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"People of the Apokalis": Spatial Disability and the Bhopal Disaster

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Abstract

*This paper considers Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007), a fictional re-telling of the Union Carbide Bhopal disaster, as a productive site of mutual engagement between postcolonial studies and disability studies, two fields rarely in dialogue. Dominant models of disability, I argue, do not translate to formerly colonial sites and/or sites that bear the burden of global capitalism. The uneven processes of globalization—which produce disabling environments—necessitate that we revise established conceptions of disability, which are derived largely from US/UK contexts. I explore a socio-spatial model that emphasizes the necessity of specific locational axes in figurations of disability. This enables more flexible understandings of embodiment, which may shift and be shifted by the particularities of space. A victim of the disaster, *Animal*—the novel's protagonist—navigates Bhopal's streets on all fours. His unique spatial imaginary, contingent on his particular form of embodiment, produces a local and embodied knowledge that foregrounds points of convergence between anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and disability politics.*

On the night of December 2nd, 1984, the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, the capital of the Indian state Madhya Pradesh, leaked forty tons of deadly methyl isocyanate gas into the air. Thousands of people perished immediately, for thousands more death arrived gradually, and for thousands more gas-related cancers, illnesses, and injuries preserved the legacy of that night. The Bhopal disaster, regarded by some

as "the worst industrial crisis in history," was followed by a second crisis of interpretation (Shrivastava 4). Death tolls varied widely; the Indian government offered a conservative estimate of 1,754 dead and 200,000 injured, United States newspapers counted 2000+ dead and 300,000 injured, and Amnesty International accounted for 7,000-10,000 immediate deaths and 15,000 eventual deaths (Fortun 15, M. Davis 130). Disparate and sparring narratives surfaced in the aftermath of the event, all of which attempted to salvage meaning from the raw material of disaster. Union Carbide presented Bhopal as a singular and unique accident, one that "couldn't happen in the United States" and that ended with the dispersal of cash settlements (Fortun 12). Twenty years later, Indra Sinha's 2007 novel *Animal's People*, a fictional re-telling of Bhopal in which the city of Khaufpur functions as urban analogue, depicts the crisis as suspended in a state of irresolution. The Kampani, a stand-in for Union Carbide, skirts accountability through mechanisms of endless deferral, leaving their impoverished victims few avenues for retribution.

Despite the neat packaging offered by the Union Carbide company, the contours of the disaster remain only partially drawn in Sinha's novel. The trace materials of the event linger in the water, the land, and the bodies of the people. As critic Rob Nixon aptly notes, "[*Animal's People*] dramatizes the illusion of the singular event," illuminating the fact that disaster is not a shut-and-close case or a narrative with a definite ending (449). Rather, it is made manifest as a form of "slow violence," a type of gradual destruction that is "typically managed through powerful strategies of distancing" that depend on "transnational corporate distance and...on both the slow emergence of morbidity and on legal procrastination" (Nixon 449). An anti-Union Carbide activist, quoted in Kim Fortun's *Advocacy after Bhopal: Environmentalism, Disaster, New Global Orders*, articulates one response to the easy narrativization of the event: "There has been an overall attempt [by the mainstream press, Union Carbide, and the Government of India] to encapsulate and exorcise, all within the logic of the market. Our task is to subvert this encapsulation" (8). *Animal's People* is fully engaged in this act of subversion. The events of that night mark the bodies of the Khaufpuri citizens, thereby foregrounding the ongoing nature of the crisis: Somraj Pandit, a local music teacher, loses his lung capacity and consequently, the ability to sing, jars of partially formed fetuses line the shelves of a local doctor's clinic, and most notably, Animal, the quadruped protagonist of Sinha's novel, navigates the streets of Khaufpur on all fours, his curved backbone a testament to corporate irresponsibility.

With his bones "twisted like a hairpin," Animal gains an intimate understanding of the geography of Khaufpur. "From a height of eighteen inches," he asserts, "you get to know a place pretty well, every crack in the road, every stone, every dropped, not-picked-up coin" (135). Deeply acquainted with the spatial arrangement of Khaufpur, he demonstrates a wealth of local knowledge shaped by his memory of that night: "...From [this tower] you can see clear across Khaufpur... That huddle of roofs, it's Jyotinagar. Lanes in there are narrow, I don't like to think about what happened in them. My friend Faqri, he lost his mum and dad and five brothers and sisters in those lanes...East's Phuta Maqbara, to the west Qazi Camp, killing grounds all" (32). Far from

understanding the city through the "logic of the market," Animal draws a map of Khaufpur through the lens of crisis and collective experience. His personal catalog of the city, one that charts "every crack in the road" and the "pissy gussets and shitty backsides" of the Khaufpuri citizens, offers a literal and even hyperbolic take on local knowledge (2).

