

Assessing the Limitations of Laughter in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

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“Whether we read laughter or humour in a particular text as subversive or not, in fact, whether we identify it as laughter or humour in the first place, is largely a consequence of the way we read, the way we understand postcolonial literatures, and the way in which we know and view the world.”

—Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein (*Cheeky Fictions* 12)

In the opening pages of Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007), the four-footed and schizophrenic narrator—aptly named Animal—foregrounds the potential for exoticist exploitation when an Australian journalist asks him to record his oral story on cassette tapes: “Somewhere a bad thing happens, tears like rain in the wind, and look, here you come, drawn by the smell of blood. You have turned us Khaufpuris into storytellers, but always of the same story. Ous raat, cete nuit, that night, always that fucking night” (Sinha, *Animal's* 5). That “fucking night” corresponds in reality to the Bhopal Disaster, of which the novel is a thinly disguised fictionalization. In Bhopal, India on 3 December 1984 an accident at a pesticide factory owned and managed by the American Union Carbide company led to the release of a deadly gas (methyl isocyanate) into the atmosphere. More than 2000 people living in the slums near the factory were killed, and more than 50,000 suffered from permanent injuries and illnesses (Guha 569-70). Since the disaster, more than 100,000 people have developed chronic conditions as a result of the leak (Sinha, “Indra”). This is hardly the stuff of humour, and yet *Animal's People* seems to want its readers to laugh. Attesting to its success in this regard, the novel's critics describe it as “bawdy,” “irreverent” and, most notoriously in *New York Magazine*, as “scabrously funny” (“Hey”). The problem with these easy responses is that the novel draws attention precisely to the uneven relations of power that persist between postcolonial texts and their readers at a moment when culturally-diverse commodities circulate widely in global markets. By constructing the journalist he encounters and, by extension, his implied readers as vultures out to salvage the pitiable remains of the disaster, Animal points to the negative effects of transnational capital on nations consigned to the periphery and the economies of reading and interpretation that might translate him into an exotic object to be consumed. In this article, I argue that Sinha's novel struggles against readerly co-optation even as, paradoxically perhaps, its

protagonist desperately seeks to make room for presumably foreign ideal readers. It is with an eye toward this tension between resistance and accommodation that *Animal's People* might be read as a sustained attempt to articulate the limitations of laughter in postcolonial contexts and, in so doing, to suggest new models for intercultural reading.

The novel's framing device, consisting of an Editor's Note and a website, is integral to its ability to evoke laughter and signal the uneven power relations in which the text, as literary commodity, is necessarily embroiled. Both the novel's and *Animal's* ability to re-define the parameters that conventionally structure the presumably polite relation between text and reader relies in part on a complex paratextual apparatus. This zone of exchange between text and off-text not only insinuates that the novel itself is the product of a grand theft on the part of its author, but also thereby disclaims any authenticity *Animal* claims to deliver. Contrary to the Editor's Note that prefaces the novel, his oral account is entirely fictional and so is its setting: Khaufpur, meaning "Terror Town" in Urdu, exists only in the author's imagination. Even if, as the editor claims, "[t]rue to the agreement between the boy and the journalist who befriended him, the story is told entirely in the boy's words as recorded on the tapes" (Sinha, *Animal's*), the mere existence of an editor suggests that the boy's words have been altered, possibly in the interest of making his account more accessible to an international reading public. The added detail that the account is recorded in Hindi points to how the text has been translated as well as edited and transcribed, giving the lie to the editor's absurd claim that "Apart from translating to English, nothing has been changed."

