



ENΘYMHMA

ENTHYMEMA - ISSN 2037-2426


No. 37 (2025)

doi: 10.54103/2037-2426/26833

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## THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM: ANIMAL VALUE(S) WITHIN AND BEYOND NECROPOLITICS IN *THE ONLY HARMLESS GREAT THING*

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### ABSTRACT

This essay investigates the conflictual and oppressive relationship between humans and animals in the context of late capitalism in Western/ized societies and how speculative fiction can imagine and inspire alternative ways for interspecies coexistence. It focuses especially on the representation of animal labor, i.e., the way animals are involved in the contemporary production system. The essay analyzes Brooke Bolander's 2018 novella *The Only Harmless Great Thing* through the lens of Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, arguing that the author provides an attempt at 'necropolitical and post-necropolitical imagination' that, despite not always being successful, envisions an alternative future without straying too far from the present.

**Keywords** — Speculative Fiction; Animals; Necropolitics; Capitalism; Animal Labor.

Romanzi, Valentina. "The Elephant in the Room: Animal Value(s) within and beyond Necropolitics in *The Only Harmless Great Thing*". *Enthymema*, No. 37, 2025, pp. 1-17



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Published online: 07/08/2025



Milano University Press

“[...] people paid to see a human ape.  
They frowned to find her happy and alive.”  
(Joshua Mehigan, “The Fair”)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the Anthropocene – a moniker that, despite resistance by several geologists (Witze), has taken roots in the collective imagination (de Freitas in Ware) – the anthropogenic, global changes to the environment demand that humanity’s way of being-in-the-world be questioned. Alongside vast research in the hard and social sciences, the humanities have been contributing to the discussion by way of ecocriticism and its many variations and subfields, interrogating the complex relationships between human and nonhuman life forces – zoe-infused beings, in Rosi Braidotti’s formulation<sup>1</sup> – and the way they are narrated. It is in this area of research that I position this essay, following a growing tradition of scholars who have been vocal about the western/ized<sup>2</sup> world’s need for new stories (e.g., Donly; Mackenthun), narratives that tackle environmental and inter-species concerns head on rather than skirting the issue or limiting their scope to a dirge for the lost present and future. Differently from other cultures, the western/ized one has been struggling with the production of stories that dare to move beyond the heartbreak and bleakness of the current situation (Mackenthun). Frederic Jameson has often been credited with the idea that, in late modernity, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. In truth, what he wrote, in a minor 1994 work titled *The Seeds of Time*, was: “It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations” (xxi). Although superficially it might seem that Jameson is implying that late modernity cannot imagine past capitalism, what he is arguing instead is that western/ized societies are struggling to conceptualize *how* to do away with capitalism – that is, the steps needed to move beyond it. This, in part, is backed by the plethora of dystopian fiction that western/ized society has been outputting in the last twenty to thirty years (Lepore; Romanzi), intent in imagining scenarios of destruction, oppression, misery, and overall decline, and “possess[ing] little to no utopian potential[, making] their moral mes-

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<sup>1</sup> “Zoe as the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself [...] stands for generative vitality. It is the transversal force that cuts across and reconnects previously segregated species, categories and domains. Zoe-centred egalitarianism is, for me, the core of the post-anthropocentric turn: it is a materialist, secular, grounded and unsentimental response to the opportunistic trans-species commodification of Life that is the logic of advanced capitalism” (Braidotti 60).

<sup>2</sup> I borrow the attribute ‘western/ized’ from Tema Milstein, recognizing its effectiveness in describing a socio-cultural reality that is not as clearly defined by geographic boundaries as it once was. Furthermore, I acknowledge that non-western/ized cultures conceptualize and live human/nonhuman relations differently from the mainstream western/ized one. In American indigenous cultures such as the Lakota/Dakota, for instance, humans, animals, and other living and non-living forces are interwoven in a network of equal relationality (see e.g., TallBear); in Aotearoa, specific environments and ecosystems such as the Whanganui River hold legal personhood. These approaches to being-in-the-world offer an alternative to the western/ized relationship between human and nonhuman entities which is under critique here, and should be kept into consideration in sketching potential ways forward.

sages [...] rather inadequate teachers of ecologically and socially sustainable behavior” (Mackenthun 3). Even the few recent texts belonging to the utopian tradition, or expanding it (e.g., those belonging to the recent *solarpunk* subgenre of speculative fiction, best represented by the 2017 anthology *Sunvault*) tend to skirt over the details about the demise of capitalism in order to focus more directly on the alternative, utopian society that awaits in an unspecified future – assuming they do imagine an alternative to capitalism instead of just a greenwashed version of it. Western/ized culture is in dire need of strong-willed stories charting the path to an alternative world both hopeful and hope-inducing without being too lenient; desirable, yet in touch with the present faults of humans. I argue, with many others (e.g., Levitas; Moylan), that, despite its many shortcomings, speculative fiction can play an important role in, at the very least, fostering awareness of the many injustices of the present, real world and, at its highest pinnacles, propose an alternative future that might lead society past its current unsustainable state.

