positions to theological schools are named after animals (Doniger 40). They are vehicles for the gods and goddesses to ride on, incarnate forms assumed to battle evil, close companions, and dangerous enemies. Animals in Hindu texts appear both as objects to teach lessons about power, violence, and desire, and subjects who symbolize various groups of people. As Wendy Doniger writes, “clearly the two—the animals of the terrain and the animals of the mind—are intimately connected, and both are essential to our understanding of Hinduism” (40). Specifically in *The Ramayana*, animals become humans’ side shadows, “they suggest what might have been. They function in the same way as the human unconscious” (Doniger 239). Predominantly through bears and monkeys, *The Ramayana* invests in an intimacy with animals where their actions mirror human lives, desires or dreams. This is not a typical version of anthropocentrism, as Doniger argues, because

animals do not act as straightforward analogies of human life. Instead, she explains that animal worlds “don’t mirror [human] life exactly; [this] is a mythological transformation, taking the pieces and rearranging them to make a slightly different pattern, as dreamwork does, according to Freud” (Doniger 239). Zoomorphism functions in Hindu mythology to change people into animals, so that animals come to embody our deepest, darkest, most impossible desires. In dreams animals often replace people towards whom the dreamer has strong, but repressed emotions. In other words, “the dreamer displaces emotions felt toward people whom [s]he cannot bear to visualize directly in his [or her] dreams and projects those emotions onto animals” (Doniger 239). Animals and animality become a site for intimate but repressed, impossible, or forbidden desires to take shape.

Bearing interwoven threads of Hinduism and Buddhism, Jambavan the cat acts as a shadow of Janie’s father. When he finishes telling Janie and Sopham tales from the *Reamker*, Janie asks her father which character she would be in this story. In response, she remembers, “my father turned toward me, as if trying to read the future from my expression. He had curving, lifting, furrowing eyebrows. ‘You’ll be like the great Hanuman, leaping across oceans. Between you and the heavens, my sweet, nothing will hold you back.’” (64). This leap can be read as foreshadowing Janie’s leap between Cambodia and Canada, so if Janie is Hanuman in this construction, her father becomes Jambavan, the one who instils strength and hope in her to make the jump. A kind of literary dreamwork read through Hindu mythology reveals how Janie’s cat comes to embody the memory of her father.

It is important to note that Janie does not perform these connections overtly in the novel, nor does she directly explain to Navin or Kiri why she named the cat Jambavan. Jambavan the cat acts as both a way for Janie to invest some of her history in another being, as well as a literary device to tether names, people, animals, history, and longing together in the small body of a cat. I contend that Jambavan's character reveals how much literary animals can mean in texts, if we can learn how to read them well. The name that Thien uses to tie Jambavan the cat to Janie's father ties Janie's current family to her history and the loved ones who died during the genocide, but continue to live on in her. Seeing how Janie commits some of the most integral parts of herself to a cat establishes a human-animal relationship that challenges who we think we are as humans, as well as who we think of as family. If our most precious, intimate memories can be invested in or held by animals, how does that change our conception of what makes us human? Like the tiger and the deer, Jambavan the cat also embodies Janie's loved ones, but unlike a wondrous, chance encounter, this cat's embodiment of Janie's father is direct, purposeful, and constructed. In this way, Jambavan the cat becomes a partner to Janie, someone who carries her history, but also helps her keep a promise that she made to her mother to carry her loved ones into the next life. Janie remembers her last moments in Cambodia and imagines her parents there with her, asking her to be brave, to remember love, and to carry them with her:

My last image of Cambodia was of darkness, it was the sound of nearly forty mute wanderers, of silent prayers. I closed my eyes. My father told me how Hanuman had crossed the ocean, how he had gone into another life. Look back, my mother said, one last time. I followed her through our twilight apartment, walked in the shade of my father, past bare walls and open windows, the noise of the street pouring in. Between us, she said, I had known love, I had lived a childhood

that might sustain me. I remembered beauty. Long ago, it had not seemed necessary to note its presence, to set the dogs out at the perimeter. I felt her in the persistent drumming of water against the boat's hull. Guard the ones you love, she told me. Carry us with you into the next life.¹¹ (Thien 135)

This passage encapsulates each role that animals play in *Dogs at the Perimeter*, starting with Hanuman and *The Ramayana*, moving to an image of dogs set to guard our most precious memories, and ending with a request to carry loved ones through Janie's lifetime. On its own, this passage shows how animals are so thoroughly entangled in Janie's memories of her family and Cambodia, as well as how she moves through relationships and intimacies after enduring so much loss. If we look past these literary animals—mythical, wild, domestic—we miss the essential ways in which Janie ties herself to other animal beings after losing everything, and we don't properly see what her mind holds onto when everything else falls away.

The Dog and the Wolf: Articulating Uncertainty

On a day when Janie feels like she is coming undone, like something had “turned over in [her], broken” (Thien 139), she phones Meng because she wants to tell him, “I know too much, I have too many selves and they no longer fit together. I need to know how it is possible to be strong enough. How can a person ever learn to be brave?” (140). Without requiring Janie to actually speak these words aloud, Meng responds by revisiting the significant and ongoing task of addressing her ghosts: “‘we have to try again,’ he says. ‘Not just once but many times, throughout our lives.’” (140). At this particular moment, Janie addresses her ghosts: “*Leave me, I think, Let me go.*” (140). But Meng's

¹¹ I will return to the image of “dogs at the perimeter” in the following section.

words follow her throughout the day as she rides the train and watches her reflection pass in the windows: “We move from brightness into a furtive grey, my reflection floats against the window. ‘*Entre chien et loup*,’ Hiroji would have said. It was his favourite expression: that quality of light when we confuse the dog and the wolf, the beloved and the feared” (143). Explained another way, the expression refers “to deep twilight, a darkness in which an approaching silhouette can be seen, but friend or foe cannot be distinguished. The phrase, between the dog and the wolf, also implies emotional uncertainty, the nuanced space between hope and fear” (Bessai). Uncertainty is a key to my exploration of grief and animals in this chapter. Thien’s focus on complexity and uncertainty is an invitation to see how we should never try to make sense of our selves, stories, histories through one frame alone. What is required to understand Janie’s attempts to come to terms with her history, for instance, is a nuanced mix of frameworks, from exploring the history and ongoing impact of the Cambodian Genocide and survivor’s guilt, to learning about theories of consciousness, studies about brain degeneration, and how to build familial relationships that can sustain someone who carries lasting effects of surviving a historical trauma. And still, all we are given are pieces to turn over and parse through carefully because saying anything absolute, concrete, and definitive might lead to a diminished awareness. What kinds of readings do we close off in our search for concrete answers to questions that are often too complicated to be made sense of through singular theories, discourses, or epistemologies? Conversely, what kinds of readings open up when we see them in the quality of light that occurs when we confuse the dog and the wolf? When we are open to the complexity of

the novel, animals exist amidst and outside the frames needed to address Janie's loss and grief, although their presence initially seems relatively small. When we learn to pay attention to literary animals in the novel, a new understanding of how Janie lives with loss opens up alongside an unfolding relationship between grief and animals. I argue that Thien's use of animals throughout the novel is essential to understanding how Janie processes trauma, loss, grief, and healing. Even though animals' presences throughout the novel are subtle, their lives are connected to Janie's in ways that reveal close and meaningful human-animal relationships, unravel a conception of family as not exclusively human, and ultimately ask us to be moved by what literary animals can reveal when we are willing to listen to them.

Hiroji's favourite expression catches my eye, in addition, because it picks up on the fact that uncertainty extends to an aspect of our relationship to animals; there will always be something unknowable about them. Animals and animality work in the saying because they can stand for qualities commonly and culturally associated with them, but these qualities can also quickly change depending on the context. Although dogs and wolves represent certain traits, we can never definitively know them in every context. A brief history of dogs and wolves reveals that the most familiar kind of dog, the domesticated dog or *Canis familiaris*, encompasses a numerous and growing group of breeds who each have their own closely connected and contingent relationship to humans and human history, predominantly as companion species. Susan McHugh communicates the variety and complexity of this species:

This group of animals has the largest range of body types and sizes of any mammal, ranging anywhere from 0.5 to 100 kilos (1 to 250 lb), any

combination of which can produce fertile offspring; the broadest geographic range of all four-footed creatures (their populations are second only to humans in worldwide distribution); the longest history of human domestication of any animal by several thousand years; and the ability to produce fertile offspring with other species, including coyotes, jackals and wolves. (*Dog* 7-8)

We generally associate dogs with qualities that reflect their solidified status as companion species *par excellence*; we think they are loyal, devoted, protective, loving (unconditionally), obedient, and strong. The qualities ascribed to dogs vary across cultures too; where some societies see them as beloved and treasured companions or family members, others see them as pests or food. The image of dogs as precious and loving family members shifts when we begin to see how particular breeds have been “enlisted to police racial, national and class boundaries” (*Dog* 122). For instance, the German Shepherd carries a complicated history that would see it at times as the ideal companion and protector to some, and at other times a threat or weapon mobilized against racialized people fighting for civil rights.¹² When Thien writes that Janie must “set the dogs at the perimeter” (135) she simultaneously invokes an image of dogs as loyal protectors, though their protectiveness has been mobilized within a fraught history of dogs being used against racialized people.

The human histories of wolves are contingent and run parallel to human actions but for very different reasons than dogs.¹³ Wolves mark a threat to human desires to settle and control the land because people view them as an apex predator whose intelligence

¹² See pages 116-125 in McHugh’s *Dog* for more information on breed-specific histories and roles of dogs like the German Shepherd.

¹³ In Chapter Three I will explore Ruth Ozeki’s endeavour to use the speculative and creative conventions of literature to write a history that belongs to wolves themselves, instead of one that revolves solely around what we empirically and scientifically know about them.

and cunning rivals our own. For some, the wolf is revered as an animal with complex familial structures and loyalties, and as fierce hunters. To others, wolves stand a little too closely with the wild, untameable, vicious sides of nature that impede and disrupt human plans for settlement and agriculture. Even as they sought to eradicate wolves, “humans, seeking to do harm to others, have cloaked themselves in images of the wolf as hunter or warrior while others who sought, or were compelled, to do harm in more malign ways became wolves—a transformation that was feared for centuries in Western cultures” (Marvin 7). Wolves’ images have become so muddled that they have been separated into the “scientific wolf” and the “cultural wolf” (Marvin 7) in an attempt to establish some distance between the two constructions, though I would argue that the distinction is not so easy. Configuring the dog or the wolf in ways that align perfectly and concretely with whichever association or construction suits the image, symbolism, or stories we hope to tell about them misses the various points at which they confound these associations.

Hiroji’s saying looks to animals and extends the same value of uncertainty to them as beings who are not always or only the beloved or the feared; we should come to value the quality of light that occurs when uncertainty comes to the fore. In spite of our attempts to pin them down and force them into culturally and scientifically constructed boxes, animals continue to escape our confines. Seeing dogs in ways that reaffirm the love, loyalty, and care ascribed to them overlooks the ways in which they can also be dangerous and feared or, even more importantly, the ways in which we are often dangerous or threatening to them. Dogs who stray—even slightly—from the traditional associations of beloved, trustworthy protectors often suffer violent consequences at our

hands. The same thing holds true for wolves. Claiming that wolves are always beings to fear misses the ways in which they are vital coproducers of habitats and ecologies, how they actually benefit environments that they inhabit, and the highly intelligent and complex social structures and bonds that they form. The point of highlighting the unknowability of animals is to further reinforce the importance of uncertainty and valuing the quality of light that would have us confuse and blur the common associations that we think we know well. Uncertainty can be a useful strategy to follow into an exploration of the relationship between grief and animals, for instance. Sometimes it is necessary to hold ideas—especially ideas about animals—open and unravel their complexity instead of trying to pin them down to one or two meanings. Overall, uncertainty precipitates the need to approach issues like health, healing, grief, and loss from various epistemologies in *Dogs at the Perimeter*.

The Scientist Who Weeps for Sea Slugs

So far, this chapter has explored how uncertain or entangled epistemologies are needed to understand what it means to long to see lost loved ones embodied by wild or companion animals in *Dogs at the Perimeter*. Each topic revolves around specific animals in the novel that shift between symbolic and mythological animals, from a tiger and a deer, to a cat, dogs, and wolves. It might seem strange to place *Aplysia*, a sea slug that Janie experiments on, next to such weighty animals, but a different world opens up, one that extends the aforementioned discussions and offers something unique, when we see *Aplysia* as a being who matters. As a researcher who works with *Aplysia*, Janie is

open to hearing what sea slugs can teach us scientifically and as beings who carry their own messages, and she passes on this openness to Kiri who—both through how Thien characterizes him and her descriptions of his thoughts—articulates an ethics arising from the question: what could literary animals tell us if we knew how to listen to them?

Aplysia is a genus of sea slugs that encompasses thirty-seven different species, most of whom live in subtropical and tropical zones, although one species has been found in the Arctic Circle. Their bodies can be translucent or tinged greenish with splotches of white or various shades of brown, and “there can sometimes be a pattern of dark brown or blackish lines forming a reticulate pattern over the head [... and sometimes] there can be scattered dark brown rings” (Rudman). Their size can vary “from just a couple of centimeters up to 60–70 cm for the monstrous *A. gigantea* from Australia. The Californian *A. vicaria* can weigh up to 15.9 kg, the size of a medium dog” (Moroz). *Aplysia* are “benthic animals, grazing on the sea beds or corals and eating algae or other plants. Seven species, for example *A. brasiliana*, are good swimmers and can cross large distances by traveling up to 1 km in one swim episode” (Moroz). When startled or feeling threatened *Aplysia* secrete a purple ink to disorient or sting whoever disturbed them. *Aplysia* have become a well-known model organism in neuroscience largely because of their giant neurons, and neuroscientist Eric R. Kandel won a Nobel Prize in Physiology for his research on memory storage conducted on *Aplysia*.¹⁴

¹⁴ For more information on *Aplysia* see: Eric R. Kandel’s *Behavioural Biology of Aplysia* (1979); Thomas H. Carefoot’s “*Aplysia*: Its Biology and Ecology” (1987); and N.B. Eales’ *Aplysia* (1921).

In the present of the novel, Janie has worked at the Brain Research Center for twelve years. “Many floors below,” Janie describes, “in my electrophysiology lab, I have listened, hour after hour, to the firing of single neurons. In my work, I harvest cells, gather data, measure electricity while, in the upper floors, lives open and change [...] so many selves are born and re-born here, lost and imagined anew” (34-35). Janie’s search for one essential self or a way to reconcile all of her different selves led her to this line of work where she spends her time experimenting on sea slugs. Though it seems an unlikely companion given Janie’s experiences with a tiger, a deer, and a cat, Thien pulls forward questions of reciprocity to and relationality with animals that work to shift the imbalance of interest on predominantly human concerns in the other encounters. Janie invites us to understand a new language between herself and Kiri that revolves around *Aplysia*; by challenging us to “weep for sea slugs,” Thien asks us to consider what sea slugs are owed in return for the multitude of ways in which their bodies have been dissected, manipulated, and harvested in experiments. Thien introduces *Aplysia* briefly when Janie bumps into her friend Bonnet at the BRC, who asks, “what I’ve been dissecting today and I tell him sea slugs” (35). Bonnet follows with a question about Kiri, “‘How’s your boy?’ he says, walking backwards now. ‘Seems like ages since Kiri visited.’ I deflect. ‘You never weep for sea slugs.’” (35). In this moment, Janie offers *Aplysia* as a distraction or deflection from having to discuss Kiri’s well being (as we learn, this is a result of Janie living separately from Kiri and her husband). Bonnet laughs at the statement, but I read it as a challenge and a prompt to ask: Should we weep for sea slugs?

Tania Aguila-Way has argued that Thein “constructs a poignant parallel between Janie and Aplysia as fellow subjects of learned fear” (“Uncertain” Section II) by drawing connections between Kandel’s fear-conditioning experiments on Aplysia and Janie’s experiences of fear and trauma during the genocide in Cambodia. Aguila-Way offers insights about Janie’s work with Aplysia that conceptualize Janie’s research in the lab as a way of sorting memories, producing a kind of knowledge that can “neutralize the uncertainties that pervade her past,” (*Fraught* 126) and cultivating a sense of security about the mind. She also offers a reading of the transfer of knowledge about Aplysia that occurs between Janie and Kiri (which I will analyze shortly) that emphasizes the way it “underscore[s] the limits of scientific reductionism” (*Fraught* 127). Curiously, Aguila-Way sticks almost exclusively to the scientific and biological processes surrounding Aplysia and avoids an emotional dimension, which is evidenced in the fact that she does not mention the exchange between Janie and Bonnet that asks us to weep for sea slugs. I am uneasy about readings that would foreground certainty and suggest a parallel between scientific experiments and historical events because it too hastily moves between the condition of the lab and the socio-political, cultural, and historical conditions that direct difficult and fraught histories of genocide, while also sidestepping questions about the ethics of experimenting on animals. I depart from Aguila-Way’s analysis by opening up a reading of Aplysia that values the contributions of science but does not see the sea slugs as beings who are exclusively stuck in scientific discourses as subjects for experimentation; I aim to uncover a way to read the sea slugs that Janie works on as parts of her family.