The website to which the editor refers readers at the end of the note is also an elaborate fiction. Sinha may have designed <http://www.khaufpur.com> to resemble the official site of an actual city, but a quick perusal of its contents is enough to expose it as a sham or, alternatively, an inside joke for the novel's interactive readers. The section of the site devoted to culture, for instance, features a description of Khaufpur's Lazies Club, an implausible cultural institution that nevertheless parodies dominant stereotypes of Indians as lazy: "We Khaufpuris are gloriously, passionately lazy. Laziness, time-wasting, sloth, is our heritage. It was through sheer laziness that no one bothered to name those places in the city and so people started calling them 2, 3, 4, etc." ("Culture"). In a move that strategically transforms the novel's paratext into a hypertext, Sinha provides a number of exciting and equally fantastic links. Most notable is the link to *The Khaufpur Gazette*, which features two interviews with the novel's title character. In response to a question about authorship, an issue which, not incidentally, has also created somewhat of a scandal around British celebrity and ghostwriter Katie Price—the interview is entitled "Katie Price vs. *Animal Spice*"—*Animal* quips: "Sore point, bloody. I recorded so many tapes and the story

is all my words but that bugger Sinha has got his name all over the book. I am not even mentioned on the cover as the real author" ("Katie").

Animal's refusal to remain contained by the physical parameters of the book, in effect an act of ventriloquism for Sinha, is part of what makes the text as a whole humorous. Yet it also serves as a playful reminder of the very real material, and often exploitative, relations of production through which an oral account may be turned into a book without crediting the author of the original tale. Animal's charge against Sinha conjures up a potentially guilt-ridden scene of reading as the novel's consumers are alerted to the possibility that what they hold in their hands is, in fact, stolen goods. The irony is that there might be some truth to this given that Sinha's fiction was largely inspired by Sunil Kumar, the now deceased Bhopal survivor to whom *Animal's People* is dedicated. Although Sinha carefully points out that his novel is a work of fiction, he acknowledges his indebtedness to a series of recorded interviews with Sunil: "Some of the stories Sunil told me about his life found their way into the novel, however the character of Animal is entirely fictional, as are his antics" ("Animal"). In using Khaufpur's website to humorously implicate himself in the series of exploitative acts Animal imagines to have occurred in the production of the book, Sinha at once highlights the need for authorial accountability and places in check the pleasure some readers might take in consuming, and subsequently exotifying, the tragic and ostensibly true account of a traumatized young man living in the so-called "Third World."

The tension between the urge to resist co-optation on the one hand, and to stimulate readers to laugh on the other, is most palpable in the novel itself. In keeping with the spirit of its paratext, *Animal's People* charts a trajectory from its protagonist's initial reluctance to sell his life experience on the international book market, through his fear of the thousands of readers the journalist assures him will read his words, to his grudging acceptance of their role as legitimate co-producers of his story. Animal's willful transgression of fictional boundaries is reflected in his tendency toward abjection and the subversive energies of Bakhtinian carnival. Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject describes the horrifying reminder of the loss the subject sustains in their separation from the mother and which they must continually expel in order to properly occupy the symbolic order (Kristeva 10). The symbolic order or the "Law of the Father" encourages the subject to repress the threat that the mother's body represents in its failure to recognize the boundaries on which civilization depends (Kristeva 12). In other words, the abject prompts the subject's entry into the domain of culture but occasionally reappears in the form of food loathing, filth, waste and decay to remind them of the fact that their coherence is premised on an originary loss (Kristeva 2-3). Since the state prior to the subject's separation from the mother is one in which subjects are not properly separated from objects, and the human not properly separated from the animal, anything that reminds the subject of that state

is necessarily liminal: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). Animal’s lack of respect for the borders, positions or rules that would circumscribe him threatens abjection; correlatively, the discovery of his own narrative impossibility forces readers to confront the abject itself. It is in part through a strategy of self-abjection that Animal attempts to resist readerly co-optation. His reliance on the carnivalesque likewise emphasizes the potential to subvert the oppressive boundaries erected by official culture, although Mikhail Bakhtin defines these in predominantly social, as opposed to psychoanalytic, terms. Both registers serve as reminders that language, and texts themselves, necessarily exceed the sums of their parts, and that the boundaries between texts are as unstable as those erected between texts and readers. In its humorous attempt to disguise its engagement with the Bhopal Disaster and its own status as fiction, the novel manifests a desire to control readings of the text while also foregrounding the politics of reading in which it is necessarily embroiled by dint of its incorporation in global circuits of exchange.