It is in this spirit that, in what follows, I propose a reading of Brooke Bolander’s Nebula-winning novella *The Only Harmless Great Thing* (2018) vis-à-vis Achille Mbembe’s necropolitical theories, detailed later. In her speculative work, Bolander chooses to tackle the current issue of animal labor exploitation head on, imagining two interweaving plotlines that illuminate both the negative aspects of the present and past, and the hopeful, if imperfect, potential for interspecies coexistence in the future. This, I argue, configures as an attempt both at a form of ‘necropolitical’ and ‘post-necropolitical’ imagination. Despite not always being successful at imagining past the trappings of our current socio-political system, as I will show momentarily, Bolander’s novella charts the route for a kind of narrative that is not shying away from reckoning with the present ills of human behavior towards animals<sup>3</sup> while trying to imagine beyond it.

## 2. TOILING ANIMALS IN A NECROPOLITICAL WORLD

Most scholars in the fields of Animal Studies, Critical Animal Studies, and Human-Animal Studies have conceptualized the modern western/ized relationship between humans and nonhuman animals as exploitative, oppressive, and conflictual (e.g., Wadiwel; Porcher and Estebanez 12; Blattner et al. 4). These scholars argue that, particularly since the advent of capitalism, humans have approached animals as a product from which to extract value or as labor force that can and must be abused, bound, processed, and killed to produce profit. This applies also to apparently non-violent human-animal relationships such as that between a human and their pet: value remains central and exchanged as one expects their pets to provide for them – perhaps not in the form of monetary value (although animal pageants and competitions, for instance, still yield a profit) but certainly in the form of emotional value.

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<sup>3</sup> For brevity, I use “animal” as shorthand for “nonhuman animal” in this essay.

In western/ized culture, the validation for this extractionist practice long precedes capitalism: the hegemony of Man<sup>4</sup> over animals finds sanctioning in the Christian Bible<sup>5</sup> and is reinforced by a long philosophical tradition inaugurated by Aristotle ([350 BCE] 1944) and continued, among others, by modern theorists of capital (e.g., Marx), and of liberalism (e.g., Locke) (Blattner, et al. 1-2). Thus, for millennia humans have relied on animals for nourishment, personal gain, entertainment, and companionship. Nevertheless, animal labor and animal value extraction more generally have changed drastically in modern times. As Porcher and Estebanez stress, there are stark differences between traditional animal husbandry and the livestock industry, whose inception in nineteenth-century industrial capitalism makes the pursuit of profit its only goal (11). Similarly, McCullen condemns the current systemic abuse of all kinds of animals and blames capitalism for it (127), suggesting that government intervention is the only means by which it can be curbed. Noticeably, several of these commentators do not advocate for total animal liberation (a position supported by the ‘abolitionist’ faction of Animal rights activism [e.g., Regan]), but for a ‘welfarist’ position that retains a role for animal labor but attempts to improve the living conditions of the laborers (McCullen is a prime example).<sup>6</sup> In discussing these dichotomic positions, Blattner and colleagues purport that

[t]he debate between welfarists and abolitionists offers animals two options – rights without relationships (as proposed by abolitionists), and relationships without rights (as proposed by welfarists) [...]. Recently, however, a growing number of scholars have tried to find a way beyond this impasse, by identifying forms of interspecies social relationships that are not premised on ‘humane use.’ Theorists have looked for examples of interspecies relations that are based on ideas of shared membership and cooperation, and that are undergirded by rights to protection, provision, and participation (Donaldson and Kymlicka 53). (Blattner et al. 4)

To simplify matters, I will call this third approach the ‘equal relationality’ approach. Interspecies relations so far have been deeply unbalanced in favor of the human; only well after the advent of modernity has the western/ized world started doubting humanity’s hegemonic position within the ecosystem, questioning, however too little and too late, whether human exploitation of animals is rightful and immutable. As a result, activism for animal rights has been growing for the past two centuries,<sup>7</sup> at times intersecting (or leveraging, and in some cases hurting)

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<sup>4</sup> Here I use Man, capitalized, in the way that Rosi Braidotti and most posthumanist scholars do: as the epitome of the humanist ideal of a superior humanity, best represented by a white, male, heterosexual, Christian person (see e.g., Braidotti). It also mirrors Sylvia Wynter’s Man2 conceptualization.

<sup>5</sup> As per the first Book of the Bible, “[men] may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26, NIV).

