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Unthinking Mastery

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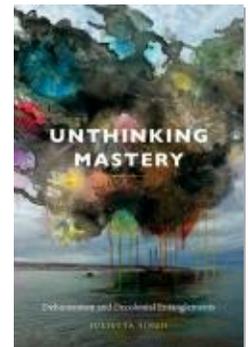
Published by Duke University Press

Singh, Juliette.

Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements .

Duke University Press, 2017.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/64085.



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CHAPTER 3

Posthumanitarian Fictions

Despite the popular mantra of multiculturalism in the 1980s, I grew up in central Canada at a moment when interracial marriages were frowned upon, a moment when old women responded to the childish misbehaviors of our brood by whispering *It's the mixed blood!*, a moment when the word “shit” circulated with schoolyard titillation to describe the color of my skin. My father was a child of Partition, born in India in a region of rural Punjab that would, in 1947 when he was six years old, become Pakistan. In the mass upheavals and extraordinary violence of that political moment, he migrated with his family to Amritsar, just on the edge of the Indian border hedging against a newly carved Pakistan. He would later immigrate to Canada to study at McGill University in Montreal, where he would meet my mother. She was herself a child of the diaspora, born in Ireland to a German Jewish mother who had been sent away from Berlin with the rise of Hitler, and to an Irish intellectual father who would accept a position at McGill and shift his family to Canada in the 1950s. My parents were drawn to each other's differences and beauty, filled with the enchantments of the 1960s, the glamor and possibility of unions across divides. But theirs was an uneasy marriage, fraught with cultural differences and the legacies of personal and political violence that persisted and proliferated through them. By the time I was born—the fourth and last of a motley hybrid crew—the utopian spirit of the '60s had quite dispersed.

When I was young, my father completed medical school and we moved from a two-bedroom unit in a duplex to a huge, bedraggled blond-brick home in an area menacingly known as “the Gates.” Couched in a small bend of the Assiniboine River, it was an estuary of Winnipeg's old money, the homes of the nation's early bankers and their ilk. It was made clear to us that *our kind* was not uniformly welcome in this neighborhood. But my mother had a special fancy for historical homes, and for trees whose lives and leg-

acies far exceeded our own. Despite my father's protests, we moved into what would become my mother's decades-long preoccupation: restoring, improving, and preserving a small space of the earth and its minor histories.

The lore of my family casts me as a difficult child, signaled unabashedly by the nickname "the little tornado"—a name bestowed on me during the one and only visit from my Babu Uncle, my father's brother from whom he was mostly estranged. My mother sketches the scene of a preverbal me tearing out my hair in frustration (from where this frustration emerges is conspicuously absent from the narrative) and offering it to her in menacing handfuls. I was a no-less-difficult teen—suspended regularly from school, remiss in class participation and attendance, and impatient with the confines of my world.

But there is a singular story couched within this family lore, and it is a story that I have always quietly cherished whenever my mother feels compelled to share it. It is the story of my inaugural act as a "humanitarian": I was perhaps five years old (in the narrative, I am always younger) when, wandering home alone after visiting a friend, I saw a white man in tattered clothing eating out of a neighbor's garbage can. I was shocked at the sight and understood that I had a responsibility to act. I ran home in tears and pleaded with my mother to help, which she did readily. We brought him home and sat together in the backyard eating homemade pizza, learning the details of how he had come to be scavenging for discarded food in our affluent neighborhood. As it turned out, he was a ward of the province living in a group home for people with "mental deficiencies" in a neighborhood adjacent to ours. My mother would come to discover that his overseers had left their wards alone for a long holiday weekend without anyone present to distribute food and medications.

For all the ways in which I would or could not conform, for all of my bad behavior within the narrative remembering of our shared family history, this was my narrative of redemption. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that it became profoundly influential to my own self-formation, to how I learned to read myself in relation to the more negative (and indeed more frequent) narratives that circulated within the family. This redemptive narrative was one that propped me up against an errant past; humanitarianism became for me a kind of refuge from the tornado that had otherwise defined me.

Through my readings of the recurring humanitarian figures of post-colonial literature, I began to return again and again to this redemptive

scene of my own self-formation. We do not always understand why we attach ourselves to certain things and ideas in the world, yet as I reread these literary figures, I began to think critically about my own formative narratives—narratives that, in ways both clear and less accessible, have shaped my self-understanding as a particular kind of subject. There was, indeed, a critical continuity between this scene of redemptive self-formation and the fact that I would pursue a doctoral degree in the critical humanities. One seemed to lead directly into the other, as though the work of the humanitarian and the work of the humanities were sutured. Yet through a vulnerable engagement with posthumanitarian fictions, I began to recognize mastery at play in what is commonly understood as a height of ethical action in the service of others. Becoming vulnerable to the self-narrations of other subjects, I also saw how the more and less overtly humanitarian aspects of my own self-constitution were in fact intimately interlaced with those less redemptive qualities that had also formed me. Rather than to rely on a dialectical ethics in which we are either “good” or “bad” subjects, an antimasterful approach to reading our own histories—and the histories of others—opens us to the messiness of our pasts, to the entanglements of our lives, and to the unsolvable riddles that shape us.

Moving in this chapter between readings of J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) and Mahasweta Devi’s Bengali short story “Little Ones” (1998), I engage postcolonial literary texts that pressure the ways humanitarian work has been imagined, represented, and enforced in the neocolonial present.¹ These texts, which are exemplary illustrations of what I call posthumanitarian fictions, hinge on the narratives that humanitarian characters tell themselves to confirm their work, narratives that position them as inherently nonmasterful actors committed to the labor of advancing humanity. I am interested in the figure of the humanitarian precisely because of its attachment to narratives of humanitarian benevolence that are revealed to have concrete, material effects in the production of human inequalities. That these narratives are postcolonial is crucial to my reading of posthumanitarian fictions, because I employ the term “postcolonial” not merely to signal particular geopolitical spaces but rather to name a constitutive modality of global political economy today. In this sense, my movement between the terms “postcolonial” and “neocolonial” insists on the ongoing entanglements and critical forms of mastery that carry over an imagined temporal divide between formal colonial rule and its afterlives.