I would like to advance an argument that through Kiri, Aplysia, and the relation between them, the novel extends an ethics of transcorporeality to unconventional or uncared for animals, like Aplysia. The concept of transcorporeality comes from *Bodily Natures* where Stacy Alaimo explores the meeting of animals, matter, and wonder “by attending to the material interconnections between the human and the more-than-human world” (2). She argues that it is possible to “conjure an ethics lurking in an idiomatic definition of matter (or the matter): ‘The condition of or state of things regarding a person or thing, esp. as a subject or concern of wonder.’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*)” (*Bodily* 2). Her book puts forward a feminist materialist ethics through the concept of transcorporeality, which looks to the contact zone between humans and nature to assert the ways in which the human is inseparable from nature or the environment. “Potent ethical and political possibilities emerge,” Alaimo explains, “from the literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature” (*Bodily* 2). Alaimo breaks down the distinction between human bodies and nonhuman natures to arrive at an argument that our conceptions of human selves come undone when we see that what we uncritically call “‘the environment’ is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves” (*Bodily* 4). Transcorporeality is important here because it provides a language for the fluid barriers we have seen between humans and animals in the novel; it gives us a way to see what happens when more-than-human animals both astound and matter to us, and it requires an epistemological model that “demands more responsible, less confident epistemologies” (Alaimo, *Bodily* 22). As a theoretical site, transcorporeality “is where corporeal theories, environmental theories, and science

studies meet and mingle in productive ways” (Alaimo, *Bodily* 3). Human-animal fluidity in the novel is not confined to religious discourse and transcorporeality can be an apt concept to approach the relationship between religious, cultural, and scientific knowledges with “epistemological humility” (Troeng, “Witnessing” 164). Alongside religious and cultural epistemologies, Thien presents science as another way of knowing animals in the endeavour to know the self. Thien also demonstrates how scientific knowledge itself changes when Janie, searching Hiroji’s desk for clues towards his whereabouts, comes across a number of objects, including “a box of paperclips, and a thumb-sized bronze Buddha in a seated posture, both hands extended in a gesture of protection. Hiroji has an object coveted by all the other neurologists: a phrenological map of the brain, drawn onto a porcelain head” (33). Thien gestures to phrenology, which has now been widely disproved as a way of “humbling” scientific knowledge as well.

I am interested in how transcorporeal ethics relates to the representation of Kiri because Thien represents him and Janie understands him through animals and animality, but he also puts forward a connection to and curiosity about what *Aplysia* could teach us if we knew how to listen. Descriptions of Kiri in the novel offer their own entanglement between how Kiri is represented in the third-person omniscient narration and through Thien’s descriptions of Janie’s thoughts about him. More often than not, Thien pairs Kiri with animals and animality, which pulls him into a particular relationship to animals, as they constitute the way that both Janie and we, as readers, come to know him. In the first instance, Kiri follows his cat Jambavan, and he in turn becomes, “an elephant, a chariot, a glorious madman” (Thien 5). Thien introduces Jambavan and Kiri in tandem and their

relationship, where they belong with and to each other, puts Kiri in the most direct and sustained human-animal relationship in the novel. I do not think that Jambavan replaces Janie as Kiri's mother, but the way in which Janie draws them together tells us she thinks that Kiri has a meaningful companion in Jambavan because she pulls him simultaneously into a relationship with Janie's father, Kiri's grandfather – whom he has never met. In a way, Janie passes on her father's stories and history to Kiri through this connection to Jambavan, but Kiri also exists in a more abstract relation to animality.

Whether he becomes an elephant trundling across the floor, a cub racing around in a pack, a worm wiggling in a playful dance, or a delicate bird, animality takes over descriptions of Kiri. On the one hand, Kiri's descriptions demonstrate that Janie understands him largely through animal metaphors, and on the other hand, a kind of transcorporeal ethics arise through Kiri's place in the novel. Alongside the first description of Kiri as an elephant, I focus on three other instances where Thien describes Kiri through animality. First, one day Janie walks to Kiri's school to see him before he starts class: "There he is. I see him now, I see him. My son races across the grounds, a cub in a pack of awkward pups, pursuing a soccer ball" (28). Second, as Kiri runs toward Janie, a girl stops him and he says, "I'm a caterpillar," but "she frowns, 'No! You're not.' 'I'm a worm,' he says, charmingly, and the girl waves both arms in a kind of Hawaiian dance" (29). Third, when Kiri and Janie look at *Aplysia* together in her lab, Janie thinks of how "my son's lashes, long and frail, are like tiny wingtips. I kneel down, touching his shoulders. They seem frighteningly small, weightless" (150). I want to push Janie's promise to "guard the ones [she] love[s]" (135) to consider how this might also be

a promise to extend the perimeters of communities, families, and kinships beyond the human. While Janie's relationship to animals that is shaped by grief has limitations because she does not always consider the animal as more than a symbol, Kiri enacts a close bond and deep curiosity about what animals might tell us if we could listen to them. Kiri's character is the perfect place to see such a promise – to consider communities and kinships beyond the human in action because he pulls together the symbolic and mythological dimensions of animals and animality passed down in story into a material way of knowing and being with animals. Already we can see a kind of transcorporeal ethics emerge through the descriptions of Kiri that consistently pair him with animals and play with animality to blur his own body together with animal qualities. Kiri's descriptions capture a crux of transcorporeality and resemble what it might look like to see the ways "in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (Alaimo, *Bodily* 2).

Though it is an unexpected or even counterintuitive place to find transcorporeal ethics, Janie and Kiri's relationship to *Aplysia* act as a model that precipitates a vision of human-animal reciprocity that highlights the selfhood of animals. Since Kiri is Janie's son, their relationships to *Aplysia* challenge forms of kinship based on consanguinity and human patriarchal modes of inheritance. Whereas cultural and religious epistemologies portrayed in texts like *The Ramayana* seem preoccupied with human lines of descent, the feminist materialist epistemologies embodied by Janie's knowledge of *Aplysia* move against the grain of anthropocentric scientific epistemologies by providing the possibility of blurring the ideas of family and inheritance as only human. Each representation of

Aplysia in the novel is remorseful. Unlike more commonplace justifications for scientific experimentation on animals that tell us to see the moral weight of their lives and bodies as sacrifices to a greater human cause, Thien challenges those who “never weep for sea slugs” (35).

When Thien returns to Aplysia later in the novel, Janie gives us a reason to feel for sea slugs as she describes her work with/on them: “anaesthetized, pinned flat, cut open with surgical scissors, the innocent creature and her brethren have given me more cells than I dare count. I feel as if I can operate on Aplysia blindfolded: first, removing a tangle of nerves, then, carefully, delicately, extracting a particular neuron and its spindly axon, the axon sagging out like fishing line” (150). Though full of remorse, each description is not only full of pain and dissection; some describe how Aplysia live and detail Janie’s long history with these creatures. “Aplysia was the first creature I studied long ago, in Vancouver”, Janie recalls, “in the sea, she looks like a petal swirling through the water, her gills clapping softly together” (150). Janie passes her knowledge of Aplysia on to Kiri, who already knows about neurobiology and experimentation. While Janie listens to what Aplysia can teach us about human brain chemistry, Kiri hears something else. In one particular encounter between Kiri and Aplysia, a more reciprocal way of knowing and thinking about animals appears. Between Janie and Kiri lies Aplysia; Janie tells him that the sea slug carries a message, and Kiri is open to hearing what Aplysia might tell him. Thien leaves us with a deep curiosity of what might happen if we understood how much animals matter and how much they have to tell us. “This is Kiri’s favorite part. ‘What’s he saying?’ my son asks. I close my eyes, listening. ‘He’s

saying, ‘Open the door, let me in! I have a message!’ ‘Come in, come in,’ Kiri whispers. ‘Tell me.’” (150). As he listens to what is inside Aplysia, Janie leans over to put her hands on his shoulders, and Kiri asks, “‘where does a thought come from, Momma?’ ‘From what we see. From the world inside us.’” (150-151). Kiri considers this and then Janie explains how “my son looks at me searchingly. ‘I’m waiting for you,’ he says. He is trying to tell me something more, to make things right” (151). Over stories told about Aplysia to messages anticipated, Kiri finds a way to try to tell his mother what he wants her to hear. The stories of Aplysia are left unfinished, which emphasizes the responsibility of the listener or reader to carry them forward.

The Cat with a Nose like a Rabbit: Extending Kinship Beyond the Human

Reading animals in *Dogs at the Perimeter* through the cultural, religious, and scientific epistemologies opens up an exploration of loss that reveals how intricately animals are embedded in the processes of grief and family. Storytelling itself enables each epistemology to exist in the novel, even as it is a mode that also exceeds all of these frameworks of meaning. A closeness to animals gave Janie a way to “recollect [her] scattered self” (Kuzniar 110), but what might this mean for the selfhood of animals? My reading of animals in *Dogs at the Perimeter*, and particularly Aplysia, invites a consideration of how Janie turns to animals to process loss and grief, how animals may become family, the promise of a closeness to animals, but I would also like to think about what we might owe them in return.

Dogs at the Perimeter ends with a sad but hopeful vision of Janie in Cambodia sifting through memories of her family. In contrast to the times when she remembered her family throughout the novel, when she thinks of them at the end something different comes into view: “what I saw this time was not an aftermath, but a window open to a different way of loving each other” (252). This different way of loving each other lines up with Navin’s final words to Janie before she leaves for Cambodia. He tells her that, “Kiri had started a new set of drawings. Aplysia, waving like a flower. One cell, two cells, or Aplysia in its entirety, a wide creature billowing through the ocean” (165). After walking her fingers across a globe to show Kiri where she was going, he “gave [her] a drawing to bring with [her]” (165). Janie touches “the blue, waxy openness [in the drawing]. ‘The sky,’ [she] said. ‘Or maybe the ocean?’” (165). Kiri nods and they consider the vastness of the universe, how the sky and the ocean, like a galaxy, just never end (166). Aplysia presents a kind of language that Janie and Kiri share, so he learns from and tries to listen to the sea slugs perhaps as a way to be closer to his mother, and she carries his drawings of Aplysia with her to Cambodia as she pieces together a new way to love others.

Taka the Old appears in the first chapter of the novel and she becomes a companion to Janie while she stays at Hiroji’s apartment waiting for him to return. She was the first one to confirm Janie’s suspicion that Hiroji had left because when Janie went to his apartment, “the cat had food and water to last for another week, but, still, she ran to me crying” (57). Their actions parallel and depart from each other. In the first instance of Taka the Old, Janie describes how, “we are two nocturnal creatures, lost in

thought, except she is sober” (17). As Janie frantically searches Hiroji’s apartment and her own mind, uncovering files and memories of the Cambodian Genocide, “silence eats into every corner of the room, creeping over the furniture, over the cat” (18). Thien conveys how, in their own ways, Janie and Taka the Old rail against the captivity that is enclosing them. The cat’s enclosure is a product of Hiroji going missing abruptly, and Janie’s is a scholar’s version of captivity resulting from Hiroji’s unsolvable absence, as well as the way her memories have held her captive, suspended between her past and present selves; Taka the Old “paces the room like a zoo lion. At the desk, I sharpen pencils furiously, lining them up in a row” (18). When Janie returns to Cambodia in search of Hiroji, Taka the Old goes to her house to stay with Navin and Kiri.

As Navin talks to Janie on the phone, Kiri gets distracted by Taka the Old: “‘This cat has a big nose,’ he said, suddenly interested. ‘Like a rabbit.’” (166). The animal here might seem like an interruption, but I read her as a way into what Navin says next to Janie. Directly after talking about the cat, Thien writes, “‘You’re part of us,’ Navin told me when I left. ‘We’re your family. We have to find a way.’” (166). For a moment Thien lets us think that the words “you’re part of us” might be directed at the cat who has a nose like a rabbit. Like the novel itself, this entire passage weaves towards and away from animals, starting with *Aplysia* and ending with Taka the Old. The relationship to Taka the Old as part of Janie’s family opens up at the end of the novel, in light of the other ways of knowing animals that Janie inherited and developed for herself and Kiri. Thinking through uncertainty and epistemological humility enables a vision of how cultural, religious, and scientific epistemologies of the self and animals are woven together in

Dogs at the Perimeter and through the examples of human-animal closeness in the novel a vision of animals as family comes forward. Janie's familial relationship to Taka the Old, which extends the normative boundaries of kinship to include animals, results from an inheritance of animal encounters and stories, from the tiger and the deer, to Jambavan the cat and Aplysia. Taka the Old allows Janie to bring together the different stories of animals that she inherited. Thien's gesture towards "a different way of loving each other" (252) leads towards a vision of family that learns to inherit animal stories and let them all move together.

CHAPTER THREE

A Buddhist Paradox for the Anthropocene: Inheriting Animal Histories in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*

Fear about the implications of our current relationship with the environment informs Ruth Ozeki's novel *A Tale for the Time Being*: in an interview published in *ASLE News* with Catherine Meeks, Ozeki exclaims, "we ought to be terrified! We ought to stop buying stuff and throwing stuff away and squandering fossil fuels and driving cars and flying in planes. We ought to stop subsidizing agribusiness and using so much energy and cutting down trees and scraping the bottoms of the oceans" (qtd. in Meeks 1). No one is left unscathed by her critique, as she points out, "I feel quite strongly about all of this, but I'm on a plane typing this on my computer as I fly across the country to promote a book that is printed on paper (FSC certified, but still...), so I have a lot of remorse about the myriad ways that I am contributing to the problem" (qtd. in Meeks 1). Remorse—for how we conduct ourselves in personal relationships or how we as a species have conducted ourselves in relation to the earth—is a powerful inspiration that reveals itself in an indebtedness to both the earth and animal histories in *A Tale for the Time Being*. Ozeki explains how on one level the phrase "time being" "simply means a timely tale, a tale for now, for this present moment in time," which, amongst its various other themes, makes *A Tale for the Time Being* a story for the Anthropocene (qtd. in Grassi). The environment and animals do not exist incidentally in Ozeki's work; rather, it becomes clear that the novel itself is a kind of tragic love story about the earth and the animals whose histories shape our world.

From Buddhist philosophy to Asian North American literature and environmental literature, Ozeki brings many worlds together to highlight the interconnectedness of disciplines and fields, transnational histories, environmental concerns, and forms of life whether mammalian, avian, or molluscan. *A Tale for the Time Being* follows Ruth, a Japanese American/Canadian author living on a remote island in British Columbia, and Nao, a Japanese teenager living in Tokyo, who come together on currents of water. Ruth's point of view structures the novel and we experience Nao's through her diary as an "intradigetic text, or a narrative within a narrative" (Ty, *Asianfail* Chpt. 1). Nao's diary travels from Japan to Canada on Pacific Ocean currents and Ruth finds it washed up on the beach, either as a piece of flotsam or jetsam depending on whether you think its appearance was accidental or intentional (Ozeki 13). An exploration of Ruth's life after her move from Manhattan to the small locality of Whaletown, British Columbia where she lives with her husband, Oliver, a biologist, and their cat, Pesto, organizes the novel.¹⁵ Her story centers around her struggle as she attempts to write a book about her mother's Alzheimer's disease and instead uncovers the differences between urban and remote, small town life, the dense histories of the land she has built her home on, and the personal relationships, both past and present, that shape her life. Ruth's is a story marked by curiosity and an endeavour to see the world through the Buddhist philosophy of interbeing. Nao's story unravels a complicated history reaching as far back as Medieval Japan, including her great-grandmother Jiko's life in the Taishō era leading up to WWII,

¹⁵ Though the postmodern aspects of the narrative are not my main concern here, the protagonist's life mirrors Ozeki's: Ozeki is married to a biologist named Oliver, they live on Cortes Island, BC, and she was writing a memoir about her mother. I refer to the character as Ruth and the author as Ozeki to differentiate between the two.

and ending in a post 9/11 world with Nao's experiences in the Harajuku area of Tokyo. Nao's story aligns with the concept of time being which we learn from Jiko, who is a *Botatsu* or Buddhist saint. Time being teaches that interdependence relates to any being who lives in time, whether past, present, or future. Nao leads us through her life, her experiences with severe bullying at school, her path towards learning to follow Buddhist practices of meditation and ritual, as well as the precarity caused by her father's work in the IT sector in both the U.S. and Japan. Ruth's and Nao's stories unfold across generations, oceans, histories, and cultures, and Ozeki muses about the capacity of forces of nature—specifically the 2011 tsunami in Japan—to bring people together.

