

Bone by Bone: Reinventing the Animal Metaphor for the Human Animal

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Abstract

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Metaphor can reinforce widely accepted truths or it can undermine them. Some of the most pleasurable moments in any poem come from the element of surprise that the latter produces. But those metaphors that fit squarely into the foundation upon which our belief systems are already built are often so subtle or normalized as to be accepted without notice, to the point that — in some cases — we have grown blind to their social implications. This blindness may pose a great danger: the constant reiteration or reinforcement of anthropocentric hierarchies and oversimplified binaries assures the continuity of a world unsafe for nonhuman life and human-but-dehumanized minorities.

Metaphors on the page do have consequences in the world. This paper examines metaphors in poetry in which animals are used as tenor or vehicle with the goal of determining when and how they dehumanize vs. when and how they decentralize the human.

Chapter 1 comprises a brief history of symbolic animal representation and an introduction to the contemporary field of animal studies. It also investigates metaphors that may commonly be considered “forbidden,” then discusses how dehumanizing metaphors are used to foment racial intolerance. In Chapter 2, I conduct a close reading of Ross Gay’s poem, “The Opening,” and Aracelis Girmay’s book, *Kingdom Animalia*, with the aim of identifying the ideologies that their metaphors reinforce or subvert. The final chapter offers up some practical suggestions for poets based on both theoretical analyses and close readings.

For our dog Gus, the kindest animal I ever knew

“animals our fellow brethren in pain, disease, death & suffering”
—Charles Darwin

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Introduction

What are the consequences of a metaphor? Does metaphor affect the physical and emotional world outside of the text that contains it, and does it do so in ways that we intend and can predict?

While the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (1965) points to metaphor as a “momentary” effect (491), metaphors can have a long-term impact on how we think, especially when they’re reproduced broadly or adapted to other contexts. A metaphor does not always fade away when the poem or story that contains it is over, and given this fact, constructing a metaphor cannot be considered only a pleasurable pastime or aesthetic indulgence. It is also a responsibility.

Metaphor can reinforce widely accepted truths or it can undermine them. Some of the most pleasurable moments in any poem stem from the element of surprise that the latter produces. But those metaphors that fit squarely into the foundation upon which our belief systems are already built are often so subtle or normalized as to be accepted without notice, as when we presume that someone experiencing “a black day” is having a bad day because of the long-established negative connotation of “black.” We have grown so comfortable with such figurative turns of phrase that we have in some cases grown blind to their social implications, and this blindness may pose a great danger: the constant reiteration or reinforcement of anthropocentric hierarchies and oversimplified binaries assures the continuity of a world unsafe for nonhuman life and human-but-dehumanized minorities.

Metaphors on the page do have consequences in the world. This paper examines metaphors in poetry in which animals are used as tenor or vehicle with the goal of determining when and

how they dehumanize vs. when and how they decentralize the human.¹ Just as Galileo Galilei was found guilty of heresy for arguing that the Sun, not the Earth, was at the center of the universe, the shift away from an anthropocentric natural hierarchy continues to meet with vehement opposition. More than 150 years after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, 34 percent of Americans still profess to “reject evolution entirely” (Masci).

An examination of animal metaphors, however, is a broad topic, one that could conceivably incorporate a vast majority of what has been written since our earliest recorded stories — an impossible task, of course. Instead, this paper will focus on a few modern and contemporary examples to elucidate and identify “types” of animal metaphor and their consequences. Given that animal metaphors are so common in everyday speech and literature that they come easily to many writers, they also run the risk of arriving at the page unexamined. The goal is to draw attention to what are usually unintended consequences of animal metaphors, and examine how these can indirectly promote the mistreatment and/or exploitation of human and nonhuman beings.

Chapter 1 begins with a brief history of symbolic animal representation and an introduction to the contemporary field of animal studies, under which designation theorists in recent years have been examining representations and misrepresentations of animals in literature and culture. The first chapter will also investigate metaphors that may commonly be considered “forbidden” in order to illustrate that metaphors can have real-life consequences, then will move into a

¹ According to I. A. Richards’ definitions, tenor is “the underlying idea or principal subject which the vehicle or figure means” (97) and “we can describe or qualify the tenor by describing the vehicle” (99). That is, in the metaphor, “the bear was as big as a house,” the bear is the tenor and the house is the vehicle.

discussion of how dehumanizing metaphors are used to foment racial intolerance. This chapter incorporates examples of problematic metaphors.

In Chapter 2, I will conduct a close reading of Ross Gay's poem, "The Opening," and Aracelis Girmay's book, *Kingdom Animalia*, with the aim of identifying the ideologies that their metaphors reinforce or subvert. These examples constitute just a slim cross-section of recent work, but illustrate that contemporary writers are showing increasing sensitivity to the social and natural implications of their metaphor-making.²

In the final chapter, this paper will offer up some practical suggestions for poets, based on both theoretical analyses and close readings. It will look more closely at metonymy as one antidote to the oversimplifying qualities of metaphor, along with other considerations that I hope will not only help writers avoid some of the pitfalls of metaphor, but will make our metaphors more precise, moving, and truthful in the process.

² An examination of *Poetry* magazine's November 2016 issue would also yield useful insights into the current state of the animal metaphor. Such a study, unfortunately, fell outside the scope of this paper.

Chapter 1: The Ripple Effects of Animals as Metaphors

Donna Haraway, in *The Companion Species Manifesto*, insists that dogs “are not here just to think with. They are here to live with” (Weil 19). For the poet, metaphor is an essential tool with which to think — to work through questions and problems, to reason, to arrive (sometimes) at conclusions. Metaphors employing animals as either tenor or vehicle have been among the most common since the beginning of storytelling, when in fables animals were often used as stand-ins for humans. Some of the world’s oldest known works of art, in Chauvet-Pont-d’Arc Cave, are paintings of animals dating to at least 26,000 years ago. But for at least two millennia, a hierarchy defining humans as superior to all (other) animals has been promulgated throughout the West³, invented and reinforced in large part by misleading stories and metaphors surrounding animals, their behavior, and their positionality in an anthropocentric universe. It’s worthwhile to understand how ingrained such metaphors are in Western culture. This section, therefore, will take a brief look at their origins before examining how contemporary scholars are seeking to revise animal representation in light of increasing scientific evidence that animals are not so different from humans as we suppose.

First, a brief word about vocabulary: throughout this paper I will use the terms “human animals” and “nonhuman animals” in an attempt to stick steadfastly to the fact that humans are only one species among many.⁴ Since one of the goals of this paper is to prove that we must

³ The Western Hemisphere is of course not the only part of the world in which such hierarchizing has taken place, but this paper focuses on Western thought because of its author’s specialty in North American, Latin American, and European literature, and because the poets examined in Chapters 1 and 2 are strongly (though not exclusively) steeped in this tradition.

⁴ Certainly, this isn’t an entirely unproblematic solution. As primate researcher and cognitive ethologist Frans de Waal points out, the term “nonhuman” “lumps millions of species together by an absence, as if they were missing something” (27–28). Finding the right terms, or redefining existing ones, is one of the many projects facing animal studies scholars. Jacques Derrida, for his part, rejects the term “animal” as a blanket categorization that we shouldn’t use; as Kary Weil

choose our language carefully, I believe this is a worthwhile effort. From time to time, I may use the shorthand “humans” and “nonhumans” or “humans” and “animals” for the sake of brevity, but I hope to reassert the proper terms from time to time with the aim of staying *attentive* to my word choice; this is something I will call upon all writers to do in Chapter 3.

A Brief History of Animal Symbolism

Nonhuman animals in fables were often hybrids of a sort unseen in the natural world: they possessed both archetypal (which is not to say accurate) traits of their species and human characteristics, such as the ability to speak our languages and social entanglements akin to our own. Yet it is unlikely that anyone hearing Aesop’s fables really believed that there are kings among frogs or that asses dress up in lions’ skins. In fact, Philostratus, a first-century Athenian sophist, wrote in his *Life of Apollonius* that poets manipulate their stories to make them seem true and confuse their audiences, whereas Aesop’s fables never pretended to be true. What Philostratus concluded merits being quoted at length:

[L]ike those who dine well off the plainest dishes, [Aesop] made use of humble incidents to teach great truths, and after serving up a story he adds to it the advice to do a thing or not to do it. Then, too, he was really more attached to truth than the poets are; for the latter do violence to their own stories in order to make them probable; but he by announcing a story which everyone knows not to be true, told the truth by the very fact that he did not claim to be relating real events.

And the poet, after telling his story, leaves a healthy-minded reader cudgeling his brains to know whether it really happened; whereas one who, like Aesop, tells a story which is false and does not pretend to be anything else, merely investing it with a good moral, shows that he has made use of the falsehood merely for its utility to his audience. (Philostratus and Conybeare)

explains, “Not unlike the term *woman* or *slave*, *animal* is a term that men have given others so as to name themselves the agents of history, freedom, thought” (26–27).

The danger in a poet's approach, Philostratus asserts, is that his or her methods for creating metaphor are hidden, just as the rigging of a play is hidden behind painted sets and curtains. A striking metaphor, then, can deceive the reader, whether by reaching its conclusion(s) through disingenuous means, or by manipulating the vehicle to fit the tenor or vice versa — that is, disregarding how the thing acts in real life.

This is easy to do with animals, if only because there are so many of them and because few humans have extensive knowledge of more than a few of them. The snake is one of the most beleaguered targets of poetic misrepresentation-via-oversimplification. While in many cases it may be a dangerous animal, poets and popular culture alike assign the snake a moral value that then creates a feedback loop, making space for additional nonexistent qualities which in turn reaffirms its evil associations. These representations can be taken to such an extreme that they lose sight of the actual animal; just one example can be found in Book 9 of *Paradise Lost*, when “the spirited sly Snake” is incapable of resisting the desire to eat an apple, that “alluring fruit.” The snake speaks of “the dark intent I bring” and bemoans having been “constrained / Into a Beast, and mixt with bestial slime” (Milton). It may seem that I am denying John Milton what is called “poetic license” and taking him all too literally when I point out that all snakes are exclusively carnivorous, that we have no evidence of their “dark intent” toward humans, and that they are not slimy (a common misconception that Milton may or may not be rehashing here). Yet it is undeniable that these false impressions, while certainly not attributable exclusively to Milton, have been perpetuated by him and countless others to the extent that in a 2001 Gallup poll, 51 percent of people in the U.S. said they were afraid of snakes, making them the No. 1

most-feared animal, scenario, or thing in the country (Brewer).⁵ That is, while no one person is responsible for the transposition of the Garden of Eden's single, metaphorical snake onto every living legless reptile, each person who rehashes the metaphor keeps that misapprehension alive, and even helps to make it more lively.⁶

A more recent example serves to illustrate this point a little further. Brigit Pegeen Kelly's poem, "Wild Turkeys: The Dignity of the Damned," begins with the lines: "Because they *are* shame, and cannot flee from it, / And cannot hide it, they go slow, / One variegated male and his harem of four wild hens [...]" (42). An emotion rendered in human language is not only projected upon the turkeys, but used to define their entire being. And the metaphor-making continues, as the turkeys are compared again and again to humans and human-made things, none of them positive: "Those laughingstock, shriveled, lipstick red hearts— / Swinging on throat and foreneck / Beneath the narrow heads that are blue // Not of the sky but of convicts' shaved skulls— [...] // Weak-winged, they heave themselves / Into the low tree roosts they drop from in the morning, / Crashing like swag-bellied bombers [...]" (Ibid.). At last, however, the poem

⁵ This is just one sampling aimed to provide insight on a larger phenomenon, given that as far as I can tell no global survey on the topic exists. The 2016 *Chapman University Survey of American Fears* reported that 32.2 percent of Americans were "slightly afraid" of reptiles, while another 32.6 percent were "afraid" or "very afraid." The survey does not specify which reptiles were feared most (GfK Group et al. 71).

⁶ The Biblical tale is not the only contributor to that fear of snakes which affects so many humans around the globe. Still, it remains unclear whether a fear of snakes is innate or learned. When anthropologist Lynne Isbell teamed with researchers in Japan and Brazil, the resulting 2013 study found that neurons in the pulvinar, a brain region unique to apes, humans, and monkeys (Hamilton), "responded faster and stronger to snake stimuli than to monkey faces, monkey hands, and geometric shapes." The findings, according to the researchers, provided "neuroscientific evidence in support of the Snake Detection Theory, which posits that the threat of snakes strongly influenced the evolution of the primate brain" (Quan & Isbell 19000). On the other hand, a 2015 study found that babies don't seem to respond to snakes with fear; "[r]ather, they have a predisposition to detect and respond rapidly to snakes," explained researcher Judy DeLoache (Hogenboom).

discovers in the turkeys the “dignity” that human animals possess, “The soldier’s last resolve to march humpbacked straight into death” (43). This metaphor does not unmake those that came before, which highlighted the turkeys’ failure to meet human standards of dignity just as the final metaphor complimented them when they did.