<sup>6</sup> Here, I use ‘animal labor’ loosely and acknowledge the inherent obscurantist practice of referring to, say, animals being birthed, reared, and killed for meat consumption as laborers. Despite this linguistic fallacy, that would rather demand stronger terms such as ‘animal victims’ or ‘animal slaves,’ I use ‘laborers’ because, in this article, I will focus mainly on animals that do participate actively in value production through their work, and not only yield a profit by being completely passive – if struggling for survival – bodies to be consumed.

<sup>7</sup> The first official association for animal rights was born in England in 1822 under the name Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals; it was followed by other smaller associations in Europe and in the United States, where the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) was funded in 1866.

the movements for the rights of other oppressed communities. For instance, one of the earliest proposals to attribute legal rights to animals in the United States exploited a parallel between African American slaves and animals;<sup>8</sup> in Britain, the anti-vivisection movement had ties with the feminist movement.<sup>9</sup> These different forms of activism align in demanding that the present assumptions on the hegemony of Man be questioned and in imagining an alternative way to be-in-the-world, one that rejects conflict and exploitation in favor of a different paradigm. What such paradigm might be is still widely debated, but different schools of thought seem to be converging on an increased role of relationality among equals (Büscher 2)<sup>10</sup>: this is the current position of most posthumanists (e.g., Braidotti; Wolfe); care theorists (e.g., Noddings; Gary) also embrace relationality as key, supporting a shift towards a care-driven form of being-in-the-world. Moving in both these areas of research, I align myself with the hope for an alternative world where current arbitrary hierarchies of dominion have been eradicated, while still respecting the differences immanent to each species – and individual, for that matter – and where care has supplanted conflict as the driver of human and more-than-human relationships.

Regardless of the precise shape this alternative way of coexisting might take, arguing for a way out of conflict and exploitation as constitutive of the core of human-animal relationships means arguing in favor of a dismissal of the current structures of (western/ized) human society, i.e., of a shift past the oppressive, necropolitical practices imposed by late capitalism. Resource extraction, capitalism’s contemporary obsession, is ontologically tied to violence. As John-Andrew McNeish and Judith Shapiro remark, “the spectrum of violence – from dramatic/direct to slow/hidden – permeates contemporary collective life; [...] the predation of natural resources forms part of a necro-political complex” (2). Necropolitics was first introduced in 2003 by Achille Mbembe to expand on Michel Foucault’s notion of biopower – that is, “that domain of life over which power has asserted its control” (Mbembe). Mbembe’s focus is on the notion of sovereignty, or “the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die,” with a specific concern for “those figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the *generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations*” (Mbembe, emphasis added). Within necropolitics, Mbembe singles out specific contexts in which sovereign bodies exercise their power to hand out a collective death sentence to one or more *human* subgroups, selected through the application of racism. In later sections, I will expand Mbembe’s necropolitics so

<sup>8</sup> In 1844, the Citizens of Ashtabula County, Ohio, signed a proposal for an amendment of the Constitution suggesting that “the animal property of the free states be represented as well as the slave property of the slaveholding states” (“Petition from Citizens”).

<sup>9</sup> For Hilda Kean, one of the most impactful early works against vivisection published in England was *The Shambles of Science* (1904) by Louise Hind of Hageby and Lisa Shartau, who also sympathised with the suffragette movement and pitted the (female) “new forces of civilization against [male] age-old brutality” (Kean 143).

<sup>10</sup> Büscher, as a sociologist rather than a philosopher, acknowledges this turn while advocating for a more concrete, practical view that takes into consideration the intrinsic differences between species, in order to avoid the potential pitfall of too much homogenization.

that it will include animals, as Bolander focuses on the sovereign ability to choose who lives and who dies beyond the strictly human sphere.

Bolander's work, which belongs to the speculative subgenre of alternate history,<sup>11</sup> draws together two unrelated real events of early 20th-century US history, the Radium Girls case and the elephant Topsy's death by electrocution, which are merged to generate an alternate timeline where a strong association between elephants and radiation exists.

In real history, The Radium Girls were employees of the United States Radium Corporation, a defense contractor that supplied the US army with radioluminescent watches. They were tasked to paint the dials with a highly toxic radium-based paint that they ingested in deadly quantities, as they were instructed to point their brushes with their mouths and were kept in the dark about the risks of contact with radium. Between 1917 and 1927, dozens of employees died of radiation poisoning, leading to a lawsuit against US Radium which set the ground for subsequent labor safety regulations (Moore).

Topsy's case hit the headlines some twenty years before the real Radium Girls scandal. She was an Asian elephant who was electrocuted at Coney Island, New York, in 1903 in front of a large audience of reporters and onlookers, due to her having become too violent to continue performing for the circus (Daly).