A Tale for the Time Being plays with the conventions of autobiography, memoir, and fiction. Rocío G. Davis looks to Ozeki's novel to rethink the boundary between life writing and the novel (87). Davis explores “some of what might be considered the transits between the fictional and the autobiographical, those narratological or ontological slippages between the imagined, the imaginary, and the images we construct about our own lives” (88). Davis is interested in how challenging the boundaries and conventions of autobiography heightens self reflexivity (88). She explains further that, “working in the liminal space between the fictional and the autobiographical might actually enable writers to negotiate their ideas and positions without actually claiming authority over them” (89). Davis is particularly concerned with the narratological conventions of the novel, such as the relationship Ozeki creates between the writer and reader, the metatextual performance, and the implied author (89). The play between fiction and autobiography in Ozeki's novel can also decenter a human exceptionalist viewpoint by allowing flexibility

in showing animals as protagonists. Although Davis does not intend to communicate that narratology or genre conventions are meaningless, as she follows Ozeki's writing in *A Tale for the Time Being*, she posits that the novel "suggests that what matters about stories are the stories themselves, rather than the generic classifications we attach to them" (99). It is important to keep in mind that *A Tale for the Time Being* "is playing with [the] idea of how you hold the story of yourself" (Ozeki qtd. in Ty "Universe" 163). What is, ostensibly, a version of Ozeki's story of herself is a story "of contingency" (Ty *Asianfail* Chpt. 1) that straddles reading and writing, Ruth and Nao, nations, diasporas, migrations, and histories.

Even as we face the cumulative effects of our actions on the earth, *A Tale for the Time Being* encapsulates a worldview that presents a way to understand that we are also small beings who can learn to see our histories as intimately connected to and contingent upon the histories of every time being on earth. I argue that Ozeki purposefully and pointedly weaves animal histories and stories, as well as trees, the land, and oceans into her story in a way that communicates the importance of learning to inherit the animal and environmental histories that have shaped our worlds. In addition to conveying the importance of learning how to inherit animal histories, the inclusion of whale and wolf histories actually does the work of inheriting animal histories through story. When thinking about human histories and families, Ozeki acknowledges the animals who have been displaced, eradicated, and exiled in the interest of building cities, towns, and human homes. Ozeki does not only weave animal stories into the history and memory of the ocean and land, but rather shows how their histories are woven into ours as well, and

discloses that they should be part of our memories of the places we call home. By imagining, writing, and musing about animal stories and histories in the novel, Ozeki recognizes how animal histories have paralleled, crossed-over, influenced, and determined human histories, and in so doing she reveals a vision of inheritance as it moves beyond the human. Donna Haraway prompts us to consider that, “when species meet, the question of how to inherit histories is pressing, and how to get on together is at stake” (*Species* 33). Learning how to inherit animal histories is important not only for the animals we physically encounter in our daily lives, but depending on how authors tell their stories, it also stands true for the countless species that we meet in literature whose histories we need to learn how to inherit well. Derrida conveys the idea that “inheritance is never a given; it is always a task. It remains before us” (95). How, then, do we learn to inherit the animal stories, histories, and bodies that shape our world, but that we did not choose? If the task is not only to inherit, but also to respond, how do we learn to respond sufficiently to the dark, uneasy histories that we have had a hand in creating?

As it coalesces around history, the relationship between humans and animals in the novel is not straightforward because it carries ongoing histories of diaspora, migration, and settler colonialism. Whether human or animal, history and responses to histories can be partial and biased. Animal histories in *A Tale for the Time Being* come attached to Ozeki’s understanding and interpretation of histories of the land, power, and human conflict. The concepts of interbeing and time being teach an awareness of how each individual is entangled in various different lives, deaths, and histories, but how one responds to this interconnectedness can be vulnerable to prejudice and bias. As I will

demonstrate in Section Two, sometimes acknowledging the inheritance of animal histories happens at the expense of inheriting difficult human histories like those passed down by the ever-present force of settler colonialism. In Haraway's words, "the fundamental ethical, political question is: to what are you accountable if you try to take what you have inherited seriously?" (qtd. in Gane 145). Can we learn to take each history that we inherit seriously without focusing on animals and the environment at the expense of human histories? We have, beyond our choosing, inherited a devastated and devastating world and are therefore faced with an inheritance of a wide range of histories to which we must learn to be accountable. In *A Tale for the Time Being* Ruth Ozeki introduces us to a world of multispecies relations, connections, and encounters in a way that undoes human exceptionalism and demonstrates how to be a human who inherits and responds to animal and natural histories. Ozeki situates the animal histories she wants to be accountable to according to shared geography; she is interested in the animals that shaped the place she calls home, and her novel gives us an example of how to inherit certain histories through narrative while also signalling the need to think critically about the histories that get displaced.

A vision of inheritance as it extends beyond the human unfolds throughout three sections of the chapter that take up, respectively, the stories of the Jungle Crow, the whales of Whaletown, and the wolves who were forced to make way for human homes. The Jungle Crow encapsulates how literary animals can orient a story. Whether as a character or as a figure that Ozeki uses to lead the narrative in desired ways to craft ideal endings for both Nao and Ruth, the crow sets the tone for how I understand animals in *A*

Tale for the Time Being as intentional, meaningful figures who drive the narrative.

Ozeki's depictions of whale and wolf histories exemplify the kinds of animal histories that shape human homes. The whales in the novel tell a cautionary story. As whale blubber "mined from the bodies of living whales" (Ozeki 58) was the primary source of oil, the majority of whales in the waters around Whaletown learned in only one year, between 1869 and 1870, to stay away. They became ghostly figures of Whaletown, "leaving only their name behind" (Ozeki 58). The history of the whales of Whaletown plays out on ocean waters and the broader history of the ocean; the whales' histories comprise a part of the ocean's memory. In the novel, the Pacific Ocean calls forward difficult histories of the tsunami in Japan and the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Ozeki brings together various strands of oceanic history in order to demonstrate that humans are at once devastating in terms of cumulative actions, but also small in relation to the capacities of the ocean. While whaling irreparably disturbed the waters, making them unsafe for whales, Ozeki also tells the story of the wolves who used to live in the forests around Whaletown. Though I bring together the whales and wolves as stories of animal history, displacement, exile, and return, I also focus on how they depart from each other because the whales bring a more global history of migration and diaspora into view, whereas the wolves are tied to the land and intersect with settler colonialism and Indigenous histories. We meet the wolves during a power outage, as Ruth stands in the dark staring at the flames of an oil lamp: "Sometimes, at dusk, she stood in the doorway listening to the wolves as they moved through the mist-enshrouded forest. Their call started low, a singular uneasy moan that threaded through the trees and gathered, as one

by one the pack joined in, their voices wild and raw, rising into a full-throated howl” (171). In spite of efforts to cull them because of the threat they posed to the farm animals who were starting to arrive in the area, “the wolf population was on the rise, and the packs had become bolder” (Ozeki 171). By attending to the wolf and whale histories in *A Tale for the Time Being*, I illuminate Ozeki’s complicated representation of animals as historical beings who arrive with their own stories and are certainly not passive, blank slates or empty backdrops for human histories.

A Tale for the Anthropocene

According to an increasingly accepted formulation, we are living in a new geological era, whose name, the Anthropocene, was coined by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000. As Anna Tsing explains, the Anthropocene is “the epoch in which human disturbance outranks other geological forces” (*Mushrooms* 19). Human influence on the earth, which we can witness as global climate change, anthropogenic extinction crises, and environmental devastation, is so significant that it ushered in a shift from the previous geological era of the Holocene to the Anthropocene, or the age of humans. The Anthropocene elicits “a variety of responses in individuals, groups, and governments, ranging from denial, disconnect, and indifference to a spirit of engagement and activism of varying kinds and degrees” (Chakrabarty 197). Scholars vary in their approach to the current planetary crises (Chakrabarty 2009; Jamieson & Nadzam 2015; Purdy 2015; Rose 2011; Scranton 2015), though they emphasize the need to recognize that we live in an era premised on “the growing impacts of human activities on earth and

atmosphere, and at all, including global, scales, [...and] emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology” (Crutzen & Stoermer 17). Other scholars query the assumption of Anthropocene thinking that (re)privileges humans as sole actors, arguing for the need to see the human as caught up in various assemblages.

Stacy Alaimo points out how recognizing that human activity has changed the planet can muddle the assumption that the world is just a vast backdrop for human subjects (*Exposed* 1). Donna Haraway resists the idea of humans acting in isolation, asserting that, “no species, not even our own arrogant one pretending to be good individuals in so-called modern Western scripts, acts alone; assemblages of organic species and of abiotic actors make history, the evolutionary kind and the other kinds too” (“Anthropocene” 159). Derek Woods looks to scale variance in order to trouble species thinking. He argues that what is necessary in an approach to the Anthropocene is “a horizontal, assemblage theory of the relations among humans, nonhuman species, and technics rather than a vertical, phylogenetic account that traces all causal chains back to the embodied intelligence of *Homo sapiens*” (138; original emphasis). *A Tale for the Time Being* offers a middle ground between those periodizations that focus on the human and those that interrogate human centrality by foregrounding human responsibility and culpability in this epoch, while also portraying humans as small and interconnected within a vast network of more-than-human beings. Following Ozeki, my aim in this chapter is to think critically and carefully about the responsibility of the human subject in the Anthropocene, even (or especially) as I pull together other strains of thought that challenge the centering of a human subject.

Theories of the Anthropocene, like Jedediah Purdy's in *After Nature*, offer important ecocritical knowledge about how we arrived at the Anthropocene and what kinds of responsibility we do or do not feel towards the earth as a result of the devastating effects we have had on it.¹⁶ But something is amiss when Purdy talks about an environmental imagination that is broken into four kinds—providential, romantic, utilitarian, and ecological (23)—and when Bill McKibben insists that humans are no longer “able to think of ourselves as a species tossed about by larger forces—now we *are* those larger forces,” and we see how forces of nature or God become forces of man (xviii). What normative conceptions of the Anthropocene and the emphasis on being post- or after nature miss is that there are countless people who do not share the same Western, secular worldviews of nature. From Indigenous peoples across the world to Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, and Zoroastrians, there are people who struggle against colonization, imperialism, and global capitalism to live with a deep respect for the earth, as well as an understanding that humans are part of an interdependent, interconnected, reciprocal relationship to nature and animals. Métis scholar Zoe Todd intervenes in Anthropocene thinking that divorces “natural” from cultural histories by building on climate scientists Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin's argument that “the beginning of the Anthropocene is, quite possibly, rooted in the environmental impacts of the genocide of

¹⁶ Scholars have further complicated the kind of Anthropocene thinking mobilized by Purdy. For instance, Kathryn Yusoff's article “Geological life: prehistory, climate, futures in the Anthropocene” highlights how, although Anthropocene thinking would see humans as a geological force, “the geophysical, genomic, and social narratives of this geological subjectification” have not been considered in ways that interrogate these human geological capacities, “not just in terms of impacts *on* the Earth, but as forces that subjects *share*” (780).

fifty million Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas, following Christopher Columbus's 'discovery' of America" (qtd. in "Relationships"). Todd asserts that if we take seriously Lewis and Maslin's claims, "then this compels humanity to tend to the interconnections between, first, Indigenous genocide and the violent enslavement of peoples from across Africa, the Pacific, Asia, and the Americas throughout the colonial period, and second, the contemporary economic, political, social, and cultural forces shaping current environmental and power relations" ("Relationships"). By refusing to accept the universality implied by normative conceptions of the Anthropocene put forward by scholars like Purdy and McKibben, Todd importantly centers the substantial roles that historical and ongoing practices of colonization and imperialism, that tore through peoples' beliefs and worldviews as they tore through the land, play in our current environmental crises.

An endeavour to homogenize human life so that we learn to focus on humans as a species is a common approach to the Anthropocene because of the assertion that climate change will bear down on all of us eventually. Following Crutzen's lead, Dipesh Chakrabarty thinks through the implications of focusing on humans as a species in order to move away from a recorded history of humans towards a deep history (212). Recorded history, Chakrabarty explains, "refers, very broadly, to the ten thousand years that have passed since the invention of agriculture but more usually to the last four thousand years or so for which written records exist" (212). Deep history occurred before written records and refers to "the combined genetic and cultural changes that created humanity over hundreds of [thousands of] years" (Chakrabarty 213). Understanding humans as a species

illuminates the consequences of the anthropogenic situation of climate change, which, according to Chakrabarty, “only makes sense if we think of humans as a form of life and look on human history as part of the history of life on this planet” (213). I contend that the move towards focusing on humans as a species should make us feel uncomfortable. Not only does it require us to “rise above our disciplinary prejudices” that tell us we should know better (Chakrabarty 215); species thinking also subordinates the role of power in establishing the category of the human. For instance, colonial and imperial histories created and then fed off of the supposed inferiority of some humans against others. Therefore, it is hasty to assume that the category of the human is itself evenly distributed across our species. Additionally, the move towards species-thinking obscures a general sense of human inequality in the interest of fighting climate change.

The defence of species thinking rests on the assertion that, unlike under capitalism, with climate change, “there are no lifeboats here for the rich and privileged (witness the drought in Australia or recent fires in the wealthy neighborhoods of California)” (Chakrabarty 221). Dana Mount challenges Chakrabarty’s claim by asserting that, “it is not enough to say that drought in Australia is proof that the West faces equal risk than the global South when it comes to climate change. The West—or certain parts of it—faces the same risk, but its ability to react and to restore quality of life will be considerably different” (17). However utilitarian or utopianist it may seem to advocate for a “universal that arises from a shared sense of catastrophe”—eluding the fact that the location of some of these catastrophes have been caused by histories of violence—we cannot assume that a world created and governed by power and inequality would

somehow turn around in the face of climate change (Chakrabarty 223). Thinking of humans as a species is, I argue, a convenient alibi for those who would overlook long histories of oppression that lead to inequalities relating not only to complicity in but also subjection to climate change. Further, focusing on humans as just another form of life on the planet does very little for animals who acutely experience, endure, and die under the consequences of climate change. In the most ideal sense, species thinking may cultivate a sense of interconnectedness so that we start to feel that we are part of the larger picture of life on earth and realize that other species' extinctions affect us. As it stands, however, even in works that prescribe thinking of humans as a species, extinction is seen as a predictor of a human future or something to define the Anthropocene, which erases animals except as symbols of a human future. How can we learn to both feel our complicity (however varying) in the Anthropocene without leaning on dangerous universals? Can we grapple with an understanding of the Anthropocene that foregrounds both the ongoing responsibilities of humans and the importance of animals?

Another question we should be asking, according to Deborah Bird Rose, is: “if we humans are the cause, can we change ourselves enough to change our impacts” (2)? One approach to the extinction crises that characterize the Anthropocene is to understand that “people save what they love” (Rose 2). While this can go in one direction to compel people only to save charismatic animals or care for beautiful landscapes, it could also reveal the potential of story to teach us to love the animals and land that surround us. Depending on how they are told, stories can teach us to see ourselves as deeply interwoven, implicated, and interconnected to the world in ways that compel us to think

of ourselves as involved in a close relationship to the animals, plants, trees, and water that we live amongst. When we pay attention to the multispecies lives in literature, we can learn to see ourselves differently. More importantly, we can learn to love through stories.