But turkeys do not strive to achieve what is deemed proud and good and dignified by *homo sapiens sapiens*, nor should they. Rather, the ease with which Kelly slides from admonishment into praise highlights just how subjective our metaphors are. One may argue that there is simply nothing of the noble in certain animals, but this is more evidence of our blindness to the impact of our own subjective metaphor-making than it is proof of objective truths. The cow is considered a dumb, passive beast of burden in Western cultures, whereas it is sacred and honored by Hindus. And had the turkey, rather than the bald eagle, been chosen as the United States’ national bird, one can be sure that the former would have, by now, been endowed with nobler qualities than Kelly permits it. Benjamin Franklin saw things much the other way, writing in a letter to his daughter: “For my own part I wish the Bald Eagle had not been chosen the Representative of our Country. He is a Bird of bad moral Character. He does not get his Living honestly” (Stamp). Commenting on a design for the Presidential Seal, he adds: “I am on this account not displeased that the Figure is not known as a Bald Eagle, but looks more like a Turkey. For the Truth the Turkey is in Comparison a much more respectable Bird, and withal a true original Native of America... He is besides, though a little vain & silly, a Bird of Courage” (Ibid.). It is hard to believe it would have taken long to transform the turkey into a not-at-all-silly symbol of American pride had it ultimately been selected for the job, though in the end the characteristics assigned to it (respectability, courage) are still human-defined values. When it

comes to Kelly's title, one has to ask who is responsible for "damning" turkeys if not human beings and their representations of these birds.

Philostratus goes on to explain another quality he deems positive in Aesop's fables, one that in fact highlights their participation in a problematic and millenia-old system of ranking animals according to *what is important to humans*, as Kelly and Franklin have exemplified:

And there is another charm about him, namely, that he puts animals in a pleasing light and makes them interesting to mankind. For after being brought up from childhood with these stories, and after being as it were nursed by them from babyhood, we acquire certain opinions of the several animals and think of some of them as royal animals, of others as silly, of others as witty, and others as innocent. (Philostratus and Conybeare)

Aristotle did not argue, as is so often suggested, that "all organisms can be arranged in one ascending sequence of forms"; rather, as Arthur Lovejoy points out, he understood "that living beings differ from one another in many kinds of ways [...], that a creature which may be considered 'superior' to another in respect to one type of character may be inferior to it in respect to another" (Lovejoy 56). Yet despite Aristotle's precaution that multiple systems of classification are possible, the idea of ranking animals with regards to their degree of "perfection" along a single *scala naturae* originated with him (Ibid., 58). This resulted in the organization of the entire universe into a hierarchical system, a "Great Chain of Being," which philosophers, scientists, and educated individuals upheld throughout the Middle Ages and into the late 18th century. Lovejoy points to a passage from 18th-century poet Alexander Pope to illustrate how the cosmic order was believed to be built:

Vast chain of being! which from God began,
 Natures aethereal, human, angel, man,
 Beast, bird, fish, insect, what no eye can see,
 No glass can reach; from Infinite to thee,
 From thee to nothing. — On superior pow'rs
 Were we to press, inferior might on ours;
 Or in the full creation leave a void,
 Where, one step broken, the great scale's destroy'd;

From Nature's chain whatever link you strike,
Tenth, or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike. (Lovejoy 60)

Neoplatonists adopted this scale and medieval bestiaries would soon disseminate it even more widely.⁷ These books combined the (mediated) thinking of Aristotle with Ambrose's *Hexameron*, Isidore's *Etymologies*, and moralizing descriptions of the natural world from the Christian text *Physiologus* (Crane 69). In the 12th and 13th centuries these texts were disseminated "outward from monastic milieus to sermons for laypeople, educational settings, and aristocratic courts" (Ibid., 69–70). They didn't distinguish between taxonomy or field knowledge and moral guidance, so that individual species were imbued with inherent spiritual and moral values.

In medieval texts, such as the *Livre du Roy Modus*, animals take on symbolic qualities within the Christian ideology. The deer, or "hart," is "symbolic of Christ's Nativity and Passion, the Ten Commandments, the temptations of the world, and man's means of escape from them" (Cummins 68). It is often contrasted with the boar as a symbol of the "devilish" (Ibid.) but it is also described in bestiaries as liable to spit water into a snake's lair, forcing it above ground, then stomping it to death (Clason 35).

Such centuries-old associations with animals survived well into the 20th century, and are still widely recognizable. "The Deer and the Snake," a poem by Kenneth Patchen published in 1939, declares: "The deer is humble, lovely as God made her." This deer is bit by a snake "in a velvet

⁷ This is not to say that the *scala naturae* did not face critique during the Middle Ages. In the 14th-century *Libro de buen amor* (*Book of Good Love*), author Juan Ruiz, Archpriest of Hita, Spain, narrates a humorous, slapstick battle between the vegetable soldiers of Doña Cuaresma (Madame Lent) and the animal troops of Don Carnal (Sir Carnival/Carnal). As Stephen Gilman points out, Ruiz was poking fun at the pedestal upon which human beings had placed themselves: "as a remote precursor of Balzac and Thackeray, [Ruiz] gleefully sought out the animal or the vegetable in human beings" (67).

arc / Of murderous speed—assassin beautiful // As mountain water at which a fawn drank / *Stand there, forever, while poison works* // While I stand counting the arms of your Cross / Thinking that many Christs could hang there, crying” (Patchen). While the identity of the second-person “you” is uncertain, it seems to be the deer, who is directed to stand still for eternity, like a Christ, to which the hart has been so often compared. (As John Cummins points out, “The longevity of the hart is an ancient commonplace” [70]). The last couplet is particularly curious, as it seems to refer to a many-armed cross (one with more than the two arms of the archetypal Cross of Jesus), evoking deer antlers. However, this deer is female, and in all species of deer but reindeer, only males possess antlers (with a few individual exceptions reported). While other interpretations of this poem could be proffered, it may not only reinforce the traditional hart-snake antagonism, but “revise” the basic attributes of a female deer either out of ignorance or to achieve poetic effect. Whichever is the case, the poem’s closing lines fall flat for those with a knowledge of deer.

With the rise of Romanticism in the 19th century came a turn away from the uniformitarian thought dominant in the Enlightenment, during which universalism across human societies was vigorously propounded (Lovejoy 298). In its place, the Romantics embraced plenitude and diversitarianism, “a conscious pursuit of idiosyncrasy, personal, racial, national, and, so to say, chronological” (Ibid., 307). God was temporalized — that is, like history itself, he worked his way up on the “scale of possibility,” transformed in tandem with the universe’s constant metamorphosis and “Becoming” (Lovejoy 317, 326). The *scala naturae* was breaking down, though fragments of it would remain intact long after.

In 1919, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats acknowledged this chink in the Great Chain as parallel to the fate of Christian ideology, which had been so tightly interwoven with the *scala naturae*. In his poem “The Second Coming,” Yeats portrayed the return of Christ to Earth — a

time when many Christians believe the righteous dead will be resurrected, thereby bringing to an end the life cycle as we know it — as a moment in which humans' connection with or control over the natural world will undergo a significant transformation: “Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer; / Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world” (1196). Yeats believed in a “cyclical view of history,” and just as the rise of Christ had brought an end to Greco-Roman civilization, so Christianity was about to be replaced at the end of a 2000-year cycle. The sphinx that enters the poem symbolized for Yeats the end of the worship of one god; in his own words, “because we had worshipped a single god [the new civilization] would worship many. ... I associated [the ‘brazen winged beast’] with laughing, ecstatic destruction” (Ibid.). The arrival of this chimeric human-animal hybrid stirs the animal kingdom into a frenzy: it “is moving its slow thighs, while all about it / Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.” The poem announces, not without an element of menace, an inversion of hierarchies in which the beastly dominates the human on the scale from lowly to divine; yet the human divinity has proven equally destructive, especially toward nonhumans: “The darkness drops again; but now I know / That twenty centuries of stony sleep / Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle, / And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” (Ibid.).

An Introduction to Contemporary Animal Theory

By the end of the 20th century, a great deal had changed: a wealth of scientific evidence was systematically corroding human attempts to differentiate *homo sapiens sapiens* from “the rest” of the animals. Among those hypotheses that have been refuted by scientific research are the following: only humans can plan for the future; only humans show empathy; only humans can

identify faces; only humans can make tools; only humans cooperate; only humans have opposable thumbs (de Waal 13, 18, 76, 125, 132, 185–191).

Primate researcher and cognitive ethologist Frans de Waal affirms that humans do have a unique skill, as far as we're aware, when it comes to language: "You won't often hear me say something like this, but I consider us the only linguistic species. We honestly have no evidence for symbolic communication, equally rich and multifunctional as ours, outside our species." In particular, language enables us to speak of the past and future in a way that chimpanzees seem unable to do (106). However, de Waal cautions against treating meaningful communication as the exclusive property of human animals, pointing out that chimps can deduce a great deal and are likely superior readers of body language (106–107, 112). And he reminds his readers that all differences in the animal kingdom are ones of degree: "no trait, not even our beloved linguistic ability, ever comes about *de novo*. Nothing evolves all of a sudden, without antecedents. Every new trait taps into existing structures and processes" (109).

For all these reasons, literary theorists have been increasingly interested in studying how human animals can represent and treat nonhuman animals fairly — a project which raises the question of how we can understand their experience, and *know* that we've correctly understood it, without projecting our humanness upon them. This is no easy task, as de Waal illustrates with an observation from physicist Werner Heisenberg: "What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning" (7). This uncertainty principle applies equally to studies of the animal mind, as de Waal explains: "The credo of experimental science remains that an absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. If we fail to find a capacity in a given species, our first thought ought to be 'Did we overlook something?' And the second should be 'Did our test fit the species?'" (13).

In their approach to these topics, literary theorists have been particularly interested in how the language we use can reinforce or undermine traditional hierarchies. *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?*, Kary Weil's insightful introduction to the concerns of contemporary animal studies scholars, often draws attention to the small and nearly invisible mechanisms by which language reinforces the *scala naturae*, as when she inserts a critical correction in the phrase "walking (with) the dog" (xxiv). As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have elucidated, the metaphorical qualities of language are present even in prepositions. With regards to how humans position themselves relative to nonhuman animals, such details are well worth paying attention to.⁸

Animal studies signals in many ways a post-poststructuralist turn. Postmodernism gave voice to minority experiences through women's studies and queer and gender studies⁹, and was liberating for many of these groups. However, Weil acknowledges that it also ushered in, in some senses, an abandonment of the ethical in favor of subjective and ever-shifting definitions of right and wrong. Language itself was a system of signifiers chasing after unattainable, always-already corroded presences or centers — it was hopelessly flawed. Many individuals were unsure of what their responsibilities were toward other living beings, the planet, and society (Weil xvii–xviii).

⁸ The ambition of this paper, however, is more limited: it will examine how poets construct those systems commonly *recognized* as metaphor and simile (systems containing the verb "to be" or the prepositions "like" or "as"), and specifically moments when animals serve as the tenor or vehicle within those systems.

⁹ Animal studies, too, in its efforts to restore the animal identity of *homo sapiens sapiens*, underscores that our fellow species do not place the same value on simplistic binaries as we do. "[T]he animals we live with—animals for whom sex and desire seems to operate without regard for gender—challenge our views of ourselves and bring us to question the processes of domestication we, too, undergo in order to become the gender and species we think we are," Weil writes (xxi). Weil is referring to evidence of homosexual acts and nonreproductive sex throughout the animal kingdom, in species from bonobos to dragonflies.

The field of animal studies, rather, seeks ways for humans to ethically represent, interact with, and care for their fellow animals, while acknowledging that we can't always know what is best for them. Scholars in this field do not deny the existence of certain kinds of objective truth, especially those rooted in scientific evidence and careful attempts at empathy with nonhuman beings. As Weil writes, "I suggest that theory's turn to animals grows out of, on the one hand, a weariness with post-structuralism's linguistic turn and a resulting search for a postlinguistic and perhaps posthuman sublime and, on the other hand, an often conflicting turn to ethics that raises the question of our human responsibility to the animal-other" (xix-xx). The animal turn, she adds, aims to escape from what Friedrich Nietzsche and, later, Fredric Jameson called the "prison-house of language," and "responds to a desire to know that there are beings or objects with ways of knowing and being that resist our flawed systems of language and who may know us and themselves in ways we can never discern" (11-12).