The figure of the humanitarian and its narrative attachments illustrate how our conceptions of the “best” human practices in the globalized world today remain committed to—indeed founded on—forms of violence and erasure that continue to be framed uncritically across popular and academic discourses. In these texts, humanitarians, who desire to work in the service of others less fortunate, finally cannot be extricated from the unequal power relations they seek to redress.² They emerge as figures that stand in opposition to the colonial mastery of others but also unwittingly work alongside its modern-day iterations. In this way, they represent the complex entanglements of politics and ethics through forms of humanitarian aid, and they offer an urgently needed perspective on the neocolonial valences of humanitarianism as ideology and practice. Despite the fact that humanitarian characters *desire* deeply to act in ethical ways, these narratives emphasize the complicity of humanitarian actors with the systems they oppose. I engage complicity through Mark Sanders, who argues that “when opposition takes the form of a demarcation *from* something . . . it cannot, it follows, be untouched by that to which it opposes itself. Opposition takes its first steps from a footing of complicity” (2002, 9).³ Etymologically signaling a “folded-together-ness,” complicity becomes for Sanders “the very basis for responsibly entering into, maintaining, or breaking off a given affiliation or attachment” (x). In this chapter, I turn to the humanitarian as a crucial figure through which to begin to reframe and renarrate the complicities of liberal subjectivity broadly, and to pressure us to loosen the attachments to which, as individual readers, we cling in order to frame ourselves as particular kinds of subjects.

Set amid an unnamed South African civil war during apartheid, Coetzee’s novel charts the path of the harelipped protagonist, Michael K. Having spent his life outcast and institutionalized, K is driven by ecological attachments and by acts of cultivation. After the untimely death of his mother, he desires to extricate himself entirely from his war-torn environment, investing himself in the landscape as a refugee of war. Toward the novel’s end, K is captured by the state and, after his collapse, is sent to a camp hospital where the medical staff aims to restore his health in order to release him once again into a prisoner work camp. At this moment, the novel abandons the otherwise omniscient narrative voice, shifting instead to the first-person narration of an unnamed pharmacist hired as a wartime medical officer. Through the narration of the officer, a self-characterized

humanitarian actor, the reader is delivered into liberal desire squarely within and alongside the frustrations of the humanitarian worker. At this juncture, the novel recounts the medical officer's bewildering encounter with K, whose emaciated body by all medical accounts should no longer be living. Against his patient's own desires to be left alone, the officer is driven to restore his patient to proper health. Ultimately, this drive to heal his patient is revealed to be fundamentally entangled with the medical officer's need to enforce his self-understanding as an agent of goodness.

In "Little Ones," Devi emphasizes the longing of the humanitarian actor to extricate himself from a relation of mastery. Mr. Singh, the story's protagonist, is a government employee hired for a short-term position to establish a relief camp in an impoverished region of Bengal. Singh's mission is to oversee the rationing of annual supplies for the starving *adivasi* (tribals)—the indigenous peoples of India who are excluded from state-afforded rights. He finds himself thrust into his role as a relief officer, and while initially repelled by the human bodies of those in need, he quickly comes to embrace his exalted status as a humanitarian. But Singh's humanitarianism reaches its limits when, at the end of the story, he is confronted by fugitives of the state who, having been deprived of basic nutrition, have become (in)human pygmies. Even more horrifying than the starved and emaciated bodies of those Singh has been serving, these unbelievable "inhuman" bodies force him to concede to his own complicity within a postcolonial system that produces healthy human subjects at the expense of others. Assailed by these unbelievable bodies, Singh's alibi as a good humanitarian subject collapses in on itself.

Posthumanitarian fictions such as these are a subgenre of postcolonial literature that create and then problematize alliances between the reader and humanitarian characters, functioning through the psychodynamics of identification at play in reading.⁴ Situated in relation to the humanitarian, the reader becomes aligned with humanitarian ideology. As humanitarian protagonists confront their complicities within systems that produce their objects of aid, the reader dwells intimately within the narrative frames and sutures of other "good" subjects. Posthumanitarian fictions represent characters whose work is revealed to harmonize with the more overt force of colonial mastery, and readers are led through the structural form of the texts into a double identification with humanitarian figures *and* the aid recipients against whom they come to struggle. By doing so, these fictions

ultimately urge readers beyond a politics of compassion for the other, directing the reader back to its own complicit relations.⁵

Posthumanitarian fictions urge us toward a radical revision of the discourses of human rights and humanitarian action and of the notion of the properly “human” that gives rise to them. They summon the erasures and exclusions that make these efforts possible, implicating the reader through narrative devices that highlight, and in turn upset, our alliances. Novels, Lynn Hunt (2007) has argued, were instrumental forces in giving rise to human rights through their capacity to represent and create empathy from bourgeois readers toward “common” people. She illustrates how eighteenth-century upper-class readers (not unremarkably, mostly bourgeois women) began to imagine the interiority of lower-class people through narrative representation, creating a frame of empathy that made possible a thinking of (other white, Western) humans as beings with a critical likeness that were deserving of “universal” rights. For Hunt, whose work is invested in a politics of empathy, reading novels allowed privileged readers to imagine that all other humans (delineated via the shared whiteness of English and French peoples) had an interiority much like their own.