The novel focuses on Animal’s life almost two decades after the Khaufpur Disaster, in and around the year 2001. As with Bhopal, it is the gross negligence of an American company referred to simply as “the Kampani” that sparks the disaster. The implication is that Khaufpur could be almost anywhere; like thousands of cities throughout the world, its residents are survivors of transnational capitalism. Like his real-life counterpart, Sunil Kumar, Animal loses his family in the disaster and, because of the deadly gas he inhales as a baby that fucking night “no one in Khaufpur wants to remember, but nobody can forget” (Sinha, *Animal’s* 1), he develops severe scoliosis: “When the smelting in my spine stopped the bones had twisted like a hairpin, the highest part of me was my arse” (15). He thereafter reclaims the name he is cruelly given by other children: “Animal.” The novel, as its title suggests, narrates his engagement with the people of Khaufpur, who have also been adversely affected by the disaster. From crotch level Animal turns his abject eye on contemporary Khaufpur, conveying to his readers the heroic efforts of fellow survivors to make something out of their lives despite the continued poisoning of their water supply—the result of the American company’s continuing failure to clean up its mess. At the centre of Animal’s first-person narrative are the heroic efforts of Zafar and his activist disciples to bring the now absent American executives to court. Peripheral, yet no less important to this central conflict, are the efforts of the French missionary Ma Franci to minister to the survivors of the disaster; the well-intentioned efforts of an American doctor, Ellie, to set up a free health clinic in Khaufpur; Animal’s own efforts to find food for himself and others, to aid in the struggle against the company, to satisfy his sexual urges; and, crucially in consideration of my argument, the journalist’s efforts to

extract a good story from one of the disaster's worst victims—"The really savage things," Animal explains, "the worst cases. People like me" (4).

My focus is not the novel's actual readers, but rather, how Animal—partly as a result of his narrated encounter with the journalist—bawdily interpolates a body of readers. Responding to the journalist's gaze, he dubs his imagined readers "Eyes" to connote the connection between intercultural reader and spectator; he appears to presume, especially at the outset, that his readers are foreign to Khaufpur. Moreover, although he never names his readers "Western," the level of knowledge Animal presumes they have about Khaufpur, combined with the substance of the comments he directs their way, suggests that he has "Westerners" in mind. On Tape Four, for example, he explains what an "auto" is in the South-Asian context, and the special manner in which it is driven in Khaufpur: "Eyes, you want to know what is an auto, it's a scooter-rickshaw with three wheels, except the way Khaufpuris drive they spend more time on two" (50). On Tape Eight he likewise assumes that his implied readers are strangers to Khaufpur and the special point of view its residents possess as a result of their positioning there: "This shop [of Uttamchand 'I'm Alive' Ajmeri in Khaufpur], to someone like you I daresay it's not much, an open-fronted shack with packets of gutka and supari dangling from strings..." (104). Animal's use of the pronoun "you" to refer to readers he assumes are privileged becomes almost accusatory on Tape Eleven, when—notwithstanding his earlier reference to the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—he infers that they are unfamiliar with trauma:

Eyes, this is the pandit's joke, he tells it against himself. It's not meant to be funny, it's a way of spitting in the eye of fate, of saying fuck you to the world which so carelessly mangled his life. Of course this joke is wasted on you, dear Eyes, first because no one has ever mangled you, but chiefly because you don't speak our language. (155-6)

Animal's own knowledge of his implied readers' possible location, the United States, is obtained through movies. As far as he can tell from the media coverage of 9/11, which had many of the same ingredients of a Bollywood blockbuster, the attacks on the United States constitute "a hoax, clip from a movie, trailer of some coming multi-starrer" (60). Any common ground the events of 9/11 might stimulate between he and his potentially American readers is thereby neutralized by his disbelief in their possibility: "Stuff like that doesn't happen in real life. Not in Amrika anyway" (61). Animal's assumptions are grounded in ignorance, yet they also gesture toward the novel's engagement with larger questions about intercultural reading practices. American survivors of 9/11 are not, after all, symbolically mangled on an everyday basis through the voyeuristic gaze of the virtual tourist. Reproducing the global circuits of exchange in which it is caught up, *Animal's People* dramatizes the unevenness of power frequently embedded in relations between storytellers, story

collectors such as the journalist, and their consumers. The implication is that the politics associated with transnational capital are intimately connected to the politics of production, circulation and reception that affect the reading of postcolonial texts.