Scholars in this field face a unique challenge: those for whom they speak cannot speak for themselves, at least not in a language we understand. The question, then, is whether nonhuman animals can achieve a certain degree of subjecthood in conversations about their experience of the world. "Anthropomorphism" has for decades carried a negative connotation: we cannot know another species' *Umwelt* (its "self-centered, subjective world" [de Waal 8]), so projecting our own human perspective on them is inevitable, and the anti-anthropomorphic camp would argue that because of this, we will inevitably *misrepresent* animals. Weil poses the problem as one similar to that which scholars in women's studies, trauma studies, and postcolonial studies face: "how to understand and give voice to others or to experiences that seem impervious to our means of understanding; how to attend to difference without appropriating or distorting it; how to hear and acknowledge what it may not be possible to say" (7).

In his well-known 1974 essay, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?”, Thomas Nagel highlights where anthropomorphism commonly fails, as it is the act of projecting a *human* mind into an animal *body*,¹⁰ acting out the age-old association of humans with the cognitive and animals with the physical. Aristotle, after all, defined animals as “those whose business is to use their body, and who can do nothing better” (Weil 29). That bats are more than their bodies, and possess some level of consciousness, complicates the problem, however. “[T]he fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism,” Nagel explains. “We may call this the subjective character of experience” (436). That is, our subjectivity has limits, and limits our ability to understand others.

However, attempts at understanding other species’ subjective experience are far from hopeless. De Waal believes that careful scientific research can approximate such understanding, pointing out that Nagel only knew about echolocation “because scientists did try to imagine what it is like to be a bat and did in fact succeed” (10). And most animal studies scholars do not view anthropomorphism as an inherently flawed method; instead, when one carefully employs “critical anthropomorphism” (an adaption of the term “critical empathy” employed in trauma theory) the result can be a powerful act of empathy (Weil 19–20). This is true in art as well as in theoretical work. Poets and fiction writers should not (and cannot practically) be condemned for attempting to represent the experience of an animal, as their methods and aims vary with every

¹⁰ As Nagel explains: “It will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one’s arms, which enables one to fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one’s mouth; that one has very poor vision, and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals; and that one spends the day hanging upside down by one’s feet in an attic. In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for *me* to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task.” (439)

piece of writing. Rather, art can be a useful tool for inspiring empathy for animals in readers and writers, and such empathy is an essential first step toward widespread conservation and environmental protection efforts.¹¹ Critical anthropomorphism, then, can be defined “in the sense that we open ourselves to touch and to be touched by others as fellow subjects and may imagine their pain, pleasure, and need in anthropomorphic terms, but stop short of believing that we can know their experience” (Ibid.). That is, we can imagine without forgetting that we are imagining, keeping always a careful eye on what our own subjectivity tends to distort.

De Waal, in his 2016 book, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?*, points out that anthropomorphism isn't so dangerous as some might insist.

In my opinion, anthropomorphism is problematic only when the human-animal comparison is a stretch, such as with regards to species distant from us. The fish known as kissing gouramis, for example, don't really kiss in the same way and for the same reasons that humans do. Adult fish sometimes lock their protruding mouths together to settle disputes. Clearly, to label this habit 'kissing' is misleading. Apes, on the other hand, do greet each other after a separation by placing their lips gently on each other's mouth or shoulder and hence kiss in a way and under circumstances that greatly resemble human kissing. [...]

Another example: when young apes are being tickled, they make breathy sounds with a rhythm of inhalation and exhalation that resembles human laughter. One cannot simply dismiss the term laughter for this behavior as too anthropomorphic (as some have done), because not only do the apes sound like human children being tickled, they show the same ambivalence about it as children do. I have often noticed it myself. They try to push my tickling fingers away, but then come back begging for more, holding their breath while awaiting the next poke in their belly. (25)

In place of a blanket rejection of anthropomorphism, de Waal crafts a new term:

“anthropodenial,” which he defines as:

the a priori rejection of human traits in other animals or animallike traits in us. Anthropomorphism and anthropodenial have an inverse relationship: the closer another species is to us, the more anthropomorphism will assist our understanding of this species and the greater will be the danger of anthropodenial. Conversely, the more distant a species is

¹¹ “[A]nthropomorphism is the first step to attributing mind to another being and, hence, to acknowledging an other as a subject capable of pain, pleasure, and will” (Weil 47).

from us, the greater the risk that anthropomorphism will propose questionable similarities that have come about independently. (Ibid.)

Anthropocentric thinking, however, is another matter, and a trap that scientists, literary theorists, and writers are all actively seeking to escape. Throughout his book, one of de Waal's primary objectives is to show how anthropocentric testing methods devalue animals' unique skills by defining intelligence as the capacity to think in the way that humans think. In one extreme example, de Waal recalls talking to a preeminent scientist about his research in face recognition; at the time, it was believed humans were much better at this task than chimpanzees. Yet chimps were only being tested on their ability to recognize *human* faces, and when de Waal asked why, the researcher pointed out that since human faces vary so dramatically, if a chimp couldn't tell the difference between them, it certainly wouldn't be able to tell the difference between members of its own species (18). Such anthropocentric thinking assumes that human faces would be just as, or more, interesting to a chimp as the faces of fellow chimpanzees, in addition to accepting as fact that we are the only species whose members don't "all look alike."

Instead, de Waal proposes that we expand our definition of what intelligence can be: "Every species deals flexibly with the environment and develops solutions to the problems it poses. Each one does it differently. We had better use the plural to refer to their capacities, therefore, and speak of intelligences and cognitions. [...] It seems highly unfair to ask if a squirrel can count to ten if counting is not really what a squirrel's life is about" (12). Weil and other animal studies scholars call for much the same solution: "We may know animals in ways they cannot—we may know their breeds, their color, their weight, their names, their 'histories'—but they may also know us in ways that we cannot know because they know the world and us by other means," Weil writes (11).

When it comes to metaphor-making, scholars call for linguistic constructions that acknowledge animals as peers, rather than using them like tools for specific ends. In his book, *The Animal Part: Humans and Other Animals in the Poetic Imagination*, Mark Payne recalls watching a beaver traveling back and forth in the water, unable to land at a human-occupied campsite. It's not unlike the way Payne wanders when he's looking for a book in the library. But, he asks, how can he make such a comparison responsibly? The answer is in acknowledging that the beaver has his own cognitive processes and an inner life that is largely invisible to the human observer: "The beaver, I think, in his single-minded devotion to the job in hand, is an animal pursuing his distinctive occupations; I too am one. His activity is not a symbol or image of mine, it is a behavior we share" (Payne 2). Moments of encountering animals, meeting their eyes, call upon our "empathetic imagination," and require us to acknowledge that we are *objects*, not *subjects*, under their gaze (Ibid., 4, 8).¹²

The Poet's Problem: Metaphor, Infection, and Consequence

There are some kinds of metaphor that are so commonly reinforced that we find it almost impossible to escape them. These are often the metaphors whose unintended consequences we have the most trouble escaping.

Consider, for example, just one of the many metaphors ingrained in everyday speech that Lakoff and Johnson explore in their book, *Metaphors We Live By*: "the mind is a machine." A few examples of how this manifests in common parlance include "my mind just isn't *working* today," "the *wheels are turning* now," and "I'm a little *rusty*" (27). It is unlikely that each

¹² This invocation recalls Jacques Derrida's book, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, a seminal work in animal studies. The piece is predicated upon the shame Derrida felt standing naked under the gaze of his cat. "Ashamed of what and naked before whom?" he asks (Derrida 4).

manifestation of the underlying metaphor developed independently (or as de Waal might put it, as a product of convergent evolution¹³); rather more probable is that one or two surfaced, and made enough of a lasting impression that they survived the text(s) in which they originally appeared. That is, they took on a life of their own and bred other metaphors that reinforced the same system. Eventually, they became so common as to be almost imperceptible as metaphors: “Ontological metaphors like these are so natural and so pervasive in our thought that they are usually taken as self-evident, direct descriptions of mental phenomena,” Lakoff and Johnson write. “The fact that they are metaphorical never occurs to most of us. We take statements like ‘He cracked under pressure’¹⁴ as being directly true or false” (28).

Such stealthy metaphor-making can have unintended and even insidious consequences, not only creating a system to which future comparisons must adhere, but also preemptively excluding other ways of seeing. Consider the characteristics of a machine: it is manmade; it can break and sometimes need to be fixed; there is a right way and a wrong way for it to work; it operates automatically, without thinking; it is nonorganic; it serves an end or purpose; it’s a human-controlled tool. Now compare this list with a few characteristics which we generally believe *cannot* belong to a machine: natural; animal; spontaneous; organic; intuitive; unpredictable. This metaphor, which permeates our daily verbal interactions, implies that humans are *not* animals, or are not *like* any other animals. It further implies that the capacity to make and control and maintain tools is a human trait, because machines are human-made, and

¹³ Convergent evolution is “[t]he independent evolution of similar traits or capacities in unrelated species in response to similar environmental pressures” (de Waal 320).

¹⁴ “He cracked under pressure” is an example of a related but separate metaphorical system identified by Lakoff and Johnson: “the mind is a brittle object” (27–28).

that in fact the mind cannot be described by any of the adjectives in the latter list. None of these conclusions is actually true.

This is not to say that the machine metaphor is entirely untrue or un-useful, but rather to point out that, especially because of its cultural pervasiveness, it has the potential to reinforce half-truths or misinformation about the mind. Just as Lakoff and Johnson caution, “The very systematicity that allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another [...] will necessarily hide other aspects of the concept. In allowing us to focus on one aspect of a concept [...], a metaphorical concept can keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor” (10).

Metaphors have the power to make us believe things that are not true, or to reinforce untrue beliefs that we already have. These slip undetected past our more analytical minds, what Daniel Kahneman, in his book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, would call our “System 2” (20). Kahneman identifies two mental processes through which external stimuli are filtered. System 1 “operates automatically and quickly, with little or no sense of voluntary control,” whereas System 2 “allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations. The operations of System 2 are often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice, and concentration” (Ibid.). Many of our daily cognitive tasks, from making quick mathematical computations to identifying the tone of a person’s voice, never require the input of System 2, which is to say that in many ways they go unexamined. System 1 is accustomed to processing information which is familiar or unsurprising to us, and this is likely to include common and pervasive metaphors, especially those that we no longer even identify consciously as comparisons, but which we mentally store as “facts.”

The machine metaphor “infects” our more comprehensive understanding of how the human mind works by assigning it *irrelevant* as well as relevant properties of a machine, outside the scope of the original metaphor. The danger in many metaphors lies in their capacity for this type of infection. In fact, some metaphors could be called “forbidden,” simply because they paint with too broad a stroke. Forbidden metaphors, too, can go almost unnoticed, as we allow System 1 to automatically suppress them as unsayable. But for the sake of illustration, I’ll offer up one example: what if you were to say that someone has a “Hitler moustache”? In fact, that person’s moustache is simply the exact shape and size as that which Adolf Hitler made notorious — and that is where the comparison ends. Yet it is in fact impossible that the comparison can end there. While the speaker may be comparing, as metaphors so often do, simply one trait that the two moustaches have in common, a chain reaction is inevitable, and the metaphor carries a slew of unintended consequences. The tenor’s character, comportment, and even moral beliefs are stained with those of Hitler. Even if this is not what the speaker meant, the metaphor contains it.

This is an extreme example, so as to make the implications obvious. What the remainder of this paper will seek to explore is when the chain reaction is more insidious, more difficult to detect. When Aracelis Girmay writes, “I do not want to marry the wind / [...] / whose tracks mark a serpent round the house” (37) she not only evokes the shape of the path that the wind follows, but inevitably assigns to the wind the same sinister intentions of which snakes are so often accused. If the poet wishes to undermine this negative implication, the poem must actively work against it; the poem has to do no work at all to reinforce it.

Consider another example, in which a poem actively engages our common assumptions about animals, only to reinforce them. When Sylvia Plath’s narrator in the poem “Sow” goes to visit the titular pig, she rejects a potentially surprising metaphor in order to reinforce the image

of a disgusting, dirty, essentially un-human creature: “This was no rose-and-larkspurred china suckling / with a penny slot” (60). In this way, she ensures that her personification of the sow later on, complete with the judgment nested inside the word “engross,” will come off as absurd: “This vast / Brobdingnag bulk // Of a sow lounged belly-bedded on that black compost, / Fat-ruttled eyes / Dream-filmed. What a vision of ancient hoghood must // Thus wholly engross / The great grandma!” (61). Here, Plath attributes to the sow an inner life — the ability to dream and the knowledge of her species’ history — and just as swiftly snatches it away. While much research regarding animal cognition came to light after Plath wrote this poem, one must wonder how long such comfortable metaphors have obscured or preemptively dismissed the questions humans should be asking about how animals experience the world.