In a multispecies world, the stories we tell and how we choose to tell them can be anthropocentric in their aim to present humans as exceptional and alone in the world. Or, stories like Ozeki's can work within a biocentric framework to emphasize interconnectedness and interdependence. If we work from the foundation that our world is constituted by numerous interwoven species, the understanding that animal stories have also shaped our worlds, and the desire to avoid simply "claiming to tell another's stories," we might "develop and tell our own stories in ways that are open to other ways of constituting, of responding to and in a living world" (van Dooren & Rose 85). Stories can become powerful tools. Thomas van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose insist that, "unlike many other modes of giving an account, a story can allow multiple meanings to travel alongside one another; it can hold open possibilities and interpretations and can refuse the kind of closure that prevents others from speaking or becoming" (85). *A Tale for the Time Being* is a powerful narrative that attends carefully and self-reflexively to the animals who animate and orient our stories. While telling the story of her human characters Ruth and Nao, Ozeki brings in multiple animal narratives and histories to run alongside—even to precede—the human stories. In this chapter, I put forward a reading of the historical, mythical, and everyday animals in the novel in order to analyze how recognizing and writing animal histories becomes a modality of human-animal interconnectedness. Literary animals play an often-overlooked role in novels like Ozeki's that articulate

diasporic history through story. Focusing on animals and nature in *A Tale for the Time Being* opens up a different reading of the novel that offers a more complicated approach to representations of history. Contrary to most readings of *A Tale for the Time Being*, I argue that animals and nature in Ozeki's novel have their own histories instead of simply being inanimate parts of human histories, and that imagining animal histories alongside human life configures history as a site of human-animal interconnectedness instead of separation.¹⁷

Ozeki's vision of human history as shaping and shaped by animal histories arises from her focus on the concepts of interbeing and time being, which foreground an understanding of the human as interdependent and interconnected with numerous beings across time, from trees, plants, and water to animals, insects, and birds. Ozeki's environmental concerns and worldview are informed by her experience as a Zen Buddhist priest. In the spirit of interbeing, Ozeki blurs the lines between Buddhist philosophy and her novel; one did not create the other, one is not superior or inferior to the other, rather, each of them exists in the other, they "inter-are" (Ozeki qtd. in Grassi 1). The Buddhist understanding of an interdependent self (or non-self)—*Anatman* or *Anatta*—is the basis of Thich Nhat Hanh's concept of interbeing.¹⁸ Understanding that we "inter-are" can only occur after the realization that an independent, whole, unchanging self is an illusion.

¹⁷ The several works published on *A Tale for the Time Being* so far do not take up the animal concerns of the novel. In addition to the articles that I deal with in the chapter, they are: Daniel Mckay (2016); Fulvia Sarnelli (2017); Peter Schmidt (2017); Marlo Starr (2016).

¹⁸ Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, poet, and renowned peace activist.

During an interview with David Palumbo-Liu, Ozeki discusses how *A Tale for the Time Being* very overtly plays with the Buddhist sense of no-self: “Buddhism teaches that because everything is impermanent, there is no fixed self that remains unchanged in time” (qtd. in Palumbo-Liu). Here, Ozeki articulates an answer to Madeleine Thien’s question from the previous chapter about whether or not there is a part of our selves that remains constant over time, some fundamental self that makes us who we are. While Thien certainly complicates the idea of an essential self, Ozeki turns the concept upside down by demonstrating how crucial interdependence is to our lives. The goal is not to stay the same, to stay stagnant or stuck in one vision of ourselves. Rather, in Buddhism, belief lies in a shifting, changing self who meets the challenges of the world with compassion and a flexible, interconnected sense of (non)self. Being aware that “I” am made up of so many “non-I” elements leads to an acceptance of non-self and an understanding of our place in the vastly interconnected web of lives on and with the earth. According to the teaching of interbeing, since there is no independent self, “what we experience as the self is more like a collection of fluid, interpenetrating, interdependencies that change and flow through time” (Ozeki qtd. in Palumbo-Liu). By demonstrating how animals, plants, water, and the earth are woven into human identities, *A Tale for the Time Being* communicates how we are comprised of the people, ancestors, histories, cultures, natures, etc. that come together in us, and we cannot see where they end and we begin. By weaving stories, histories, myths, and environments together throughout the novel, Ozeki takes on the often-confounding sense that there is no such

thing as an independent self that exists in isolation from other people, animals, or the earth itself.

The concept of interbeing originated from a branch of Buddhism created by Thich Nhat Hanh called Engaged Buddhism. Buddhism's focus on liberation from *samsara* (the circle of life) in combination with conceptions of a universal justice in *karma* have been critiqued for their potential to detach Buddhists from the realities of a violent and oppressive world, making them blind to worldly suffering (Edelglass 419). Engaged Buddhism emerged in the midst of the Vietnam War when histories of political and imperial conflict, as well as devastating violence took center stage, and it continues to focus on countering social, political, and institutional injustice. "Engaged Buddhism is just Buddhism," Nhat Hanh explains, "when bombs begin to fall on people, you cannot stay in the meditation hall all of the time. Meditation is about the awareness of what is going on—not only in your body and in your feelings, but all around you" (qtd. in Malkin). Rising to meet the challenges first of a contemporary world overcome by war, Engaged Buddhism's current concerns lie with globalization and how to put forward a global ethic. A Buddhist global ethic is not, however, as dogmatic as it might seem. It asks people of all beliefs, values, cultures, and religions to bring their collective wisdom together to tackle the increasing global problems of war, oppression, climate change, etc. with mutual respect and mindfulness.

However, this global ethic also comes with its own baggage. Interbeing and especially time being ask people to be aware of and contend with the histories of suffering and oppression that have shaped our world, but the prescription of mindfulness

and openness, to understand and have compassion for the oppressor as well as the oppressed, can lead to a certain amount of opacity about how to concretely deal with the histories of specific places that are often elided or overlooked. The concept of time being brings forward the temporal threads of Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings about the interdependent no-self—where we are connected not only to beings in the present, but also to everyone who came before us and everyone who will come after us. In its simplest formulation, a time being is “someone who lives in time, and that means you, and me, and every one who is, or was, or ever will be” (Ozeki 3). Time, in this conception of life, unites every being on the earth because we all live within it. The concept of the time being originates from Zen master Dōgen Zenji's text “For the Time Being,” and Ozeki emphasizes the importance of this text by beginning her novel with this quotation:

An ancient buddha once said:

For the time being, standing on the tallest mountaintop,

For the time being, moving on the deepest ocean floor,

For the time being, a demon with three heads and eight arms,

For the time being, the golden sixteen-foot body of a buddha,

For the time being, a monk's staff or a master's fly-swatter,

For the time being, a pillar or a lantern,

For the time being, any Dick or Jane,

For the time being, the entire earth and the boundless sky. (qtd. in Ozeki 1)

The point of enlightenment for some, like Jiko, the Buddhist nun, is to understand the connections that bring all beings together in order to help everyone—and “not just the

human beings, either, but all the animals and other life-forms like amoebas and viruses and maybe even plants that have ever lived or ever will live, as well as extinct species” (Ozeki 19). Time beings can be as big as the entire earth, as small as an amoeba, as literal as a fly swatter, or as figurative as the “stories and words [who] are time beings” (Ozeki 24), but one thing remains constant: all time beings deserve respect, care, and to be approached with humility and understanding.

In *A Tale for the Time Being* I see the concept of time being working to reveal how wolves, whales, the ocean, humans, and the earth exist in close relation to time and history. The concept of time being asks us to contend with the histories that have shaped all of our positions on the earth. While interbeing informs the broader worldview of the novel, time being is a concept that we learn to see in every character and story. In fact, in the opening section of Nao’s diary—which becomes the opening section of Ozeki’s novel—she lists a cat as her final example of a time being, and then stresses the interspecies relationship while placing it in the larger context of the natural world: “Do you have a cat and is she sitting on your lap? Does her forehead smell like cedar trees and fresh sweet air?” (Ozeki 3). Ruth furthers the relation to cats as time beings by promptly introducing us to her cat, Pesto, in the opening section of her story. Pesto bookends the novel as it begins with Nao’s question and when Pesto goes missing later on, the resolution to his disappearance drives the end of the novel. At the beginning, when Ruth excitedly examines the plastic bag containing Nao’s diary, which she has just found on the beach, “the cat, attracted by all the activity, jumped up onto the table to help. He wasn’t allowed on the table” (9). Pesto is always mischievous and gets into trouble in

ways that annoy Ruth, but he closely connects with and mirrors Oliver. “They were a team, Oliver and the cat,” Ruth describes, “when Oliver went upstairs the cat went upstairs. When Oliver came downstairs to eat, the cat came downstairs to eat. When Oliver went outside to pee, the cat went outside to pee” (9). The introduction to *Pesto* portrays the close relationship between him and Oliver, as well as the ways in which their everyday lives move alongside each other. By drawing parallels between historical, mythological, and everyday animals, *A Tale for the Time Being* illuminates the ways in which our relationships with historical and mythological animals come to bear on our relationships with everyday animals or the ones we call family. Especially when thinking through interspecies relationships, the concept of time being in the novel requires us to see not only how we draw animals close in casual, loving, everyday ways, but it also can inspire us to confront human and animal histories together to realize how forces like settler colonization, global capitalism, species extinction, and habitat loss interact and intersect with each other. The novel mobilizes the concept of time being to force us to confront how we—and this “we” encompasses everyone and everything from the land, and the ocean, to trees, animals, and humans—have all moved through contingent and difficult histories.

Literature occupies a distinct position in the relationship between animals and history. Whereas scientific and historical understandings of animals are constrained by empirical objectivity and boundaries established by the charge of anthropomorphism, fiction as a genre allows for more creativity. The literary envisions animal memory and story in ways that the restraints of science and history won’t allow because authors are

able to test the limits of anthropomorphism by giving animals a voice, memory, family, and intimacy in representations of their own histories. Animals “can hardly be characterized as novel historical subjects,” since, as Harriet Ritvo explains, “their remains have provided valuable evidence for historians of cultures that left little or no written trace” (403). Aside from animal remains, historians have been interested in “animal-related institutions” such as zoos, agriculture, scientific laboratories, pet-keeping, and eradication practices (Ritvo 403). People who have worked closely with animals such as breeders, hunters, and scientists, as well as famous animals have had their biographies chronicled by historians (Ritvo 403). A recent increase in attention to animals in history can be attributed to two shifts. One is a changing historical attention to the roles of animals in the world that does not abide by a clean separation between human and natural histories. Shifting political landscapes guide historians so that their “sense of what was important in the past tends to mirror their sense of what is important in the present” (Ritvo 404). The shifting interests in marginalized histories have led to “history from the bottom up” (Ritvo 404), which can attend to increasingly inclusive political and cultural interests in animals. Another shift is a growing interest in environmental history. Although environmental histories often focus on concepts of nature or wilderness with little interest in animals, they open the door to thinking about the beings who live in closest contact to nature. Working against notions that animals are ahistorical, passive beings, two convergent tendencies in the historical uptake of animal-related topics emerge. First, is a willingness to acknowledge “the historical significance of animals,” and second, is an endeavour to present animals as “part of the general history of a given

time and place instead of isolating them in peripheral, or even antiquarian, sub-fields” (Ritvo 405). Animals become the subjects of their own histories both in proximity to and at a distance from human histories.

Erica Fudge also tackles the relationship between animals and history, working through what it would require to see animals as historical agents who are not blank pages or backdrops for human history. One central concern of work in “the history of animals over the past fifteen years has been to what extent we humans can ever come to know, or understand, the animals of the past when the documents we have access to, and from which we build our histories, were written by humans” (“Cow” 260). Several historical studies have demonstrated the multiple and complicated ways in which animals affect, disrupt, disorient, and challenge human histories throughout a vast range of time periods, contexts, and places.¹⁹ Fudge works against scholars who present humans as exclusively having “thoughtful agency,” which makes them actors who shape and determine histories, or those who would collapse the human/natural history binary by pushing humans into natural histories without considering the role of animals. When it comes to animals in history, agency, Fudge proposes, may not be solely attached to categories of thought, but rather to a consideration of how animals have oriented history itself (“History”).

¹⁹ See: Virginia DeJohn Anderson’s *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America*; Kathleen Kete’s *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris*; Harriet Ritvo’s *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age*; and Nigel Rothfels’s *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo*.

One aspect of animals in history that these studies have not been able to access is an animal's "sense of self-in-the-world that is easily accessible to or recognizable by us" ("History"). Fudge insists that the unknowability of animals or the limits of understanding them through human histories does not close down the importance of historicizing animals. Rather, histories of animals can broaden our sense of the past and make visible the lives of those who were relegated to invisibility in ways that can inform our present moment and future relationships with animals ("Cows" 261). For instance, chronicling histories of species extinction won't bring those animals back from the dead, "but it might challenge the meaning of such extinctions as we continue to encounter them in the future" ("History"). Where historical studies of animals falter in their ability to portray the lives, emotions, thoughts, or memories of historical animals, literature reveals its strengths because stories like Ozeki's can represent animals without either fear of historical inaccuracy or being held back by the accusation of anthropomorphism. Primatologist and psychologist Frans de Waal asserts the need to pull apart anthropocentrism or human exceptionalism and anthropomorphism. He registers his frustration with charges of anthropomorphism because they are "typically used to censure the attribution of humanlike traits and experiences to other species" ("Tickling Apes"), specifying that we most commonly withhold the traits that we like about ourselves "(everyone is free to speak of aggression, violence and territoriality in animals)" ("Tickling Apes"). We should not, however, embrace all forms of anthropomorphism uncritically. "Gratuitous anthropomorphism," wherein humans uncritically project any and every feeling and emotion onto animals, "is distinctly unhelpful" (de Waal "Tickling

Apes”). By uncoupling anthropocentrism—which subordinates every form of life to the superior capabilities and capacities of the human—from anthropomorphism, de Waal prompts two important questions: “How likely is it that the immense richness of nature fits on a single dimension? Isn’t it more likely that each animal has its own cognition, adapted to its own senses and natural history” (“Tickling Apes”)? de Waal provides a vocabulary for both differentiating between anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, and thinking critically about anthropomorphism instead of simply accepting it.

I agree that we should think critically about anthropomorphism, but that we should not dismiss literary representations of animals because they appear to be offering visions of animals that enable them to express complex traits and capabilities that we value in ourselves like love, companionship, longing, resilience, memory, intelligence, and/or histories. Literature has the ability to represent animal histories, for instance, in ways that may be deemed anthropomorphic but not straightforwardly anthropocentric. Ritvo asserts that we must hold at a distance and be careful not to collapse the different conventions of history and literature because they simply are not “the same thing” (405). Literature can speculate about and extrapolate from what history and science teach us about animals. In her novel, Ozeki weaves animal histories into a general understanding of human history and she muses about what an animal’s sense of self-in-the-world may look, sound, and feel like. The context of the Anthropocene demands a more robust and interconnected understanding of animals and I propose that *A Tale for the Time Being* is not just a story for, but also a *response to* the idea of the Anthropocene that includes animal inheritances and works to decenter the human.

A Bird's-Eye View as Narrative Topography

“On the bough of the bigleaf maple, in the crepuscular shadows, sat the singular crow. It was glossy black, with a peculiar hump on its forehead and a long, thick curved beak.”

--Ruth Ozeki

In *A Tale for the Time Being*, home is a slippery concept for humans and animals. Ruth found her home by drifting between New York City and Whaletown. Oliver and Ruth muse about the origins of the Hello Kitty lunchbox that contained Nao's diary and how it reached them, considering that it too might be one of the “drifters, [...] escaping the orbit of the Pacific Gyre” (13). “There are eleven great planetary gyres,” Oliver explains, “two of them flow directly toward us from Japan and diverge just off the BC coastline. The smaller one, the Aleut Gyre, goes north toward the Aleutian Islands. The larger one goes south. It's sometimes called the Turtle Gyre, because the sea turtles ride it when they migrate from Japan to Baja” (Ozeki 13). The debris or

flotsam that rides the gyres is called drift. Drift that stays in the orbit of the gyre is considered to be part of the gyre memory. [...] Oliver] picked up the Hello Kitty lunchbox and turned it over in his hands. ‘All that stuff from people's homes in Japan that the tsunami swept out to sea? They've been tracking it and predicting it will wash up on our coastline. I think it's just happening sooner than anyone expected.’ (Ozeki 14)

What does the gyre's memory hold? What kinds of objects become flotsam, what do these objects say about human conceptions of the ocean, and how do they impact marine life? While figuring animal lives as interconnected and interdependent on our own lives, it is essential to contextualize a concern for animal life alongside broader questions about the impact of human existence on the planet. *A Tale for the Time Being* figures this impact by thinking about the Pacific Ocean, from its gyres and marine life to the force of drift, tsunamis, and the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Also a drifter on the Pacific Gyre, a

Japanese Crow (or Jungle Crow) who becomes a mythical, guiding figure for Ruth, arrives in Whaletown shortly after the diary. In response to Ruth's curiosity about the Jungle Crow's origins, Oliver responds, "anything's possible. People made it here in hollowed-out logs. Why not crows? They can ride on the drift, plus they have the advantage of being able to fly" (Ozeki 55). Ruth was searching for refuge, not only for her mother who was suffering from Alzheimer's disease and her husband who had come down with a severe flu-like disease, but also for herself and when she was being "perfectly honest, she would have to acknowledge the role she played in their *drift*" (Ozeki 57; emphasis added). By connecting the drifters through ocean currents, from Nao's diary and the Jungle Crow to Ruth and Oliver, the novel puts forward a kind of kinship between forces of nature, like currents of water, and the forces that drive, carry, or push humans through our lives. But humans never arrive or live alone. In combination with Ozeki's conceptualization of home as a space that is shared (often violently) with other animals, trees, and plants, such a kinship contributes to the novel's aim to resist human exceptionalism by showing that humans can be an ordinary, even small, presence on the earth.

