



Displacements: Framing (and) Ruins in John Berger's *King* and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*

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ABSTRACT

This essay brings John Berger's *King* (1999) together with Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) to think through displacements with/in ruins. I interpret the settings of the novels, consider the narrative voices used to articulate the stories, and contemplate the contexts provided by various paratextual devices, in order to address this primary concern. The lives depicted in *King* and *Animal's People* are precarious, disenfranchised, exposed to (toxic) waste. They are structured by, through, and with, ruin.

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In preparing one of the talks that preceded writing this essay, I came across a passage in Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) in the chapter on Indra Sinha's novel *Animal's People* (2007). The passage warrants quoting in full:

Prophecy now involves a geographical rather than a historical projection; it is space and not time that hides consequences from us. To prophesy today it is only necessary to know men [and women] as they are throughout the world in all their inequality. (Nixon, 2011: 45)

The passage comes from a section on 'the modern novel' in an essay by John Berger that was originally printed in 1969, called 'The Changing View of Man in Portrait'. In it, Berger grapples with the 'simultaneity and extension of events and possibilities' (Berger, 1972: 40), as well as with scales of change, ethics, exploitation and other 'political' concerns. Nixon, however, cites the passage by way of Edward Soja's *Postmodern Geographies* (1990). There it is included as part of a larger argument concerning a 'spatially politicized aesthetic' (Soja, 1990: 22) pertaining to postmodern geographies.

My interest is not in an archaeological project of excavating quotations back to an (imagined) origin:¹ I am more interested in a patterning of concerns for sites and histories, and also a tracing of concerns with art, via concerns with geography, to an analysis of displacement informed by postcolonial and posthumanist critique. The settings of John Berger's *King* (1999) and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* attend to displacements: displacement of waste, displacement of people, and the displacement of worlds. As novels, they provide sustained imaginations of setting, refracted through voice, and framed by covers (and other paratextual devices). Both novels enact a kind of geographical displacement, but do so *also* through the representation of the (not-quite-)imaginary or, perhaps, more-than-imaginary.

SETTING: RUINS

Setting might be considered something static, a background upon which action takes place. However, thinking of setting as a gerund, placing emphasis on the '-ing' of the word, suggests an ongoing activity, an agency. John Berger's *King* and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* are not so much set against a particular background, as that they emerge with wastelands or ruins.² This consideration helps to recognise the agential properties of the material worlds as they structure the narrator-protagonists' precarious lives. In articulating the imagined worlds of their stories, both Berger and Sinha evoke post-industrial ruins, and voice their stories through 'humanimals' who forge livelihoods from these abandoned, discarded spaces. I turn to the voices later; first I consider ruins, and ruination.

In *Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination*, Ann Laura Stoler insists that ruin is not what is left, but what we are left *with* (Stoler, 2008: 194). This point has been crucial in shaping my understanding of ruins and the process of ruination: it finds articulation already above in my insistence on the '-ing' of setting. In her introduction to *Imperial Debris*, Stoler further asserts: 'By definition, *ruination* is an ambiguous term, being an act of ruining, a condition of being ruined, and a cause of it. Ruination is an *act* perpetrated, a *condition* to which one is subject, and a *cause* of loss' (Stoler, 2013: 11). Ruins structure some lives and are the (infra)structures that are the consequences of other lives. Here, already, a sense for ruins as displaced matter emerges.

Ruin is often thought in terms of its temporal displacement. Particularly in its more monumental forms, ruins point to other times—times of empire, of war, of past excesses. Particular kinds of ruins evoke a past (sometimes even considered 'glorious', though this, like much else, depends on the perspective adopted). Some critics connect ruins to an incomplete future, like Nick

1 Most obviously: there is nothing wrong with trusting another academic to cite correctly.

2 In what follows, I stress ruins (at the 'cost' of thinking through waste), which resonates with the themes of the 'Reading in Ruins: Exploring Posthumanist Narrative Studies' Special Collection more evidently. I would like to encourage my reader to think of waste as informing my deliberations on ruins, particularly for the ways that, to quote Vicki Squire, 'waste can be understood in the context of modernity both as an invention to produce order as well as an element that is destabilizing of modern order, the international system and the sovereign subject that this invokes' (Squire, 2014: 15).

Yablon (2009, drawing on Robert Smithson) and, similarly, David Alworth, who references the ‘untimeliness of ruins’, that is, ‘the way that they spatialize multiple times, as well as multiple senses of time, within a single site’ (Alworth, 2016: 107).