Perhaps one of the gravest mistakes metaphors have persistently committed is adapting animals so as to neatly fit into our metaphors without regard to those animals’ actual natures or ways of living in the world — that is, optimizing animals for an anthropocentric end. In section II of his poem, “The Next Time,” Mark Strand draws animals and the natural world almost as though they were small plastic or china figurines in a dollhouse, perfectly poised for acting out whatever scene the narrator might choose for them:

Perfection is out of the question for people like us,
 So why plug away at the same old self when the landscape
 Has opened its arms and given us marvelous shrines
 To flock towards? The great motels to the west are waiting,
 In somebody’s yard a pristine dog is hoping that we’ll drive by,
 And on the rubber surface of a lake people bobbing up and down
 Will wave. (8)

In this excerpt, landscape and dogs alike are “pristine” or “shrine”-like, that is, unspoiled and perfect, in contrast to what “people” can achieve. While idealizing the natural world in

comparison with *homo sapiens sapiens* seems on the surface to be respectful, this does not make it true; it in fact misrepresents the natural world through oversimplification, so cannot be called entirely respectful. The poem reinforces a binary in which humans are on one end and everything else in the world is on the other. Yet natural processes and animals' experience in the world is incredibly complicated and messy, and humans are not so special as to be excluded from this messiness; we are one of countless species of animals and plants and we evolved just like the rest, so that we share a great number of traits with other members of the natural world. Metaphor sometimes simplifies to illuminate, but other times it can simplify to the point of absurdity.

Furthermore, I dare say that anyone who has ever known a dog or two would find "pristine" an entirely perplexing adjective for describing one, in no small part because "pristine" is so rarely used for describing individual living beings. In any case, the adjective at best implies that the dog was "made," for the purposes of this poem, to be looked at as an aesthetic object; perhaps it is a perfectly trimmed poodle. Ross Gay, as we shall see in Chapter 2, explicitly addresses and corrects the problem of using animals as a tool of metaphor irrespective of what they actually are in his poem, "The Opening."

Racial Binaries & Dehumanization: How Animal Metaphor Invents the "Human"

Before formulating his theory of natural selection, Charles Darwin wrote in a notebook: "Animals — whom we have made our slaves we do not like to consider our equals. — Do not slave-holders wish to make the black man other kind?" The same dehumanization that denies our common origins with animals has also been used to deny that all members of *homo sapiens sapiens* are "netted together" through their shared ancestry, and has enabled "inhuman" treatment of fellow humans as a result (Benton 487–488).

A misleading or poorly wrought metaphor can be harmful, and where there is the potential for harm, the writer must consider her responsibilities. She can devise comparisons and propagate myths that seem to exist only on a metaphorical plane, that are designed to fade away when the poem comes to a close — that, as a result, look entirely harmless. But sometimes metaphors escape their containers.

The impact on animals of irresponsible animal metaphors should by now be clear. But since the beginning, metaphor has had the potential to harm fellow human beings, as well. One of most harmful metaphors in the history of the Western world has been the black-white dichotomy: good vs. evil, good vs. bad, purity vs. corruption, positive vs. negative. It's almost impossible for us to avoid using this metaphor in everyday speech and even in writing. On the page, the traditional connotations of black and white must be actively countered, or else they automatically don their trusty tuxedos.

This metaphor has real and measurable effects on our perceptions about race. A large-scale replication of a 2004 study concluded that “Words with a positive meaning were evaluated faster when font color was white rather than black and words with a negative meaning were evaluated faster when font color was black rather than white.” That is, we automatically have more trouble assigning negative connotation to something when it's white, and find it more difficult to assign a positive connotation to something when it's black (Meier et al. 174). This metaphor is unconsciously and automatically applied by System 1 in the real world¹⁵, and its impact on how human animals perceive people with darker skin is hugely damaging.

¹⁵ The authors of the aforementioned study point to Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory as a possible explanation for how such metaphors are extrapolated to interpret situations far removed from the ones in which the metaphor was originally applied. “For example, in infancy and adolescent [sic], people likely experience powerful people and animals as being high in vertical position. As a child, more powerful people are typically taller and higher

In *The History of Black*, John Harvey explores how the color black has been used metaphorically across a large swath of cultures, from early human history to the present. He points out that the assignment of a negative connotation to the color is not something we are born with:

It is also clear that animals are not spooked by black in the way that humans are. To a cow, a black snake is no more frightening than a lime-green one, and you cannot spoil an animal's day by setting a black cat to across its path. Animals are protected, it would seem, by the fact that since they do not have words, they also lack metaphors.¹⁶ It was a bad day for black animals when humans came on the scene, and began to speak, and to use metaphors too. Then the black of fearful night could be the black of misfortune, depression and death. (20–21)

Yet in the course of human history, the association of black with sin and evil is relatively recent; after all, every human had dark skin for hundreds of thousands of years (Harvey 25), and many peoples have included black deities among their pantheons (Ibid., 31). According to Harvey, pervasively negative connotations for blackness emerged with the rise of Christianity.¹⁷ Certainly, the concept of “a cosmic war between light and darkness” existed before the New

and less powerful people are typically shorter and lower. Thus, we physically experience powerfulness as high and powerlessness as low. In adulthood, such experiences may lead to conceptual metaphors that pair powerfulness with high and powerlessness with low (e.g., rising to the top)” (Meier et al. 174). All this is to say that we easily apply metaphors that were accurate in one situation to circumstances in which it is not reasonable to apply them.

¹⁶ It can be argued that animals don't lack metaphors entirely. Being scared by a creature that looks *like* one that previously attacked you may be called a metaphor, and animals are capable of this kind of learning. Then again, this would be a dramatic expansion of our current definitions of the term.

¹⁷ This does not mean black had no negative connotations before Christianity. For hundreds of years, people believed that our bodies contained a black substance that the Greeks called *melancholy*, what was later in England called “black bile.” It was believed this substance could cause depression as well as mental and physical deformities (Harvey 137). In this way, the Greeks tied morbidity and insanity to blackness (Ibid., 138–139). However, because this bile existed in every human body, the connotations of its color were not then linked to race. That is, the metaphor could not escape its *context*. Of course, black also had positive connotations in the ancient world. Before the arrival of white-skinned people in Africa, “black had a double value comparable to its value in other societies as the colour of elegance, and of death” (Ibid., 182).

Testament, but this “is not, however, quite the same as a war between light and blackness. Christianity completed a change which was latent in all of the light-dark imagery when it equated the darkness with sin, and at the same time made sin black” (68). In fact, sin is more likely to be associated with the color red in the Old Testament, likely because of its visual linkage with bloodshed (Ibid.). Once Christianity began associating black with despair and evil, dark-skinned Ethiopians began to be equated with sinfulness and the Devil:

The ancient world did not have a problem with skin colour¹⁸: it simply understood that the further south one’s homeland was, the darker one’s skin would be burned by the sun. But for Christian preachers, searching for images, examples and metaphors, the temptation was irresistible, and the ‘Ethiopian’ became at once the image and the demonstration of sinfulness. For the Ethiopian was black from the curse laid on Ham, a divine punishment laid on sin, and this curse was equated with the blackness of sin, though all Genesis says is that Ham’s descendants will always be servants (9:25). (Harvey 70)

This example of how metaphors can run rampant, creating and reinforcing untruths outside of their original context, should serve as a sobering warning for any writer. Language itself is symbolic, using words as stand-ins for objects and ideas. It also contains the artifacts of “dead” metaphors, as Lakoff and Johnson elucidate in *Metaphors We Live By*. It is therefore impossible for any writer to avoid metaphor. What is important, then, is that writers be aware that they are making choices constantly, and that reinforcing the predominant metaphor is very often easier than subverting it.

It is important to talk about race in the context of animal metaphors because the primary effect of metaphor-making about animals has been, for many centuries, the reinforcement of hierarchies in which humans are a step above all other animals: considered more valuable, more intelligent, closer to the divine. The stark line drawn between humans and the rest of the living

¹⁸ As Harvey clarifies, “It is not that the ancient world had no colour prejudice. [...] But the element of colour-prejudice was fluctuating, and was not, in the Roman world, identified with slavery” (166).

world invents the binary of human/nonhuman, creates the possibility of *dehumanization*, enables us to devalue other *homo sapiens sapiens* by associating them with animals or assigning them animal characteristics.

“Black” itself is a gross generalization of widely varying skin tones, and Frantz Fanon rarely uses the word “black” in his psychological analysis of colonialism’s dehumanizing effects, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harvey 186). As Harvey points out, “Calling Africans black has made it easier to call them animals, children, idiots, demons, prostitutes, lepers and syphilitics. Words for ‘black’ have assisted in a kind of psychic dumping in which bad things are driven from us and fastened onto Africans” (180). Alvaro Andrés Reyes calls the metaphorical dehumanization of dark-skinned and colonized peoples an act of violence equivalent to waging war:

It is the violence of the colonizer that has created the colonized; it is through their ‘bayonets’ and ‘cannon fire’ that they have destroyed the very the social fabric of native life, i.e. economy, lifestyle, and modes of dress [...]. Thus, it is through this violence that the colonist not only imposes a separation of the species but in fact ‘fabricates’ its other, the colonized. If the colonists can say that the native is an animal it is because their violence has reduced him to an animal-like existence. (108)

Similarly, Spanish *conquistadores* denied humanity to Native Americans, and used their less-than-human status to justify “inhuman” treatment of them. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, the Spanish kings’ official chronicler, wrote a treatise in 1552 offering four justifications for Spain’s conquest of the Americas. “The last of these [justifications], and the most applicable to those barbarians we vulgarly call Indians [...] is the following: those whose natural condition is such that they must obey others, if they refuse the empire of that other, and there is no further recourse, should be dominated by arms” (Reyes 16). This language evokes Aristotle’s conclusion that animals “are by nature slaves and it is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master” (Weil 29). Royal historians in the Spanish court described Native

Americans as “inhuman beasts” (*bestias despiadadas*) and Sepúlveda further compared them to the *homunculus*, small men lacking culture, historical records, and written laws (Choe 126–127).

When Charles Darwin decentralized the human, Weil asserts that he also challenged “masculine pride.” Women’s powerlessness in the face of patriarchy and privilege can be likened to the animal’s position (xxiv). But Weil celebrates the antiessentialism that queer ecology explores within evolutionary theory, which corrodes rigid boundaries and asserts that “the human-animal difference is one of degree, not kind” (de Waal 221). While Weil does not advocate for the complete dissolution of boundaries, as this would eliminate all possibility for differentiation (which can be practically useful), she does argue that “it would be wrong to essentialize the affinities between women and animals and thereby to reaffirm a gendered binary of nature and culture” (xxiv). In the end, any group that suffers discrimination and oppression faces the danger of being forced onto the inferior pole of the human/nonhuman binary, so it is the binary that must be toppled. Dehumanization, its inevitable result, is a danger to all species, including to every human animal.

Unfortunately, this method of dehumanization is still widespread today. In 2016, African-American actor Leslie Jones was targeted by a barrage of sexist and racist tweets and online comments. She was compared with nonhuman primates, including a male gorilla, Harambe, who was killed in 2016 at the Cincinnati Zoo. Jones eventually left Twitter as a result of this hate speech, and the social media platform banned alt-right instigator Milo Yiannopoulos from Twitter for his participation in the harassment (Rogers). Yiannopoulos’ popularity did not wane afterwards. In fact, he was invited to speak on college campuses throughout the U.S. Yiannopoulos was a fervid supporter of Donald Trump, who just months later was elected the 45th President of the United States. One could argue that Yiannopoulos’s metaphors should not

be permitted to unfairly “infect” the image of Trump just because Yiannopoulos supported him; however, Trump himself has expressed xenophobic and anti-Muslim opinions, and has targeted non-white immigrants as hostile to the United States although he has married two white immigrants.

On July 18, 2016, the same day Jones closed her account, she tweeted: “Ok I have been called Apes, sent pics of their asses,[]even got a pic with semen on my face. I’m tryin to figure out what human means. I’m out” (Ibid.). Jones’ comment points to the specific tactic employed by her attackers: dehumanization. If “human” is, as so many suppose, a term synonymous with the noblest, most morally sophisticated, and most intelligent form of life on Earth, the hateful diatribes of those who would deny Jones her humanity must exclude ipso facto their authors from the “human” club.

The human/nonhuman binary is not only an oversimplification but a fabrication, and a harmful one at that. It is a primary enabler of individual and institutional racism, and when metaphor-makers reassert this binary, they are enablers, too.