The Jungle Crow is a multilayered character who flies across the boundaries between Ruth's dream world and her everyday life. The Jungle Crow manifests from a dream that Ruth has about Jiko. As we learn later in the novel, the setting of the dream is very similar to the temple where Jiko lives: "the dream took place on a mountainside, somewhere in Japan, where the shrill cries of insects broke the silence, and the nighttime breezes in the tall cypress trees were fresh and restless" (Ozeki 38-39). Ruth watches Jiko

slowly type responses to Nao's questions that she posed in the previous section of the novel. Afterwards, tired from the effort, Jiko stands on the edge of the veranda and looks out at the garden, "where old rocks cast long shadows and the bamboo whispered. The smell of wet moss mixed with the scent of incense burned earlier in the day. She took a deep breath, and then another, and raised her arms out to her sides, spreading the wide black sleeves of her robe like a crow stretching its wings and preparing to fly" (40). Jiko stood still for a while and then "brought her arms together in front of her body and started swinging them back and forth. Her sleeves flapped and filled with air, and just when it looked like she might take off, she appeared to change her mind" (40). The appearance of the Jungle Crow picks up on a tradition of thinking about knowledge, beings, or information from Asia as old, mythical, and mystical.

The second passage that precipitates the Jungle Crow's appearance occurs when Nao briefly references how her father spends his days sitting on a bench "and feeding the crows" (52). After Ruth reads this passage aloud to Oliver he remarks, "'interesting about the crows'" (54). He explains that he has been doing research about Japanese crows and "the native species there is *Corvus japonensis*, which is a subspecies of *Corvus macrorhynchos*, the Large-billed or Jungle Crow" (55). Oliver continues to explain that his research was a result of an encounter with a bird he believed to be a Jungle Crow. He heard the ravens talking, so he "looked up and saw that they were harassing a smaller bird. The smaller bird kept trying to approach them, but they kept picking on it, until finally it flew over to the fence near where [he] was working" (55). "'I think it was a Jungle Crow,'" Oliver insists, and this was particularly interesting because he thinks it

could have “rode over on the flotsam. That it’s part of the drift” (55). Oliver’s description of the crow’s difficult and out-of-place interaction with the “native” species of ravens resembles Nao’s experience of having to return to Japan after growing up in Sunnyvale, California. Alongside the various ways in which her family’s lives were made precarious by the move back to Japan, Nao is forced to deal with bullying from her classmates at school, whom she likens to “a pack of wild hyenas moving in to kill a wildebeest or a baby gazelle” (48). While Ruth’s dream of Jiko as a type of crow draws on traditional understandings of Asia as a mythical and mystical place, Oliver’s scientific explanation of the crow and the similarities of its situation to Nao’s, place the crow in a decidedly modern context as a contemporary diasporic subject. Diaspora, in the novel, moves in several different directions, whether through Ruth’s lineage of (non)connection to her mother’s birthplace of Japan, Nao’s move from Japan to California and then back to Japan where she finds herself hopelessly out of place, or the crow’s either voluntary or involuntary movement from Japan to Canada. The crow is not just a diasporic character in the novel; he is particularly a transpacific figure who rides the currents of the Pacific. The crow moves between nations in unpredictable ways that disregard national boundaries and calls into question how national apparatuses of citizenship and borders do and do not control the movement of all beings.

When Ruth finally meets the Jungle Crow, her friend Muriel who is a retired anthropologist complicates Oliver’s predominantly scientific knowledge of the bird, asking “How do you know it’s a he?” and explaining that he could be a she:

Grandmother Crow, or T’Ets, Sliammon. She’s one of the magical ancestors who can shape-shift and take animal or human form. She saved the life of her

granddaughter when the girl got pregnant and her father ordered the tribe to abandon her. The father told the Raven P'a to extinguish all the fires, but T'Ets hid a glowing coal for her granddaughter in a shell and saved the girl's life. The girl went on to give birth to seven puppies, who later took off their skins and turned into humans and became the Sliammon people, but that's a whole other story. (Ozeki 96)

I take up Ozeki's representation of Indigeneity in more detail in another section, but the mention of the Tla' Amin creation story here is the most sustained and detailed engagement with Indigeneity in the novel, though it occurs without Indigenous characters. Ozeki leaves ambiguous Muriel's authority to tell this particular story, leaving it unclear whether her knowledge is the result of heritage or her work as an anthropologist. I want to emphasize two aspects of the encounters with the crow so far: first, that she or he appears to Ruth only after she has pieced together several different ways of knowing animals, from a more mythical or mystical sense of the crow arising from Jiko and Japan, to scientific epistemologies from Oliver, and finally to Muriel's relating of the Tla' Amin understanding of the crow. The way that Ruth makes sense of the crow's presence through different epistemologies echoes the ways in which epistemologies came together around animals in *Dogs at the Perimeter*. Second, in keeping with the novel's ambiguous perspective on Indigeneity, a matter I address below, it is apt that the story of Indigenous traditions is qualified as "a whole other story" (Ozeki 96), which makes it a story for another time, whether it is relegated to the past or solidified as a story that is not for the now of the novel.

The crow becomes an unpredictable kind of companion to Ruth who finds herself wondering about whether she "had managed to make friends with the ravens" (122) or if she was safe when a storm hit the island (146). Ruth searches for the crow when she is

not around or observes and asks questions of her when she is. The crow's movements parallel Ruth's and Oliver's in ways that Ruth is aware of, but there are also passages about the crow that signal ways of knowing the bird that Ruth is not privy to. The crow brings together the whales and the wolves that I will discuss shortly, and Ozeki portrays the crow as having a detailed knowledge of the island. In a few long passages, which I will not reproduce fully here, Ozeki writes about the island from a bird's-eye view:

The crow lifted up its slick black shoulders and shuddered, which was the corvine equivalent of a shrug. It flapped its feathery wings once, twice, thrice, and then rose up from its perch, flying through the heavy cedar boughs. It circled the roof of the house. Down below, a ragged line of wolves ran silently, in single file, following a deer trail through the salal. The crow cawed out a warning, in case anyone was listening, and then flew higher, away from the little rooftop in the clearing, until finally it cleared the canopy of Douglas fir. Soaring now above the treetops, it could see all the way to the Salish Sea [...] A cruise liner bound for Alaska was passing through the Strait of Georgia, all lit up like a birthday cake, covered with candles. Circling higher still, up and up, and the mountains of the Vancouver Island Range came into view, the Golden Hinde, the white glaciers glowing in the moonlight. On the far side stretched the open Pacific and beyond, but the crow could not fly high enough to see its way home. (Ozeki 173-174)

The passage situates, from the crow's point of view, both the locality of the island and how it fits into a more global picture surrounded by the Pacific ocean. The description of the crow's perspective in the passage highlights that all perspectives—even bird's-eye views that are implied to be all encompassing—are limited. We see the topography not only of the land, but also of the story itself through the crow's eyes as she observes the beings who surround Ruth's home, the towns and industries that have developed on the island, the mountains that range along the coast, and the ocean that surrounds everything and stretches eventually to Japan, though it is out of sight and out of reach. Ozeki

demonstrates how literary animals can orient stories and she takes this idea even further when the crow appears in Ruth's dream world to lead her back in time towards Nao.

The crow is a robust, complicated character in *A Tale for the Time Being*, and Ozeki writes her into being in a way that communicates a consciousness of and self-reflexivity about how authors use literary animals gratuitously for narrative purposes. When it comes time for Ruth to read the end of Nao's diary she finds that "the words are all gone." (Ozeki 343). She is devastated by this loss and disoriented by what this means for her own story. Then, she has a dream that takes her through Nao's stories in repetitive motions and delirious images that are nightmarish. At the height of the dream/nightmare, the word crow "appears on the horizon, black against the unbearable light, and as it comes closer, it starts to turn and spiral, elongating its *C* to create a spine, rounding its *O* into a sleek belly, rotating its *R* to form a forehead and a wide-open beak. It stretches wide its *W*ings, flaps them once, twice, thrice, and then, fully feathered, it starts to fly. It's her Jungle Crow come to save her!" (Ozeki 349-350). The crow represents a living being, but Ozeki also depicts quite literally how animals can be born from letters and words.

The crow appears in Ruth's dream and she thinks that the bird "seems to be leading her somewhere" (Ozeki 350). As she follows the crow, a vision of a man sitting on a park bench "feeding a mangy flock of crows" (Ozeki 350) comes into view. The crow leads Ruth to Nao's father and she intervenes in Nao's story by saving her father and leading them together to Jiko's temple, which changes the course of Nao's life. Others have helpfully explicated this intervention in relation to the other ways that Ruth

“receives and edits Nao’s diary” (Davis 98) through the addition of footnotes and annotations (Davis 93). To explain how the events in Ruth’s dream translated to Nao’s reality, Muriel simply states to Ruth, “my theory is that the crow from Nao’s world came here to lead you into the dream so you could change the end of her story. Her story was about to end one way, and you intervened, which set up the conditions for a different outcome” (Ozeki 376). Davis contends that Ruth “becomes an actor in Nao’s story, the author who revises the plot to achieve a desired ending” (98), although she vaguely refers to how Ruth “is called” (98) towards this ending. It is important that the crow leads Ruth to Nao’s father and subsequently a new and happy ending for Nao’s story because it clearly demonstrates how literary animals are used to further the desired plot. In a way, Ozeki relegates responsibility for what I read as a fairly unforgiveable act of intervention to the crow who does not endure any consequences.

After the crow shows Ruth the way to Nao’s father, the narrative shifts so that Nao’s and Ruth’s narrative’s directly parallel each other, which signals the possibility of the same author writing each story. Ozeki introduces the shift with both a new section and an epigraph from Marcel Proust that calls forward the ways in which we read books “without knowing if anything of the being, whose name it was, survives in these pages” (qtd. in Ozeki 356). To further solidify the crow’s use as a guiding figure for Ruth and Ozeki, the bird also leads Ruth and Oliver to Pesto who had previously gone missing, and in so doing she simultaneously leads to one of the main resolutions in Ruth’s story. Indicating that her time in Ozeki’s story is done, the crow does not stay after she directs Ruth and Oliver to Pesto; rather, this final act is seen as “a parting gift” (Ozeki 378). The

meaning that Ozeki invests in the *Jungle Crow* as a main character who has the power to lead and direct human stories sets the foundation for other, more fleeting animal stories and characters that inhabit *A Tale for the Time Being*. To read the whales and the wolves in the context of the *Jungle Crow*'s influence signals the contributions of animals in human stories and histories.

Whale Histories and the Pacific Ocean's Memory

Ozeki introduces us to whales at the same time as she introduces us to Whaletown, explaining that it was once a whaling station and that is how it received its name. As Ozeki describes, “whales were rarely seen in nearby waters anymore. Most of them had been hunted out back in 1869, when a Scotsman named James Dawson and his American partner, Abel Douglass, established the Whaletown station and started killing whales with a new and extremely efficient weapon called a bomb lance” (Ozeki 58). This shoulder rifle housed a harpoon fitted with a bomb designed to penetrate deep into the whale's skin and then explode seconds after. The bomb lance revolutionized whaling and within that year alone “Dawson and Douglass had shipped more than 450 barrels of oil, 20,000 gallons, south to the United States” (Ozeki 58). In those days, the primary source of oil was blubber. Development of the technology “for extracting kerosene and petroleum from the prehistoric dead” gave the whales a fighting chance for survival (Ozeki 58). “You could say that fossil fuels arrived just in time to save the whales, but not in time to save the whales of Whaletown. By June of 1870, a year after the station was established, the last whales in the area either had been slaughtered or had fled, and

Dawson and Douglass closed up shop and moved on, too” (Ozeki 58). Whaling, as this history demonstrates, is not only important because it created the locality of Whaletown and brought many diasporic labourers to the land, but also for the impact it had on the whales who used to live in the area. Ozeki attends to the beings who were forced to make room for human settlements. “Whales are time beings,” she declares (58). They have lived for many generations and their existence spans across human history. She recounts the true story of a whale who was killed off the Alaskan coast in 2007 and an undetonated projectile from a bomb lance was found embedded in its blubber. By dating the projectile, researchers determined that the whale was between 115 and 130 years old. Ozeki insists that, “creatures who survive and live that long presumably have long memories” (58). They have learned that “the waters around Whaletown were once treacherous for whales, but the ones that managed to escape learned to stay away. You can imagine them chirping and cooing to each other in their beautiful subaquatic voices. *Stay away! Stay away!*” (Ozeki 58).

Fields within whale biology have been studying whale communication and culture. Findings indicate that whales communicate through echolocation and biologists are uncovering that these sounds possess grammar and syntax which “indicate the presence of cultural lineages” (Roman 202). Humpback whales, for instance, in breeding areas that stretch over 4500 km between Hawai’i and Mexico sing identical songs (Roman 203). Even more remarkable than the consistency of the songs across long distances is the fact that these songs change over time; “slight variations in the songs occur each year. But, as with evolution, these changes can make huge leaps in a short

time” (Roman 205). Whale biologists call the shifts in whale songs evidence of “cultural revolution” in humpback whales, which is significant, although they acknowledge that there are still a lot on unknowns, such as “why do they [the songs] switch? A preference for novelty, perhaps, though this notion seems to be contradicted by the observation that all whales in a particular area sing the same song in a given year. Could there be a cultural aesthetic?” (Roman 205). Yet, both our ability to study and understand whale communication, as well as their ability to communicate with each other, is under threat by noise pollution in the ocean. The whales in *A Tale for the Time Being* may not have been able to tell each other to stay away if sonar, explosions, or human traffic were close by. Ozeki extrapolates from the scientific evidence of whale communication to consider what the whales may be telling each other about the waters around Whaletown. The words she imagines them saying clearly reveal the consequences of our actions that teach the animals that we love or admire to stay away. The story of the whales brings with it a more global view of industry, capitalism, and natural resources playing out on ocean waters. The mass killing and displacement of whales necessitated by whaling also invokes questions about homes. Who gets to stay in the homes that they choose? Who is forced to leave? Where do whales go to make new homes, and what can they do when they long to return?

“Every now and then,” Ozeki writes, “there’s a whale sighting from the ferry that services the island” (58). The captain of the ferry “cuts the engine and comes on the PA system to announce that a pod of orcas or a humpback has been spotted on the port side at two o’clock, and all the passengers flow to that side of the ship to scan the waves for a

glimpse of a fin or a sleek dark back, rising up from the water” (58). Everyone’s excitement is palpable, as “the tourists raise their cameras and mobile phones, hoping to capture a breach or a spout, and even the locals get excited. But mostly the whales still stay away from Whaletown” (Ozeki 58). The whales’ long memories of brutal histories in the waters around Whaletown keep them from coming back. We learn more about whales from Ruth’s friend Callie, a marine biologist, when she describes “giving a lecture about the order Cetacea” to a crowd of people on a massive cruise liner heading towards Alaska (Ozeki 116). During the lecture, “she showed video and talked about their complex communities and social behaviours, about their bubble nets and echolocation and the range of their emotions. She played recordings of their vocalizations, illustrating their clicks and songs” (Ozeki 116). The cruisers also had a chance to put their new knowledge about whales to use when a pod of humpbacks came close, “treating them to a spectacular display of surface behaviours, breaching, spy-hopping, lobtailing, and slapping” (Ozeki 116). I posit that we are meant to frame the violent history of whaling (not to mention ongoing violence) within a robust understanding of whales as ancient, complex time beings in order to prompt the questions: what does our capacity for such violence say about who we are as a species? By learning to appreciate how animals respond and resist human histories of violence, can we develop a more complicated understanding of ourselves in the world that does not either overestimate our power or downplay our responsibilities? The whale stories show the other side of our interconnectedness to animals by portraying the threat we pose to animal life and forcing us to interrogate our capacity to make their homes and lives so precarious.