The specific ruins of *Animal’s People* and *King*, however, do not speak to temporal displacements as much as they do to geographical shifts, in line with the quotation from John Berger mentioned above. Externalised dependencies such as those depicted in *King* and *Animal’s People* show the ‘slow violence’ (Nixon, 2011) of exploitation and displacement, and yet through this externalisation, are revealed as integral to the systems that sustain other livelihoods. In other words, this reveals the ways inequality is folded into prophecy by way of displacement.

In ‘Waste Matter: The Debris of Industrial Ruins and the Disordering of the Material World’ (2005), Tim Edensor³ recognises a displacement as producing the ruins that he explores (and recounts exploring):

Industrial ruins continue to litter urban Britain as old mills, workshops, breweries, forges, chemical works and rubber factories decay in the marginalized areas of cities [...] [They] are produced through the relentless, increasingly global, capitalist quest for profit maximization, where less profitable nodes in production networks are apt to be dropped, as production moves to other parts of the world. (Edensor, 2005a: 313–314)

Ruins emerge as implicitly contradictory sites: localised and globalised, decaying and becoming (or producing), and simultaneously present and displaced.

In another of Edensor’s publications, *Industrial Ruins* (2005), ruins are noted for the ways they ‘push back’ on authoritative attributions of meanings. Edensor notes that ruins are ‘typically deposited on the outskirts of the city’ and comprise ‘excess matter, containing superfluous energy and meaning,’ interrupting ‘planners’ vision[s]’ ‘as disorderly intrusions’ (Edensor, 2005b: 62). Both of Edensor’s explorations of ruins as site grapple with the externalisations of matter as an effect of ‘the unevenness of capitalist expansion, revealing sudden local economic recessions within a broader global dynamism’ (Edensor, 2005b: 165). As Carlos López Galviz et al. suggest: ‘Ruins [...] are relational, in time *and space*; they speak to what (and who) is not there’ (López Galviz et al., 2017: 532, my emphasis).

Such concerns for infrastructures—specifically the consequences of a world irrevocably shaped by colonialism, capitalism, globalisation, and other formations that work to concentrate resources in particular places, and with particular people, by displacing risk, waste, toxicity, etc.—need not come at the cost of thinking about structures that occur at other scales. Specifically: consider materialities and all matter (of agencies):

Materiality is a rubric that tends to horizontalize the relations between humans, biota, and abiota. It draws human attention sideways, away from an ontologically ranked Great Chain of Being and toward a greater appreciation of the complex entanglements of humans and nonhumans. (Bennett, 2010: 112)

Such thinking, too, comprises a displacement. It pushes back against the implicit centring of human concerns by integrating nonhuman agents, indeed including all matter of ‘biota, and abiota’ (ibid.). Settings can expand to include all these things, in their particular structures, structuring relations, which is to say, providing—affording—access to some things and preventing access to others:

Things are caught up in dependencies based on what is available (what the affordances are), on the non-redundant reliance on a limited number of things, on

³ When Edensor celebrates the spaces of the ruin as giving rise to play, he explicitly acknowledges the advantage his gender and age give him. He is of a gender that means these places might be considered safe (or, rather, not explicitly dangerous: the unruliness of the spaces does harbour some dangers, as will become evident later on), and his (middle) age works to exempt his activities, for the most part, from delinquency. Edensor has overlooked the ways in which race shapes his being in and with certain environments: activities rendered as play by people of certain ages and races will be interpreted as delinquency when enacted by different bodies, and the way these categories intersect gives rise to further interpretations (for example, see Epstein et al., 2017).

the duties and obligations associated with things, and on the sheer scale and density of the interconnected networks. (Hodder, 2012: 52)

The worlds of novels, like *King* and *Animal's People*, depict the dependencies, affordances, materials, and waste of sites of ruin in ways that, crucially, grapple with all kinds of human and nonhuman agency.

SETTING: DUMP

In *King* we read of the narrator's home: 'The terrain is used as a dump. Smashed lorries. Old boilers. Broken washing machines. Rotary lawn mowers. Refrigerators which don't make cold any more' (Berger, 2000: 4). This is the environment which King and his humans, Vico and Vica, inhabit. It is off a motorway, not far from an airport, and also near a river-mouth. Aside from the site's name, Saint Valéry, we learn little about its specific location, other than its derelict state, a 'zone where people don't stop unless obliged' (2), and its proximity to an unnamed city. The vagueness of setting makes it, in my interpretation, mappable on to any number of sites: the kind of forgotten zone outside any European (or any Global) city, to which risk is externalised. It is the 'away' to which trash is thrown: present, but permanently displaced.