In my essay, I discuss how Animal's unique spatial imaginary, which wrests new meaning from the symbolic and material topography of Khaufpur, engenders a local, collective, and embodied knowledge that resists the erasure of the local and the dissolution of survival networks under the disabling forces of neoliberal globalization. By making this knowledge contingent upon disabled experience, Sinha demonstrates that the legacy of the Bhopal disaster rests upon a stratum of disabled bodies, and further, imagines the city of Khaufpur itself as both a disabling and disabled environment. Finally, through his interpretations of the symbolic and material landscape of Khaufpur, readings that emphasize the survival strategies vital to navigating abject poverty, Animal complicates the teleology of personal and/ or regional rehabilitation, thereby foregrounding the ways in which anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and disability politics converge.

Postcolonial Studies and Disability Studies: A Conversation

The myriad epistemic, spatial, and bodily concerns raised by *Animal's People* speak to the pressing necessity of considering Postcolonial and Disability Studies in tandem. Conversations between the two fields have only recently begun to take place, with the majority of the scholarship only beginning to map the points of connection and lacunae in this nascent dialogue. One particularly salient intersection identifies disability as an inextricable part of the project of colonialism. In the article "Disabling Postcolonialism: Global Disability Cultures and Democratic Criticism," Clare Barker and Stuart Murray assert that the "history of colonialism (and its post/neocolonial aftermath) is indeed a history of mass disablement" (230). Anthony Carrigan offers a similar observation in "Postcolonial Disaster, Pacific Nuclearization, and Disabling Environments," stating, "Western colonialism is often viewed as a cultural and environmental 'catastrophe of enormous proportions' and its resultant inequalities underpin postcolonial populations' vulnerability to social and 'natural' disasters" (255). Although Barker and Murray's figuration of the history of colonialism overlooks the non-human aspects of colonial projects, the sequential relationship of disaster and disability illuminates the ways in which the neoliberal marketplace produces disabling environments, particularly in formerly colonial states. In the case of Bhopal/ Khaufpur, the "slow violence" generated by Union Carbide/ the Kampani can be connected to overurbanization.

In *Planet of Slums*, Mike Davis links the multitude of urban crises in Third World cities—inadequate or nonexistent sanitation systems, crumbling infrastructure, mass unemployment, malnutrition, the proliferation of slums—to both neoliberal policy and the

legacy of colonialism. "Urbanization without growth," Davis writes, describes the exodus of "surplus rural labor to urban slums even as cities ceased to be job machines" due to IMF and World Bank policies of agricultural deregulation (15). The phenomenon of overurbanization is the result of "the worldwide debt crisis of the late 1970s and the subsequent IMF-led restructuring of Third World economies in the 1980s," which forced governments of debtor nations to greatly reduce spending and limit regulations, leading to increased privatization of housing markets and public utilities, reductions in social services, and increased traffic in foreign imports (Davis 14). The advent of globalization, which feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty describes as "the unfettered mobility of capital and the accompanying erosion and reconstitution of local and national economic and political resources and of democratic processes," compounded the problems of the urban poor, who faced increasing cuts to social services and declining opportunities for formal employment (124). Overurbanization transformed the urban environment of Bhopal. Its population growth tripled in the 1970s, leading to a severe housing shortage (Shrivastava 3). By 1984, "more than 130,000 people," or about "20 percent of the city's population," lived in slums (Shrivastava 3). Further, Bhopal's weak physical and social infrastructures, the lingering product of colonialism, made rapid industrialization and economic development exceedingly difficult. One of the reasons Union Carbide chose to place a plant in Bhopal, notes Kim Fortun, was because "the region was seen as 'backward' and thus targeted for development by the Indian government" (xiv). During a period of financial decline, however, the plant began to manufacture deadly methyl isocyanate, disregarding its original designation for "commercial or light industrial use" (Shrivastava 35). Due to the company's considerable standing and influence in Madhya Pradesh and India, the city's numerous objections to MIC production were overruled by government and state authorities (Shrivastava 35). Notably, two of Bhopal's largest slum colonies directly faced the Union Carbide plant, thereby placing the people least equipped to handle disaster in the epicenter of danger.

In the case of Bhopal, this crisis emerged from an agglomeration of disabling factors: the pressure for rapid industrialization in a city ill-equipped for hasty development, the rapid influx of migrants to a space that could not sustain them, the problematic location of the pesticide plant, and the inadequacy of Bhopal's health care infrastructure in the face of disaster. As Carrigan argues, the "resultant inequalities" of colonialism's legacies, coupled with the mechanisms of neoliberal globalization, underscores certain postcolonial populations' vulnerability to disaster—in this case, Bhopal/ Khaufpur's urban poor (255). These twinned forces re-shaped Bhopal into a disabling environment that disproportionately affected the poorest of the poor, who bore the brunt of social, economic, and political marginalization. Not only were they directly in the path of harm, but they also had the least access to health treatment in the aftermath of the crisis. This synthesis of disabling forces offers an answer to Animal's troubling question: "Do you suppose anyone can explain, why did the Kampani choose this city to make its factory (32)?" The Bhopal disaster, from origin to afterlife, demonstrates the ways in which disability is imbricated in postcolonial, anticolonial, and neoliberal politics.