When the unnamed journalist, or “Jarnalis” as Animal calls him, arrives in Khaufpur with the intention of obtaining a disaster memoir for which he has already negotiated a book contract, Animal initially refuses to tell his story. He rightly recognizes that his words, their character decided in advance, will merely be co-opted in the name of rights, law and justice. In an inner monologue directed to the journalist, he explains: “Those words sound the same in my mouth as in yours but they don’t mean the same [...] On that night it was poison, now it’s words that are choking us” (3). Animal is aware of the political inefficacy of books written about Khaufpur, most of which merely bleat the usual clichés. Such clichés, he insists, do more harm than good to the people of Khaufpur. Part of the danger, as he implies in the novel’s succeeding pages, is his own and other Khaufpuris’ amenability to exoticist codes of interpretation: “With what greed you looked about this place. I could feel your hunger. You’d devour everything. I watched you taking it in, the floor of earth, rough stone walls, dry dungcakes stacked near the hearth, smoke coiling in the air like a sardarji doing his hair” (4). Although Animal directs his words to the journalist, they apply equally to the novel’s potential readers, who, to borrow the words of Graham Huggan, might unwittingly use exoticism as “the safety-net that supports these potentially dangerous transactions, as the regulating-mechanism that attempts to maneuver difference back again to the same” (22). Animal’s decision to record his story after all, a decision he comes to despite the “awful idea” (Sinha, *Animal’s* 7) of being probed by thousands of curious readers, is motivated by his desire to counter exoticist maneuvers. He *will* seek to accommodate his readers, but not without first demonstrating his awareness of how his words might be misinterpreted. Animal accordingly asserts his difference from them and suggests that the novel itself stands as evidence of the fact that, at least within his fictional world, he has obtained the right to tell his story on his own terms. That is, if he is to adopt the role of good host to the Eyes that threaten to freeze him as an exotic object to be consumed, he will do it *his* way. He subsequently warns his readers: “I’m not clever like you. I can’t make fancy rissoles of each word. Blue kingfishers won’t suddenly fly out of my mouth. If you want my story, you’ll have to put up with how I tell it” (2). Animal’s telling, deceptively packaged in the form of a transcription, with “Tape” instead of “Chapter” headings, demonstrates his unwillingness to offer up the juicy, exotic tidbits he imagines his readers, if they are anything like the journalist, expect to consume. Rebellious, or so he thinks, against the exploitative business transactions figured in the text and on its borders, Animal tells his impossible story in the bawdiest language possible. This choice appears to be largely an effort on Animal’s part to dissatisfy the

journalist's, and possibly also readers', request for a marketable story—a strategy that nevertheless backfires when the journalist discovers that Animal's language offers the impression of authenticity. Even as Animal's bawdy language manifests a desire on his part to resist co-optation, it actually functions, at least potentially, to accommodate demands for the raw, gritty accounts of reality India supposedly has to offer.

The only way out of this dilemma for Animal is to provoke a consciousness in his readers of the politics that frame reading at any given moment. As he repeatedly implies throughout his story, reading is hardly an innocent practice. Rather, a reader's own socio-cultural position always already informs their reading of a text. Animal knows full well that regardless of what he says readers originating from and embedded in contexts radically different from his own will co-opt his words, casting him and his fellow survivors as romanticized or otherwise repugnant victims unable to speak on their own behalf. Since he cannot address his implied readers directly, he can only make the impossibility of his narrative the focus of his equally impossible tale. Confirming Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's thesis that the subaltern's speech tends to be mediated by elite others, the novel itself exists as a product of Animal's inability to speak.¹ Animal appropriately projects himself into a simultaneously tempting but threatening abject territory safely removed from culture. He explains on Tape One:

The world of humans is meant to be viewed from eye level. Your eyes. Lift my head I'm staring into someone's crotch. Whole nother world it's, below the waist. Believe me, I know which one hasn't washed his balls, I can smell pissy gussets and shitty backsides whose faint stench don't carry to your nose, farts smell extra bad. (2)