The ruin of *King's* setting is a displacement, and/because it is abundant with displaced matter. In particular, ruin and waste are shown to be what the characters are left *with*: the rubbish tip overlord makes coats out of old maps and brochures, cookers are repurposed as tables, and food is scavenged from rubbish bins. Piles of abandoned white goods, the stench of burning petrol, and the invisible clouds of ostensible toxicity characterise both setting and its characters. It is a place to which all kinds of daily habits contribute, a ruin *not so far away*, nevertheless definitively away.

SETTING: KHAUFPUR

Animal's People is set in Khaufpur, India. Khaufpur is an imagined Bhopal, a connection that becomes clear through the paratexts of the novel, such as the "About the Author" section (in the edition I consulted), or in the reception of the novel more broadly. Bhopal is known for being the site of the Union Carbide (now Dow Chemicals) toxic disaster that occurred in 1984.⁴ A similar disaster has taken place in the past of the characters of *Animal's People*. By being both Bhopal and also not-Bhopal, the setting of Khaufpur also enacts a displacement: the setting is displaced to the imaginary and, at the same time, connected by various links to the real world referent.

As Robert Nixon suggests, 'we can recognize Khaufpur as both specific and nonspecific, a fictional stand-in for Bhopal, but also a synecdoche for a web of poisoned communities spread out across the global South' (Nixon, 2011: 46). In imagining Khaufpur, *Animal's People* displaces Bhopal, and, simultaneously, is suggestive of the ways in which disasters such as Bhopal are themselves displacements—externalisation of risks as a consequence of the outsourcing of the sites of production for (dangerous) chemicals.

Citing a 'Carbide community relations official' interviewed in 1991, Wil Lepkowski notes that, before Bhopal,

the whole chemical industry operated on the basic assumption that what we did within our fences was none of anyone's business [...] And the people outside the fences didn't think it was any business of theirs, either. Bhopal changed all that. (Lepkowski, 1994: 25)

In the fictional world of *Animal's People*, like the world we inhabit, all manner of livelihoods have been exposed to chemical shifts and changes. Fences, or borders, act as tenuous boundaries at best when confronted with environmental disaster. Displacement is never complete, its deferral never absolute.

⁴ The responsibility (and conclusive compensation) for this disaster remains unresolved in courts of law to this day.

In *King* and *Animal's People*, the non-normative bodies of the narrators work to broach species barriers, to query assumptions about norms, and to critique ideas of humanity and 'human-ness'. The narrators' not-(quite-)human forms rest uneasily at the cusp of species borders, and these voices articulate their de-centred stories from their dis-placed settings. The unusual status of the narrators has not escaped the attention of other critics, whose work I will draw into what follows, though I will argue for interpretations that acknowledge and sit with the ambiguities (rather than, as some critics have attempted, to 'pin down' their status).

In the context of a special collection on posthumanism, comparing the two novels gives rise to a line of analysis that further problematises the 'borders' around what constitutes 'human'. For this contribution, this crucially builds on the (new materialist) reading of the sites of ruin, which reckons with the agential capacities of ruin as *ruination* and the complexity of human and nonhuman entanglements of agency (following Stoler, Bennett and Hodder as above); crossing, that is, the borders between biotic and abiotic forms. It also thinks through the human/nonhuman animal divide, and through other frameworks that have tended to problematise particular notions of normative humanity.

Both *King* and *Animal's People* have narrators whose cognitive and/or physical abilities deviate from what is widely understood as the 'norm': Clare Barker suggests that dominant social models insist that the term disability 'relates not to the physically or cognitively "impaired" body itself but rather to the social disadvantages and oppression that accompany non-normative embodiment' (Barker, 2011: 4). Barker also notes, however, that 'social devaluation is not necessarily always the prevailing response to differential embodiment' (ibid.), which is why she opts to include 'exceptionality' alongside 'disability' in her book *Postcolonial Fiction and Disability* (2011). The juxtaposition of the two terms further serves to stress the ways in which the normative assumptions of the term do not apply evenly across the globe: 'it is not always efficacious to focus on disabled people's marginalization from norms and resources, as this would imply some stable centre to work from,' Barker argues, 'but rather to consider how political states of exception may give rise to exceptional experiences and forms of critical understanding for disabled individuals' (Barker, 2011: 5). These are crucial interventions into, or at least additions to, posthumanist critique. *King* and *Animal's People*, with their ambiguous renderings of humanimal narrator-protagonists who are 'mad' or 'disfigured', both articulate stories that give voice to such precarious positions.