In his analysis of what he calls the “Third World *Bildungsromane*,” Joseph Slaughter (2007) traces how empathetic reading takes on a much less idyllic political function. This increasingly popular genre represents despotism abroad through characters that are able to escape or challenge the barbarity of their native lands. Through these texts, readers identify with characters that have suffered and survived the atrocities of elsewhere. They are able to feel that they themselves have, through the act of reading and thus “knowing,” staged a “humanitarian intervention.” However much I may want to recuperate a sense of the reader as one engaged in the cultivation of critical capacities, Slaughter’s formulation warns how readily reading can reaffirm rather than challenge global politics. Indeed, as Freud argued in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, reading practices based on empathy have a disturbing habit of allowing the reader to insert themselves universally: “We shall always tend to consider people’s distress objectively—that is, to place ourselves, with our own wants and sensibilities, in *their* conditions, and then to examine what occasions we should find in them for experiencing happiness or unhappiness. This method of looking at things, which seems objective because it ignores the variations in subjective sensibility, is, of course, the most subjective possible, since it puts one’s own mental

states in the place of any others, unknown though they may be” (2010, 62). Because empathetic reading does not challenge the reader’s own subjectivity but instead allows them unthinkingly to impose their own “wants and sensibilities” on others, it becomes a masterful gesture in which the self is always authorized above and beyond its others. Empathetic reading might allow readers to extend their sense of who is human, but without calling into question the presupposed humanity of the reader and the politics that gave rise to it as such.

This is precisely why vulnerable reading is so crucial to the exchange between reader and text. In contrast to the work of the novel in the eighteenth century and to empathetic readings of contemporary representations of Third World despotism, posthumanitarian fictions unsettle the narrative sutures of the empathetic reader—to open the fissures that join the reader to its textual allies, to pressure the racial politics of the humanitarian/recipient relation, and in so doing to query the reader’s particular claims to and performances of humanity. Posthumanitarian fictions anticipate—but crucially, do not announce—ways of being that exceed or depart from the hegemonic “human” of modernity: the bounded, Western, white, heteromasculine, able-bodied subject. This work of the text on the psychic and bodily life of the reader is crucial to the double-pronged project of dehumanism: on the one hand, a critique of Western humanism through attention to narrative and its fissures, to how exclusions are revealed through close attention to narratives that seem otherwise seamless; and on the other, an opening toward alternative, creative, and as yet unimagined forms of political action and relation. Critically, this opening toward the unknown is radically different from the psychic splitting of the subject. The latter defensively closes down the possibilities by moving too quickly to cordon off the good from the bad, the pure from the persecutory. By bringing readers into this defensive disavowal of the split subject, posthumanitarian fictions invite us into the splits and crevices of our own subjectivities, inviting us to inhabit ourselves differently.

Humanitarian Fetishism

Posthumanitarian fictions enable us not only to see the interrelations among structural, material, and ideological forms of oppression but also to begin to envision alternate forms of alliance that exceed those that currently

define global relations. In posthumanitarian fictions, narrative form and fissure reveal humanitarianism to be part of an ideological imaginary—a way of relating to the structural and material facts of the neocolonial enterprise through what I call “humanitarian fetishism.” Coupling Marx’s (1992) formulation of the commodity with Freud’s ([1962] 2000) conception of the fetish, humanitarian fetishism is a process that negates one’s own complicity in the mastery of the state over its disenfranchised subjects by obscuring the material, social, and psychic aspects of humanitarian practice. In Marxist theory, “commodity fetishism” names the process of disavowing the “definite social relation between men” in the production of material objects (1992, 165). This disavowal leads to the fantasy that in capitalism one simply exchanges money for an object. Marx compels us to recognize that material objects do not magically appear but are produced by and through material labor, which is in fact the source of an object’s value. Fetishism in Freud takes a decidedly psychic turn, naming the overvaluation of an inappropriate sexual object. What is important here is that for Freud the choice of the fetish object has a very determinate psychological etiology. A fetish is a fantasmatic way of covering over a traumatic realization; in response to trauma, which must be disavowed, the subject immediately rescripts the original trauma with an object-ideal that governs the subject’s fantasy life.

Despite a long-standing difficulty in reconciling the Marxist and Freudian accounts of fetishism within critical theory, Christopher Breu concatenates the two versions in his analysis of what he calls “avatar fetishism.” Drawing on Slavoj Žižek, Breu is interested in how materialities and bodies are disavowed by postmodern culture’s production of identities. For Breu, “avatar fetishism” names the disavowal of “the material processes, objects, and embodiments that structure and enable everyday life in our ostensibly post-industrial era” (2014, 22). In psychoanalytic terms, avatar fetishism is “akin to the construction of an ideal self or an ideal ego” (22). Breu’s merging of the valences of Marxist and psychoanalytic fetishisms helps us to see how the inability to register and attend to the materialities and material agencies that make particular kinds of life possible is intimately tied to processes of subject formation and of psychosocial life.

While humanitarian action hinges on relations of power (since the humanitarian is one who is in a position of relative power and thus able to offer aid to those in need), posthumanitarian fictions illustrate how this power becomes masterful through humanitarian fetishism. By obscuring

and enforcing one's own power in the humanitarian effort, by upholding the narrative of humanitarian benevolence and disavowing material complicities, humanitarian characters come to reproduce the very structures of power they desire to dismantle. The humanitarian ego becomes the benevolent master of someone else's house. Singh's and the medical officer's work turns out to humanize themselves but does little to uphold the humanity of those they seek to uplift. Critically, this process of humanization that looks to the other but ultimately turns back toward oneself echoes the historical justification for the humanities, which has sought expressly to humanize its students. Humanitarian fetishism allows these characters, like those engaged in the humanities, to fantasize about becoming more fully human precisely by repressing their participation in the constitutive dehumanization of aid recipients. Put simply, humanitarians can only come to understand themselves as the kinds of subjects that do good in the world by ignoring the masterful material relations that enable their work. Humanitarian fetishism applies not strictly to those who work in explicit spaces of aid but is also a critical compulsion of liberal subjectivity itself. Focusing on the figure of the humanitarian throws humanitarian fetishism into relief by turning readers toward our own relations to mastery, whether we pretend to be unmasterful in order to prop up the ideal of our benevolent subjectivities or we believe in "good" forms of mastery as necessary to the elevation of all humans.