Here Animal transforms himself from a potentially exotic *object* of consumption into the laughable yet radically ambiguous thing that his implied readers must reject in order to maintain their distance from the abject horror he represents—"Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A 'something' that I do not recognize as a thing" (Kristeva 2). In situating Animal on the border, Sinha enables his protagonist to assert his own impossibility and his difference from imagined readers, who, especially if they are American, would be hard pressed to aspire to his point of view. As Elli, the American doctor who comes to Khaufpur to establish a free health clinic, tells Animal: "I assure you that if you had been born in Amrika, you would not be running around on all fours" (Sinha 140). Linked in terms of her nationality to the American company whose gross negligence led to a gas leak in its Khaufpur factory, Ellie's statement is troubling for the ways in which it models how Animal's difference might

¹ In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak moves from "a critique of current Western efforts to problematize the subject to the question of how the third-world subject is represented within Western discourse" (271).

be constructed by India's others. Yet she provides yet another reminder of the uneven power relations that separate him from his readers. Animal's unique perspective is, at least in part, the effect of American action (or inaction) in Khaufpur. It is this separation—a separation Animal insists on highlighting—that discourages him from telling his story in the first place. “What am I to tell these eyes?” he asks himself in frustration, “What can I say that they will understand? Have these thousands of eyes slept even one night in a place like this? Do these eyes shit on railway tracks? When was the last time these eyes had nothing to eat? These cuntish eyes, what do they know of our lives?” (8). Animal's bawdy language, and his direct allusions to the improbability, indeed undesirability, of readerly identification, sits uncomfortably alongside his desire to educate the privileged eyes that he imagines probe him so unmercifully. Part of his strategy is to project a worse image of his person than his readers possibly could. Having already, on the first tape, abjected his self, Animal practically guarantees—or so he hopes—that his readers will neither pity nor exotify him. Adopting a reactive stance, Animal ensures that his readers are sufficiently distanced from himself. He clearly marks out the psychic territory in which they are to remain.

At the same time, the springboard for Animal's intended collaboration between himself and his readers is precisely the dialectic of accommodation and resistance he articulates. Repeated invitations to his ideal readers to share in his peculiar vision of the world, expressed in phrases such as “Eyes, I wish you could come with me into the factory” (29) and “Eyes, imagine you're in the factory with me” (30) compete with his insistence that they, and other Khaufpuris too, cannot possibly know him. Continual shifts between his desire to resist implied readers and his desire to accommodate them contribute to the development of a dialogue that is deliberately at cross purposes. Drawing on the reader-response theories of Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, Walter F. Veit suggests that “it is in misunderstanding the other that the other is recognized as the other which does not want to be mistaken for a familiar being” (169). As the foregoing analysis suggests, Animal does not want to be mistaken for a familiar being; rather, his discourse demonstrates a pressing need to be recognized as radically different. His reclamation of the derogatory label “Animal” is part of this strategy and impresses upon his readers and fellow Khaufpuris alike the role difference plays in (mis)recognition: “Zafar and Farouq have this in common, I should cease thinking of myself as an animal and become human again. Well, maybe if I'm cured, otherwise I'll never do it and here's why, if I agree to be a human being, I'll also have to agree that I'm wrong-shaped and abnormal” (Sinha 208). As long as he identifies as human, Animal is subject to the norms against which humans measure other humans. To identify as an animal is to be free of the narrow ontological views that frame human perception. Before his implied readers, or other Khaufpuris for that matter, can understand him, Animal

must remake himself as utterly abject—a maneuver that actually guarantees that others will misrecognize him. It is nevertheless by stimulating a delicate process of misunderstanding on the part of his, and India's, others that Animal attempts to resist exoticist interpretations that would appropriate and subsequently integrate him into a familiar order while also preserving his newly romanticized foreignness. Since the familiar, in Veit's terms, merely stands in for the self who imposes their gaze on the other, "[i]n the dialectic of appropriation and rejection we find the birthplace of self-consciousness and, at the same time, the locus of misunderstanding" (169). It is in this sense that *Animal's People* might be read as a sustained attempt to model ethical intercultural reading practices.