VOICE: KING

Berger's *King* starts by declaring '*I am mad to try*' (2, italics in original).

This is the voice of the eponymous King. Readers never 'discover' whether King is human or dog: we learn about his friends (some human, some canine), his living circumstances (in a lean-to on a rubbish heap on the outskirts of an unnamed European city), and of his day-to-day life, before he is forced off the lands he inhabits by developers at the close of the novel.

King has received critical attention for the ambiguity of species of the narrator-protagonist. Georg Zipp, initially following a dualistic structure of thinking King-as-dog alongside thinking King-as-man, concludes that '[t]he pretence of being a dog thus becomes the metaphor through which the person who suffers can bear [...] debasement' (Zipp, 2014: 180). For Ralf Hertel, whose interest is in the narrator's capacity to sense (specifically: smell) his way through a world, King is clearly a dog: 'The fact that King is a dog sniffing his way through the world also informs his narrative posture: head bowed and nose on the ground, King tells his story from the low perspective of the weak and downtrodden' (Hertel, 2005: 121). The ambiguity of King—the capacity of this narrator-protagonist to be *both* human and animal—is not a trick, although it might be, for some readers (maybe Zipp and Hertel), an exercise in deliberate suspension of disbelief.

In *King*, the use of verbs to describe the narrator's movement ('trotting' (2), 'lolloped' (5)) are one way to trace his animality. These are verbs usually used to describe nonhuman animal movement. Another way that the narrator's animality can be traced is the abundant evocation of smell. The smells evoked in *King* are plenty, and for the most part are unpleasant: the scent

of spoilt milk (22), of urine (23), and of mushrooms (18), and industrial smells like damp tyres (195) and diesel and oil (179).⁵ Elsewhere, reference is made to species by means of direct interpellation ('Fart off, dog' (13) and 'Is he your dog?' (15), but species remains undermined in the quote 'Where I'm not human at all, is that I am possessive about pain' (14).

Rather than deciding whether King is human or nonhuman animal, a reading of the novel that upholds this ambiguity proves more productive—and shifts the emphasis of interpretation from questioning representation into encounters with entanglements (following Karen Barad, 2007). As Roman Bartosch and Christian Schmitt-Kilb argue, the ambiguity is key to a recognition of shared being: 'King can say "us" and mean a group of beings, an interspecies companionship, united by shared experiences of suffering and social degradation' (Bartosch and Schmitt-Kilb, 2019: 110). Attenuating to King's self-asserted cognitive difference, through his opening statement 'I am mad', means grappling with the other dimensions of difference (or of 'deviations from the norm') through an I-narrative that debases its own 'I'. This is not simply a challenge to the terminology of 'first-person-narrative', but is a challenge to the concept of a cohesive narrative that might emerge from a stable position marked as 'I'.

VOICE: ANIMAL

The story of Sinha's *Animal's People*⁶ starts 'Tape One' by declaring: 'I used to be human once' (1).

The past tense of the phrase echoes an indeterminacy of species already suggested by the title of the novel. The reader later learns that the 'Animal' of the title is the English translation of the name of the protagonist—Jaanvar. It is not just the juxtaposition, but also the possessive pronoun that does crucial work in establishing what could be seen as a posthumanist framework via the paratextual device of the title: *Animal's People* (and not, say, *People's Animals*, for instance). This name—Animal—is the consequence of a childhood taunt 'sticking' (see 16); it is also the consequence of a determined narrator wishing to claim animality.

In *Animal's People*, our narrator encounters humans at 'crotch level' (Snell, 2008). Like *King*, the sensual palate includes olfactory, tactile and aural sensitivities. In particular, the heightened olfactory sensitivity works to consolidate this sense as an association with nonhuman perception (I am thinking here of the cultural work of 'sniffer dogs', for example). Again, as with *King*, this is not the 'end point' of thinking through the positionality of the narrator, but to note the ways in which a sense of animality diffracts both human and nonhuman being.