In her work on the politics of humanitarian aid, Lisa Smirl argues that "the practices involved in post-crisis reconstruction by the international humanitarian aid community are inseparable from the production and reconstruction of global relations and identities" (2008, 237). Smirl illustrates how humanitarian aid practices, and in particular the spatio-material politics that enable such practices, ultimately confirm and "reconstruct" the disparities between aid workers and those they seek to assist. The aim of Smirl's work is to intervene in what she calls the "humanitarian imaginary," a mode of intervention that is based on "idealized assumptions regarding social organization and community" (2015, 2). The practices of humanitarianism reproduce, often devastatingly, the divides between the Global North and South. Indeed, as Costas Douzinas (2007) and Elizabeth Bernstein (2010) have argued from quite different vantage points, humanitarianism can easily couple with the military objectives of imperial power.

Both *Life & Times of Michael K* and "Little Ones" pressure the "humanitarian

tarian imaginary,” emphasizing how humanitarian subjectivities are foundationally shaped by forms of mastery they persistently disavow. In these stories, the impulse toward mastery over other human bodily and psychic lives cannot be extricated from the aims of humanitarian characters, and the power to disavow one’s own complicity becomes folded into mastery’s particular function in the neocolonial crisis zone. As fictions, these texts reveal the always fantasmatic nature of mastery, positioning disavowal as that which paradoxically makes mastery flourish. The qualities of mastery that I elaborated in the introduction to this book emerge subtly but powerfully across these stories: despite their own profound desires, humanitarian characters work to distinguish themselves from their objects of aid, to form hierarchical relations between themselves and their aid targets, and to extend this relation across time.

What we see through representations of humanitarian action in the postcolony is a humanitarian subject that is split. On the one hand, the humanitarian sustains a self-narration as a benevolent political subject working to amend the damages of oppressive regimes. On the other hand, this subject disavows its material and ideological entanglements with neocolonial power. Repeatedly, the humanitarian protagonists of these fictions cannot bear to confront their complicities and they cling to a need to neatly demarcate the good from the bad. By inviting readers to identify with humanitarian protagonists, posthumanitarian fictions urge readers to attend to their own fictions, to the ways their conceptions of themselves as fundamentally benevolent often require a forgetting of the negative valences of their entanglements. Posthumanitarian fictions can in this sense be read as narratives *about* narratives and are fictions that beckon readers to engage literature as an ethical terrain from which intimate forms of self-reflection become critical potentialities.

The spatio-material politics of humanitarianism resounds with what Fanon in the colonial context called the ever-present “lines of force” that structured the colonies (1963, 38). For Fanon, the spatial politics of the colony revealed overtly the force of the colonial relation; the colonies were divided into “compartments”—different zones of restriction and access that reinforced the power of the master while ensuring the subjugation of the slave. Emphasizing the spatial politics of queer life, Sara Ahmed builds on Fanon to argue that “colonialism makes the world ‘white,’ which is of course a world ‘ready’ for certain kinds of bodies, as a world that puts certain ob-

jects within their reach” (2006, 111). Ahmed’s argument builds on the ways the world becomes oriented toward certain bodies well beyond those colonial contexts in which the “lines of force” are directly demarcated. Fanon and Ahmed resonate in posthumanitarian fictions as they represent the psychic and material lives of humanitarians whose presence in the crisis zone continuously confirms and situates their superiority over those they have come to serve. The critical continuities across colonial regimes and humanitarian practices are crystalized through postcolonial representations of the crisis zone as the ground on which the human is revealed to be not only a historically contingent subject but one that continues to be ideologically and structurally enforced. Through their representations of humanitarian actors, Coetzee and Devi emphasize those “best practices” of liberal action by attending to the narratives issued by these characters about their own benevolent functions. These texts insist that dehumanization is a structural problem that not only implicates but *sustains* the humanitarian as a figure of liberal excellence.

When *Life & Times of Michael K* turns abruptly two-thirds of the way through the novel to the narration of the medical officer, much attention is given over to K’s body as a site of bewildering emaciation. Although K refuses treatment, his body continues to be subjected by the state via its workers. The bodily enforcements and discomforts to which our protagonist is subjected are narrated and queried by the new narrative voice of the humanitarian. It is as though within the narrative only those who are deemed downcast are embodied, while those more normative and able bodies that give aid come under a privileged bodily erasure. It is not simply that K falls victim to this system and suffers as a result; it is that those well-fed bodies thrive within the systems they seek to amend. This thriving is perversely represented through a critical narrative absence, the novel’s casual erasure of the bodily conditions of the medical officer’s modes of sustenance in the hospital. Here we might recall the critical function of the mundane in Gandhi’s writings that I signaled in chapter 1. For Gandhi, the details of everyday bodily habits and processes were vital to the subject in search of truth. Scrupulous attention to the mundane for Gandhi was crucial to the pursuit of an ethical life. Yet while so much narrative attention is given to K’s body—and to how this body is (mis)read in the hospital/camp—the medical officer’s bodily habits, spatial relations, and alimentary practices are made powerfully invisible in the text.