These practices figure in the novel's plot, which frequently mirrors the conflict implicitly played out on the novel's website and in the figurative margins of the text where Animal speculates about who is reading his story and why. Intercultural reading practices premised on misunderstanding emerge most strongly in those sections of the text involving Ellie Doctress, who might, in part due to her status as an American, be read as representative of Animal's implied readers. Putting into play the same assumptions that Animal initially brings to bear on his implied readers, Zafar—the leader of the activist group determined to make the company responsible for its negligence—persuades the community to boycott Ellie's clinic. He wrongly surmises that the company will use the data she collects to argue that the ongoing illnesses suffered by the disaster's survivors are not caused by the disaster. "You need case histories," he argues, "a health survey. Now do you see? Abracadabra-funtootallamish! Out of the blue appears an Amrikan to start a health laboratory" (Sinha, *Animal's* 69). Acceding to the same processes of misunderstanding that Animal believes exist between himself and his implied readers, Ellie likewise assumes that her neighbor Pandit Somraj is also opposed to the clinic. Her assumption persists even when he joins her in protesting the boycott and signs her petition. This rather humorous misunderstanding climaxes in a battle of music as Ellie struggles to drown out Somraj's hoarse singing with her piano. (His vocal chords are damaged as a result of the disaster.) It is only when Ellie confronts Somraj directly, and they sort out their misunderstanding, that Somraj admits: "In any case it did not bother me, there was a certain beauty in the clashing of our musics" (198). Somraj's statement is reminiscent of an earlier lesson he offers to Animal, that the seemingly discordant croaks of frogs are collectively musical: "Animal, if you know how to listen you can hear music in everything" (49). When taken together, differences need not be interpreted as cacophonous; one need only actively listen to hear the harmony that differences make. After relaying the same advice to Ellie, Somraj explains: "I don't distinguish...I try to hear it all together, all at once. When songs clash, as you called it, sometimes out of that comes a new music, something completely fresh" (216). The value of this metaphor for Animal's prescribed mode of

reading becomes explicit near the end of the novel, when he suggests that musical notes might be interpreted as promises. Somraj elaborates on this idea, arguing that it is the singer rather than the notes that make promises:

‘The notes of the scale are all really one note, which is *sa*. The singer’s job is to sing *sa*, nothing else only *sa*, but *sa* is bent and twisted by this world and what’s in it, by grief or longing, these things come in and introduce desires into *sa*, bending and deforming it, sending it higher or lower, and the result is what we call music.’ (249)

Affected by this speech and Somraj’s gentle reminder that “there’s music in all things” (250), Animal concludes that “maybe there’s even some kind of music to be had from potatoes and vultures” (250). It is at this moment in the novel that Animal most embraces the possibility that the event of misreading might in itself become musical—that his implied readers might be perceived as “Ears” (listeners) rather than “Eyes” (lookers). Both terms maintain the emphasis on the productive role of bawdy humour, which is reflected in Animal’s own *sa*, a note as appropriately bent and twisted by the world as his body.

It is through Animal’s bawdy language and, correlatively, on his body, that the uneven power relations governing the reading of his tale play out. Animal’s bawdy language provides a caustic medium through which to provoke his implied readers, and it proffers for critique dominant images of India as nothing more than a site of abject poverty. His emphasis on the bawdy/body in turn helps to articulate the concrete realities with which ordinary Khaufpuris have to cope on a daily basis. The substitution of Animal’s buttocks for his face, necessitated by his physical condition, also emphasizes the symbolic role perceived difference plays in communication and accedes to the development of critical awareness for both Animal and his readers. Bakhtin’s reading of Rabelais may well be applied to *Animal’s People*: “He made the top and the bottom change places, intentionally mixed the hierarchical levels in order to discover the core of the object’s concrete reality, to free it from its shell and to show its material bodily aspect—the real being outside all hierarchical norms and values” (403). Both Rabelais and Sinha deploy the crude humour associated with the folk in order to perform this positive negation. Where the authors depart is in their aims. According to Bakhtin, Rabelais’ images sought to oppose “the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture” (4). Sinha’s images, in contrast, appear to be directed at certain collectors and consumers, who, in their tendency to fetishize postcolonial texts, conceal harsh concrete realities and the uneven power relations that make them possible. In this case, the harsh concrete realities constitute the material effects of the Khaufpur Disaster, which, in part as a result of interpretation, amount to an erasure of the Khaufpuri past. “When something big like that happens,” Animal explains, “time divides into before and after, the before time breaks up into dreams, the dreams dissolve to darkness” (Sinha, *Animal’s* 14). Animal’s oral tale represents an attempt to fill the gaping hole in