Despite disability's multiple relations to postcolonial concerns, Disability Studies as a field has rarely taken up material outside of a Western context. The dominant theoretical models of disability studies, which largely emerged from US and UK frameworks, do not take into account the varied manifestations of disability across the globe. Disability Studies currently emphasizes the divide between the social model and the medical model, the latter imagining disability as the property of an individual and subject to medical treatment, and the former imagining disability as a product of one's social and physical environment. To elaborate, medical discourses envisage disability as an *individualized* defect, a crippling abnormality that treatment must eradicate. This particular formulation equates disability with pathology, thereby enforcing a regime of physical and psychological normalcy that codes difference as grotesque aberration. Under this regime, disabled subjects are regarded as objects deserving at best pity and charity, and at worst, contempt, disgust, and even death.

In response to this system of devaluation, practitioners of the social model refuse to accept pathology as a given. Instead, this model views disability as constructed via social processes of norm enforcement. It distinguishes between impairment, which is defined as a non-normative or altered physiological state, and the social, cultural, and historical articulation of that impairment as disability, which often translates to mass stigmatization and cultural exclusion. In the influential article "Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century," Lennard Davis interrogates the ways in which "normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (3). He argues that disability as a concept "arrived with industrialization and with the set of practices and discourses that are linked to the eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century notions of nationality, race...sexual orientation, and so on" (3). According to Davis, normalcy in the modern sense did not appear until the mid 19th century, alongside the advent of statistics and the bell curve (3). The concept of "normalcy," then, is revealed to be historically contingent and embedded in notions of "progress, of industrialization, and of ideological consolidation of the power of the bourgeoisie" (L. Davis 15). In short, the power, might, and development of the nation rested upon the shoulders of healthy, laboring bodies.

In the vein of Davis' argument, many scholars of the social model view the disciplinary regime of normalization as disabling, not the impairment in and of itself. However, this particular figuration of disability, which relies upon deviation from a normative body, fails to map onto disabled bodies in numerous postcolonial states, in which disability may be "a constitutive feature of community life" (Carrigan 255). "As an agent of biopolitical control," Barker and Murray write, "normalcy in particular might not function in the same ways in different cultural contexts... in communities experiencing mass disablement (due to war, disaster, or industrial accident) people with disabilities often constitute a numerical majority" (229). Further, in "Constructing Normalcy," Davis conceptualizes disability and normalcy within a particular historical and cultural context, namely, 18th and 19th Western discourses of progress and industrial development, the particularities of which may differ significantly in other eras and locales. Davis' conception of normalcy, while productive within the context of the US/ UK, cannot and

should not account for all disabled experience. In *Animal's People*, "normalcy" functions to some degree as a mechanism of standardization; for example, although Sinha's novel is peopled with disabled characters, none stands out more than Animal, who frequently expresses his desire to walk upright. However, Animal is also part of a disabled collective, the impoverished and sick Khaufpuris known as "Animal's People," who are numerous enough to shift the thresholds of physical health and ability to undermine the regimentation implied by normalcy. "Normalcy," then, takes on variable senses within certain postcolonial sites and within the novel itself, thereby altering the exclusionary paradigms that largely animate Disability Studies as a field.

A postcolonial critique of disability theory thus foregrounds the universalizing tendencies of the social model, in which the disabled subject is always a Western subject, and the hegemonic discourse of disability, which is anchored by "a Western state-centered model that assumes values of individual rights and equality guaranteed by legal contract" (Davidson 118). Disability Studies, on the other hand, illuminates the marginalization of disability within postcolonial scholarship, despite the relation of colonialism's legacies to mass disablement. In order to theorize disability beyond the Western context, scholars must identify the limitations of the social model as currently conceived, and in so doing, begin to conceptualize disability as multiply articulated and contingent upon social, cultural, historical, and regional particularities. This imagined branch of scholarship, which Barker and Murray term "contemporary materialist postcolonial criticism," will allow us to take "particular, situated experiences as the starting point for disability analysis, enabling acts of criticism emerging from and informed by (rather than applied to) 'cultural locatedness' in the first place" (228). Taking Barker and Murray's emphasis on "cultural locatedness" into account, I will begin my analysis of disability in the material and experiential realm of *Animal's People*.