Bolander's makes these two events converge by adding to Topsy's real timeline a few months working for US Radium as a substitute for the Radium Girls before being electrocuted. The novella is set at an unspecified moment of global conflict evocative of World War I. At the point the story begins, US Radium has been paying off the surviving Radium Girls and has bought 'rebellious' circus elephants to replace them, since they can better sustain radium damage. In this alternate timeline, despite humans and elephants being able to communicate in a sign language called proboscidian, elephants are still considered "just animals" (Bolander) that can be sold and exploited to their deaths. Regan, the last surviving Radium Girl in US Radium's employ, is tasked to train the elephants, among which is Topsy. The two form an uneasy bond over their impending deaths by radiation poisoning. After killing Regan's supervisor in a fit of rage, Topsy's storyline reprises real history, and she is condemned to die by electrocution in front of a wide audience. However, Regan offers her an explosive suicide pill moments before her public execution, leading to their deaths and those of the executioners and onlookers. This moment marks the beginning of the Radium Elephant Trials, which grant sovereignty to the elephants and cement the link between radioactivity and elephants to the point that, some hundred years into the future, Kat, a human scientist, is tasked to negotiate with the elephant collective, the Many Mothers, to convince them to have their genome modified so that they will glow in the presence of nuclear waste.

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<sup>11</sup> Alternate histories are described as "a timeline that is different from that of our own world, usually extrapolated from the change of a single event; the genre of fiction set in such a time" (Prucher).

The novella consists of two interwoven plotlines narrated in the third person with shifting internal focalization, featuring Topsy, Regan, and Kat as “reflectors” (James 1907). The first plotline is pseudo-historical, narrating the events leading up to Topsy and Regan’s death, while the second is speculative in the more traditional sense, focusing on the future negotiations between Kat and the Many Mothers. These storylines are interspersed with fragments of elephant tales, narrated by one of the Mothers to one of the calves and detailing their creation myth and the reason why they eventually came to glow.

Despite the many lines of analysis that this novella inspires, (e.g., the narrative choices to express a nonhuman voice, or the strong gender component of the story) what interests me especially here is how Topsy’s whole life has been entangled in human profit-making and the consequences that her death has on the treatment and sovereignty of the elephants. In what follows, I will argue that the pseudo-historical plotline depicts Topsy within the current necropolitical context, extending a racial dimension onto the elephant. Conversely, the second plotline attempts to imagine a post-necropolitical future for human-animal relationships, which nevertheless fails to free itself completely from the logic of capitalism. I will thus conclude that Bolander’s attempt is best aligned with the third, in-between approach of animal rights activism that denounces the current necropolitical treatment of animals and tries to conceptualize past animal labor exploitation toward a form of ‘equal relationality.’

### 3. THE NECROPOLITICAL VALUE OF ELEPHANT LABOR

As stated earlier, Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics is squarely anthropocentric. Here, I am expanding it through the work of Aph Ko and Syl Ko, who, in their 2017 book *Aphro-ism: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, and Black Veganism from Two Sisters*, discuss the fraught ties between racism and speciesism. As Bénédicte Boisseron writes in *Afro-Dog*, “[t]he black-animal subtext is deeply ingrained in the cultural genetics of the global north, an inherited condition informed by a shared history of slavery and colonization” (ix), and one should beware of making too hasty an analogy between race and animality, as it “can be harmful when it is meant to serve one cause over the other; when its sole function is, for example, to serve the animal cause by instrumentalizing the black cause” (xiii). Boisseron lists several examples of animal rights activism that have either trivialized or downright harmed the cause of human minorities, “reinscribing a discriminative approach that one had sought to reject in the first place” and pitting “blackness against animality, forcing black themselves to engage in a battle over spared likability” (xi-xiv). In her view, “[t]he black-animal analogy inherently and inevitably reenacts this interspecies battle, as it perpetuates a rivalry that traps the contenders in a paradigm that precludes any chance for the escape of either from this hierarchical measuring system” (xv). For most afro-pessimist thinkers, the black condition is incomparable to any other in the history of mankind (e.g., Baldwin, of course, but also Hartman and Wilderson). Nevertheless, there are parallels that are acknowledged even by some

of these scholars. “Staying clear of analogizing the black condition is something that Wilderson successfully accomplishes,” writes Boisseron, “except when it comes to the animal. [...] The black condition is without analog, *except for the animal*” (xvii-xviii, italics in the original).

By suggesting that necropolitics should be expanded to include the animal, I am following Boisseron in trying to highlight the *connection* between blackness and animality, rather than drawing a potentially harmful comparison between the two. My point is that a discourse on sovereignty and the ability to decide over the life and death of entire categories of living beings, such as necropolitics, should not leave out *all living beings apart from humans*, despite the undeniable anthropocentric source of such necropolitical practices. Animals have been subjected to species-specific forms of necropolitics for millennia; recognizing that they, too, suffer under the necropolitical oppression of Man should not mean diminishing, trivializing, or straight out eliding the plight of oppressed humans, but acknowledging that they are all *connected* by their status, in western/ized culture, as non-Man.