This does not mean that when writers do this, they do it intentionally. In fact, it is all too easy to reinforce black/white and human/nonhuman binaries without even realizing it, since they have been in place for so many centuries. Here, another example from the otherwise magnificent Brigit Pegeen Kelly is in order. Two opposing forces, the empathetic and the anthropocentric, are at work in much of Kelly’s 1995 book, *Song*. The speaker in these poems shows herself to be profoundly moved before the death of a deer (Kelly 37–39, 72–76), and familiar with the movements and habits of swans in a way that hints at long and careful observation (38–39, 74–75). Her depictions of these animals seem true to how they move through the world — that is, Kelly adheres in this case to de Waal’s “know-thy-animal rule” (77). Nevertheless, the speaker

does occasionally assign human-centric valuations to these animals: swans are “mean” and “often ugly” (74). These can be called anthropocentric terms because from the swan’s perspective, an approaching human child may be perceived as a threat, so that it may seem reasonable, from the swan’s perspective, to act in self-defense. The speaker both judges and refuses to judge: in the space of two pages, the poem includes two caveats, variations on “you can’t judge the swan out of the water” (75).

The poem most pertinent to a discussion on race is “The Pear Tree” (67–69). This piece sets up the yellow finch in opposition with the black crow. The finch, a beloved pet, has colors comparable to those of healthy pears, a “finch of many colors, a hundred colors, a thousand / Too many to count” (68). But in this year bad for pears, the finch has died; the speaker buries this “*plaything of the man’s heart*,” a projection of herself, just as she gives up hope for the citrine-studded wedding ring that “the man” has denied her (67). Thus the crow becomes a stand-in for her despair, and she lets loose a tirade against it:

[...] But now the pears I count on are green

And misshapen. They have no breasts or feathers, nothing
Soft to stick your fingers in. Even the crows don’t want them....
Filthy birds. *Look at them*. Black as the waters of the bog
They brood over. Liars’ tongues are black like that.

And so are the songs of Darkness. And so is the skirt
I smothered the bird with. Shrouding the cage,
Bringing the dusk in early.... How loud the rain is. (68)

In just the space of a stanza, the crow, because of its blackness, is associated with terrain in which no beloved pear trees can grow, with filth, with lying, and with Darkness itself — the opponent of goodness and light in the Christian dogma. In fact, the crow is placed in direct contrast with “The color of my pears in good years” which “turns the dark rain // Into a coat of many colors, a hundred colors, a thousand, / As many as the colors in the *songs of God*” (67, my

emphasis). And this opposition to God himself is because of the crow's appearance alone, as is made clear by the speaker's invocation: "*Look at them.*" Crows need not be judged by any other measure. The poem thus inches uncomfortably close to reaffirming not only black-white binaries but racialized binaries by which a person's worth can be determined just by *looking at them*. These crows are only one color, down to even their eyes: black. They come with the cold, "squalling and fretting," and "They bring the dusk / In early." (67). Through a parallelism they are likened to the rain: "The rain will keep falling. The crows / Will keep flying" (69). These animals are utterly devoid of positive attributes.

At the same time, Kelly does implicate herself as a participant in the "songs of Darkness" with the lines, "And so is the skirt / I smothered the bird with." Here, she is comparing herself directly with the crow, which undercuts the likelihood that her evocation of darkness was an intentional and conscious reference to race. Instead, she associates it with something negative in the world and also in herself. Still, the racial element is hard to ignore here, so that these lines serve as a warning to any poet about the web of associations that they can unintentionally call forth.

It is clear that the crows in this poem exist much more within the metaphorical realm than they do in the flesh-and-blood world, since they do not move through and interact with the world as crows outside the poem do. The speaker does not seem to have observed them as closely as she has swans or deer. Careful observation, the "know-thy-animal rule," has the double benefit of accurately portraying the animal and opening up the poem to unexpected new methods of metaphor-making, as we shall see in Chapter 3. Instead, these crows are stand-ins for a centuries-old way of thinking.

Chapter 2: Approaches to Animal Metaphor

This chapter will conduct close readings of a long poem by Ross Gay and a book by Aracelis Girmay, two contemporary poets who are challenging traditional methods of metaphor-making and the binaries that those methods uphold.

Embracing the Animal in “The Opening” by Ross Gay

Ross Gay’s poem “The Opening,” from his book *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude* (2015), explores how we manipulate animals to create metaphors that are false representations of them, and likewise false or insincere representations of ourselves and our emotions. Only an accurate portrayal of an animal or plant, achieved through sympathetic and intimate knowledge of it, can create metaphors that open doors within us, allowing us to access our emotional (and animal) selves.

The speaker in this poem is seeking to reconnect with that part of himself that bonded with his father over buckets of hot wings from Kentucky Fried Chicken, a shared experience characterized by “grease and gore” (60) under “the looming sign of the Colonel smiling like one concealing some awful and bloody secret” (61). Since the era of these dinners, the speaker seems to have rejected or suppressed the pleasure he took in these meals, as evidenced in his description of them in violent terms. This suppression has split him into two selves, one represented by a first-person “I,” and the other — the more animal, violent, and emotional self — called “Myself.” The latter, as the side that reveled in the hot wings, has been repressed to the point that he manifests fearful and even (as we shall see) violent tendencies: “You likewise might wonder how Myself has arrived / at this flamboyant terror, and accretion // the way in

caves, where nothing without light / is seen, minerals will gather into impossible spires // waiting to impale a thing” (62). Living in the dark has made “Myself” dangerous.

These violent daydreams are sometimes directed at the speaker’s mother. The KFC meals were a ritual in which she refused to partake, so that the animal self which emerged during these dinners has felt from time to time an uncontrollable violence¹⁹ toward (or distance from) her, perhaps because her non-participation shone a light on just how bloody those encounters were.

The speaker has a daydream of

[...] his own hands working a vial
of some sort from which he poured a poison

into his mother’s half-eaten tub of blueberry yogurt
which imagined matricide is perhaps especially jarring

to Myself, given the awkward walking he does
avoiding ants and other tiny beasts,

given the long prayer he found himself giving
the chickadee that met its death against his windshield, [...] (63)

Later, he recalls his mother’s mourning after his father’s death, a time during which he found himself more affected by her suffering than moved to his own. It seems that, at that time, he was incapable of accessing or expressing his pain, which, alongside his affection for those shared meals with his father, had been suppressed, deemed unacceptable. This pain will remain inaccessible so long as he is ensconced in a human-made, unnatural, and thereby dead world:

how sad my mother was when my father died, goddamn,

¹⁹ Here, I insist on repeating the word “violent” rather than invoking one of its synonyms, because (it is worth noticing) so many of them attribute violence to nonhuman animals or dehumanized humans: brutal (from Latin *brutus*, “heavy, dull, stupid,” later expanded to “of the lower animals); savage (c. 1300 “wild, undomesticated, untamed” and used to refer to animals and places, later used to refer to “wild” people living outside of “civilization”); barbarous (from Latin *barbarus*, associated with “barbarian”); this is only to name a few (Harper). This is rather persistent misdirection for Earth’s only warring animal (cf. footnote 17).

how sad was Myself; and how scared was Myself,
scared nearly, in fact, to death, at his mother afraid

or not sleeping well or not unpacking for months in her new apartment,
outside of which Myself, visiting, would sit in his car

for a half hour or more, staring
into the yellow aluminum siding's patina and the seam

it made with the fake white brick
as he felt the bones of his chest breaking which was the feeling

of the very real terror he had at what his hands might do, which his hands
would never do, [...] (65-66)

This terror is the emotion that, just a few pages earlier, he has attempted to describe using the extended metaphor of shrikes trying to break into an attic, "collapsing / the bones of their bodies" (64) in their desperation to get inside. The scene is terrible and gory, an escalation of the violence of cleaning chicken bones with his own teeth (61). The shrikes are described as "murderous birds" (63) whose hunger drives them to violent desperation and their own self-destruction, who leave "shivering feathers blood-glued to the cracks" (64) in the shingles and walls of the attic, "until the attic roared with soaring and the war / screams of birds clutching one another with talons // by the neck or back" (64). That Gay leaves the word "war" hanging out at the end of this line is significant: he wants to forefront the underlying dishonesty in this metaphor, which he will soon disavow entirely. No animals are known to wage wars in the human sense of the word²⁰; this is, rather, a personification, a projection of his own experience

²⁰ The term "war" is "inappropriate to describe conflict in the non-human animal kingdom," explains Dan Dembiec, supervisor of mammals at the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens. While chimpanzees can attack other groups in an attempt to gain territory, their raids resemble guerilla attacks more than the formation of armies and alliances to "fight it out and see who wins" (Langley) In the case of "The Opening," Gay is not comparing *homo sapiens sapiens* to all nonhuman animals, but specifically to birds. Shrikes are, indeed, hunters, as Gay acknowledges (66). Northern shrikes eat small birds, rodents, and insects, sometimes impaling them on a spike or thorn for eating later (Kaufman). But the desire to get indoors for food and shelter is a human

onto the shrikes in a way that alters their natural (perhaps it is better to say “observable”) behavior.

One thing that the speaker believes he does have in common with these birds is a natural tendency toward violence — but the *type* of violence, he finds, is distinct. He associates it with his animal self, “Myself.” He is worried that, as in the case of shrikes, hunger or pain can compel him to commit bloody acts. But the violence exhibited by animals such as birds is generally a scabble for immediate survival, rather than a long-held grudge. The imagined moment in which he poisons his mother is not like the sudden and panicked incursion of hungry birds on the speaker’s attic: because he uses poison, it is premediated; because it is his mother, it is personal and based on remembered past experience.²¹

At last, Gay rejects the metaphor of the shrikes trying to break into the attic as hopelessly anthropomorphic, therefore unjust toward the birds and useless to him. After a full page developing this panicked and bloody scene, he abandons it:

which is, in fact, the wrong metaphor, the more I think of it,
for the birds in question favor the long view

of open meadows. They love exposed perches on which they fasten
their talons and unwrap their beautiful wings in the wind.

And the birds I’m talking about are not birds at all,
but common sorrow made murderous [...] (65)

desire; and that false metaphor, “I am happy / to remind us both again, was not the feeling at all. All Myself was feeling, // in fact, was not feeling his heart break again and again. / The way he did for some time sitting with his mother // in her living room [...] while she sobbed” (66).

²¹ As de Waal points out, many animals, including birds, remember the past and plan for the future. However, the speaker is comparing apples and oranges: shrikes’ violence caused by a desperate, immediate hunger with a premediated poisoning of his mother. For this reason he must ultimately reject his own metaphor.

The birds are just projections of a human consciousness, “not birds at all,” crafted by Myself in the process of sealing off his emotions in the forgotten attic of his mind “for fear of what might forever slip in and be felt” (65) — that is, the pain of his father’s death. He cannot feel this pain because he has denied himself the tender feelings that memories of the shared KFC chicken wings should evoke.

This pain, this simple sadness, pops up throughout his life in disguises — costumed as violence, as cruelty, and as birds. Metaphor can be used to obfuscate just as easily as it can be used to illuminate. If you’re twisting the natural world to fit human terms, Gay asserts, that’s a sign that you’re not being honest about what it is to be a human animal.

Interestingly, the more “animal” “Myself” is where the speaker of the poem roots his emotions: “All Myself was feeling” (66). Humans have a long history of denying that animals can experience emotion at all, so this may seem an unusual cohabitation. But it is after the section with the shrikes (which is section three of the poem) that Gay embarks upon a new and corrective project: the desire to access and grapple with emotion through interactions with nature. In section five, the final part of the poem comprising almost half its length, the speaker recalls the planting and pruning of a “beautiful peach tree” (when it comes to nature, Gay does not shy away from the simplest and most shimmering/unequivocal of adjectives). The tree is a replacement for Gay’s failed bird metaphor, and even has some bird-like characteristics, such as the roots which the speaker “took ten minutes to feather [...] apart” (67). The speaker takes on the maintenance of this tree as a parent cares for a child, but cautions that such a relationship requires careful cultivation or it can turn sour, like that of the “grumpy neighbor” with his “unsmiling middle-aged daughter” (68). The neighbor’s wife, too, is shrouded in “a gloomy gray pantsuit” (Ibid.), like a tree that hasn’t been pruned enough to let the light in. In her, though, the

speaker finds a bird metaphor that does work, because it not only accurately depicts the natural conduct of birds but uses it to elucidate why the flowers of springtime also energize human animals:

[...] I've seen in March or April
 when the tree's myriad pink mouths unfurl
 and blow kisses to everyone in sight, the burdened curl
 of the old lady's back uncoil—I've seen her stand up some and wink
 at that tree, and, no kidding, saw her once teeter out
 in a gloomy gray pantsuit and, scrubbed by the bloom,
 change her costume right then and there to something
 frilled and blazing, which she wore on her trot
 through the neighborhood whistling to the birds [...] (68)

Just as many species of bird (including chickadees, which appear earlier in the poem) molt their feathers and don “more colorful spring breeding plumage,” often with the purpose of attracting a mate (“The Basics: Feather Molt”), this woman — bent as she is under the weight of age and suffering — cannot resist spring's natural call to celebration. Taking joy in nature and in life, then, becomes the speaker's means of reckoning with the pain in his past and accessing joy. What has been holding him back — what sends him back to the parking lot of the KFC in Levittown, Pennsylvania, where his father used to buy the chicken they would share — is a sense of shame over how animalistic and violent this shared memory made them both: “comrade[s] in grease and gore” (60). Sitting in that parking lot, “Myself” “barely looks in my direction / a bit animal with sweat glistening the back of his neck // and his temples, his jaw flexed with his hands / clutching the wheel” (61). Again, the speaker has so rejected the animal side of himself, and the violence and emotion that it contains, that he's been split in two.