While the medical officer imagines himself to be a caregiver in pursuit of healing, he confronts the fact that his work within the militarized space of the hospital is absolutely complicit with the penal system that will in turn take his patient's healthy body and put it to service in a war his patient wishes to avoid. This aligns with the novel's provocative skirting of race and its particular force in the South African context; while race is virtually imperceptible across the novel, the style and form of the medical officer's narration forcefully insinuates racial difference and its attending dehumanizations. What the novel "forgets" to include emerges poignantly, asking readers to re-member the material and psychic structures that prop up our own intimate and political lives.

"Little Ones" plays more directly with the contrast between the bodies of those in need of aid and the bodily comforts to which Singh as humanitarian is privy. As a political activist, Devi insists that the "sole purpose" of her fiction is to "expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies" and to write fiction that is a documentation of reality (1998, ix). Based on nutritional and anthropological research, Devi depicts the "stunted" body of tribal peoples not as a metaphor for dehumanization but as a fact of deprivation. While Devi's insistence on the factual does not account for the instrumental work of narrative itself in the making and shaping of particular bodies, her overtly political fiction does point us to the tangible failures of the postcolonial nation-state and to the liberal bourgeoisie's complicity with the creation of abject postindependence tribal life.

At the start of the story, Singh is characterized as "extremely honest and sympathetic" and is set against the region's impoverished inhabitants who have "no *honest way of living*" (Devi 1998, 1). Taking up a short-term position away from his comfortable city office in the food department, Singh is shocked by the desolation of the geographic region and its people. The narrator reveals that Singh has been educated about tribal life exclusively through commercial Hindi films, in which the adivasi are represented in perpetual states of ecstatic song and dance. As such, Singh "had the impression that adivasi men played the flute and adivasi women danced with flowers in their hair, singing, as they pranced from hillock to hillock" (2). His filmic illusion of tribal life is shattered by his contact with the "near-naked, shriveled, worm-ridden, swollen-bellied" bodies of the adivasi, and the encounter initially "repels" him (2).

Set against this scene of absolute dehumanization are details of the comforts afforded to Singh as aid-giver: “A bath in cool well water. His aunt’s husband—a Minister. Hence, top quality rice served at table. Peas pulao. Meat, gulabjamun, pickle. At night, beds out in the open. The earth dampened with water, so slightly cool” (Devi 1998, 9). While Singh remains psychically unsettled by the sight of the adivasi people and by narratives that circulate among the government workers of terrifying ghost children that live in the forest and steal food rations, the story offsets Singh’s own bodily entitlements against those he serves. Unlike the conspicuously absent bodily comforts of the medical officer in Coetzee’s novel, Singh’s comforts are embedded in the narrative as spatial objects that physically and psychically orient Singh as distinct from those he serves and that waylay the haunting facts and fantasies of life in the region.

While Singh accepts these comforts, he continues to be haunted by stories—not only of inhuman thieving children but also of government officials who themselves steal food and other rations to sell on the black market. The logic of his informant suggests that since the “savage,” “irresponsible,” and “animalistic” tribal populations cannot care for themselves despite government charity, there is little use in ensuring that the rations properly reach them. Ration theft turns out to be not only the work of little inhuman bodies that emerge from and disappear back into the forest but also the work of those who represent and serve the state. The story in this sense collapses the division between the state and its adversaries.

The acuity of the story is in how it characterizes Singh’s desire to break from the system he represents. Making a decision to set himself off from other corrupt government officials, Singh engages the humanitarian imaginary by believing that his politics can be parsed from his privilege. He is by all accounts a successful humanitarian actor: he runs a “disciplined camp” that appears to be free of government corruption and supersedes protocol by insisting on an increase of medical and nutritional supplies (Devi 1998, 14–15). But humanitarian fetishism seeps into the narrative through Singh’s increasing comfort with his status as a successful humanitarian. Despite the fact that the narrative from its outset has emphasized that “the entire area is a burnt-out desert” on which nothing can grow (1), he fantasizes that he can persuade the tribals to engage in agricultural life: “He also wonders whether it will be possible to change their future. Honest and compassion-

ate officers are needed. Such officers will be able to *convert* these people to agriculture. He decides to submit a *note* the moment he gets to Ranchi. It's not possible for so many people to survive only on relief year after year" (15). The language of "conversion" in this passage emphasizes the split between Singh's desire to help those in need and the simultaneous desire to bring them into the fold of his own ideology. This profound desire to help becomes folded into an ideology of conquest in which Singh—imbued with rights as a humanitarian citizen and with a degree of state authority—is the exceptional figure who can enact radical change simply by persuading the tribals to act differently and by submitting a simple note to the authorities informing them of his solution. Singh cannot see that couched within his own purported claims to goodness is a desire for conquest. Precisely because he refuses to see his own complicity at work, he is able to set aside the haunting legacies of both state-employed and ghostly thieves and to fall calmly into "untroubled sleep" (15). What "Little Ones" illustrates is how Singh's desire, through its fetishistic play, refuses the ecological and political realities that not only give rise to the abject lives of the tribals but also, perversely, enable his own humanitarian ego-ideal to flourish.

Sociogeny and Narrative Force

Literature, I am arguing, is a crucial site through which to explore how narratives instantiate subjectivities. For Fanon, as we saw in chapter 1, narrative has a sociogenetic function, producing and sustaining humans in ways both material and ideological. Although Fanon's attention is toward black male embodiment in the colonies, his formulation of sociogenesis extends to all modern embodied subjectivities. Reading literature can be a crucial vantage point from which to rethink the human as a product shaped and enforced through narratives that are historically, socially, politically, and filially produced. Shaped through narrative, subjects are always also (and often unthinkingly) engaged in the ongoing narrative productions and enforcements of themselves—and of others. Posthumanitarian fictions emphasize how even those of us deeply invested in the labor and ethics of human care remain active in the creation of "human" subjectivity and in the enforcements of its abject alterities. Put concisely, these fictions show us how claims to goodness (signaled through humanitarian action) are ensnared in the production and enforcement of dehumanization.