In the chapter “Notes from the Border of the Human-Animal Divide,” Syl Ko argues that, despite the at times stark differences in the forms of oppression experienced by a given group, a focus on the similarities would help overturn the whole system based on a dichotomy of human-other, where ‘human’ actually means a very limited type of human – western, male, white, heterosexual (essentially, what Braidotti terms ‘Man’). She writes:

When I say our situation – the situation of not-quite-humans – and animal oppression are entangled, I mean [that o]ur position in society – our social, political, and moral status – is rooted in the domain of the Other. [...] When we think about our oppressions with respect to their cause – the propping up of ‘the human’ (the long project of Western colonialism and domination) – then the fine-grained differences between them start to matter less. [...] That means, in spite of our cosmetic differences and situations – our many species, races, genders, belief systems, ways of being, geographic regions of origin – we are kindred spirits in a fight to depose the human. (Ko n.p.)

Aph and Syl Ko essentially argue that the current hegemonic worldview works on a hierarchy of categories, with the human as the most desirable and the animal as the least desirable. Specific human groups are positioned closer to the animal than to the human and should therefore work together to dismantle the whole system, rather than aim at being granted inclusion in the human category.

In Bolander’s work, necropolitics takes on both the human and the animal in the pseudo-historical plotline. Both Regan and Topsy are excluded from ever belonging to the human, with the former being forced into not-quite-human status (what Büscher calls “less-than-human” [3]) due to her belonging to an extremely poor family and thus being unable to leave US Radium for better, non-life-threatening employment. Despite their differences, both ontological and in the treatment they are reserved, they find common ground on which to build an understanding that leads to the death of ‘the human’ – that is, of those that oppressed, exploited, and for all intents and purposes killed them.



In line with Ko's argumentation to take on white supremacy as the source of multi-target oppression – i.e., oppression that reaches more than one non-human subject, in *species-specific* ways – Bolander offers a non-human human and a non-human elephant as victims of the capitalist extractivist machine, underscoring how “recent dynamics in global capitalism are the latest in a long line of historical developments that structurally diminish both humans and nonhumans” (Büscher 3). Thus, Regan and Topsy are not only exploited by the same company, but also abused by the same supervisor. However, while US Radium literally consumes both Regan's and Topsy's bodies, American law only intervenes in the former's case and remains indifferent in the latter's. Their oppression, although similar and coming from the same source, is not identical. Where their experiences of non-humanity truly converge is in the way Regan and Topsy react to being forced into such non-human status: having been isolated from their family and community, they rebuild one together, finding kinship and solidarity across the species boundary in order to exact their vengeance and reclaim their right to full agency and subjectivity.

In choosing similar but non-identical experiences of oppression for a human and an animal, Bolander seems to be heeding the warning about conflating all group-specific forms of oppression into one general category called ‘the oppressed.’ However, concentrating on the American context, which is notoriously prone to deregulated markets (Schiller), has very poor rankings in global indexes on animal welfare,<sup>12</sup> and has a long history of institutionalized racism, Bolander also makes the somewhat sketchy choice to have more than one form of oppression intersect on Topsy, as the elephant feels the consequences of both the animalization and the racialization of bodies chosen to be exploited. This, going back to Boisseron's warning about eliding blackness in favor of the animal, is where Bolander leaves herself open to criticism, as no human character is explicitly racialized in the novella, and the racial Other in Bolander's alternate universe is conflated with the animal to the point of total coincidence. In making the elephant the receptacle of both violence towards animals and violence towards racialized Others, Bolander in a sense removes the need for two separate discourses on the specificities of the oppression of these two categories, falling for the same, decades-long mistake of *comparing* rather than *connecting* the experience of black people and animals.

The most evident nod to the history and narratives of slavery is in Topsy's name itself, the same of a slave character from Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As the Many Mothers tell in their tales:

They named her after a slave in their own Stories, because even humans know Stories are We, and they try, in their so-so-clever way, to drive the Stories down gullies and riverbeds of their own choosing. But chains can be snapped, O best beloved mooncalf. Sticks can be knocked out of a Man's clever

<sup>12</sup> See, by way of example, the Animal Protection Index, where the US is currently rated D, based on 2020 data (<https://api.worldanimalprotection.org/country/usa>), or the 2020 VACI index, where the US places 48th out of 50 sampled nations and is described as a “very poor performer (‘F’)” in producing, consuming, and sanctioning cruelty, the three indicators under evaluation (<https://vaci.voiceless.org.au/countries/united-states/>).

hands. And one chain snapping may cause all the rest to trumpet and stomp and shake the trees like a rain-wind coming down the mountain, washing the gully muddy with bright lightning tusks and thunderous song. (Bolander n.p.)