Disability as Socio-Spatial Experience

In Sinha's novel, disability is intimately linked to the production of urban space. By placing a pesticide factory adjacent to the city's slums and ignoring the poisonous residue, the Kampani transforms the environment of Khaufpur into both an object and agent of disablement. A product of this disabling environment, Animal in turn deploys his disability as an agent of revision, in which his particular form of embodiment engenders an alternate spatial conception of Khaufpur. In this instance, *Animal's People* posits disabled bodies and urban space as co-constitutive, a formulation that is not without precedent. Drawing from the work of sociologist Henri Lefebvre and cultural geographer Edward Soja, Brendan Gleeson offers a formulation of disability that emphasizes the "dialectical relationship" of "the body and social space" (49). In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre conceives of space as "permeated with social relations; it is not only supported by social relations, but it also is producing and produced by social relations" (qtd in Gleeson 45). In short, space creates social relations, and in turn social relations create space. Expanding on the work of Lefebvre, Edward Soja introduces the concept of spatiality, or "socially produced space," and describes the "socio-spatial dialectic" as a formulation "which recognizes spatiality as simultaneously...a social

product (or outcome) and a shaping force (or medium) in social life" (qtd. in Gleeson 45). Gleeson's spatial model of disability, which imagines social space as "created by the social practices of lived, material bodies," turns on Lefebvre's assertion that "the whole of (social) space proceeds from the body" (qtd. in Gleeson 48). He emphasizes the material and above all, *embodied* dimensions of social space—bodies do not passively occupy space, but rather, actively engender its creation. Further, Gleeson views the body and social space as co-constitutive; social spaces engender particular forms of embodiment, and bodies produce social space through their social and material practices.

Disability, according to Gleeson, is a "socio-spatial experience that emerges from core social relations," the geographies of which must be mapped from the "co-ordinates provided by the cultural, political-economic and spatial organization of society" (54). This formulation, which emphasizes the necessity of specific locational axes in any figuration of disability, enables a more capacious and flexible articulation of embodiment, which may shift and be shifted by the particularities of space. It also parallels Barker and Murray's notion of "cultural locatedness," specifically, the notion of disability as engendered by "particular, situated experience." When considered in tandem with *Animal's People*, disability as socio-spatial experience assumes an explicitly political valence, in which embodiment, social space, and "core social relations" are fundamentally shaped by the power dynamics of the global capitalist order and the legacy of colonial violence.

Although the concepts of "cultural locatedness" and disability as "socio-spatial experience" similarly arise from a US/ UK context, they provide an explanatory force that illuminates and is illuminated by Sinha's novel. Unlike the "minority rights" framework, this set of schema imagines disability as shaped by and contingent upon spatial, economic, political, and social modalities. Therefore, disability as it operates in *Animal's People* is very much determined by the legacy of colonialism, the aftermath of disaster, the policies of neoliberalism, and Khaufpur's urban environment. Further, I should note that disability as a social and cultural construction may function very differently in Bhopal. As Barker and Murray write, "In a variety of postcolonial contexts, culturally specific beliefs about embodiment, ontology, communal identity and belonging continue to shape disability experiences" (228). Bodies may be subject to different systems of interpretation, thereby complicating what the term "disability" even signifies. Since I am unfamiliar with the ways in which disability is perceived in Bhopal, my textual analysis has its limitations. In the narrative realm of Khaufpur, however, disability—as illness, impairment, or particular embodiment—is tied to a particular network of site-specific meaning. Disability becomes legible in a variety of ways—through the framework of victimization, through medical and curative discourses, and finally, through the boundary separating human from animal.

Insisting upon the historically and culturally contingent nature of lived experience, cultural geographer and Marxist critic David Harvey "demonstrates how [particular and specific forms of embodiment] must inform analysis of real contexts, insisting, for

example, that investigations of urban social space in capitalism must begin with the *'prior question...of whose bodies produce the city versus whose bodies inhabit it'*" (qtd. in Gleeson 48, emphasis mine). Harvey's critique deepens Gleeson's model, which implies a mutually transformative relationship between the body and social space, and in so doing, overlooks the power dynamics that wrest the production of social space from its inhabitants. The notion of the socially, politically, and economically marginalized body—a body with little power over its space of inhabitation—shifts the equilibrium of this dialectic. Khaufpur, in its current poisoned state, was "produced" by a powerful multinational corporate body, which projected its calculations of risk and profit onto the city's geography. Grounded in the logic of the market, this particular spatial imaginary—a way of "knowing" the city—resulted in the deaths and illnesses of thousands of Khaufpur's poorest residents. The Kampani further manipulates its control over "space" by distancing itself temporally and geographically from the city, leaving the Khaufpuri citizens to cope with Kampani poisons. "The case against the Kampani," narrates Animal, "had been dragging on for endless years. It stood accused of causing the deaths of thousands that night, plus it ran away from Khaufpur without cleaning its factory" (34). Nearly powerless in the face of the Kampani, the impoverished citizens of Khaufpur inhabit a city barely of their own making.