Approaching these constitutive narratives with vulnerability—with a willingness to engage that which we have wished to avoid, and in so doing be crafted anew—can be a world-making practice through which we become other to ourselves. Posthumanitarian fictions draw readers toward their own critical complicities with structures of dehumanization, emphasizing how complicity becomes obscured through narrative practices that continuously obfuscate responsibility toward others. In the effort to approach a dehumanist ethics—which is itself an enduring and irreducible commitment—we must read deconstructively and approach texts, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminds us, not as anthropologists but as imaginative readers prepared for forms of self-othering as “an end in itself” (2003, 13). Through vulnerable reading, and through an avowal of complicity to which I turn in the next chapter, we might begin to revise, rewrite, and elaborate ourselves by untangling and demystifying the narratives that have crafted us to date.

Life & Times of Michael K underscores the medical officer’s failure to become vulnerable to the narrative force that has produced both himself and his patient as particular kinds of subjects. The novel maps an intricate connection between the medical officer’s claim to goodness and his unrelenting need to hold control over his dehumanized patient. Through a psychodynamics of narrative identification, which sutures readers to the narrative voice(s) of the text, the reader becomes textually and ethically implicated in this paradigm. Structurally, the novel begins and ends with an omniscient narrative voice, but three-quarters of the way through it shifts to the first-person voice of the nameless humanitarian medical officer before returning to the omniscient narrator to conclude the novel. These two narrative voices, critically distinct in tone but linked through their repeated dehumanization of K, likewise reveal the sociogenetic force that unrelentingly bears down on the “disabled” protagonist.

In the first sentences of the novel, a sympathetic midwife obscures K’s newborn body from his mother before assuring her that a child with a hare-lip is a sign of good luck. Despite this assurance, his mother “did not like the mouth that would not close and the living pink flesh it bared to her” (Coetzee 1983, 3). Relaying the mother’s dislike for the physical body of her child, the narrator takes on through free indirect discourse the mother’s alienation from her child, repeatedly describing the baby K as “it.” Unwanted and dehumanized from the outset of the novel, K’s body reveals an

openness (a mouth that would not close) and externalization (the baring of living pink flesh) that is unpalatable to the social world embodied through the mother. As the novel progresses, K is repeatedly evoked in animalistic terms, likened, for example, to “a dumb dog” (28). Unabatedly harsh in the portrayal of K, the narrator presents the reader with an unsettling and unrestrained “factual” account of K’s bodily, psychic, and social life.

After following the exhaustive details of K’s journey through dispossession, the death of his mother, his search for her ancestral home, his retreat from a social world at war, and his increasingly conflicted relation to eating as a necessary act of violence against that which one consumes (a fascinatingly Gandhian crisis), he is misrecognized as an accomplice to war deserters and captured by the state. The novel then turns abruptly to the narrative voice of the nameless wartime medical officer, a voice that appears initially sympathetic toward K and comes as a form of readerly relief. Yet these two narrators are in crucial ways aligned, not only through their persistent dehumanization of K but through their roles as “social” voices: the first, omniscient, and the second, a poignantly nameless liberal subject.

The medical officer’s narration begins with a fundamental misrecognition of K and with a concern for his patient’s well-being: “There is a new patient in the ward, a little old man who collapsed during physical training and was brought in with very low respiration and heartbeat. . . . I asked the guards who brought him why they made someone in his condition do physical exercise” (Coetzee 1983, 129). The novel establishes an initial identification between the reader and the humanitarian narrative voice, on the one hand distinguishing them by virtue of the reader knowing the details of K’s backstory (which situates the reader, interestingly, in a position of narrative authority over the medical officer), while on the other hand aligning them through a shared desire to preserve K’s body and to bestow him with full humanity. This alliance is distressed, however, as the narrator becomes increasingly ambivalent and forceful toward the object of its humanitarian desire. Initially characterizing himself as “soft” within a hard system and a healer amid systemic degradation, the medical officer is finally disabled through his relation to K from remaining within his own well-crafted narrative about his exceptional status as humanitarian. Understanding that his patient’s story has been radically misrepresented by the state, the medical officer struggles to recraft K’s history through his medical assessments and through the insufficient details of a patient who refuses to

abide by the strictures of self-accounting that the state demands of him. In the geopolitical space of the camp hospital where prisoners, inmates, and patients become interchangeable categories, K's anomalous body comes to haunt the medical officer as he realizes that it signals not only its medical exception but the pervasive exclusions of the nation-state in and beyond times of war. While K's shocking emaciation may at one level be read as self-induced, it also betrays for the medical officer the systemic injustices that produce it and that sustain his own fully imbued humanity (132).

Benita Parry argues that in Coetzee's oeuvre, various "figures of silence" are "muted by those who have the power to name and depict them" (1998, 151). Following this logic, K stands in contradistinction to the medical officer, who attempts through his own narrative projections to account for his patient's silence. Parry's concern that such figures of silence may well reinforce the supremacy of Europe—of Europe's historical claim to the word and the world—is crucial to a consideration of the medical officer's function in the novel. Although his encounter with his patient begins with compassion and with a desire to revise the state's narrative about K to protect him from criminal punishment, his language and logic continuously reveal his masterful drives. His narration begins with repeated pronouncements of uncertainty about his patient: "Though he looks like an old man, he claims to be only thirty-two. Perhaps it is the truth" (Coetzee 1983, 130). Signaled by the "perhaps" that throws the truth into question, the narrator shows a willingness to suspend his authority and to engage other narrative possibilities. Yet his claim to authority comes quickly into conflict with his commitment to being "soft." Having successfully stalled the authorities from an undoubtedly torturous interrogation of his patient, the medical officer declares: "the long and the short of it is that by my eloquence I saved you. . . . I hope you will be grateful one day" (142). Insisting that his "eloquence" is K's saving grace, the medical officer's work as a medical practitioner becomes bound to his desire to wield discursive power; he cannot help but to wish for the gratitude of his patient, and in so doing reveals the congruencies of discourse, enforcement, and aid in humanitarian action.