Song is the other most relevant element connecting Topsy's characterization to that of the real-world African American enslaved people. Considered, in Bolander's fictional world, one of the distinguishing traits of elephant subjectivity, Topsy relies on her memory of tales and songs to retain her connection with the rest of her peers. In a parallel with Black people toiling in the fields,

As she works she sings, tufts of Story-song plucked from memory, faded but firm-rooted beneath the skin. [...] She pauses for a moment in her song. She pauses, but the singing continues, outside her skull, outside her memory, rippling out through the barn's beams. Up and down the dim length of the building, unseen Mothers catch-carry the thrum. They pass it along the line like a Great Mother's thighbone, trunk to trunk, tongue to tongue, mouthing tasting touching smelling *remembering*. Yes. Yes. *I know this one. This is Furmother's Lay. She tricked a bull. She scattered the Stories. This is one of those Stories.*

Her hum rejoins the others. The night ripens with song. (Bolander n.p., italics in the original)

While it cannot be overlooked that Bolander's choice may be detrimental to the black cause, her explicit references to African American slavery certainly help to reinforce the message of the unbearable violence inflicted on Topsy and, synecdochally, to all animals in the current extractionist epoch. Like human slaves, Topsy suffers both the horror of captivity from an extremely young age and the horror of total commodification, being relegated to the economic category of *property* – what Dinesh Wadiwel considers “[t]he chief means whereby the biopolitical war against animals is codified and secured!” (x). She persists till adulthood in a state that Giorgio Agamben would define *sacred*, and Achille Mbembe would call “a form of death-in-life” (n.p.). She is not granted personhood, her subjectivity is actively suppressed, her body is chained, flogged, and slowly consumed in the name of profit. Once she becomes too much of a liability, she is discarded in a most cruel way; even her death is turned into a spectacle to reap every last dollar from her; in line with her non-human, *sacred* status, her executioners would persevere in legal impunity (and did in real history), if it weren't for Topsy and Regan reclaiming their deaths and exacting revenge on their tormenters.

For Topsy, value extraction takes different forms at different moments of her life. First, off-page, she is a source of profit as a circus animal. Value is extracted in increments of ‘activity or passivity’: as a calf, she was exhibited as a marvel from a foreign land, to be observed and admired. As she grew, she was taught “to dance and do tricks and how to be alone in the wide old world” (Bolander n.p.), labor being demanded by way of performance. Laboring animals are none too infrequent in human history – from horses to mules to dogs, other species are entangled in our production systems. The circus is just one of the many ways in which animals can be exploited.

Nevertheless, as if ‘traditional’ animal labor was not enough to highlight its exploitative character – not outrageous enough, given its ubiquity in history – Bolander also makes the labor of the animal coincide with that of a human when Topsy takes over Regan’s old job as a factory worker – the second form of value extraction. Once she arrives at US Radium, she is given the task that used to be the Radium Girls’: holding the brush with her trunk, pointing it with her mouth, and drawing the dials on clocks and instruments. With it comes a daily quota to be reached and a supervisor who physically abuses her. Her body, already a source of profit by way of entertainment, now becomes a means of production in the manufacturing sector. As Bolander recounts:

Every day she eats the reeking, gritty poison. The girl with the rotten bones showed her how, and occasionally Men come by and strike her with words and tiny tickling whip-trunks if she doesn’t work fast enough. She feels neither. She feels neither, but rage buzzes in her ear low and steady and constant, a mosquito she cannot crush. (Bolander n.p.)

Thirdly, once she becomes too unmanageable, and thus revenue cannot be fully guaranteed, Topsy returns to yielding profit through entertainment – just not due to her exotism or performances, but due to her suffering a horrible death in front of an awe-stricken audience.

It is in this moment that Topsy, a besieged body in Mbembe’s terms – a body that has been captured and enslaved for most of its life – reclaims her agency, her sovereignty by reclaiming death itself, with two consequences: on the one hand, suicide liberates Topsy from bondage by escaping her captor’s hold; on the other, Topsy chooses to die in an explosion that destroys the very source of profit – herself – and those who extracted value from it, annihilating the possibility of further exploitation. With this act of martyrdom, to echo Mbembe’s words, “resistance and self-destruction are largely synonymous” (n.p.).

This moment, formally, comes at the end of the novella, closing the narrative. However, Regan and Topsy’s plotline is interwoven with another chain of events, set a century later, which give the reader insights into Topsy’s legacy. Thanks to Topsy, elephants have now acquired personhood and a right to sovereignty. However, as evidenced by the negotiations between the Many Mothers and the human representative, Topsy’s exploitation exceeds her death: she continues to be a site of extraction – in this case, of *symbolic* value. Her death, which linked radioactivity to elephants, prompts the “Atomic Elephant Hypothesis” (Bolander n.p.) – that is, the idea of using elephants as living signifiers of radioactive danger by making the whole species glow in the presence of radiation. This continued exploitation is explicitly acknowledged by the lead scientist working on the Atomic Elephant Project, who, talking to Kat about her proposal to launch a campaign for the correct representation of elephants in human media, remarks: “It’s just... cost aside, have you considered the levels of scrutiny we would be under if such an intensive campaign were launched? [...] That’s not even getting into the emotions surrounding Topsy’s act. Justified, unjustified – she’s at the center of this project, but do you really, truly believe any-