On the other hand, Animal's spatial imaginary, which emerges from his particular form of embodiment, offers a competing vision of Khaufpur. From his vantage point of eighteen inches, Animal experiences a unique urban geography characterized by physical intimacy and closeness, the inverse of corporate distance. His detailed understanding of Khaufpur, from the city's spatial layout to its "social and material practices," positions him as a spokesperson of the local; he provides the "anti-voice to the new, ornate, chivalric discourse of 'development'" (Nixon 462). Animal views the city as fundamentally shaped by the collective experience of crisis, which turned the narrow lanes of the bidonvilles into shallow graves. However, even in the prolonged afterlife of the disaster, Animal extracts valuable forms of knowledge from local and collective experience, survival strategies that enable Khaufpuris to navigate the apocalypse.

As an orphan "well schooled in street work" by the crafty Ali Faqri, Animal learns quickly how to subsist in Khaufpur: "Faqri told me to stop creeping round behind the eateries... So I began parading up and down in view of the clientele, nothing puts a person off their food more than a starving Animal watching every mouthful" (19). To appease Animal, the proprietors give him handouts; leftovers served "nicely in a bowl" (19). "In this way," Animal asserts, "I learned that if you act powerless, you are powerless, the way to get what you want is to demand it" (19). This passage records the transfer of street knowledge from teacher to student, an exchange that imparts information crucial to Animal's self-preservation. Faqri's strategy, which requires Animal to step out of the margins and into full view, forces the restaurant clientele to reckon with his physical presence. This encounter marks a violation of social boundaries, in which Animal—an inhabitant of the slums—refuses to remain hidden. Animal's brash exhibition of his twisted and filthy body, an abject body in the act of trespass, transforms the social space of the restaurant and momentarily grants him some degree of power.

This particular strategy, shared between Animal and Faqri, offers a small, although significant, means of resistance—a means by which marginalized Khaufpuris can re-assert themselves in their cityscape. By underscoring the worth of local knowledge and of survival networks, Animal re-shifts the equilibrium of the socio-spatial dialectic, which in some small way enables his body, and the bodies of the Kampani victims, to shape their city.

In search of a cure

Throughout Sinha's novel, both Animal and the city of Khaufpur are subjected to a Western regime of norm enforcement, in which abject poverty and mass disablement—the residues of colonialism and global capitalism—are critiqued and "corrected" via Western medical practice. Radically re-shaped by the Kampani poisons, Animal, Animal's people, and the urban landscape of Khaufpur can be read as sites of injury, and as such, subject to cure and recovery. Through this restorative rhetoric, the raw material of disaster and poverty is organized into a linear narrative of "healing," in which the injuries dealt by globalization/ colonialism can be exorcised through medicine and individualized treatment. In *Animal's People*, the greatest proponent of this narrative is Elli Barber.

A well-intentioned and charitable doctor from Coatesville, Pennsylvania, Elli arrives in Khaufpur with the goal of offering poison victims necessary health care at no cost. She establishes a free clinic, a high-tech and modern alternative to the "big hospital where... you go in with one illness come out with three" (55). However, despite the many benefits offered by the clinic, it remains unattended. In a community rightly suspicious of American imports, Elli becomes the target of speculation. Zafar, a widely loved activist leader, surmises that she may be a puppet of the Kampani, who will presumably instrumentalize her medical data to further distance itself from responsibility. Less convinced of Elli as conspirator, Animal initiates a tentative friendship with the doctress, partially predicated on the "wild, stupid, unforgivable hope that she might cure [him]" (141). Confounded by the response—or lack thereof—to her offer of free medical help, Elli expresses her frustration with Khaufpuris to Animal:

[...]People in this city tolerate open sewers, garbage everywhere, poisoned wells....But wait, let someone come along with an open-hearted offer of help, these same citizens can't tolerate it, in fact find it so intolerable they must mount a boycott. People in this city must be either blind or mad. I don't get the way Khaufpuris think. (151)

As a field, Disability Studies has maintained a critical stance on medical knowledge and authority, which has a long history of stigmatizing and unnecessarily "correcting" physiological and cognitive variation. Disability scholars frequently question the power of medical professionals to "describe and validate everyone's experience of the body," and to police bodies through mechanisms of norm enforcement (Wendell 253). Since this knowledge is so unquestioningly valued, medical practitioners "have the social permission and responsibility to determine what forms of existence are 'abnormal' and how various 'abnormalities' are to be managed" (Ho 108). In Sinha's novel, Elli's