K's unwillingness to comply with his enforced medical treatment becomes for the narrator a rejection of his own self-designated identity as a humanitarian amid the war. What the medical officer cannot see is how K's refusal to comply with the treatment is part of a much larger resistance to institutional force. Noting K's lack of desire for "status, authority,

community, and property,” Anthony Vital suggests that while K fosters no resentment for his own lack and is “imposed upon utterly, yet without complicity,” the medical officer by contrast “finds his own complicity simultaneously distasteful and inescapable” (2008, 91). K’s recalcitrance becomes for the narrator a paralyzing force: “You have never asked for anything, yet you have become an albatross around my neck. Your bony arms are knotted behind my head, I walk bowed under the weight of you” (Coetzee 1983, 146). Crippled by the symbolic weight of K’s body, a body that is evoked now as a dehumanized albatross, the medical officer struggles to rationalize his position in relation to his (inhuman) patient. He claims control by renarrating their relation and filtering it through the canon of Western Romanticism as he leans on Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” ([1798] 1951), and he shores up his own human subjectivity by dehumanizing his patient. Through this double movement, Coetzee signals that the subject of Western Man cannot be separated from the literary production of its inhuman and dehumanized others. Establishing K as the albatross, the medical officer becomes the mariner who is stifled by a creaturely imposition. The point is not that Coleridge’s poem necessarily restores the medical officer’s humanitarian power over K but that this renarration allows him to continue to be the subject who narrates, who spins the narrative structure within which the present takes on its meaning.

Not long after reconfiguring his narrative in relation to Coleridge’s “Rime,” the medical officer appears to undergo a radical transformation and wishes to “surrender” from his position of authority, a position that insists on the refusal of his complicity in the dehumanizing effects of war (Coetzee 1983, 149). Couched within the middle section of the novel is an epistolary plea from the medical officer to his patient. Therein the medical officer writes: “You are going to die, and your story is going to die too, forever and ever, unless you come to your senses and listen to me. Listen to me, Michaels. I am the only one who can save you. I am the only one who sees you for the original soul you are. I am the only one who cares for you” (151). The use of “care” here works as a euphemism for the medical officer’s ability to preserve K’s story by making it legible to state bureaucracy. The persistently declarative stance of the letter reveals how the medical officer repeatedly fails to persuade K to behave according to his will, and in consequence the language he employs to frame K becomes increasingly commanding. This is because K’s silence threatens the medical officer’s power

to *make* the patient speak, or what Michel Foucault calls “the incitement to discourse”: “an institutional incitement to speak . . . , and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to have it spoken about” (1990, 18). While the medical officer’s repeated refrain that he is “the only one” who cares about or can save K registers his self-appointed exceptional status, Foucault reminds us that this does not in any way make him exceptional: the power to make speak is precisely what allows the operations of bureaucratic power. All at once, his insistence that “Michaels” *must* listen to him and obey his commands stands in stark contrast to the more ambiguous and open “perhaps” that earlier characterized his relation to K. He ends his letter in command form: “I appeal to you, Michaels: *yield!*” (Coetzee 1983, 151). Preserving his anonymity to readers, this “appeal” issued as a command to “yield” is signed by “A friend.” This marks the fantasy of the medical officer’s perspective and his willful blindness to his own coercive and corrective desires. Because friendship is characterized by reciprocity,⁶ the medical officer’s declaration of friendship is not only a delusion but another moment of asserting his coercive will.

The force of narrative comes into its sharpest focus when the medical officer pronounces K’s life not worth living: “In fact his life was a mistake from beginning to end. It’s a cruel thing to say, but I will say it: he is someone who should never have been born into a world like this. It would have been better if his mother had quietly suffocated him when she saw what he was, and put him in the trash can” (Coetzee 1983, 155). Here, the medical officer hits on one of the greatest obstacles of humanitarian ideology today: How does the humanitarian avoid enforcing judgments about a worthy or valuable life? What standards apart from one’s own can one seek to provide for those one wants profoundly to assist? Recalling Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2007) emphasis on the coercive work of bringing all humans into the fold of modernity, here the medical officer’s discursive power is one that aligns entirely with modernity’s unrelenting quest for increasingly uniform and consumptive ways of living.

Finally, when K disappears from the camp hospital, the medical officer confronts the folly of his thinking and, with a “great force,” realizes that it is in fact his own life and not K’s that is wasting. Reversing his narrative logic to envision himself as the “prisoner to this war” (Coetzee 1983, 157), the medical officer desires suddenly and urgently to become K’s disciple. Yet he yearns to become his wayward patient’s disciple, to give up on a cer-

tain form of forceful human being, only after his patient has vanished. The sudden wish to become K's "foot follower" (which I will return to in more detail in the next section) turns out to be yet another narrative fantasy. While the medical officer can entirely change his narrative, what he cannot surrender is the compulsion to *construct* the narrative, to hold mastery over its production and his particular position within it.