Khaufpur's history with new stories about his community—the hopes, the dreams, the struggles, and the funny incidents that punctuate everyday life in the city's slums. Animal may enjoy six degrees of separation from his fellow Khaufpuris as a result of his scoliosis, but they are still *his* people. In response to Ellie's confusion as to why the ailing residents of Khaufpur will not patronize her clinic, Animal states simply: "Elli doctress, no surprise or shame. I understand because these are my people" (183). Ellie is decidedly not one of Animal's people. "We are friends," Animal explains to her, but not equal friends" (175). The relationship Animal develops with his implied readers is equally unbalanced and, like his friendship with Ellie, leaves him "broke" (176). The problem lies in the gaze Ellie and others like her impose on Khaufpur and the bodies that inhabit the city:

'Look Ellie,' I say, feeling like I want to explode, 'I'll tell you what disgusts me about this place, which isn't what disgusts you, such as scorpions, filth, lack of hygiene, etc.... It's not that if I want a shit, I must visit the railway line...'

'Hardly your fault,' says she, misunderstanding.

'Not a question of fault. You foreigners talk as if the sight of a bum is the worst thing in the world, doesn't everyone crap?'

'Not in public, they don't.'

'There's a lot to be said for communal shitting. For a start the camaraderie. Jokes and insults. A chance to discuss things. It's about the only opportunity you get to unload a piece of your mind. You can bitch and moan about the unfairness of the world. You can spout philosophies. Then there's the medical benefit. Your stools can be examined by all. You can have many opinions about the state of your bowels, believe me our people are experts at disease. The rich are condemned to shit alone...'
(184)

Animal's confrontational discourse and his subsequent praise of communal defecation foreground Ellie's unhealthy preoccupation with the corporeal and emphasize the intimate sense of community forged by poor Khaufpuris—a subject position Ellie cannot, in Animal's view, even begin to comprehend. "You haven't a hope," he says, "You are a good-hearted doctress but nothing do you fucking understand" (185). Through this and other conversations between himself, his implied readers and the characters who populate his story, Animal makes clear that the battle through misrecognition to recognition will be waged between the mangled bodies of Khaufpuri survivors and outsiders who might profit from their suffering. Humour functions in this text to liberate its author, protagonist and reader from the false seriousness of their own "petty human preoccupations" (Bakhtin 380), but in so doing it also suggests that understanding may only come about as a result of misunderstanding.

The question the text must leave unresolved is whether or not understanding can be reached at all given the circuitous routes of ideological exchange in which *Animal's People* is hopelessly implicated. In a passage that once again reveals his own ignorance while referencing how knowledge is mediated through the internet, Animal admits: "I don't

know where you live, Eyes, but here in Khaufpur you can see everything on the internet” (Sinha, *Animal’s* 45). Zafar confirms his own and other Khaufpuris’ ignorance about India’s others: “We know zilch about their lives, they know nothing of ours, that’s the problem” (66). *Animal* himself embodies the loss that translation entails: his birth on the page is simultaneously a death. His story remains a commodity to be consumed, provided that it is consumed at all. Although it was critically acclaimed when it was released in 2007, and was shortlisted for a Man Booker prize, *Animal’s People* sold few copies. Its failure to achieve commercial success and, indeed, the failure of all novels shortlisted for the 2007 Booker in this regard was so remarkable that Sinha references it on Khaufpur.com. The website affiliated with the novel features a link to an article in *The Observer* on the merits of *Animal’s People* in comparison to Katie Price’s bestselling, ghostwritten novel: “Last week it emerged that Crystal, the second novel, by one ‘Katie Price,’ otherwise known as the glamour model Jordan, had outsold the entire Booker shortlist combined. So, what, exactly, is it that the Booker writers—Ian McEwan, Lloyd Jones, Mohsin Hamid, Anne Enright, Nicola Barker and Indra Sinha—are doing so wrong?” (Cadwalladr). Cadwalladr playfully concludes that the Booker writers are too well read, actually write their own novels, have a large vocabulary, create believable characters, maintain ignorance about current fashion trends, and seek to develop a plot (Cadwalladr). The insinuation is that mediocre novels will always sell better than acclaimed works of literature with a capital “L,” in part because they do not consciously attempt to be marketable. Given that I have characterized *Animal’s People* as a novel that strategically positions itself in opposition to exoticist maneuvers, where does this then leave Sinha’s text? *Animal’s* words may respond critically to the exoticist strategies of the virtual tourist, but they are also doubtless incarcerated by his anticipation of how they might be received. *Animal* effectively talks himself into a corner even as he comments on the vagaries of interpretation, lending credence to Vikram Chandra’s observation that “[t]o be self-consciously anti-exotic is also to be trapped, to be censored.” In the end, can the novel only poke fun at its own inability to be heard?