The ocean is home to whales and countless marine animals and plant life and it also surrounds, shapes, and orients human homes in *A Tale for the Time Being*. The whale history detailed above belongs to a larger history of the ocean, which I suggest can be conceived of as the ocean's memory. The novel establishes the connective potential of water along with ocean cultures to query the lines that divide humans from nature, animals, plants, and water. The ocean, in *A Tale for the Time Being*, connects people and animals across time and space and Ozeki blurs the distinction between the ocean, water, waves, and humans. "A wave is born from deep conditions of the ocean," explains Jiko, "a person is born from deep conditions of the world. A person pokes up from the world and rolls along like a wave, until it is time to sink down again. Up, down. Person, wave." (Ozeki 194). The growing body of works on water both within the Environmental Humanities and flowing across disciplinary boundaries come together on this point: water connects us. In *Thinking with Water*, Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Niemanis describe how "waters literally flow between and within bodies, across space and through time, in a planetary circulation system that challenges pretensions to discrete individuality" (12). Artist Basia Irland asserts that, "we are water. Our bodies house streams: lymph, bile, sweat, blood, mucus, urine. Water enters, circulates, leaves—individualized hydrological cycles" (*Basia Irland*). Dorothy Christian, a scholar from the Secwepemc and Syilx Nations of the interior of BC, writes about "water, a very critical part of who we are as human beings and which I have heard Elders refer to as the 'life blood' of Mother Earth" ("Untapped" 232; original emphasis). Similarly, in "Watersheds" Chinese Canadian poet Rita Wong explains:

we are roughly 70% water, and we are part of the hydrological cycle, not separate from it. Some of the water that is in our bodies may have previously circulated in dinosaurs millions of years ago, or jostled around with fish in lakes and rivers, or been processed by our local sewage treatment plant. Water connects us to places, people and creatures we have not seen, life that is far away from us, and life that came long before us. (115)

The ways that water—specifically water in the Pacific Ocean—figures in *A Tale for the Time Being* demonstrates not only how water connects us, but also how water gathers stories, memories, and histories (Chen et al. 5). Ozeki’s representation of the ocean, as well as its role in directing the narrative, is consistent with thinking that “water is a *matter* of relation and connection. Watery places and bodies are connected to other places and bodies in relations of gift, transfer, theft, and debt” (Chen et al. 12). Each character’s story in the novel is connected through a relationship to the ocean and Ozeki pushes the consideration of relationality to examine a paradox in which human actions and lives are both small and heavily consequential in relation to the ocean.

The ocean connects everyone in *A Tale for the Time Being*. Oliver knows its currents, the effects of plastic on gyres and marine life, and the movement of drift after the tsunami. Ruth understands herself to be part of the ocean’s drift and her life changes when the ocean brings her Nao’s diary. Jiko knows that there is little difference between herself and a wave and she teaches Nao to see herself as inextricably caught up in a relationship with the ocean as a time being. Nao’s father inherits a family history with the ocean, as we learn that his grandfather Haruki, who was enlisted as a kamikaze pilot in WWII, decided that instead of hitting his U.S. target during the Battle of Okinawa, it was “better to do battle with the waves, who may yet forgive me” (328). The ocean ebbs and flows around each character and it is woven into their identities in a way that is informed

by the biological presence of water but not limited to it alone. As a literary presence, the ocean in Ozeki's text is not only a narrative device; it is a character with history, memory, and being that can act independently from—and even contradict—the human characters' trajectories. Ozeki also pushes past the connectivity of water to show both how water has the capacity to kill us, and how we are involved in a paradoxical relation to the ocean. Ozeki captures an appreciation for the ways that the ocean drives the narrative and acts as a force in itself, while also addressing the darker sides of our relationship to ocean waters. The 2011 earthquake and resulting tsunami in Japan drives the novel's narrative as it facilitates the flow of debris from Japan to British Columbia, bringing Ruth and Nao closer. By painting a nuanced picture of the various roles the ocean plays on the earth, Ozeki does not romanticize the ocean's connective potential at the cost of understanding the devastation caused by natural disasters like the tsunami, nor does she portray an ideal human relationship to the ocean that overlooks the serious and harmful impact we have had on ocean water and marine life. She situates the tsunami and its aftermath within the ongoing impacts on water and the human, animal, and plant lives that depend on it, and alongside a respectful and realistic portrayal of the ocean.

As an example of the destruction caused by the tsunami, Ozeki tells the story of Mr. Nojima, who survived the disaster but was forced to watch his wife, daughter, and infant son disappear “when the wall of black water and debris smashed through their house” (Ozeki 111). Ruth watches Mr. Nojima on television as he sifts through a field of debris, through “splintered houses and crumpled cars, cinder block and tangled rebar, boats, furniture parts, smashed appliances, roof tiles, clothing, stuff—the ghastly midden

piled several meters deep” (Ozeki 112). “I’ve lost hope of giving [my family] a proper funeral,” he says, “but if I can just find something, just one thing that belonged to my daughter, I’ll be able to rest my mind and leave this place” (Ozeki 112). Ruth watched the footage pouring in from Japan and described “studying the wave as it surged over the tops of the seawalls, carrying ships down city streets, picking up cars and trucks and depositing them on the roofs of buildings. She watched whole towns get crushed and swept away in a matter of moments” (Ozeki 112-113). As she recounts watching hours of scattered, frantic, and sometimes eerily calm camera footage of the tsunami, Ruth notices that one thing stays consistent: “always, from the vantage point of the camera, you could see how fast the wave was travelling and how immense it was” (Ozeki 113). Though the tsunami may have brought together the two main stories in the novel, the once precious objects that were later found scattered across the Pacific Coast represent the everyday lives that were washed into the ocean. The text encapsulates how the ocean, even as it is a life-giving, connective force, can also lay waste to the lives we thought we had. As Mr. Nojima explains, “the life with my family is the dream. [...] This is reality. Everything is gone. We need to wake up and understand that” (Ozeki 112). A darker side of understanding our smallness in relation to the ocean reveals itself here, as the novel captures our vulnerability to natural disasters. Though the ocean can teach us that we are not always invincible to the forces of nature that we too often conceive of as beneath or separate from us, the other side of this reality is that human action has also made life precarious, dangerous, and even impossible for countless marine creatures.

From garbage patches to nuclear waste, Ozeki tackles some of the most devastating effects of human actions on the ocean. *A Tale for the Time Being* highlights the ways in which humans mistreat the ocean largely due to the “persistent (and convenient) conception of the ocean as so vast and powerful that anything dumped into it will be dispersed into oblivion” (Alaimo, “States” 477). Moreover, many ocean zones that have high populations of marine life, like the benthic and pelagic zones, are relatively unknown and depicted as completely alien or isolated from human activities (Alaimo, “States” 477). In spite of growing evidence that marine life ingests, absorbs, and harbours toxins that eventually make their way up the food chain to directly impact humans, we continue to dump garbage, radioactive water, and pollutants into the ocean. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch, which is comprised of the Great Eastern and Western Patches, is a glaring example of human impact on the ocean. The garbage patches throughout the world are astonishing:

‘There are at least eight of them in the world's oceans,’ [Oliver] said. ‘According to this book I’ve been reading, two of them, the Great Eastern Patch and Great Western Patch, are in the Turtle Gyre, and converge at the southern tip of Hawaii. The Great Eastern Patch is the size of Texas. The Great Western is even larger, half the size of the continental USA.’ (Ozeki 36)

Essentially, the garbage patch is an area of spinning and suspended marine debris that is bound by the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre, and the circular motion of the gyre pulls debris to its center and traps it there (“Great Pacific Garbage Patch”). The garbage patches are comprised mostly of plastic items that do not degrade. As Oliver explains, they contain “plastic mostly. Like your freezer bag. Soda bottles, styrofoam, take-out food containers, disposable razors, industrial waste. Anything we throw away that

floats.” (Ozeki 36). Ozeki contrasts the organic movement of ocean gyres against the stuckness of garbage patches because the natural forces of gyres flow and carry drift, while items in the garbage patch get “sucked up and becalmed, slowly eddying around. The plastic ground into particles for the fish and zooplankton to eat” (Ozeki 36). Seemingly harmless, disposable, everyday objects turn malevolent and nightmarish as they become suspended in the ocean indefinitely (Alaimo, “States” 487). As we continue to cast enormous amounts of plastics into the ocean, it becomes clear that “the gyre’s memory is filled with all the stuff that we’ve forgotten” (Ozeki 114). The Great Pacific Garbage Patch mirrors humanity’s existence on the earth back to us. Michelle N. Huang compellingly reads the Great Pacific Garbage Patch in the novel as it “draws attention to jettisoned histories of disregard and violent erasure” (99), which is especially salient when she looks to other texts’ representations of the garbage patch to call forward its role in the racial formation of Asian Americans and the “racialization of plastic” (109). I am curious about how we might begin to think about the ocean’s capacity to house disregarded and jettisoned histories, to keep them swirling around, embodied by a sea of plastic. Can we think of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch as not only a representation of human history, but also a part of the ocean’s memory? In the same way as she does not romanticize the ocean’s destructive potential, Ozeki does not idealize our relationship to the ocean when she highlights the garbage patches. The bigger picture of the novel looks to the ocean to situate human life within this paradox of being small in terms of individual being, but also catastrophic in terms of cumulative human action driven by forces like consumer capitalism.

After the tsunami, Ruth scours the daily 2011 Fukushima Nuclear Accident Update Log, which described “the details of the desperate efforts to stabilize the reactors” (196). The logs detail the “feed and bleed” strategy that Tepco employed to try to prevent the meltdown that had actually already happened. “In the weeks following the tsunami,” Ozeki recounts, “[Tepco] pumped thousands of tons of seawater into the reactor vessels at the Fukushima nuclear plant [...] and it created about 500 tons of highly radioactive water each day—water that needed to be contained and kept from leaking” (196). Ozeki details the release of “11,500 tons of contaminated water into the Pacific Ocean. That much water is roughly equivalent to the contents of five Olympic swimming pools” (197). Though the company went to great, albeit hasty lengths to determine the risks to humans of introducing tons of highly radioactive water into the Pacific Ocean, they did not consider the risk to the aquatic plant life or marine animals; “the company did not estimate the consequences to the fish” (Ozeki 197). The novel represents the seriousness of mistreating the ocean and overlooking marine life as something more insidious than a careless oversight. While Ozeki challenges humanism by positioning it as densely entangled, interconnected, and interdependent with a more-than-human world, she also aligns with humanism by privileging human action and responsibility. In another section about the tsunami, Ozeki describes an area in Japan that was hit particularly hard by the wave. She explains that, “letters carved in stone are more durable [than water], although not so easily distributed, but inertia can be a good thing. In towns up and down the coast of Japan, stone markers were found on hillsides, engraved with ancient warnings: **Do not build your homes below this point!**” (114; original emphasis). Though some of the

warnings were more than six centuries old, the stones remained out of the wave's reach. The stones housed “the voices of our ancestors,” said the mayor of a town, destroyed by the wave. “They were speaking to us across time, but we didn't listen.” (114). Ozeki connects ignoring the voices of ancestors to ignoring the impact of releasing radioactive water on marine life, and in doing so, the novel brings forward the role that history—whether natural history or what we have learned from our ancestors, who are important in the concept of interbeing—should play in determining how we act as a species in this world.

Ozeki's focus on the ocean, from its connectivity to the almost unthinkable ways that humans have mistreated it, compiles a history of the ocean that reflects an endeavour to tell the water's stories, to think through the water's memories, and to think, more generally, with water. Astrida Niemanis conceptualizes thinking with water as a way of “paying attention to water—really paying attention to it, its movements and relations, its vulnerabilities and gifts, what it does, and how it organizes itself and other bodies” (52). When we pay attention to water, we will see that thinking solely of its fluidity “is a rather impoverished way of understanding the logics of water” (Niemanis 53). Hydro-logics, Niemanis proposes, offer a better, more nuanced way of thinking about the capacities and modes of water (53). She details each hydro-logic—gestationality, dissolution, communication, conduit, memory-keeper or archive, sculptor, differentiation—and admits that this list could be longer: “(is not water also lover, scribe, alibi, genealogist, saboteur...?)” (55). I am specifically interested in the hydro-logic of water as memory-keeper or archive in relation to Ozeki's novel as the ocean stores “flotsam, chemicals,

detritus, sunken treasure, culture, *stories, histories*” (Niemanis 54 emphasis added). As Ozeki represents the importance of the ocean in each character’s life, she also tells ocean stories that approach what the Pacific ocean’s memory might look like. The last hydro-logic that Niemanis lists is “*unknowability*. Somewhat ironically, *unknowability* refers to water’s capacity to elude our efforts to contain it with any apparatus of knowledge” (55). In a way that also recalls Thien’s focus on uncertainty, *unknowability* for Niemanis “is both the logic of refusal and an invitation to humility” (55). In other words, water escapes our ways of knowing, it overflows our attempts to contain it, it refuses to comply with any one or two ways of understanding its roles and potentials, and all of its complexities demand humility.

Niemanis follows the need for humility to argue that, “thinking with water, then, might help [us] imagine and cultivate a much-needed *epistemology of unknowability*” (58). By looking to water through various epistemologies that come from Jiko’s knowledge of Buddhism, Oliver’s scientific knowledge of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, the history of the tsunami, and the dangers of not listening to the ocean, Ozeki uses storytelling to show how it flows through and orients the characters’ lives in multiple and unpredictable ways. Further, especially through her emphasis on how the ocean should make humans understand their smallness, she gives us a story of the ocean that demonstrates what it might look like to follow Lee Maracle’s call to “truly humble yourself to water” (33). Water connects us and sustains us. It also destroys us. Water demands humility and thinking with water, as Ozeki does, requires us to tarry with the unknowable.

On Wolves, Indigeneity, and Violent Histories of Human Homes

Unlike the whales who learned to stay away, the wolves around Whaletown endured violent histories, but they did not stay away. Whereas Ozeki paints an intricate picture of whale being, her representations of wolves are defined by violence, not only wolves' capacity for violence, but also the more vicious side of human interconnectedness with animals. Drawing a parallel between our histories of obliterating whale homes, families, and social structures and wolves' cruel attacks on our domesticity should provoke us to see how, although we are horrified by the wolves' violent tendencies, we are not so different. We first encounter wolves in *A Tale for the Time Being* in a short chapter about Ruth. Ozeki situates the wolf chapter between two chapters about Nao; one deals with her anger and scars caused by her experiences of bullying, and the other discusses learning to use the Heart Sutra as a meditation that provides a kind of superpower to protect her from her anger. Ozeki tells the story of the wolves during the silence and encompassing darkness of a power outage at Ruth and Oliver's home. While trying not to use her kerosene lamp to read Nao's diary, Ruth listens to the wolves running and howling in the forest outside her house. Their presence worries her especially because that night "Oliver [had] insisted on going running" (Ozeki 171). She also worries about the growing boldness of the wolves and the threat they pose to the everyday, domestic lives of the people who lived around Whaletown: "they approached people's houses, snatched cats, and lured dogs into the forest to eat" (171). A tension emerges here between humans and animals, the wild and the domestic, which is largely

played out violently between the wolves and traditional companion animals, like cats and dogs, who live in a more conventional, accepted, and encouraged proximity to humans.

The novel does not solely blame the wolves for their violent actions, but places them in the context of an historic human-animal relationship largely defined by violence where “wolves, more than any other animal, have been emblematic of the wild and particularly of the dangerous and threatening qualities of the wild” (Marvin 7). Ozeki frames the wolves’ actions as a reciprocal violence resulting from the history they endured “back in the 1970s, when the wolves killed cattle and sheep, the islanders responded with a wolf cull, hunting them down, shooting as many as they could, and stacking their bleeding carcasses like firewood in the backs of their pickups” (172). Connecting the wolves’ actions to a brutal history of wolf culls in the area pulls forward the parallels drawn between humans and wolves—where wolves become a threat because they are apex predators who compete with humans for food animals—that has been predominantly wielded in favour of human homes and settlement. “People still remembered this,” explains Ozeki, “and so did the wolves, and for a while they stayed away. But now they were back” (172). Here she brings out the wolves’ history, memory, and right to the land in spite of human habitats and directives.