The first-'person' narration brings the reader into the lived-world of *Animal*. In Pablo Mukherjee's reading, this ambiguity of positioning finds articulation in the neologism 'transpersonality',

whereby he can experience the objective existence of his entire environment [...] as a network composed of related subjects [and which] can often shape his narrative style, for example when his first-person perspective demonstrates qualities more usually associated with a third-person omniscient narrator. (Mukherjee, 2010: 152)⁷

Mukherjee recognises the ambiguities of the narrative position, and brings these to reckoning with the story of the fictionalised Bhopal disaster. Crucially, Mukherjee notes the legal arguments put forward about the most suitable location to put Union Carbide on trial for accountability for the disaster, where it was first argued that, as an American company, the trial could not be held in India and then, 'memorably, that American courts and juries could not try it because they would not be able to comprehend the reality of daily life in India' (142). For Mukherjee, this line of argumentation lays bare an 'unbridgeable gap between two apparently discontinuous worlds. What is human in one is not so in the other. What is understood as the environment in

⁵ If, as Ralf Hertel suggests, this comes from the 'low perspective of the weak and downtrodden', and the 'dog's nose point of smell' (Hertel, 2005: 121), then the strange turn of phrase (a point of smell?) elicits the pervasive language of sight (Hertel indeed uses the word perspective in this same sentence). Zipp argues, to the contrary, that King's use of smell is not convincing (however, he uses the particular metaphors that King employs to substantiate this claim, a move that neglects the role of the reader in the reception of the text).

⁶ I address the editor's note claiming the text has been translated and transcribed from an oral Hindi tale below.

⁷ I wonder at the need for a further 'trans-' term here, and at the same time am curious that Mukherjee wishes to hold on to the 'person' in his term 'transpersonality'. More on this follows.

one, is incomprehensible in the other' (ibid.): a displacement of law and responsibility, diffracted through an ambiguous narrator protagonist.

Animal's posture, a consequence of the events of 'that night,' structures his existence. Having been left with significant damage to his spine following the events, Animal moves through the world on all fours. His world is structured accordingly: 'How do you shit, when your arse is up in the air and legs too weak to squat? Not easy. What do you look like as the turds tumble from your hindquarters?' (16). He befriends (fellow) dogs over scavenging for food; befriends (fellow) humans in protesting the events of 'that night'; and he also befriends a foetus with severe deformities held captive in a jar (Khā-in-the-Jar). Species barriers are tested, and the limits of livelihoods are strained, in these cross-agency friendships.

In the closing section of *Animal's People*, the phrase 'upright human' (366) shifts the category of human, opening it up to non-normative locations by suggesting that 'upright' is simply one way of being human. The site of physical and/or cognitive difference is hence a further dimension through which the tenuousness of 'humanity' is tested. In *Animal's People*, it is Animal's deformed spine, a direct consequence of the disaster of 'that night', that lends itself most explicitly to a reading in this way. The spuriousness of the borders between biological species becomes evident, then, through the protagonist, Animal, and his *own* claims.

VOICE: THINKING NARRATION

The spuriousness of the borders *between* biological species becomes evident, as well as the ethical weight of such border-drawing, through the protagonist-narrators and their *own* claims to humanness. This is the moment where the unevenness of the category of 'humanity'—that is, what counts *as* human—*within* the biological species becomes evident at a structural level. As Lewis Gordon has argued, 'dominant groups can "give up" humanism for the simple fact that *their* humanity is presumed, while other communities have struggled too long for the humanistic prize' (quoted in Adair, 2019: 121–122).

Recall, again, the opening statements: 'I am mad to try' (Berger, 2000: 2) and 'I used to be human, once' (Sinha, 2008: 1); dwell, for a moment, on the protagonist-narrators' aesthetic renditions of their worlds (smell) and movements through their worlds (on all fours). Practising this kind of attention might draw on critical animal studies' interventions, and/or from those of disability studies, as outlined above. Both texts reckon with non-normative positionings, and thus articulate responses to conceptualisations of humanness and their imagined displacements. The ambiguity of the narrative voice of *King* and *Animal's People* brings with it the ambivalence of the dehumanising trope within postcolonial studies, as asserted by Achille Mbembe (e.g. 2001) and Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (e.g. 2010), amongst others. This trope acknowledges the colonial gesture of reducing the human other to animal, a discursive move with material consequences, as patterns of thought manifest in patterns of treatment, power, and disempowerment.

Returning to the issue of narratological terminology that frames narrative interpretation: on a very specific level, it becomes necessary to ask the question as to why the status of the narrator—as (nonhuman) animal, as a human kind of animal, as 'fully' human—is at all a quandary. Aren't all narrators made-up, anyway? Here, terminologies of narration indicate the ways in which knowledge and understanding are framed. A posthuman and queer narratology might also reckon with disability studies to engender a more inclusive infrastructure for writing about—and thinking through—narratological concerns.