medical expertise also translates to environmental "expertise," through which she describes and disparages particular forms of Khaufpuri existence. Elli's spatial imaginary of Khaufpur, which is telescoped primarily through the lens of pathology, casts the city as a space of urban blight. In the context of Western medical discourse, both Khaufpur and Animal become deficient "bodies" in need of healing. Elli wields her authority in her assessment of the slums, specifically, the Nutcracker: "Look at this filth, litter and plastic all over, open drains stinking right outside the houses...Every bit of waste ground is a latrine" (105). Here, she deploys what D. Asher Ghertner terms a "green aesthetic," which is defined as "a distinct observational grid (or legibility) for making normative assessments of urban space" (148). Through her disapproval of the waste-strewn streets, Elli projects her sense of aesthetic normativity—a "hegemonic sense of how [a] city should look"—upon the Nutcracker (148). Projecting the narrative of recovery and renewal onto the city itself, Elli proposes that the Khaufpuri government should "organize people into teams to pick up the litter. Bring in pipes, water taps, build proper latrines" (105). In offering this superficial solution, Elli fails to consider the larger systemic forces—such as overurbanization—that decimate Third World urban infrastructure, and instead views the garbage, open sewers, and toxic wells as evidence of civic laziness and "tolerance." She fails to acknowledge that much of Khaufpur's faltering infrastructure can be attributed to U.S. corporate involvement in the city's rapid development. She polices the "body" of the city through her expressions of disgust, identifying the dung-filled streets as an abnormality to be corrected via waste management. This figuration parallels the medical model of disability, which reads physiological difference as an anomaly in need of cosmetic correction. In this passage, the Nutcracker is not only a disabling environment, but also a *disabled* environment, one subject to the same disciplinary regime as bodily deviance.

Elli's open condescension towards pity for Khaufpur is a source of conflict between her and Animal, who resists her pathological reading of the cityscape. Although Elli has sound intentions and provides vital services to people in need, her uninformed perspective discounts the experience and knowledge of Khaufpuri citizens, casting them alternately as victims and as fools, as "blind" or "mad," but never as people with agency. Her naïveté, which Sinha underscores, is symptomatic of a problematic set of assumptions. As Michael Davidson notes, "when U.S. policy makers attempt to intervene in global health crises in developing countries, they often bring Western assumptions about social normalization that undermine the goodwill gesture" (119). Although Elli's goodwill gesture should not be minimized—she is, after all, supplying medical treatment to people without recourse to healthcare—her denunciations of the city uniformly and uncritically apply Western aesthetic norms to non-Western sites, and signify her ignorance of the larger shaping currents at work. Of course, the sanitation crisis in many Third World cities decimates the general quality of life, and I do not want to diminish its weight or scale. However, Elli's contempt for this crisis evinces her superficial understanding of Khaufpur. Because this slum deviates from Elli's notion of a proper, "civilized" city, one with proper waste management and sanitation systems, it is subject to dismissal. By emphasizing Elli's naïveté, *Animal's People* identifies the limitations of the "healing" model, which often turns upon rhetorics of pity and condescension, and offers a narrow framing of poverty that does not account for

systemic networks of oppression. This critique, which emerges from conversations between Animal and Elli, complicates the figuration of Khaufpuri bodies and slums as injured "sites" in need of healing.

Animal and Elli offer competing visions of Khaufpur's material and cultural topography, and the most salient point of departure is that of human waste. Excrement, and particularly the open display of it, throws the epistemological and social divide between Animal and Elli into sharp relief. If the environment operates as a "category of knowledge" for both parties, then Elli's understanding of the Khaufpuri world registers public shitting as anomaly (Ghertner 148). For Animal, however, it is one of the quotidian practices that shape urban space. Despite her charitable intentions, Elli's pity ("Oh poor Animal, what a life!") eventually infuriates Animal, and he scolds her for her attitude (184). Notably, his angry outburst contains a speech on the merits of public "relief":

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

The image that Animal composes—of open defecation, folk laughter, and comradeship—evokes the aesthetic of grotesque realism theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World*. Although Bakhtin explicitly deals with folk culture and popular humor in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, his notion of grotesque realism resonates with this scene. The "material bodily principle," or "images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life," anchors grotesque realism, which celebrates popular humor and the common folk (Bakhtin 18). In the realm of grotesque realism, the bodily principle is "deeply positive...It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, but as something universal, representing all the people" (Bakhtin 19). It celebrates the "lower bodily stratum," the "zone in which conception and a new birth take place" (Bakhtin 21).

Viewing the world from crotch-level, his spatial imaginary determined by the redolent odors of "shitty backsides," Animal is a creature of the lower bodily stratum and an agent of grotesque realism (2). As such, he does not view communal defecation as a sign of pathology or of abnormality, but rather, as a valid and valuable social practice, one that unites the folk.

In *Rabelais and His World*, the anchoring principle of grotesque realism is degradation, or "the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity" (Bakhtin 20). It requires contact with the lower material stratum, and acknowledgement of a body that defecates, fornicates, consumes, and gives birth, an open, unruly body with orifices that devour and expel. The body valorized by the grotesque aesthetic stands in opposition to the bourgeois, proper body, a form regulated by the "new bodily canon," which closes off all orifices and disavows the lower bodily stratum (Bakhtin 320). This disciplinary regime attempts to divorce the human body from its animalistic functions, and cordons off the

practices that signify the body's materiality: eating, fornicating, and defecating. In this way, the new bodily canon separates body from mind, and human from animal. Further, it creates a bounded, closed body that is truly remote and individual, and most importantly, severed from the possibility of merging and commingling with a human collective—a body that is condemned to "shit alone."