In the novel, Ozeki foregrounds the wolves’ resistance and resilience by portraying them as beings who have endured long histories of violence, but still exist and have some agency to disrupt human and companion animal lives. Instead of learning to coexist and understand the wolf’s vital role in their ecosystem, “Provincial wildlife officers had come to the island to teach people what to do. Haze them, the officers said.

Shout at them. Throw things. Easier said than done” (Ozeki 172). In another wolf encounter, Ruth recalls looking “out her office window to see Oliver in his running shorts, brandishing a huge stick and bellowing as he chased a wolf up their driveway. Oliver was running full tilt. The wolf was barely loping, taking his time” (172). The contrast between Oliver running at full speed armed with a stick and the wolf loping casually in this encounter demonstrates the futility of an approach to wildlife based on fear, hatred, and disrespect. Ozeki’s example of human and wolf histories conveys the idea that a more ethical human-wolf coexistence should arise from acknowledging that there is something about the particular histories and capabilities of wolves that demands respect.

Respect for wolves in *A Tale for the Time Being* arises from a realistic understanding of the animal. Ozeki does not gloss over who the wolves are and what they are capable of. Respect and an appreciation of our interconnectedness should come from a full understanding of animals that does not idealize or romanticize them in an attempt to obscure their violent behaviour. In the novel, Ruth’s friend tells her about a terrible incident between her husband’s dog and a pack of wolves:

‘His little dog got snatched by the wolves last night. They sent a young bitch out and he followed. Stupid dog. The pack was waiting on the far side of a ravine. Set on him and killed him, just like that. Tore him to shreds and ate him.’ She looked back toward the living room, where her husband was still sitting. ‘He watched it happen. Called him and chased after, but couldn’t get across the ravine. He’s too big. Too slow. There were just pieces of fur left by the time he got there. He loved that little dog.’ (Ozeki 316)

To recognize our interconnectedness with wolves who are capable of destroying the lives of animals we hold dear and with whom the wolves may be thought to be kin tests the

limits of interbeing and time being. Recalling Hiroji's favourite saying in *Dogs at the Perimeter*, Ozeki's depiction of the conflict between wolves and dogs reveals another side of the uncertainty that might allow us to confuse the dog and the wolf. It is easier to care about, feel connected to, and interdependent with companion animals who share our homes, like Ruth and Oliver's cat Pesto, gentle, charismatic animals whom we admire, or even a one-sided vision of wolves that exclusively sees them as "highly intelligent and complex social creature[s] that posed no threat" (Marvin 8). Part of interbeing's and time being's conceptual strength lies in the acknowledgement that our interconnectedness stretches across our entire beings and everything we are capable of. Everything and everyone is a time being who lives in a relation of interbeing simply by virtue of their existence, and this assertion challenges us to see our commonalities even across histories of violence.

The histories of animals who were displaced and eradicated to make room for human homes, and particularly Ozeki's example of wolves who were exiled and then returned to Coast Salish territories, should bring to mind the histories of Indigenous people, settler colonialism, and diaspora. Though a worldview that centers interbeing and time being has the potential to connect people across different histories and lives, it proves to be an inadequate strategy for dealing with systemic oppression, at least in part because interbeing and time being tend to deal on the level of inter-personal relationships. When Indigeneity (even as a trace) and Buddhism come together, as they do in Ozeki's novel, Indigenous histories and conceptions of the land and settler colonialism demand a more critical and nuanced approach to the Buddhist concepts of interbeing and time

being. *A Tale for the Time Being* gets caught up in the tension between Indigeneity and Buddhism, and this comes to the fore when Ozeki describes the “nickname” for Whaletown, which was more akin to “a shadow name that was rarely spoken: the Island of the Dead” (142). In one of the few mentions of Coast Salish people in the novel, Ozeki describes how “some said the name [Island of the Dead] referred to the bloody intertribal wars, or the smallpox epidemic of 1862 that killed off most of the indigenous Coast Salish population. Other people said no, that the island had always been a tribal burial ground, laced with hidden caves known only to the elders, where they entombed their dead”; “still others insisted that the nickname had nothing to do with native lore at all, pointing instead to the aging population of retired white people, who’d come to spend their twilight years on the island” (142). But, “Ruth liked the nickname. It had a certain gravitas, and she’d brought her own mother here to die, after all. Her father’s ashes, too, she’d brought with her in a box” (142). The mixing of humour and sarcasm works to obscure and detract from the colonial history of this specific place.

It is important to understand how both Ozeki and Ruth are implicated in histories of settler colonialism. Love, illness, and the lure of Canadian healthcare carried Ruth from Manhattan to the locality of Whaletown, populated by 50 people give-or-take on the Pacific Rim. After falling in love with her husband, she was “content to exchange the tiny one-bedroom apartment that had been her home in lower Manhattan for twenty acres of rain forest and two houses in Whaletown. ‘I’m just trading one island for another,’” she told her New York friends (Ozeki 57). The character Ruth’s move from one island to another in the novel mirrors the author Ozeki’s movement in real life between Manhattan

and Cortes Island (the name that, given during an expedition in 1792 after Spanish Conquistador Hernán Cortés, signifies its colonial history). Settler status, particularly as it relates to people of color, is not unified or monolithic, but rather requires a more stratified vision of colonial settlerhood (Phung 292). Malissa Phung's article "Are People of Colour Settlers Too?" addresses the need to think of people of color as settlers because they are complicit in the colonization of Indigenous people, but she argues that the position of settlers of color demands a careful and complicated approach premised on the question of whether or not all settlers are equal (291). With this in mind, we can see how Buddhism acts as a kind of settler discourse in the novel and how the fact of Ruth's "ownership" of property in Whaletown benefits from a history of colonization that displaced Indigenous peoples and animals. The island that Ruth lives on comes with its own histories that reveal a long legacy of settler colonialism woven into the land.

The Northern Coast Salish people, specifically Tla' Amin (Sliammon), Tlo'hos (Klahoose), and Homalthco (Homalco) peoples, inhabit the area that stretches between Whaletown and Cortes Island.²⁰ "Salish" is a term that linguists and anthropologists applied to a whole family of languages that comprised 23 distinct languages and then they extended the name to the Indigenous peoples "of a large region of the northwest Canadian coast that includes the sheltered waters of Johnstone Strait, the Strait of Georgia, Juan de Fuca Strait, Puget Sound, and Hood Canal" (Washington 586). Siemthlut Michelle Washington, who was raised in the village of Tla' Amin and is a

²⁰ The spellings in parentheses are English spellings, though they have become widely accepted. I mostly use the Indigenous spellings (except where scholars have used the English spellings in their work), but I have included both spellings in this list for clarity.

Sechelt, Māori, Klahoose, and Sto:lo scholar, tells the history of the Indigenous peoples who lived and still live on and around Cortes Island. The Tla' Amin, Tlo'hos, and Homalco peoples mostly speak the Mainland dialect of Eye a jo thum and are often considered “‘one people’ by academics and Elders alike” because of their close cultural, linguistic, familial and social ties (586). “Traditionally,” Washington explains, “groups who identified themselves as Sliammon, Homalco, and Klahoose each occupied a cluster of villages and recognized a territory associated with these villages and resource-gathering areas” (587). The “mental map” of the territories

has been passed down through the generations. Those who resided in Sliammon villages freely used the resources found in their environs, apart from resources such as salmon streams that were owned and taken care of by specific individuals and kin groups and required access through kinship or the permission of leaders. Kinship, nevertheless, permitted access to resources located beyond original Sliammon territory to fisheries, clam beds, and hunting areas more commonly associated, for example, with Homalco and Klahoose families. (Washington 587)

The first recorded European contact occurred in 1792 bringing along “a host of external and internal factors [that] have resulted in considerable transformations to the social, political, and economic structures of Sliammon society” (Washington 584). Washington is careful to note that the effects of colonization on her ancestors cannot be pinpointed to a “single dramatic event, apart from first contact itself” (584). She describes how Northern Coast Salish people, like all Indigenous peoples in Canada, endured “epidemic diseases that decimated our population, a residential school system, legislation that restricted the practice of our language and culture, and an enforced system of government” (584). As they continue to live in a nation defined by ongoing settler colonialism, Washington contends that, “it has been a long journey for the Sliammon

people, and we acknowledge that our Klahx klah xay (Elders) have passed on the knowledge from our He heow (ancestors) under great hardship and duress. Our challenge as Sliammon people will be to connect what is relevant from our knowledge of traditional governance with the requirements of a modern society” (584). Even though Ruth Ozeki currently lives on Cortes Island in very close proximity to Indigenous people and the Klahoose Reservation, the presence of Indigeneity in the novel is limited to the description of the island’s nickname, a passing mention of the Klahoose Reservation (225), and Sliammon mythology about crows (96; 376).

A blind spot that results from Ozeki’s Buddhist approach to the histories of Cortes Island is a lack of attention to the histories of Indigenous peoples who have inhabited this place long before the arrival of settler and diasporic communities. In his article, “Indigenous Place and Diaspora Space: Of Literalism and Abstraction,” Daniel Coleman asserts:

the scandal of the *relation* between Indigeneity and diaspora is that, despite their shared challenge to the settler state’s claims to liberal equity and justice, their different histories of displacement by colonialism and by the racial nation-state have tended to set very different, even opposed, political and social objectives for Indigenous and diasporic peoples. (Coleman 62; original emphasis)

The political project for Indigenous peoples—owing to long histories “engulfed by corporate extraction of resources from traditional lands and by unwanted assimilation into settler colonial systems of governance, has often expressed itself in a politics of separatism and sovereignty” (Coleman 62). For generations of immigrants and refugees, national citizenship and access to global capitalism appears to necessitate a politics of belonging, but when racism, xenophobia, classism or other forms of oppression arise,

their politics turn to unbelonging (Coleman 62). Setting and location—both where the novel takes place and where Ozeki herself lives—demand a consideration of what happens to representations of history when diasporic people, like Ozeki, settle on unceded Indigenous territory. In contrast to her representation of the histories, survival, and resistance of wolves, Ozeki confines Indigenous history and Indigeneity to passing remarks or references to the past. I'm not arguing that an interest in animal histories necessarily negates an interest in Indigenous histories or that one needs to be exalted over the other. Rather, I find it curious that Ozeki carefully represents the histories of the land and the animals who live in and around Whaletown and Cortes Island and yet she elides histories of Indigenous peoples who played a crucial role in shaping the island. In an interesting turn that shows the fallibility of Ozeki's focus on history through interbeing and time being, I posit that representations of Indigeneity in her novel resemble early colonial descriptions of Coast Salish territory that erased or disappeared any Indigenous presence or involvement with the land.

In "Beyond the Water's Edge," Jeff Oliver contrasts early conceptions of the Northwest Coast of British Columbia as "an untouched wilderness" against the extensive involvement that Indigenous people had with the land, forest, and coast, as well as the integral role that the land played in their social structures (3). Oliver traces one version of conceptualizing the area as untouched, pristine, or uninhabited to Franz Boas and his descriptions of the coast versus the forest during his early explorations to Canada. Boas, like many other anthropologists after him, noticed the vibrant social structures playing out in Indigenous villages on the coast, but he drew a stark contrast against the forest or

interior that seemed to him to be untouched. Boas describes how “the overwhelming solitude and stillness of the shores, the monotony of the dark pines and cedars, of the channels and of the roaring cascades beget a longing for the sight of human work, of human habitation, that swallows the admiration of the magnificent scenery” (229). “The idea of the Northwest Coast as wilderness *par excellence* is nothing new,” as since first contact, Europeans who settled the area used a similar conception of the land: “‘Vast’ were its mountain ranges, ‘interminable’ were its forests; but crucially, it revealed little [to nothing] in the way of human endeavour” (Oliver 3). Even fifty years after Boas wrote about the area, little had changed. Anthropologist Phillip Drucker recounted a view of the land that follows Boas’s lead: “the woods, seen from the water, seem to form an impenetrable mantle over the irregular surface of the land. After one finally breaks through the luxurious growth along the margin, he finds himself in a dark gloomy moss-covered world” (qtd. in Oliver 3). We can see how framing the impenetrability of the woods confounds and frustrates Drucker, though he only experienced the land through his own ways of knowing and did not stop to consider that perhaps the woods had been intentionally shaped that way (by human hands). The inability to consider Indigenous involvement in the forest and interior that extended beyond the coast led to a convenient and false idea that the forest was pure wilderness existing without human contact. This view persisted—and, I would argue, still persists—and manifests in more recent work by environmentalists who conceive of “Indigenous peoples as the ‘original conservationists...people so intimately bound to the land that they left no mark upon it’” (Oliver 4). We see even more evidence of this line of thought in “a myriad of glossy

coffee-table books, calendars, and tourist ephemera” that reinforce the idea of the area as “‘primeval’ and ‘untouched’” (Oliver 4). Any Indigenous involvement or conceptions of the land are erased or relegated to marginal notes or footnotes in order to enable a view of the area as an open signifier available for use—whether that aligns with environmentalists or other settlers seeking to profit from deforestation, logging, mining, etc. (Oliver 4).

Jeff Oliver analyzes ethnographic, ethnobotanical, paleoenvironmental, and archeological approaches for evidence that the forests around the Northwest Coast were, in fact, not untouched or void of human involvement, but rather that the maintenance, cultivation, nourishment, and orientation of the trees, plants, mosses, etc. played a significant role in Indigenous cultures. He discusses how what was thought of as untouched was actually an intimately “worked landscape” (Oliver 12) for Indigenous peoples, which can be seen in the ways that fire was used to maintain and shape the landscape, the ways that plant crops were cultivated throughout the forest, the use of cedar trees, and the fact that the uniformity of forests that we commonly take for granted occurred through careful, labour-intensive care. Washington writes about the importance of the land (and not just the coast) to Sliammon people and the impact that losing the land has had on Northern Coast Salish peoples: “Places once visited for harvesting resources or for finding spiritual assistance are now the sites of housing developments, parks, and marinas or scarred by clear-cut logging” (584). We do not experience much of these vast and complicated Sliammon histories in *A Tale for the Time Being*. The sparse mentions of Indigenous people set against long descriptions of the land, water, forests, and beaches

surrounding Cortes Island (perhaps even the erasure of the name and therefore history implied by “Cortes Island”) resembles early colonial thinking about the land and demonstrates the resilience of this kind of thinking. Like early settlers who sought to envision the land in ways that justified their desires to use and exploit it as if it belonged to no one, perhaps Ozeki nullifies the presence of Indigeneity in a way that makes the novel unaccountable to Indigenous ways of knowing.

Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice states that “kinship isn’t a static thing; it’s dynamic, ever in motion. It requires attentiveness; kinship is best thought of as a verb rather than a noun, because kinship, in most indigenous contexts, is something that’s *done* more than something that simply *is*” (150). In thinking through “an ethical Native literary criticism,” Justice foregrounds kinship and community as they relate to decolonization, literature, and the critical lenses through which we read Indigenous literature (149). In relation to Indigenous communities, literature can play an irreplaceable role “in ensuring the continuity of indigenous nations into the future” (Justice 150). Literature is at the heart of Justice’s vision of decolonization imperatives because “the storied expression of continuity encompasses resistance while moving beyond it to an active expression of the living relationship between the People and the world” (150). While *A Tale for the Time Being* cannot be categorized as Indigenous literature, when thinking through Indigenous-diasporic relationality it is important to hold diasporic stories up to the goals of Native literary criticism to see how they stand with or work against them. We can learn to inherit histories through stories, we can unlearn our positions in the world, and stories can bring lives and deaths that we once overlooked into

view; literature can build kinships. History is also only part of any story because “relations are the primary axis through which we can understand ourselves and each other” (Justice 151). Whose histories does *A Tale for the Time Being* inherit and who is the novel interested in building kinship with? The few words that Ozeki uses to describe Coast Salish people—“dead,” “shadow,” “wars,” “smallpox,” “entombed”—tells a very different story than the words Justice uses to describe Indigenous communities: “kinship,” “dynamic,” “resistance,” “active,” “living relationship.” “Stories define relationships,” Justice writes, “between nations as well as individuals, and those relationships imply presence—you can’t have a mutual relationship between *something* and *nothingness*” (150; emphasis added). By confining Indigenous people to the past or to violent histories of death and disease, the novel not only denies an inheritance of Tla’ Amin histories, but also works against endeavours to emphasize Indigenous survival, continuance, resurgence, and sovereignty politics that dovetail complexly with environmental politics.