one should know in detail *how the sausage is made?*” (Bolander n.p., emphasis added). Tellingly enough, elephants in general and Topsy in particular continue to be associated with extractionist imaginary: one might not often get to eat elephant sausages, but these fictional pachyderms have certainly been put through the grinder, metaphorically and literally, and continue to be subject to human exploitation even after they have gained sovereignty, something that is abundantly clear to them, as well. As the elephant matriarch tells the human negotiator: “you’re asking us to more or less agree to the perpetuation of this twisted association” (Bolander n.p.). Topsy’s particular brand of symbolic exploitation is thus extended to her whole species, with the caveat that the Many Mothers choose to be subjected to it in exchange for sovereign land in which elephants will be able to live freely.

#### 4. THE POST-NECROPOLITICAL VALUES OF ELEPHANTS

The world in which the Many Mothers can choose freely whether to have their genome modified to become glowing signifiers of radiation danger is, despite its many imperfections, an *attempt* at post-necropolitical imagination. Bolander writes into her alternate history a watershed moment that clearly separates the necropolitical ‘before’ – when elephants were treated as non-humans – from the allegedly post-necropolitical ‘after’ – when elephants have achieved sovereignty and are, at least by law, considered equal to humans, i.e., the dominant human classes. This, in itself, rings an alarm bell, as it contradicts the Ko sisters’ invitation to rethink human-animal relationships past the Human, and rather attempts to carve out a space for elephants within it. Elephants, in fact, despite achieving some form of freedom, remain deeply enmeshed in human affairs, continuously assessed as potential allies whose strengths could be exploited in the fight against – in this specific instance – the passing of time and the short span of human memory for all things dangerous. They do not merely become free individual bodies, but a free *political* body – as in, a sovereign political body, capable of making collective decisions by virtue of the elephants being social animals,<sup>13</sup> a matriarchal nation whose subjects participate in community-making by way of storytelling and remembering,<sup>14</sup> and whose identity is reinforced by their own well-preserved pachydermic exceptionalist mythos.

Blattner and colleagues argue that Animal Studies is undergoing a political turn “motivated by a desire to reconcile ‘rights’ and ‘relationships,’ but more specifically [insisting] that any such reconciliation requires attending to fundamentally political questions about the representation and participation of animals in our collective decision-making” (9). Bolander’s novella seems to pick up on this, granting its sovereign elephants agency to participate in interspecies politics.

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<sup>13</sup> “We feel,” is what the elephant representative signs during the Radium Elephant Trials, the first expressed acknowledgement of elephant collective emotions (Bolander n.p.).

<sup>14</sup> “We were shackled and splintered and separated; the Many Mothers could not teach their daughters the Stories. Without stories there is no past, no future, no We. There is Death. There is Nothing, a night without moon or stars” (Bolander n.p.).

There is, however, a downside to that, as it ensnares elephants in the same conflict-based form of human politics described by Foucault, who stated that “[l]aw is not pacification, for beneath the law, war continues to rage in all the mechanism of power, even in the most regular. [...] Peace itself is a coded war. We are therefore at war with one another; a battlefield runs through the whole of society, continuously and permanently. [...] We are all inevitably someone’s adversary” (“Society” 50-1). If necropolitics is defined as the practice of sovereign bodies to instrumentalize existence and hand out collective death sentences (Mbembe n.p.), then the elephants might have at least in part moved beyond it, but they have not escaped the clutches of Foucauldian biopolitics, nor of capitalism. Bolander’s elephants might not have an interest in dealing out *death* sentences, but they very much retain a desire to control and extract. No longer enslaved, profit-making property in the capitalist system, elephants now negotiate for what is their due. “What exactly are you offering the Mothers in return if they say yes?”, reports the proboscidian translator to Kat, as she is meeting one of the matriarchs to discuss the Atomic Elephant Hypothesis. Upon hearing Kat’s answer – that the elephants would be doing everyone an incredible favor, for the greater good – the translator asks her incredulously: “Did you seriously just show up to what is basically a diplomatic meeting with no bargaining chips whatsoever?” (Bolander n.p.).

The elephant matriarch, upon deciding to accept in exchange for complete sovereignty over the territory where radioactive waste would be buried, explains:

We are not doing this for you. We are doing it for all the ones that might suffer in the future because of you and your thoughtlessness, your short tempers, your dangerously short memories. [...] If this ... compromise is the only way to make sure the story survives, the real Story ... [...] Please do not misunderstand me. We aren’t protecting your secrets. We are guarding the truth. They [future living beings] will see how we shine, and they will know the truth. (Bolander n.p.)