The "proper latrines" championed by Elli signify the new bodily canon, as they anchor the highly ritualized activities that regulate and sanitize defecation. "The toilet," writes Joshua Esty, "is a powerful symbol of technological and developmental superiority—one that has the corollary effect of intensifying, via a newly potent scientific language, the negative valence of shit" (28-29). Both symbolically and materially, excrement—and the act of producing it—must be separated from the "proper" body. Shit, "as both psychoanalytic and anthropological theory would suggest," denotes "the fuzzy boundary between inside and outside, between the self and not-self" (Esty 34). This terrifying ambiguity, which disrupts the notion of the bounded, bourgeois body, suggests that the body is in fact wedded to its material functions, that it is open and unfinished, and presents the whole, proper, and "individual" body as a fiction. Animal's frank discussion of defecation degrades this bourgeois ideal by bringing it down to earth, to the lower material stratum: "You foreigners talk as if the sight of a bum is the worst thing in the world. Doesn't everyone crap?" (184). Through open disgust and disavowal of public shitting, Elli attempts to distance herself from the act of defecation. However, Animal punctures her façade through mocking her condescension and propriety. He shifts the power asymmetry between the "proper" foreigner and the "filthy" slum-dweller by emphasizing their common animality. In so doing, he levels a hierarchy contingent on bourgeois notions of the proper body, with those labeled as "dirty" clustered at the bottom.

Further, Animal's defense of communal shitting instantiates his particular system of values, which emphasizes local and collective networks of survival—the inverse of both corporate distance and the individual cure. Of course, communal shitting should not be overly romanticized. A problem "rooted in colonialism," the "sanitation crisis" in many Third World cities has significant and numerous consequences: humiliation and vulnerability, particularly for women; typhoid, cholera, dysentery, and hepatitis; and contamination of potable water (Davis 135). Also, it proves easy to valorize shit when you don't have to live in it. However, in the context of the novel, Animal's knowledge centers on survival—how to navigate abject poverty and live, and how to exercise agency and power in a world that has divested you of both. His interpretation of communal shitting, a powerful act of counter-signification against discourses of pathology and abnormality, emphasizes the necessity of solidarity—a human collective who shit together. This community generates its own medical knowledge by "reading" each other's bowels, a form of local healthcare that interprets shit as a means of disease *prevention*. In this way, Animal's people have a small degree of mastery over disease, rather than just being victimized by it. Communal shitting, then, can be read as a "material practice" through which impoverished Khaufpuris produce their social space. When Animal pities the rich for "[shitting] alone," then, he underscores the value of

collective existence over the individual, isolated, and bourgeois body. In Animal's spatial imaginary, slums are not *uniformly* sites of contamination in need of a "cure," but rather, they are lively social spaces that produce and sustain local networks of knowledge.

The paradigm of recovery, which organizes the anarchic material of crisis into a linear narrative of healing, assumes its most concrete form in the novel's conclusion. After long and relentless battles against the Kampani, the residue of disaster still lingers in Khaufpur: "[...] The hearing's again been post-poned, the Kampani's still trying to find ways to avoid appearing... There is still sickness all over Khaufpur, hundreds come daily to Elli doctress's clinic" (365). In this state of indefinite suspension, however, Animal is granted the possibility of closure: the coveted surgery that will enable him to walk upright. Yet, after a period of long deliberation, Animal ultimately elects to reject the operation:

Eyes, I reckon that if I have this operation, I will be upright, true, but to walk I will need the help of sticks. I might have a wheelchair, but how far will that get me in the gullis of Khaufpur? Right now I can run and hop and carry kids on my back, I can climb hard trees, I've gone up mountains, roamed in jungles. Is life so bad? (366)

As a spokesperson of the local, Animal—and his twisted body—functions as a metonym for the poisoned city of Khaufpur, or, as Rob Nixon writes, as "a symbolic condensation of the vast army of the economically orphaned, abandoned to their fate by the merciless logic of the neoliberal marketplace " (450). However, if Animal operates as shorthand for Khaufpur, or on a larger scale, the "army of the economically orphaned," how can we interpret his rejection of a surgery that would exorcise the poisons from his body? By underscoring Animal's mobility in the city of Khaufpur, this passage demonstrates how spatiality produces certain forms of embodiment. In the uneven and gutted topography of Khaufpur, where curb cuts and other paths of access do not even register as concerns, a wheelchair would greatly compromise movement, as it is designed for flat, even, and paved terrain. In the context of Khaufpur, Animal is not disabled, but especially abled. Ability emerges as a socio-spatial experience, and because he can easily access and navigate Khaufpur's terrain, his body is no longer legible as disabled. Further, his refusal rejects the problematic politics of legibility and appearance that govern post-disaster legal compensation. In this performance of disability, the people victimized by industrial disaster, who are disproportionately "the illiterate poor," are "thrust into a labyrinth of self-fashioning as they seek to fit their bodily stories to the story lines that dangle hope of recognition, possibly, though elusively, even recompense" (Nixon 461). In the case of Bhopal, monetary value was affixed to a sliding scale of disability:

30,000 people identified as "permanently disabled" were allotted approximately \$5,200 each. The 20,000 people identified as 'temporarily disabled' were allotted approximately \$3,215 each. A final medical category—for people who had suffered injuries of 'the utmost severity'—would be the basis for up to \$25,000 in compensation. (Fortun 38)

Marketplace logics and the paradigm of recovery dovetail through the mechanism of financial compensation, which dispenses "cures" via the monetary equivalents of

disease and injury. Here, the colonial slogan of "divide and rule" transforms into "divide and cure," in which individual cash settlements paper over larger systemic failures. As previously mentioned, it was the dispersal of these settlements, along with geographic distance ("It could not happen in the United States"), that enabled Union Carbide to impose a false sense of "closure" on the tragic event. However, Animal's refusal of surgery disallows narrative closure—we cannot contain his story within the narrative arc of recovery. His story is in excess of the teleology of healing, spilling outward from the narrative framework of containment. And thus, the residues of slow violence remain. As a character especially devoted to the collective—the novel, after all, is titled *Animal's People*—Animal was unlikely to accept the solution of the individual cure, a superficial fix that narrowly frames and "diagnoses" the violence of neoliberalism. The novel thus concludes with an expression of solidarity: "Eyes, I'm done. Khuda hafez. Remember me. All things pass, but the poor remain. We are the people of the Apokalis. Tomorrow there will be more of us" (366). Once shunted into the dankest corners of Khaufpur, Animal asserts the power of the collective poor—an army that gains strength from numbers, and that cannot be contained within the boundaries of the slum. As a representative of the "lower bodily stratum," Animal signifies the material residue that proper society, with "[its] ornate rhetoric and social etiquette," must shun in order to continue the myth of wholeness and unity (Nixon 451). Thus, Animal functions as an agent of what Julia Kristeva terms "the abject." Forms of the abject, such as corpses or excrement, "show [us] what [we] permanently thrust aside in order to live" (Kristeva 3). The abject threatens "identity, system, order" through its radical ambiguity—a form without boundaries, it signifies both the "self and not-self," and thereby demonstrates the inherent instability of the body (Kristeva 4). Therefore, if one wishes to maintain order, the abject must be cordoned off, repressed, or expelled. However, the abject ultimately refuses repression, and it constantly "[resurfaces] as a discomfiting reminder of the limits to the social barriers and the studied amnesia that elite society strives to uphold" (Nixon 451). Abject forms thus derive their power from their capacity to haunt—in this case, they disallow corporate distancing through the force of sheer magnitude and the denial of narrative closure. The boundaries erected by the Kampani to maintain the neoliberal order—mechanisms of endless deferral, temporal and geographic distance, cash settlements—are haunted by the sheer magnitude of the poor.

Disabled and disempowered by a global capitalist order, Animal rejects the logic of the marketplace and the paradigm of recovery, twinned mechanisms that contain and disavow the raw, sprawling material of disaster. Animal's radical acts of counter-signification, in which he re-interprets the symbolic and material topography of the city and re-inscribes it with his presence, re-asserts his body and the collective body of his people into a space drastically transformed by the Kampani. Indeed, *Animal's People* forces us to contend with the localities erased by the distancing mechanisms of globalization, and it does so via Animal's unique spatial imaginary—a mode of understanding that emphasizes the value of local knowledge, networks of survival, and that resists the medical and corporate devaluation of Khaufpuri existence. At the novel's close, Animal tentatively gestures towards the possibility of rebirth and renewal, a cyclical alternative to the linear trajectory of recovery. Whereas the recovery model offers the individualized cure, the narrative of rebirth requires a complete systemic

overhaul as a precursor for change. As Nixon notes, "Animal views himself as a four-footed species without precedent or the prospect of progeny, the alpha and omega of his kind. We can read him as a new beginning, which (in keeping with the novel's apocalyptic tenor) doubles as the end of time" (450). This reading parallels the figuration of Animal as an agent of degradation, a figure who levels hierarchy through the democracy of shit, who brings things "down to earth...in order to bring forth something more and better" (Bakhtin 21). The "new beginning" might signal a new world order, in which the capitalist architecture structuring the globe will be heartily dismembered, or it might signal the harnessing of the collective power of the disabled poor—the people of the Apokalis.

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