The concepts of interbeing and time being that the novel foregrounds ask us to recognize the histories by which everyone in a story arrives, but does not necessarily provide tangible ways to uncover and engage with these histories and thus start to undo systemic oppression. The point is not to resolve the tension between Indigeneity and diaspora in *A Tale for the Time Being*, but rather to work through and establish a clearer idea of the relations that Ozeki cultivates and the relations that are elided or overlooked. Continuance and continuity are the most basic forms of Indigenous resistance; as Michi

Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson asserts, the very fact of their survival is powerful in itself and not to be overlooked:

My ancestors resisted and survived what must have seemed like an apocalyptic reality of occupation and subjugation in a context where they had few choices. They resisted by simply surviving and being alive. They resisted by holding onto their stories. They resisted by taking the seeds of our culture and political systems and packing them away, so that one day another generation of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg might be able to plant them. I am sure of their resistance, because I am here today, living as a contemporary Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg woman. I am the evidence. Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg people are the evidence. (15)

Simpson paints a picture of the resistance and resilience of Indigenous communities as they come down to one key point: survival. To focus solely on violent histories of death and disease and erase the histories of survival and continuity of Indigenous people is to tread too closely to the stereotype of the vanishing Indian. Especially when contrasted with the robust engagement with wolf histories on the island, the novel's engagement with Indigenous history as either simply over or confined to mythology reaffirms colonial conceptions and works against a notion of living kinships.

Inheriting Animal Histories

Ozeki illuminates a more personal side to the stories arising from the tangle of the Anthropocene, and her use of interbeing and time being demonstrate a mode of engagement with the earth as it is. There is a warning throughout *A Tale for the Time Being*, a caution against thinking of human life as isolated from the earth and animals, and a push to not only understand, but also change our impact on the lives that surround us. Even more, the novel unleashes the dangers of not seeing our interconnectedness, whether by conceiving of humans as invincible to forces of nature or forgetting that our

actions reverberate through a whole world of land, water, plants, and animals. “Human exceptionalism blinds us,” Anna Tsing asserts; the stories of human mastery that we have inherited “from the great monotheistic religions” (“Unruly” 144) diminish the possibilities of seeing our interdependent connections in the world. Though the Buddhist concepts of interbeing and time being, as mobilized by Ozeki in her novel, arrive with their own limitations, we can learn from them to see ourselves as entangled in a relationship of “species interdependence” (“Unruly” 144). This relationship pertains to the myriad ways in which mythological and historical animals exist in human histories and can stretch as far as encouraging us to feel our smallness in relation to whales and the ocean, or laying bare our faults in relation to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and nuclear waste.

Ozeki writes literary animals and their histories into *A Tale for the Time Being* as a way of both responding to and inheriting the animal stories that have shaped the stories of our selves and the places we call home. The Buddhist concepts of interbeing and time being build a foundation for understanding animals as both interconnected and entangled in our lives and ways of knowing and as beings who have lived across time and have their own histories and memories. What arises from Ozeki’s approach to representing animals, water, and the land as having their own histories, but also as figures that orient and drive the story, is the need to consider the unknowable in a way that foregrounds humility and respect for the more-than-human world. Unknowability works against the idea of knowledge as mastery, and rather affirms that we need to think of ways to attend to and cultivate the complexity of texts, ideas, and histories as it runs alongside Stacy

Alaimo's call for "less confident epistemologies" (*Bodily* 22). A focus on unknowability calls forward the necessity of questioning the structures that we have held in place for so long, like history, family, and inheritance. Inheritance holds together human exceptionalism, but as I argue throughout this chapter, Ozeki's novel reveals that inheritance is also something that extends to animal stories and histories. *A Tale for the Time Being* gives us an example of what it looks like to inherit animal histories in complex, imperfect, and unfinished ways. As Rita Wong and Dorothy Christian stress, "we need and deserve better stories, ones that will restore our relations with one another and ourselves, somehow, despite the immense burden of history we have inherited" (*Downstream* 7). *A Tale for the Time Being* is an example of what stories can do to represent humans in complexly biocentric and not solely anthropocentric ways. Ozeki writes a story for now, one that understands how animals arrive in our stories with their own histories in tow, and works to inherit those histories well.

CONCLUSION

Navigating the Unknowability of Animal Stories

“These days I take emotional solace from understanding that animals are not like me, that their lives are not about us at all.”

--Helen Macdonald

There is a whole world within my own apartment that I have no access to. As I spend so many hours at my computer writing about human-animal closeness, a battle amongst our cats has been playing out around me. In the past few months, our youngest cat, Ferdinand, has decided to launch full-scale attacks on our middle cat, Penelope. Sometimes Jordan and I can depend on Mews to run towards the fight and break it up, leaving us questioning if it is a relief that “cat land” seems to be governing itself. Other times, Mews eggs on the fight by swatting at Penelope or chasing Ferdinand. One thing is consistent: when Ferdinand really goes after Penelope it is always startling. The attacks are a quick blur and the sound of paws scrambling, followed by screams from Penelope that are unsettling enough to send chills up and down our spines, making us feel nervous long after everything settles down. It feels like we have tried everything to make the attacks stop. One strategy was to break the fight up, isolate the cats, put Ferdinand in a kennel, and sharply chastise him for being bad. Another strategy that we tried when everything else failed was to simply do nothing. I thought that if we had somehow contributed to the problem, maybe we should try to stay out of it and see if it would resolve itself. The second strategy seemed to work for a few days, but I think it was more likely a result of their confusion instead of anything productive. Once Ferdinand realized that there were no hindrances standing in the way of his bad behaviour, the full-scale

attacks became more frequent and more aggressive. Penelope quickly became withdrawn and scared, crouching low to the ground, sticking to the walls, and running quickly whenever she came out to eat or use the litter box. It also was nearly impossible not to come running when she cried out, so our instincts betrayed our “stay out of it” strategy on more than one occasion. More than anything else, what came forward to me was an endless list of questions: how have we shaped the cats’ relationships? What did we do wrong? How are they speaking to each other in ways that we cannot perceive? Is Ferdinand’s behaviour the result of a physical problem or is it emotional? Is this a result of Penelope refusing to belong to cat land and sticking too closely to us? Perhaps most worrying was the question of whether or not this behaviour will get worse when, in a couple of months, we all move to a 500 square-foot studio apartment in New York City.

I am overwhelmed by the uncertainty that comes with the recognition that we know so little about the animals whom we consider family. How many times have we referred to our cats as “cat children”? How often do we marvel at the fact that we can be fully ourselves around the cats, often doing things in front of them that we would only do when alone? How many “I love yous” have passed between ourselves and the cats, either in words or with slow, deliberate blinks? Yet, like in any healthy relationship, love alone is not enough. We adopted Penelope during our second year in Hamilton after Mews started to develop some obsessive behaviours and seemed to be very sad and lonely. At only two months old, Penelope had found herself in Hamilton Animal Control, but she was rescued by an animal sanctuary and placed in a foster home. She came to live with us when she was six months old and we have all done our best to learn how to know each

other. We think that Penelope had been abused when she was very young because she was initially quite skittish and flinched a lot if we moved our hands towards her face too quickly. Penelope is a long, skinny, peaches-and-cream tabby cat who looks very graceful but is actually the clumsiest cat I have known. She consistently misses jumps, falls asleep sitting up and slowly tips over, and she always scrambles around the house trying to get where she is going. Penelope instantly bonded with Jordan and he is clearly her favourite being in the house. I'm not sure if we did a good job of integrating her and Mews because Penelope seems to prefer human company and she does not always seem interested in getting to know the other cats. On a few rare occasions, though, I have found all three cats sleeping together on our bed and this makes me so happy.

Ferdinand is a very sweet cat in a lot of ways. He loves to play, and hearing the soft pads of his feet moving quickly across the floor is one of my favourite sounds. When I am sitting at the desk, sometimes he will gently meow and nudge me until I let him slowly slide onto my lap where he will sleep for hours. Because he is a very large, fluffy cat, his body spills over the space of my lap and I usually end up abandoning my work so that I can use both arms to hold him in place. He spends hours watching the birds on the tree outside of our main window and I am convinced that he and the birds share their own kind of language that may extend beyond predator/prey relations—a conviction that was only furthered when I witnessed an interesting exchange between him and a mourning dove. Ferdinand came running into the office one afternoon, squeezed himself onto my office chair with me and stared at a mourning dove sitting on a power line in front of our house. I noticed that the mourning dove was also facing towards Ferdinand and every

time the bird “cooed,” Ferdinand chirped, with the coos and chirps following each other and never happening without a response. Ferdinand enjoys when we stand with him to watch the birds. He sits there, chirping, looking between our faces and the birds as if to say “did you see that?!”. When we brought him home, after saving his mother and helping to raise her four kittens, I remember watching him sleep on the desk in front of me. He was a tiny ball of fluff with big eyes and an inquisitive, mischievous face. I was completely overwhelmed by how much I loved him. Unlike Mews and Penelope, I felt ready for Ferdinand. I felt like we knew what we were doing and that we could undoubtedly give him a happy, healthy home.

But Ferdinand has always had strong boundaries. He will quickly bite or swat when you thought you were just snuggling, he will not tolerate nail clipping or brushing (which is a particularly bad problem because he is long-haired). At our wits end, after a particularly bad onslaught of attacks against Penelope that happened when Jordan was away, we took Ferdinand to the vet in order to rule out any physical health problems. After getting thoroughly handled and examined by the vet (surprisingly with no complaints from Ferdinand!) he got a clean bill of health. The vet explained to us that a few of his behaviours were “innate or instinctual” like how humans suck their thumbs. He said to always ignore such behaviours, though he was not terribly concerned about the fighting, as he simply told us to clap to break the fights up and then move along. He also prescribed a feline pheromone diffuser that helps to calm cats by releasing pheromones that they like into the air. It is hard to know if the diffuser works or not. During the first few days of using it, the cats seemed eerily calm and complacent, and the sense that I

have no idea what is going on in cat land just increased. Clearly, there are ways that the cats speak to each other and ways that we might communicate to them in complete silence.

The diffuser was too good to be true. The fighting started again and we have returned to a strict kennelling strategy where we scruff Ferdinand and put him in the kennel any time he begins to show aggression towards Penelope. In the midst of writing, I have spent hours scrolling through pages about cat behaviour from “experts,” simultaneously reassuring myself that things could be a lot worse and feeling bad because I know that things could be better. I have watched in horror as people film their cats stalking them through their houses before launching, claws out, at their faces! I have typed “aggressive cat-cat behaviour” into Google in as many different ways as I can think of. I have also navigated numerous cat interruptions: having to leave behind pages and thoughts to run and break up a fight; trying to reassure hungry cats who crowd me that it is not, in fact, breakfast/lunch/dinner time; and trying to move each one of them, but especially Penelope when she plants herself squarely in front of the computer, purring, face too close to the screen, clearly enjoying the warmth. In the last few weeks of writing I built a no-cat-boundary around my spot on the desk and have had to defend it every day. The point of thinking about, loving, living with, and learning about animals is that we cannot assume to know everything about them. In the past seven years I have lived closely within our human-cat family and although we know each other very well in certain ways, they still manage to confound me almost daily.

Maybe we can find comfort in knowing that stories are some of our best tools to articulate this complexity. To study animals in literature, as I have, requires an acknowledgement of the humanist conventions of literature, story, and storytelling. To what extent are our ideas of what constitutes a story, what or who constitutes a legitimate protagonist, and even who is capable of telling a story shaped by humanism? Though I have distinguished between anthropocentric and biocentric stories, the simple fact that stories, as we know them, are written and told by and for humans means that they will always privilege humans. I began each chapter determined to pay close and careful attention to the specific animals in each novel, and what arose each time, unfailingly, was a more capacious view of the human and the ways that we are inextricably bound to animals. Can literature tell animal stories? What is an animal story and if it did exist, would we be able to perceive it?

Literary animal studies scholars, such as Robert McKay, Erica Fudge, and Susan McHugh put forward Coetzee's concept of the sympathetic imagination as an approach to representing animals well, responsibly, and ethically. To imagine oneself into the body and mind of an animal is thought to be an impressive exercise in trying to understand and cultivate empathy for animals. The most famous or often-cited examples of the sympathetic imagination can be found in Thomas Nagel's essay "What Is it Like to be a Bat?" or Franz Kafka's short story "A Report to an Academy." If an animal story told by a human endeavours to foreground animals and put narrative conventions to use solely in the interest of animals, then it could follow that a story that tells us what it is like to imagine ourselves into the being of an animal is the epitome of an animal story. I do not

think that the sympathetic imagination is the only way to value animal stories because the goal of animal stories should arguably not be to fully or concretely understand animals. As Helen Macdonald writes, there is always something about animals that will escape our understanding: “you cannot know what it is like to be a bat by screwing your eyes tight, imagining membranous wings, finding your way through darkness by talking to it in tones that reply to you with the shape of the world” (“Animals”). Macdonald reminds us that even Thomas Nagel explained “that the only way to know what it is like to be a bat is to be a bat” (qtd. in “Animals”). But, Macdonald values the attempt of imagining because “it forces you to think about what you don’t know about the creature” (“Animal”). Perhaps more than the attempt of imagining, Macdonald sees promise in observing animals, trying to understand how they live and what their worlds might look like because it can lead to new conceptions of how to be in the world; “the various lives of creatures have led me to feel there might not be only one right way to express care, to feel allegiance, a love for place, a way of moving through the world” (“Animal”). Animal stories are not just stories that feature animals as protagonists or main characters. In the novels that I analyze, animals do not always figure as prominently as the human characters, but I have argued that each novel tells animal stories by perceiving how animals live alongside us, and how they can challenge our understanding of our place in the world. There is more than one way to tell an animal story, and a good animal story will lead us towards a broader understanding of our place in the world, even as it draws us closer to the unknowable.

This project began with the conviction that animal, postcolonial, and Asian diasporic studies need to start speaking to and with each other, particularly about how stories have brought each field's concerns together. Animals are woven into our stories using threads that come from several different epistemologies. The postcolonial, diasporic novels that I have focused on demonstrate the multiple, complex ways in which animals orient and drive the narrative, and when we learn to pay close attention to them, they inspire us to reconsider ideas about belonging, family, and inheritance as exclusively human-centered. I endeavoured to write a dissertation that attends to the tangle of knowledges that come together to inform how we know animals. I wanted to understand my own orientations towards human-animal closeness as they arise from a mix of belief systems, and I saw a closeness to animals resonate complexly in the novels I chose. Human-animal closeness is not perfect. As I demonstrated in chapter one, sometimes a proximity to animals is the result of forceful, oppressive colonial forces that draw and keep colonial and postcolonial subjects close to animals to justify their subjugation. However, in *The Book of Salt* Truong portrays how a postcolonial subject can carve out a space of resistance—even if it cuts through his own and animals' flesh. Sometimes, human-animal closeness is violent and sometimes we draw animals close to make them family. Chapter two follows the animals in *Dogs at the Perimeter* to explore how grief and loss can lead towards animals, and how Janie both inherits and builds on the animal stories passed down through her family. What emerges through interwoven epistemologies that contribute to the understandings of grief, loss, health, and animals in the novel is a vision of family that includes animals and opens toward a different way of

loving each other. Inheritance, which is a central issue in this dissertation, culminates in the representation of animals as main characters, along with their stories and histories in *A Tale for the Time Being*, which I take up in chapter three. Ozeki's novel communicates the need to inherit the animal histories that have shaped the places we call home and the act of writing animal stories and histories into the narrative begins to do the work of inheritance. Arising from the Buddhist concepts of interbeing and time being, an idea of humans as simultaneously devastating in terms of cumulative actions and very small in relation to the vastness of the ocean precipitates the need for epistemological humility.

Each chapter of this dissertation handles a different aspect of human-animal closeness that extends a vision of belonging, family, and inheritance beyond the human. Though the novels inevitably privilege the human, I have revealed how they also lead to uncertainty and unknowability about animals, whether through the murkiness of the in-between, the ways that uncertainty can lead to interwoven epistemologies and vice versa, or the need for epistemological uncertainty and humility in the face of animals. Good animal stories can happen amidst human-centered stories. Reading and writing can be places to care for animals. Good animal stories should lead us toward the unknowable and the humility that comes from realizing the false promise of mastery proposed by overly confident epistemologies or concrete and immovable understandings of human and animal lives. Perceiving how human-animal closeness works in Asian diasporic literature in imperfect, uncertain ways that foreground interwoven epistemologies and broaden conceptions of kinship inspires more questions than it provides answers; this is

certainly not an end-point. Rather, thinking about animals through a recognition and appreciation for uncertainty and humility is a good place to start.

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