Perhaps part of the problem is the narratological terminology we generally use to describe narrative situations. This terminology belies a central privilege that the two texts question: the privileges of human-ness, humanity, and personhood. The terminology, first-*person*-narrator, already elicits a tendency to ascribe humanity to narrators, an assumption that works to suppress any ambiguity about their positionings. Whilst the use of 'person' in narratological terminology comes from 'personae', a dramaturgical category, a residue of the quotidian use of 'person' rides with the narratological category: the terminology suggests thinking of, and accepting, the narrator *as* human, as a *person* in the quotidian sense. Even if, as Jan Alber et al. point out, the narrator 'may be human or human-like but he, she, or it can also be an animal, an inanimate object, a machine, a corpse, a sperm, an omniscient first-person narrator or otherwise impossible' (Alber et al., 2010: 115–116), I still feel that some assumptions of a

normative ‘person’ that this category elicits are carried with the terminology. They are based on shaky pronouns (I, we, you, he, she), that is, pronouns that do not translate across languages particularly well, and that do not translate across specific identity positions either (such as the fluid or non-binary-gender use of ‘they’).

Whilst the narrative terminology (‘first person’) rests uneasily with the oscillating status of the protagonists, it is the narrative *form*—which does not require physical forms, just the imagination of the reader—that allows for these precarious creatures to emerge. Our capacity to ‘sit with’ ambiguity is, I think, larger than many of the structures and terminologies that we have available to describe such ambiguities: here, specifically, the narratological structural terminology for the description of a narrative position.

This seems a structural concern—thinking about narratological terminology—but it is not divorced from the frameworks and infrastructures of thinking about narratives, and of imaginative engagements with other beings and other worlds. Given these interventions, re-considering the narratological terminology will mean not only rejecting the (obsession with) person-hood, but also—and this is *not* entirely unrelated—carefully considering the emphasis on perspective, focalization, and similar metaphors of sight (see also Huck, 2009). The emphasis on sight permeates scientific knowledge—as shown by vocabulary such as ‘insight’ and ‘reveal’, as well as metaphors such as ‘foreground’. Again, these concerns tie in with the deliberations on normative human bodies, privileging certain ways of knowing (sight) through certain positions.

To think about being King or Animal is, in this contribution, to think about the narrator-protagonists as not-(quite-)human, or more-than-human. It is also to think about the ways that these novels evoke lives in ruins, livelihoods in ruination, and how they trouble central humanist/ic assumptions that the form of the novel carries with it.

PARATEXT: WORKING (AGAINST) AMBIGUITY

The comparison of *King* and *Animal’s People* has thus far centred on the settings of the novels, as well as on their narrator-protagonists, King and Animal: that is, specifically on the narratological deliberations that arise when considering their respective positionings and their (post)humanist consequences. I have argued that such considerations are prefigured by the opening statements of the novels—‘I am mad to try’ (Berger, 2000: 2) and ‘I used to be human, once’ (Sinha, 2008: 1)—in particular. These statements are, however, *not* the first encounters that readers will have with the novels, or even their stories: readers come across texts through all manner of contexts, that is, through suggestions by other readers (or suggestions generated by algorithms), through intertextual references, through teaching environments, and so on. Such ‘first encounters’ do significant work as initial contexts, framing the reception and reading experience of the texts. All the more so, as both of the novels use paratextual devices in order to frame their stories in specific ways, that is, in ways that further pre-figure, or work specifically against, ambiguous, even ambivalent, imaginations of the world.

One such paratext is the cover.⁸ The cover actually frames the reading experience, be it as the dust jacket of the hardcover, the thick paper or paperboard binding of paperbacks, or the image that appears in an electronic reading device. David Alworth notes jackets ‘do not just visualize genres’: they ‘provide a platform, which is to say both a material support and a launch pad, for an image that will circulate as currency through digitized economies of culture and information’ (Alworth, 2018: 1138). The particular design of the cover image has the potential to attract specific readerships and to invite particular interpretations, a function that becomes even more evident when there are several editions in circulation (a line of argumentation that I have developed elsewhere: see Crane 2012: 14, for example).