However, through intimate interaction with nature, the speaker learns to embrace Myself — his animal, emotional side — as a natural part of himself, and an important tool. What he discovers in the process of pruning his tree is that death makes room for life. The tree is personified to the point that it becomes, for him, a kind of surrogate child, a “ruddy young growth” (69) with “limbs // wrist thick” (70), a “sturdy crotch” (69), and flesh (70). It’s necessary to prune the peach tree so that it can thrive: “In this neck of the woods you have to prune / a peach tree if you don’t want the fruit to rot” (68). So one April afternoon, he takes out his tools and sharpens them into what simultaneously evoke instruments of war and utensils for eating. To prune the tree is a violent act, and it is painful for him: he cuts and saws off those limbs infected with disease or liable to snap off and destroy the tree.

I do this again and again, crawling through the branches
as though through a beloved’s ribs. Friends, if you haven’t guessed,

every time I do this a little bit I mourn,
leaning the pruner’s steel flush against the flesh,

or working back and forth the saw’s grin and feeling
the smooth wood tumble or twirl into the little tomb which, after

the cutting is done, is about my size—is about the size,
give or take, of everyone I’ve ever loved. [...] (70)

The speaker has been unable to stand before his father’s tomb and face with raw emotion the fact of his death, until this moment in the poem, in which he can see within it not only violent, “inhuman” destruction but its participation in a cycle of continual renewal and rebirth, in which violence is a *creative* act. Just as a parent who shelters his or her child from pain too much may in fact endanger that child, the entire tree would die without this pruning of individual limbs. “This is how, every spring, // I promise the fruit will swell with sugar: by bringing in the air and light— / until, like the old-timers say, the tree is open enough // for a bird to fly through. Which,

in fact, they do—two cardinals / flirting; a blue jay flashing in its pompadour [...]” (70-71). The birds have returned — finally, now, in their own clothing, not as metaphor but in the full glory of birdness, just as the speaker has reunited his two halves, embracing what is emotional and animal and even violent in him as a source of life’s continual renewal.²² This passage still personifies the birds with such words as “flirting” and “pompadour,” but as we have established, it’s hard to avoid framing metaphors in human terms; what’s different here is that personification is employed in an attempt to create an accurate portrait of how these particular species actually interact, so that the anthropomorphism serves to incite empathy for the real creature, not a bird revised and reinvented for the sake of metaphor.

At the beginning of the poem, with *Myself* in the driver’s seat in the KFC parking lot, “I” points to something, tenderly and carefully trying to draw *Myself*’s attention to that thing (61). *Myself* is at this point still too “animal” and intimidating to the first-person speaker, possessed of a “flamboyant terror” (62). The only creature who sees both of them sitting in that parking lot is an infant, whose inability to speak makes it as inscrutable as some nonhuman animals. Yet in its ability to see them it possesses a strange and perhaps unexpected wisdom (62). The end of the poem returns to this moment of pointing, as “*Myself*” reunites with or converges into “I” in the moment in which he understands what “I” was pointing to. This realization comes as he’s still

²² The idea that nonhuman animals experience death differently and derive less pain from it than humans do is not so uncommon. Joanna Klink comes to a similar conclusion in her 2015 poem, “Variations on a Trance”: “But the birds are not reckless. / Every minute their fat shapes are filling with sun, / and I apprentice myself to their candor. / Their bodies drift on the moving branches, solid— / they are not taking and keeping. / They are not torn papers in a rumor of wind, / their small backs brown fields holding thunderclouds up. / Inside their bodies, nothing falls to the earth and dies” (Klink). The poem at the same time rejects comparisons of the bird with inanimate objects.

perched in the peach tree, watching an unnamed bird take joy in the boughs. The speaker sees that he is directly responsible for creating a space for life:

its ruffled, musty body sways on the tree's furthest finger,

resting exactly where I put it,
singing just as I asked it to,

which, from up here, where the newly open view is good, I can see
is what I was pointing to, what I was saying quietly to Myself,

in the parking lot of the KFC in Levittown, Pennsylvania,
as Myself shivered, and looked up, trying to see,

trying to hear. (71)

The antecedent of “which” is “the tree’s furthest finger.” As it turns out, there may have been a bird in that parking lot which Myself — so exhausted by self-denial or self-hatred and his constant effort “not to take anyone with him over the ledge on which he stands” — was incapable of sensing (61). “I” was pointing to the answer: that he should not suppress but embrace his animal self, that he should allow himself to experience the emotions of mourning, but also open his eyes to joy and life even amid destruction and loss.

Gay’s Denial of the Human-Animal Divide

The human animal, as I’ve said, have a long history of asserting that nonhuman animals do not experience emotion. Descartes believed animals essentially functioned as machines (Weil 29). In *Looking for Spinoza*, Antonio Damasio identifies emotions such as “disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, sympathy, and shame” as mechanisms that protect even the simplest animal organisms (39). He therefore argues that, because “Emotions play out in the theater of the body, [...] Emotions and related reactions seem to precede feelings in the history of life. [They] are built from simple reactions that easily promote the survival of an organism and thus could easily

prevail in evolution.” (28, 30). Even paramecia and flies have reactions that you could call emotional (42). Feelings, he clarifies, happen in the brain and are not experienced by all organisms, but rather — over the course of time — “introduced a mental alert for the good or bad circumstances and prolonged the impact of emotions by affecting attention and memory lastingly. Eventually, in a fruitful combination with past memories, imagination, and reasoning, feelings led to the emergence of foresight and the possibility of creating novel, nonstereotypical responses” (80). In this system, emotion is an automatic reaction occurring primarily in the body, and feeling is how we react in the brain to this bodily sensation: “Emotion-related thoughts only came *after* the emotion began,” Damasio explains (69).

In Gay’s poem, one could interpret the “I” as that human tendency to deny the existence of automatic and uncontrollable bodily emotions and urges as “animal,” and instead place the seat of the human experience in the “rational” (or at least “rationalizing”) brain. The desire to deny our animal origins is deeply rooted in human history, as we have spent millennia seeking ways to differentiate the “human” from the “animal.” While this has been touched upon in Chapter 1, it’s worthwhile to delve a little deeper into a few of the proposed systems in order to understand better what Gay is arguing against in “The Opening.”

Descartes claimed that humans have language, and that’s what makes them different from animals (Weil 8). This definition has been confirmed as far too simplistic, and in fact never was fully satisfactory to those humans with any intimate knowledge of animal life. Gaston III, count of Foix, wrote in his 14th-century *Livre de chasse*, a hunting manual, that stags “sing in their language, as does a man deep in love” (Crane 110). He also advises the hunter “speak to his hounds in the most lovely and gracious language that he can, which would be long and complex to write down, especially when they are tired, or are far behind, or in bad weather” (Ibid., 114).

The belief that animals can understand and react to human language bespeaks their capacity to participate in and react to verbal cues and verbally or physically delivered information. This is why, in an interview, Jacques Derrida suggested that we “reorient discussion of what language is toward the situational event of communication. The communicative event, Derrida argues, is actually what grounds our understanding of language, since without it ‘there would be no language,’ and communicative events obviously do not take place only between human beings” (Payne 9). “Language,” then, may describe a highly specific and uniquely human phenomenon, but its absence does not imply a lack of communication.

Aristotle argued that “the only difference *in kind* which he distinguishes between the animal and the human intelligence is that while the animal has memory, the power of learning, and sagacity, or *practical intelligence*, man alone possesses what we may call ‘speculative reason’” (Sells xvi–xvii). He concluded that animals “are by nature slaves and it is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master” (Weil 29). This association of the human with the mind and animals with the body would persist for centuries, including in Cartesian thought. Heidegger, too, denied animals consciousness or subjectivity, calling animals “poor in world” and humans “world forming” because animals supposedly lack access to language and “language is what affords humans access to things ‘as such’” and enables them to inquire into the properties of individual things and beings by abstracting them (Weil 29–30). Thomas Nagel, as we have seen, argues that we first must admit that there is much we do not and cannot know if we are to approach the problem in search of accurate answers.

In “The Opening,” Gay acknowledges his desire to reject the animal in himself along with the greater natural world of living beings as primitive or violent, not worthy of or desirable in human beings. However, in pairing the animal and emotional worlds in the entity called

“Myself,” Gay, like Damasio, acknowledges that emotions exist within the animal “side” of himself, and are not exclusive to humans. In fact, he is incapable of accessing his emotions if he denies their seat in the body and in all those aspects of himself that make him, essentially, “just” another animal. The human being cannot create the false human-animal division lest it deny some of its own most basic and innate characteristics. And in fact, *homo sapiens sapiens* should rejoice in being an emotional animal, because this unites it to natural cycles which do not see death as an end, as the human mind sees it when it prolongs “the impact of emotions by affecting attention and memory lastingly” (Damasio 80).

Even the form of Gay’s poem enacts this perspective of life as ever-branching, complicated, and multiplicitous. In “The Opening” and throughout *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude*, Gay prefers long, winding, even page-long sentences unafraid to shoot out in multiple directions at once. The only exception is in the brief fourth section of the poem, which enacts the violence that we inject into language itself, especially into language around animals, through a series of interjections and imperatives. These phrases self-contradict, and demonstrate how, through metaphor, we try to bend animals to our needs as though they were tools. Compare, for instance, the use of “Chickenshit” vs. “Honey” (an animal product) in section four, which is reprinted in its entirety here:

My Beloved Chickenshit; My Sweet
 Little Chickenshit; don’t run,
 My Baby. Don’t flee, My Honey.
 Hunker down. Hunker down. (67)

The underlying menace in these contradictions — in, for instance, telling someone who you’ve just called “Chickenshit” not to run or calling them “Honey” — also highlights our inescapable dependence on the same animals that we belittle and depreciate. In fact, this belittling is what allows us to use them as tools for our own ends. The supposed inferiority of the

animal, and the creation of defining distinctions between what is human and what is not, enables us to justify killing them, eating them, mistreating them, and using them for labor. As Donna Haraway puts it, animals both human and nonhuman have under various guises been “made killable” (Weil 117).²³ Instead, Gay argues, we must embrace our membership among them, otherwise we will never know who we really are.

Gay may be continuing the poetic project that Rainer Maria Rilke began in his eighth “Duino Elegy,” which even uses the same terms as Gay employs. Rilke writes:

With all its eyes the natural world looks out
into the Open. Only *our* eyes are turned
backward, and surround plant, animal, child
like traps, as they emerge into their freedom.
We know what is really out there only from
the animal’s gaze; for we take the very young
child and force it around, so that it sees
objects—not the Open, which is so
deep in animals’ faces. Free from death.
We, only, can see death; the free animal
has its decline in back of it, forever,
and God in front, and when it moves, it moves
already in eternity, like a fountain. (193)

The animal seeks outside itself its identity in the larger world, as the speaker in “The Opening” ultimately does. In this poem, Gay seeks and finds that space in the natural world that is the balancing point between life and death, in which the death of parts of the peach tree

²³ Weil explains Haraway and Derrida’s solution to the problem of killing animals in terms that evoke the eternal cycle of life and death in Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Eighth Elegy”: “As opposed to ‘making killable,’ Haraway proposes that we think instead about ‘killing well’—a concept that she builds around Derrida’s notion of ‘eating well.’ Both ideas begin with the premise that ‘we all must eat’ and that eating, like living, entails feeding off another’s life or livelihood” (Weil 117). At the end of “The Opening,” the speaker comes to terms with the violence of having torn into chicken flesh as a means of bonding with his father when he realizes that he does not have to withdraw completely from participation in death, because he cannot. Rather, he needs to be intimately familiar with his role in the larger cycle of death and life so that he can achieve and contribute to a life-giving balance, as he did when he pruned his peach tree just enough for tree and birds alike to thrive.

ultimately makes space for multiple forms of life to continue to exist and thrive. Evolution, as the process by which animals and plants carve out niches and specializations that allow them to thrive in specific environments while minimizing resource competition, achieves a delicate balance in which death creates space for more life in an eternal cycle. As Kary Weil elucidates:

Rilke's 'Eighth Elegy' articulates in 1922 what seems to have become an increasingly powerful, contemporary notion—one that is both mournful and hopeful—that (1) human consciousness is an obstacle to a knowledge that we may have once possessed—a larger, less circumscribed, and less rational way of knowing—and (2) it may be possible if not to retrieve, then to imagine a fullness of vision in poetry or through the eyes of those who are removed from 'normal' sociolinguistic behavior, whether nonhuman animals or persons with certain linguistic and cognitive disabilities.²⁴ (120)

So while Nagel insists that animal consciousness is mostly inaccessible to us²⁵, Rilke and those theorists who embrace a certain brand of "critical anthropomorphism" (Weil 20) as "a potentially productive, critical tool that has similarities to empathy" (Ibid., 19) believe that we may be able to at least glimpse animals' subjective experience. Poetry and art may be one of the primary means to achieve this, as their aim is often to help us experience *within ourselves* some part of that subjectivity.