With such an affirmation, the matriarch is not only rejecting the human interpretation of the power dynamics that would be sealed with such an agreement – whereby the humans would be benefiting from elephant bodies at essentially no cost – but also making the elephants’ moral and intellectual superiority explicit. Her words reek of disdain, the very same that seeps from the creation tales the Mothers tell their calves, referring to humans (“flat-faced pink squeakers with more clever-thinking than sense”; *Poor things, Poor things, Poor prideful, foolish things!* [Bolander n.p., italics in the original]), male elephants (“Then as now We pitied the bulls, our Sons and Fathers and occasional Mates” [Bolander n.p.]), and other species (“a mosquito she cannot crush” [Bolander n.p.]).

Notably, Bolander’s elephants find themselves able to negotiate so fruitfully within a capitalist human system because they, too, exist socially on a conflict-based dynamics – not within the Many Mothers, per se, but in their interactions with what they perceive as the ‘other’ outside of their matriarchal community: by way of example, the creation myth of “Furmother-With-The-Cracked-Tusk, starmaker, tigger of tiger tails and player of games” (Bolander n.p.) retraces the physical and psychological fight between the female mammoth who originated all the stories

and the bull who hoarded them, and sets the tone for the strict belief in elephant matriarchal exceptionalism that pervades the rest of the tales and underscores the gendered dimension of pachydermic prejudice.

Thus, Bolander's attempt to imagine a post-necropolitical society based on equal interspecies relations falls short of truly moving beyond our current biopolitical and capitalist system of being-in-the-world. Rather, it falls into the trap of trying to welcome non-human others into the human – a well-meaning narrative decision that nevertheless does nothing to eradicate the underlying issue of species-related exceptionalism. In truth, by making the elephants able to play the capitalist game – to excel at it, even – Bolander's imagination folds under the pressure of our present reality, whereby one is considered successful only insofar that they can extract more value for themselves than others do. In other words, in trying to free the elephants from the oppression of human exploitation, she has turned them into copycats of their very oppressors. She might have successfully envisaged a stop to the *necropolitical* exploitation of animal bodies, but she has not managed to move beyond a less deadly form of capitalist extractionism.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Speculative fiction is one of the best sites for experimenting with imagination that dares acknowledge the ills of the present and work towards offering alternatives. Bolander's novella *The Only Harmless Great Thing* is a prime example of the imaginative potential of speculative fiction, and of its limits. It resonates with discourses of agency, sovereignty, extractionism, and exploitation of animal lives – that is, lives that are not human in the very narrow sense illustrated earlier. The pseudo-historical plotline well highlights the evils of the current necropolitical treatment of animals by singling out the case of an individual, Topsy, who stands for every other creature subjected to the abuse of capitalist greed – often in conjunction with a war effort. Bolander's choices for the second, future plotline, however, show that a post-necropolitical, interspecies society might still not be based on interspecies solidarity, as advocated by some scholars (e.g., Coulter), but rather on conflict that moves from the physical to the political plane. Bolander's elephants do not seem to be able – nor want – to be free from the logic of late capitalism. Human-animal relationships, as portrayed by Bolander, land rather in the non-abolitionist, non-welfarist approach described by Blattner and colleagues (4), whereby interspecies decisions are based on equal relationality, mediating between the needs and desires of different species, and do not focus solely on human necessity and demands. Anthropocentrism is not so much abandoned in Bolander's alternate future as it is juxtaposed to other forms of -centrism: different iterations of exceptionalism coexist in Bolander's world, with humans continuing to believe in their superiority over elephants and elephants in their superiority over humans, while nevertheless being able to bargain for solutions that can be mutually beneficial. Species-specific exceptionalism would not necessarily be detrimental to a post-necropolitical, post-capitalist world, as it could be a

means to recognize the intrinsic differences characterizing each species. Rather, it is its use as a justification of oppression and exploitation, as a motive for reclaiming superiority, that is to be condemned and done away with. Bolander's matriarchal elephants show the same hybris that is causing the downfall of Man: they are not dismantling the system in favor of a flat ontology – the purported reason why the Ko sisters believe interspecies solidarity should exist – but are contributing to its persistence, reinforcing hierarchies that are merely overturned, and never destroyed.

In sum, Bolander's may not be the best alternate future for human-animal relationships, nor the most imaginative in terms of interspecies non-conflict-based relationships, but it has the merit of speculating 'close to home,' along the lines of possibility, rather than implausibility. One should not be stopped in their attempts to imagine further, though. Solidarity can be one of the main drivers of interspecies interaction, if only humans and more-than-humans would relinquish conflict as the main driver of sociality.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my 2023 and 2024 colleagues at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Animal Studies Summer Institute for their precious insights on an early draft of this paper.

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