SOME KING COVERS

The edition of *King* that framed my reading was that of the 2000 Bloomsbury edition. The image shows an empty tin can, which has been cut to resemble a crown: the material (tin, possibly waste) and the symbol (a crown, symbol of royalty) are already indicative of the ambiguities

⁸ For Gerald Genette, ‘in principle, every context is a paratext’ (Genette, 1997: 8). The cover is a particularly prominent, and rather immediate, example.

and paradoxes that ensue in the text. *King* was initially published without any reference to the author on the cover—a deliberate rescinding of a ‘big name’. On the cover of the edition that I read, the author’s name is entirely absent (and the title itself is rendered only as an impression on a tin-can-crown). The cover seems to want to suggest to us that we can come to the text without any knowledge, forging links to John Berger’s extensive writings on visual culture, animals, or capitalist critique.⁹

In contrast: the cover of the Pantheon edition, for example, includes the author’s name at the bottom, as well as a subtitle, *A Street Story*. In further contrast, the cover of the Vintage edition, which picks up on the graffiti aesthetics of the Pantheon edition, includes images of two (and-a-half) dogs. Whilst all three covers include waste materials and/or graffiti to suggest an aesthetics of ruin, the latter cover in particular prefigures a reading of the narrator-protagonist *King as dog*. The paratextual work of such a cover quashes the ambiguities still left open by other aspects of the novel.

SOME COVERS: ANIMAL’S PEOPLE

The cover of the edition of *Animal’s People* that ‘framed’ my reading attempts to visually render the crucial indeterminacy of the narrator-protagonist’s species identity. This edition shows a crawling, stick-like figure in black at the centre of yellow and orange rays. The figure, with perhaps three limbs and an elongated head, crawling or falling, is laterally oriented: the image has something of a human form at the same time as suggesting something rather more nonhuman, against the lurid colours of the rays, which might allude to the toxicity that pervades the novel. Other covers, as was the case with *King*, either fail to attempt to present such ambiguity, or shut it down from the beginning: several covers of other editions of *Animal’s People* (not necessarily even other publishers) include the face of a young, Indian, boy. Instead of suggesting an ambiguous humanimal, such covers render *Animal* human—furthermore, almost infantilised (*Animal* is actually 20 years old, but the images show a much younger face)—in the vein of the ‘postcolonial exotic’ (see Huggan, 2003).

PARATEXT AND/AS CONTEXT

Displaced along multiple lines—locations, species, abilities—*Animal* and *King* occupy precarious positions. Because precarious has its etymological and legal roots in the notion of request (crucially, a request which can be denied or revoked), it is intensely entangled in issues of enunciation and speaking. The broaching of distance is, somehow, and importantly, a task that literature can assume (but does not necessarily enable, as the interpretations proffered by the covers suggest).

Where Berger’s text works to employ the paratextual *absence* of the author’s name, read here as a gesture towards indeterminacy and ambiguity, Sinha’s employs other paratextual devices to similar ends (beyond the cover, that is). One of these paratextual renderings is the almost satirical website, at www.khaupur.com (last accessed 2 March 2021). The website is designed in a style that recollects mid-nineties web design, which has an interesting ‘authenticity’ effect, at the same time that it is troubling for its implicit stylisation of ‘modernity’. Heather Snell declares the website an ‘elaborate fiction’, noting its paratextual qualities becoming hypertextual intricacies, as well as arguing that ‘it also serves as a playful reminder of the very material, and often exploitative, relations of production through which an oral account may be turned into a book without crediting the author of the original tale’ (Snell, 2008).

The paratexts, in particular the covers, of the novels are a crucial component of how the texts situate their stories. It is similarly impossible to disentangle each novel’s paratexts from questions of power constructs, including the power of the publishing industry. These devices work to structure potential interpretations: they frame the texts, structuring indeterminacies and ambiguities, eliciting responses.

⁹ Berger on this: ‘When the author’s name is on the cover and especially if it’s an author like me who has written quite a lot of books, the book is first seen as a kind of literary event. [...] I wanted it to be announced as a street story rather than as a new novel by John Berger’ (Berger, qtd. in Zipp, 2014: 17). And, yes, this footnote is using the author-function to renounce the author-function.

Recall, once more, the opening statement of John Berger's *King*: 'I am mad to try' (2, italics in original). Here, King is speaking specifically of the telling of the story, specifically addressing the readers that he will lead to the ruinous setting. It is a precarious site, one that, by the end of the novel, gives way to a further displacement as bulldozers encroach on the site to clear it for development.