Our current efforts to build ethical systems that encompass and incorporate animals are problematized by "the belief that only humans know death," Weil adds. Instead, several animal studies scholars argue that "the ethical must grow instead out of an experience of shared

²⁴ Weil explores the "The Eighth Elegy" in greater depth in her book, *Thinking Animals*.

²⁵ It may be possible to approximate ourselves to an understanding of a bat's subjectivity, but this will take effort and future study, just as it would if you were trying to communicate with a human animal whose experience was different from your own, as Nagel explains: "One might try, for example, to develop concepts that could be used to explain to a person blind from birth what it was like to see. One would reach a blank wall eventually, but it should be possible to devise a method of expressing in objective terms much more than we can at present, and with much greater precision. [...] But [...] it seems unlikely that any physical theory of mind can be contemplated until more thought has been given to the general problem of subjective and objective" (Nagel 449–450).

mortality or bodily vulnerability. [...] Such an ethics is derived from what [Cora Diamond] calls ‘the difficulty of reality’—a difficulty that our thinking often deflects in order to avoid the pain it can cause—both physically and psychically” (xxii). That is, humans avoid confronting death, as the speaker in “The Opening” does, because our introspection blinds us to “the Open”:

participation in the natural world and recognition of how it functions to free us from death — a freedom that, according to Rilke, animals experience and we do not. Emily Dickinson talks about sealing off intolerable emotions in her poem, “There is a pain—so utter—,” in much the same way the speaker in “The Opening” cauterizes these painful spots. For Dickinson, this repression manifests as a kind of blindness, in contradiction to “opening,” which is a kind of sight.

There is a pain – so utter –
 It swallows substance up –
 Then covers the Abyss with Trance –
 So Memory can step
 Around – across – upon it –
 As One within a Swoon –
 Goes safely – where an open eye –
 Would drop Him – Bone by Bone – (252)

A redefinition of the human as animal after the collapse of the *scala naturae* has, in fact, been the project of countless writers over the last two centuries. Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* celebrated natural plenitude — no less so in his poem “This Compost,” which despite its depiction of soil as a conglomeration of dead and rotting beings, celebrates its capacity to wipe away disease and start life anew: “It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions” (292). Rilke looked to the animal gaze in order to achieve self-identification as one animal among many: “as if awakened, she [the black cat] turns her face to yours; / and with a shock, you see yourself, tiny, / inside the golden amber of her eyeballs / suspended, like a prehistoric fly” (“Black Cat,” Rilke 65). The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset inspired the Generation of ’27 — including Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Rosa Chacel, and Salvador Dalí — to

“dehumanize” art by ceasing to observe and seek to represent the human animal looking from the outside in, instead focusing on the workings of their own minds. What followed were self-reflective, surrealist, and stream-of-consciousness texts that inverted the traditional hierarchy in which humans were placed at the top: “Ahora bien: lo humano, el repertorio de elementos que integran nuestro mundo habitual posee una jerarquía de tres rangos. Hay primero el orden de las personas, hay luego el de los seres vivos, hay, en fin, las cosas inorgánicas. Pues bien: el veto del arte nuevo se ejerce con una energía proporcional a la altura jerárquica del objeto. Lo personal, por ser lo más humano, es lo que más evita el arte joven” (Ortega y Gasset 177–178).²⁶

In short, the decentralization of the human animal has been a collective project, one from which today’s poets have learned a great deal.

Undermining the Human-Animal-Object Distinction: Aracelis Girmay’s *Kingdom Animalia*

Poet Aracelis Girmay’s book, *Kingdom Animalia*, takes on the difficult project of undermining distinctions between animal, human, and inanimate object, and uses metaphor to do so. In the title poem (the first poem in the book), the speaker’s brother and “his love” share a bed, “& their teeth / flash in the night, oh, body. / Oh, body, be held now by whom you love. / Whole years will be spent, underneath these impossible stars, / when dirt’s the only animal who will sleep with you / & touch you with / its mouth.” (15–16) Here, the beloved is at once a human body, an animal, and dirt, and maintains the characteristics of all three. Dirt has an animal

²⁶ “Now, then: the human, the catalog of elements that comprise our usual world, contains a hierarchy of three levels. At the top is the order of people, next living beings, and last, inorganic things. So: the negation of new art is practiced with an energy proportional to the hierarchical level of the object. The personal, being more human, is what the new art avoids most.” My translation.

or human mouth — in fact, the distinction is not made, because Girmay’s whole aim is to point to the constructedness of that difference.

In the book’s second poem, “Elegy,” Girmay argues that touch transcends the categories we have constructed to distinguish between human, animal, and thing. The poem addresses much the same question as Gay did in “The Opening” via its epigraph, “*What to do with this knowledge / that our living is not guaranteed?*” Emotional connection is possible via peaceful and careful physical connection, and is a way of healing and eventually transcending a fear of death, because the world goes on living around us. Like Gay, Girmay finds solace in a growing branch, which continues to flourish despite the passage of time. It’s worth reproducing the poem in full here:

Perhaps one day you touch the young branch
of something beautiful. & it grows & grows
despite your birthdays & the death certificate,
& it one day shades the heads of something beautiful
or makes itself useful to the nest. Walk out
of your house, then, believing this.
Nothing else matters.

All above us is the touching
of strangers & parrots,
some of them human,
some of them not human.

Listen to me. I am telling you
a true thing. This is the only kingdom.
The kingdom of touching;
the touches of the disappearing, things. (17)

Girmay resists depicting the tree as a thing that exists with the purpose of enchanting and comforting individual humans; rather, it will one day shade “the heads of something beautiful.” That is, it may shade the multiple heads of a human group or humans as a whole, or just as likely may shade a swaying patch of dandelions. Girmay chooses to make no distinction, and in the process, identify no hierarchy: both tasks are equally important. And just like Gay, Girmay

embraces the simple adjective “beautiful” — the sort of word often banned from poems — not only (in her case) to describe nature, but to describe anything, to acknowledge the potential for beauty in anything.

Girmay also combines objects and animals in what may be called double or self-correcting metaphors, highlighting their interchangeability and therefore emphasizing their surprising similarities over their differences.²⁷ “Do not let me mistake you // for a shadow or a gull” (20) she writes in one poem; “one by one my breaths / would go out looking: a procession // of homeless dogs, / or clouds” (24) she writes in another. In the latter, human breath is also confused with nonhuman animals and things. In the poem “Swan, As the Light Was Changing,” every living being and thing in the scene takes on a similar aspect, or perhaps better said, comes to be equally cloaked in the same “animal”: “All skins gleamed orange // as the sun made tricks out of us, brilliant as new coins or foxes” (33). Girmay furthermore speaks of “the gold fields of my skin” (34) and several times confuses girls with gulls or birds.²⁸

Such metaphors, in the past, may have given the impression of “lowering” the human rather than elevating nonhuman animals and objects, but Girmay works to ensure that the latter takes place in her poems. And “work” is the correct verb here. As I’ve stated before, it takes little effort for the poet to reassert long-standing traditions and hierarchies, but to reject them requires

²⁷ Brigit Pegeen Kelly compares fruits with the body parts of dead animals in her poems: “And the pears this year // Are green or misshapen. [...] / Pears like the organs of chickens, plucked for cooking” (67); a dead doe, “Her belly white as a cut pear” (37). In each case, both the tenor and vehicle are once-living but now dead or moribund. While this looks similar to Girmay’s method on the surface, Girmay seems to seek an elevation of the object and animal to the same level of sanctity as the human animal, whereas Kelly is asserting that only in death are animals and plants on equal footing.

²⁸ This occurs in the poem “March, March” — “resuscitated by the laughter of birds, & girls” (35) — and in “Running Home, I Saw the Planets”: “There / was the laughing of the beautiful girls, / shrieking gulls” (45).

a poem to acknowledge and actively push against them. Girmay does this again and again, for instance in the dedication of her poem, “Praise Song for the Donkey”: “*for Lama & Haya & the donkey, killed by an Israeli missile in Beit Lahiya, northern Gaza*” (89). Here, Girmay places the nonhuman animal on equal footing with the humans who lost their lives, a move that may be considered insulting by those who still believe in some manifestation of the *scala naturae*. Girmay refuses to let it be insulting, pointing out that the donkey suffered the same terrible attack as these girls did, and was united with them in death; after the bombing, a witness said, “*It was not possible to identify which parts belonged to the donkey & the girls*” (Ibid.). “Praise the girls still saying words,” Girmay writes; “praise the girls, their hands, the hooves / of their hearts hoofing against their opened chests / opened on the open road plainly, praise / the plain day, praise the donkey in it” (Ibid.).

The epigraph for *Kingdom Animalia* is a quote from Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species*: “The framework of bones being the same in the hand of a man, wing of a bat, fin of the porpoise, and leg of the horse,—the same number of vertebrae forming the neck of the giraffe and of the elephant,²⁹—and innumerable other such facts, at once explain themselves on the theory of descent...” (Girmay 11). This points to the fact that all animals, including humans, vary from one another by degrees; as de Waal explains, given how evolution functions, it’s highly unlikely that any trait should emerge fully formed in just one species. For this reason, almost all of those characteristics which humans have held up to differentiate us from animals, from tool-making to emotion to a capacity to plan for the future, have been found in varying degrees in other animals. What becomes dominant is honed by need and circumstance, not “general intelligence.”

²⁹ And of the human. All have seven vertebrae in their necks. Almost all mammals do.

Girmay's book, then, argues that humans are indeed animals, especially in our tenderest, most intimate, and most desperate moments. Her poem, "On Living," begins with a possibly human mother³⁰ who dies and leaves "Girl" and her sister to mourn. The sisters "mother each other, still, like wolves, like any animal / will do, does, once she's found she's been pushed or fallen / out of the grave, to live" (30). Moments of physical and emotional intimacy, too, make our animal nature evident. In "Starlight Multiplication," Girmay speaks to her deceased grandmother, hoping that she has experienced this type of intimacy, "as they kissed the soft meat between your legs," mentioning the "red horses you saw / when your husband touched your ankle with his mouth" (27).

The red horses, which return in "Self-Portrait as a Snail," seem to represent the movement of thought, which is both a thing in the world and a massless, ethereal substance: "For years, I am the snail / trailing my thought behind me: / a red horse, or carpet" (52). It can be argued that to make a horse a simple representative of human thought is to oversimplify the horse, and to deny how it actually moves through and experiences the world. However, the human body has taken on a fluid capacity to transform over the course of Girmay's book, and never stays in one form for long.³¹ The underlying thesis is that the human body contains all animals simultaneously, as

³⁰ It is probable that Girmay leaves the species of the mother intentionally vague, as later she points out that mothering is not an exclusively human act. In fact, it is easy for this act to transcend species boundaries, since it is such a widely shared role: "We have never been cats before, / but pretend we are their mothers" (Girmay 57).

³¹ The human body, like all others, is a costume to be worn, an incomplete portrait of all the things a living being really is: "Now, / the garden is a skin I wear. Somewhere / in the box of this old house, // my child-skin hangs quietly between the coats, / shed: a parachute or bag full of red dirt & teeth" (59). This excerpt appears in a poem called "Self-Portrait as the Snake," one of many poems in which the speaker transforms into a nonhuman animal or a thing. Others include "Self-Portrait as the Snail" (52), "Self-Portrait as the Pirate's Gold" (65), and "Portrait of the Woman as a Skein" (54–56). The use of the definite article in these titles may be problematic given that, as Jacques Derrida would point out, it points to an originary or idealized version of snakes and snails, when in fact each category contains within it countless variations down to the

vestiges of or cousins within the evolutionary process — the human as a “plural thing” (Girmay 49). Girmay never attributes to the horse characteristics which are not its own, so that this type of metaphor-making, while it is an oversimplification in order to emphasize shared traits, oversimplifies universally at the service of a larger project, treating everything it touches like debris floating on a tide. The book does not seem to betray any of the animals or objects it incorporates because it does not stop long enough with any of them to describe them in detail. Description is often where the error of attributing useful, incorrect characteristics in the service of metaphor is committed. Instead, the snail’s trail of thought is just as quickly transformed into “blood falling behind me like a stranger’s tail” (52), a statement that plays with our tendency to automatically assume a “stranger” is human, the word itself containing both the unknown and with it, the possibility of knowing. This moment, in which the stranger has a tail and therefore cannot be human, undermines the long-standing belief that there is nothing “there” to know in the mind of an animal, as well as the more modern belief that the animal’s experience is, to us, unknowable.