If *Animal’s* speech is always already mediated by the hungry journalist, the mysterious editor and the even more mysterious addressees of the text, not to mention the faceless company that spins its own version of the disaster to its advantage, then one can only answer in the affirmative. The point is that the subaltern’s speech cannot arrive at its destination in the same form in which it departed, making the assertion of a subaltern view of the world next to impossible. For better or for worse, *Animal’s* speech constitutes one node within a complex network of competing and often hostile discourses. Perhaps his only option and that of the text’s is simply to offer a playful reminder of the need to re-think the rigid categories that divide one people or culture from another in a world in which genuine attempts at intercultural understanding are often

lacking. Animal raises questions about the power of subaltern speech, but his abject deployment of carnival also clears a space wherein the assumptions that readers might bring to bear on postcolonial texts may be effectively deconstructed. Michael Bernard-Donals affirms that “[i]t is the possibility of a radical transformation of the ways a culture sees and understands the relations among its subjects that is the central contribution of a Bakhtinian notion of carnival to cultural studies and postcolonial theory” (113).

Notwithstanding its failure to become a bestseller, *Animal's People* re-emphasizes the need to do the important work of unlearning oppressive epistemological categories in favour of thinking, seeing, and hearing otherwise. That a successful collaboration might arise out of misunderstanding remains to be seen, but what Animal infers is that the seemingly impermeable gap between text and reader might in itself become a bridge to increased awareness about the politics of interpreting culturally different books. Making good on his prescribed mode of reading, Animal himself increasingly acknowledges the possibility that if read out of context his humour might become offensive—especially to his female readers: “Eyes, I don’t know if you are a man or a woman. I’m thinking the things I am telling are not suited to a woman’s ears, but if a person leaves things unsaid so as to avoid looking bad, it’s a lie” (79). In acknowledging the difference gender might make in how his readers respond to his language, Animal demonstrates a newfound openness to the idea that readers might be as difficult to figure out as him. They are not necessarily like the journalist, whose pre-existing book contract circumscribes his story in exploitative ways. Instead, Animal’s readers might, he implies, resemble his “best people”—his dog Jara, his adopted mother Ma Franci, his friend Nisha. Once he gets over his initial trepidation, Animal shows an increasing interest in keeping his readers sufficiently hooked. Whether his bawdy language works for or against him on this point is largely irrelevant. What is crucial is that, despite his use of bawdy language, or perhaps because of his refusal to leave unarticulated the impoliteness that might inform interpretation, Animal encourages his implied readers to turn their gaze on themselves. “As you read him,” Sinha points out, “he’s reading you” (Sinha, Interview). If exoticism, as Huggan argues, helps to maintain the pretense that the mainstream remains unaltered by its contact with the margins (22), then *Animal's People* serves as a reminder that looking goes both ways. Bawdy language plays an important, and contradictory, role in this assertion of reciprocity, liberating its unreliable narrator and, hopefully, some readers too, from normative views of reality. Perhaps more importantly, Animal’s impossible bottoms-up point of view functions as a strategy to deliver a singular, and purportedly funny, version of the world—one in which readers are ultimately invited to share.

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