Where *King* might interpellate its readership by way of its indeterminate setting, simultaneously placed and displaced into the margins of European or global cities, *Animal's People* is perhaps more direct. Roman Bartosch notes that 'Animal turns the narrative of disaster into an account of unthinkability whose experience forces the question onto us whether we could be "Animal's People"' to then ask 'are we the "Eyes" that stare their shallow humanist stare, or do we share the experience of the Apokalis?' (Bartosch, 2012: 18).¹⁰ I am inclined to argue that for many readers, myself included, our privileges—including the means and inclination that lend themselves to engaging in practices such as reading literature—mean grappling with the ways in which we are entangled with the troubled position afforded to the 'Eyes' in the text:

'Look at him [the journalist], see his eyes. He says thousands of other people are looking through his eyes. Think of that.'

I think of this awful idea. Your eyes full of eyes. Thousands staring at me through the holes in your head. Their curiosity feels like acid on my skin. (Sinha, 2007: 7)

This simile—acid on skin—is an affective response, implicating the reader. The simile will, like toxicity, affect readers in different ways.¹¹ For Jennifer Rickel, the passage 'interrogates the discursive and ideological structures that allow for the supposed dehumanization of individuals' (Rickel, 2012: 90). It is nonetheless important to realise that dwelling with such accusations harbours its own problems. As Sumana Roy recently argues, reading literature as 'Guilt Lit' engenders literary habits akin to addiction, where 'privilege-footprinted text[s]' become a 'kind of antibiotic that will cure us of our privilege' (Roy, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The novels that form the core of this essay, John Berger's *King* and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, centre around the lives of their more-than-human protagonist narrators, and dwell with their displacements. Their protagonists inhabit positions at the periphery. They forge their subsistence from the leftovers of neocolonial/capitalist structures, and implicitly (*King*) or explicitly (*Animal's People*) exist in their worlds as humanimals: precarious livelihoods and ambiguous lives. Such precarity and ambiguity diffracts key concerns of posthumanist thought: the novels allow for a thinking through of posthuman concerns regarding the epistemological status of the human as occupying a particular subject position, as is queried by the prefix 'post-', as well as the ontological status of the human (sometimes in opposition to nonhuman animals, sometimes in opposition to technologies).

Some 50 years may have passed since Berger wrote the lines quoted at the outset, but the timeliness of Berger's concerns has not aged. Writing in a year marked by massive fires, floods, plagues, and a global pandemic, geographical displacement renders otherwise privileged lives vulnerable to systemic inequality. The year 2020 saw the 'West' encounter civil unrest,

¹⁰ Another paratextual framing device, the 'Editor's Note' at the start of *Animal's People*, asserts: 'This story was recorded in Hindi on a series of tapes by a nineteen-year-old boy in the Indian city of Khaufpur. True to the agreement between the boy and the journalist who befriended him, the story is told entirely in the boy's words as recorded on the tapes. Apart from translating to English, nothing has been changed.' (Sinha, 2007: front matter). *Animal's People*, thus, is established from the outset as a pseudotranslation (Rath, 2013) and a quasi-transcription, conscious of the politics of enunciation and speaking. Karsten Levihn-Kutzler suggests that, due to the inclusion of non-English words, for instance, along with other characteristics, 'the narrative voice is not so much a translation as an emulation of what Animal would sound like if he were telling his story in English' (Levihn-Kutzler, 2018: 181).

¹¹ For instance: 'By forging a direct relation with his readers, speaking directly to our own consuming eyes, he insists that we not become simply another set of viewers who relish stories of Third World suffering. Animal has identified us, has called us out, and in doing so has refused the unidirectional tendency of reading the other without the necessity of, to summon Butler again, letting ourselves become undone' (Singh, 2015: 143; the reference is to Butler's 2004 study *Undoing Gender*).


challenge racist infrastructures, and grapple with defunded health services (amongst other problems). The year 2021 proffers no relief (so far; we might hope though: see Solnit, 2020). At the time of publication, posthumanist interventions into interpretative strategies play out in real time, with any insistence on using species boundaries to articulate a human exceptionalism rendered particularly fragile as we learn to share our lives with a virus, whilst using the full force of technology to counter it.

There is something about the two voices in these two worlds—indeterminately on the cusp between human and nonhuman—articulated in this way, interpellating their readers from—and through—these places. Speaking from the ruins, taking their precarious places in settings marked by displacement, *King* and *Animal's People* imagine stories from displaced, decentred, disabled, exceptional positions. Their voices speak of, and to, agencies that emerge with the leftovers, and of stories of 'making do' as stories making worlds.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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