Being a member of *homo sapiens sapiens*, Girmay does permit that humans or human-like hybrids protagonize most of her poems, and they possess characteristics that other animals do not. In the poem, “Three Girls, One of Them a Coward Girl,” the girls begin by mothering a group of cats, but suddenly turn violent:

We are busy drowning cats, though
 we say we are saving them &
 making them clean, so drop
 the small mouths into water & scream,

the way they thrash before we reach

level of the individuals. It is (perhaps unfortunately) easier to see what is problematic in this if we imagine a poem called, “Portrait of the Human.” It seems a gross oversimplification, an impossible task to contain “the Human” within a single poem.

(I do not) back into the pail to save them,
away from the clear, gray eye of the human
mother who would stop our game forever

if she saw. We were hunters.
To see them scatter, frantic,
made our teeth grow long. (57)

The violence brought out by the hunt is in this poem a characteristic that human animals share with nonhuman animals, but it is also a false equivalence in the case of these girls, whose senseless actions, performed absent the need for sustenance, resemble more an exclusively human custom: baptism. The girls become cats (“We have never been cats before, / but pretend we are their mothers”) in order to inflict this violence on other cats; that is, this type of religious expression, unique (as far as we know) to humans, encourages us to inflict violence not in the course of the hunt to obtain food, but against our own species. Like Gay, Girmay catches herself in the act of blaming the “animal” within human beings as the source of violence, then corrects herself. Human animals commit a type of violence that is uniquely their own.

Chapter 3: Suggestions for Responsible Metaphor-Making

The aim of Chapters 1 and 2 of this paper was to identify when metaphors that involve animals are most and least accurate in their representation of nonhuman animals and in their placement of the human animal not at the top of a hierarchy, but among the rest of the kingdom Animalia. I hope that I've made clear my ethical reasons for doing so, but ethical thinking is by no means the only requirement for writing aesthetically "good" poetry. Political correctness has the potential to undermine honesty, and can in fact silence discussions of social or ethical issues before the poet even has a chance to begin writing. Political correctness is not the same as ethical thinking, so the goal of this paper is not to demand the meticulous banishment of vast categories of metaphor. Rather, the invocation for poets is simply to *pay attention to your metaphors*.

At the same time, this investigation has led me to believe that ethical metaphor-making not only has the potential to ensure that poets' assertions are more *true* to the represented world, but can also result in more *emotionally* true and insightful work, as well as new, surprising, and aesthetically pleasing metaphors and images. This chapter will offer up five potential solutions to the problems that this paper has identified, which are as follows:

(1) that a metaphor in any given piece of writing can infect the real world, and be applied outside of its original context resulting in non-factual statements or connections;

(2) that a metaphor can have ripple effects unintended by the author;

(3) that metaphors almost always oversimplify by ignoring some aspects of the tenor or vehicle while highlighting others, and that these oversimplifications can be harmful as well as enlightening.

Solution 1: Prime for nuanced thinking

In *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Kahneman aims to prove that “our thoughts and our behavior are influenced, much more than we know or want, by the environment of the moment” (128). By acknowledging the poem as an “environment” that primes, or prepares, the reader to reach certain conclusions, the poet can counteract this effect. For example, writers can in fact counteract the black-and-white thinking that comes automatically to many readers, as mentioned in Chapter 1. A 2013 study found that “exposure to an incidental black and white visual contrast leads people to think in a ‘black and white’ manner, as indicated by more extreme moral judgments” (Zarkadi and Schnall 355). Those given a black-and-white-checkered background behind the text of a moral dilemma or social issue gave more extreme ratings (“significantly further from the response scale’s mid-point”) in contrast with those who had an all-grey background or a yellow-and-blue-checkered background. That means that when confronted with a *non*-black-and-white scenario, people’s thinking became more nuanced and open to gray areas.

How does a poem’s metaphorical language prime the reader for certain types of thinking or particular conclusions? Poet Jorie Graham has delivered a powerful talk in which she explains how each image in a poem primes us for the next, so that the order of presentation in a poem is critical (Graham). Taking a more analytical look at how this chain is working in a piece of our own writing could help us prevent readers from reacting in ways that we don’t want. It’s a way of limiting and controlling the implications of our metaphors.

Priming can also trap a metaphor inside its poem or story — that is, prevent it from being applied haphazardly, give it an expiration date. Some metaphors are useful only in the moment and context they’re applied. Like any species, they’re well-adapted to their habitat, and when reintroduced elsewhere can wreak havoc on that new environment.

Solution 2: Employ critical animalization, personification, and objectification

In a 1955 paper published in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* in London, Max Black, taking a look at some child-appropriate metaphors, concludes that personification is found in even the simplest of metaphors (274). He asks if this is significant, and I believe that it is. One of metaphor's primary functions is to frame the world in terms that we can understand: that is, in human terms, using human language. For instance, we say, "The clouds are crying" or "The branches are fighting" (Ibid.) as a common way to explain the world to children.

As one of the earliest forms of metaphor-making that children encounter, personification creates the frame through which we view the world, building an essentially anthropocentric world. We adapt things to us, rather than adapting ourselves to them. What would the opposite look like? Maybe, "Her face is raining," or when two people are having a fistfight, "Their branches are clattering together under a high wind." These examples may sound awkward because of their hasty construction, but at least in part, they sound strange because they propose a type of metaphor-making that we're uncomfortable with.

Of course, the whole point of metaphor is to make the tenor more understandable using a vehicle that is familiar to us. If whales make metaphors about humans, they've probably watched our war games and weapons tests and said we had an itchy dorsal fin with no one to rub it. (Even that metaphor is not so far from human terms, unfortunately, nor could it help being.) So if a metaphor is to be practically useful to us, we usually do need to frame a tenor in human terms — or even find it unavoidable to do so.

That doesn't mean that we can't observe and be cautious of the impact that this has on us. Personification reinforces — and perhaps is one of the inventors of — the human/nonhuman binary. Because this binary invents a hierarchy, animalization has historically been considered a

way to “lower” or devalue the tenor of a metaphor, whereas personification lifts that tenor up. It’s the difference between “Mad as a March hare” and “The ocean danced in the moonlight.” Certainly, there are exceptions to this, such as “loyal as a dog.” But loyalty is not really a personification: animals have been proven to cooperate with others of their species, and even across species lines. Loyalty is yet another trait humans can no longer claim as exclusively theirs.

Solution 3: Aim for localized, rather than universal, description

Aniconism — for instance, the Jewish prohibition against writing the name of G-d and the common Islamic prohibition against reproducing living beings and especially the prophet Muhammad in visual art — could be considered a reaction against the assertion that life *can* be encapsulated in, and thereby *reduced* and distilled to, a single manmade object, whether it’s a word or an image. In the case of both, such a representation is essentially a metaphor, a symbol for the thing.

This is one reason that Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish *vanguardistas*, and Western modernists called for metaphor that did not *try* to accurately portray the tenor, since this is in some ways an impossible task. Instead, they aimed to show the movement of thought in the hopes that art, at least, might be able to accurately portray *thought*. T. S. Eliot’s famous line, “When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table,” does not “accurately” describe an evening in any traditional sense. Here’s another example. If I say, for instance, that a cat is as strong as a bull, I endow it with characteristics from a real-world animal without creating anything that didn’t already exist — except for a highly unusual cat. But if I say the cat is like a ship moving toward a delta at dusk, we observe the contexts and predilections and

experiences that create my particular mind. We observe how I feel toward the cat (and the ship) without ever once believing that this is an objective truth outside of *me*. It is a description that is *locally*, not *universally*, true — thus preventing applications of the metaphor outside of the context of the poem. And because it is a truth within my mind only, it is a means of objectifying my mind so that it can be studied under spotlight. It is only through isolating the processes of the human mind, Ortega believed, that we can inspect the lens through which we observe the world.

In his book, *Real Sofistikashun*, Tony Hoagland points out that “there is in the use of metaphor something faintly opposed to reality. Somber or joyful, rational or surreal, descriptive or fantastic, a metaphor is intrinsically a breaking away from fidelity and continuity, an allergic reaction to too much reality” (31). Most poets and readers would agree with this. But Ortega, who believed in an objective though unattainable reality, would point out, and I would agree, that metaphor also brings new things into the world — that is, it alters reality, and even creates new realities. “The mind is a machine” certainly has created *a* reality to which we respond in ways that significantly change the world: for instance, since the mind is considered something that can be “broken,” entire mental institutions and classes of drugs and disciplines of inquiry have been created, in part, in an attempt to “fix” “broken minds,” predicated on the belief that there is a right way and a wrong way for a mind to function.

There’s also something important to be said about surprise. As I’ve pointed out already, since metaphor is the act of putting something in a category, it is almost always an oversimplification. But if a metaphor is surprising, or doesn’t exist in this world but rather creates something new in the world, it can be a *complicating* act. A surprising metaphor is often a search for the *single* thing the tenor and vehicle have in common, and the more surprising that commonality is, the

less likely that the infection of other characteristics can occur. This is a generalization, and as always, exceptions exist.

Solution 4: Embrace metonymy

Metaphor compares things so as to put them, though only temporarily, in the same category. Metonymy, when used in the absence of metaphor, finds one or two things about a person or animal or thing that makes him/her/it stand out — that differentiates and individualizes. It doesn't create a category. If it refers to a man as "big nose," it doesn't seek and include other members in the "big nose" category to place alongside him for the purposes of comparison. It does categorize the *speaker* or *observer* based on what details she or he chooses to highlight; for instance, if a speaker's chosen metonyms focus on a person's weight or physical appearance, it could indicate that the observer is a health nut, or shallow, or obsessed with his/her own appearance. Again, more than anything, it's a spotlight on the mind.

Solution 5: Be specific in tenor and vehicle

If I say that women are like mother hens, this metaphor is generalized and nonspecific in both tenor and vehicle, and few contemporary writers or readers would call it a productive or useful comparison. Of course, generalizations being what they are, there are exceptions. But metaphor can find deeper resonances and insights in particularization, while at the same time avoiding the well-worn routes of stereotype.

Particularization may well be its antidote. Moving away from generalized tenors and vehicles is almost always a good approach, both ethically and aesthetically. If I choose instead to say that *my sister* is like a *particular hen* that we raised together as a child, at least three things happen:

first, a modern reader is less likely to reject it as a gross generalization with too many exceptions to count. Second, as writers, we have access to a whole host of unusual details and comparisons uniquely offered by each of these individuals; it will be a richer metaphor overall. And finally, we avoid unintended consequences in which the metaphor escapes the poem and wreaks havoc, helping us stereotype and oversimplify women and hens alike.

Two lines placed together near the end of Sylvia Plath's "Tulips" illustrate the difference between generalization and specificity:

The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;
They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat, [...] (162)

Most readers can picture the African cat much better than they can see the vaguely defined "dangerous animals." And I would argue that if "African cat" was made more specific, it would be an even richer, more vivid, and perhaps more targeted or insightful metaphor.

In short, specificity, like metonymy, highlights the individual and prevents infection, unintended ripple effects, and oversimplification.

Conclusion

Though the *scala naturae* was widely dismissed well over a century ago in academic circles as an inaccurate portrayal of the natural world, human animals continue to cling to their pedestal. We often do so unconsciously, despite our understanding and acceptance of the theory of evolution, despite mounting evidence that nonhuman animals are intelligent beings with agency and subjective inner lives.

Poets, however, cannot afford to be blind to how their metaphors function, especially when they are reasserting beliefs that the poet herself does not hold as true. Writers and artists are in large part responsible for reinforcing the *scala naturae*, and in so doing they have also supported dehumanizing categorizations, which over the course of history have been used to justify racism, violence against our fellow human and nonhuman animals, slavery, subjugation, and countless varieties of mistreatment. On an ethical level, poets have a responsibility to argue against such categorizations. On an aesthetic level, there can be nothing beautiful about reinforcing them. Any metaphor that pleases the senses despite its dehumanizing qualities has simply succeeded in deceiving the reader, lulling her to sleep with an old, familiar tune. We must do better than that.

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