Ultimately, the medical officer of *Michael K* butts up against the borders of his own narrative but cannot breach them. Although he fantasizes about becoming K's disciple, his final words in the text betray the medical officer's ongoing attachment to mastery. Conceding that K will not speak to him, the medical officer poses a question followed by an imperative: "Have I understood you? If I am right, hold up your right hand; if I am wrong, hold up your left!" (Coetzee 1983, 167). Like the "yield!" that closes his letter to K, the medical officer finally cannot relinquish his imperative mode, still desiring to govern over the movement of K's body. His inability to avoid command, to depart from the logic of the master that underscores his humanitarianism, exposes the contradiction at the heart of his desires. Coetzee's novel brings humanitarian fetishism to crisis while he illustrates through the language of the humanitarian that this fetishism cannot simply be overturned by a desire for noncoercive human relations. The medical officer's failure to move out of a paradigm of mastery reveals the unremitting force of humanitarian fetishism. His status as master appears constitutional at the end of his narrative: the desire to undo his own mastery, to relinquish his mastery and emerge as disciple, becomes perversely folded into the activity of the master as such.

Singh's Specters

"Little Ones" likewise plays on a tension between the well-intended liberal notions of the relief officer and the necessity of his coming to terms with his complicity in a system that creates the need for relief. Yet the narrative closure suggested by "coming to terms" is precisely what does not and cannot happen: Singh reveals that complicity can be felt, can be registered, but it cannot be *admitted* within the masterful narrative of humanitarianism. He is an intermediary figure explicitly situated between institutional initiatives that it is his job to carry out and the experience of poverty that proves his efforts ineffective. Across the story, the narrative grammar re-

veals the acute ambivalence Singh feels toward both ends of this spectrum, and finally, toward himself.

The story dramatizes and exceeds Coetzee's humanitarian actor by emphasizing and confronting the force of narrative through the psychic undoing of its protagonist. Parama Roy acutely locates "Little Ones" as "the bureaucratic gothic" (2010, 127), a haunted narrative that requires its administrative protagonist to accept as fact that which is firmly held as fictional in the rational mode. Devi exposes the vital link between fiction and fact by historically situating her story within scientific research that confirms that starvation can lead humans to become pygmies. She employs haunting throughout the story to reveal that Singh's fear is generated not by otherworldly bodies but by subaltern human bodies that are deformed as byproducts of liberal democratic life.

Singh's own narrative unfolds in relation to two other crucial narratives that circulate within the story. The first is that of the troubled political history of the region, a narrative about tribal protests and retaliation over a government resource excavation of sacred lands. Having killed the government officials who desecrated their sacred space, these tribals disappeared into the forest and were never seen again. The other narrative alongside which Singh's story develops is a ghost story that circulates within the camp about "inhuman," animalistic, thieving children who come from the forest and steal food rations from the government base. These two narratives, the historical and the haunted, weave through the story and implicate Singh as a government employee. Singh's own narrative of humanitarian benevolence, and the adjacent narratives of historical violence and ghostly haunting, are revealed to be inextricable: the tribal enemies of the state turn out to be the terrifying "little ones" who steal the rations that Singh is paid to distribute. The story pressures us to consider how the separation of these narratives is necessary to preserving the functioning of the welfare state and to Singh's subjectivity as a humanitarian therein. Humanitarian fetishism, which structures Singh's subjectivity and shields him from the material realities of his work, is sustained precisely through this narrative splitting.

This discourse of conquest heightens and becomes more overt when two bags of rations are stolen and Singh discovers that his child disciples are accomplices to the crime. As a result, his disciples emerge for Singh as false worshippers and are transformed into strangers: "Befuddled and wounded with the realization of trust betrayed, he looks at them. Unfamil-

iar, unknown faces. Those same boys. But in their faces there is no echo of the despairing question that rends his heart. Smiling the cruel smiles of the victorious, they disappear into the darkness of the forest in the wink of an eye" (Devi 1998, 16). At this moment of betrayal, the roles are reversed and it is the child thieves who emerge victorious and not the humanitarian worker who "saves" them. Unlike Singh, whose victory confirms his status as the humanitarian imbued with full humanity, the boys are relegated to strangers and animals as a result of their small victory over him. Standing "befuddled and wounded," Singh's dedication to his "disciples" is contingent on their reverence for him; without this devotion, Singh's narrative quickly recasts them as enemies. This moment in which Singh envisions the boys as strange and animalistic marks a significant shift in the story from a view of the Other as that which is to be pitied (and therefore helped) to the Other as something precisely threatening and inhuman. These two formulations are closely bound, of course; in each case the other remains something to be *overcome*. As a result of their betrayal, the boys swiftly cease to be appropriate subjects of pity; they are no longer seen with compassion but rather are defined by an animal savagery that encroaches on Singh's safety and sense of self.

Whereas Coetzee emphasizes the entrapments of narrative and its often subtle force through the humanitarian's own narrative tropes, Devi pushes beyond the borders of self-narration to stall the proliferation of masterful subjectivity. When Singh follows the ration thieves into the forest, he encounters not the little ghosts of local lore but the tribal renegades whose bodies have over years of starvation radically mutated. Unlike those other thronging adivasi bodies Singh has been helping to feed, these bodies have survived off so little that their statures have mutated from the status of starved but recognizably human (like Michael K) to starved and unrecognizably human. Singh becomes literally paralyzed by the incomprehensible sight of their bodies, and as he stands in disbelief, the adivasi renegades encircle and molest him with their shriveled, "grotesque" bodies (Devi 1998, 18). For Singh, his implication in this system of oppression is absolutely unfathomable. He has, after all, worked diligently to feed the starving populations of India despite his own privilege. But their deformed and diminutive bodies in contact with his own lead him to a crisis of his own subjectivity.

In her reading of this scene, Roy argues that "this touch of the other . . . makes his own body monstrous to himself. More than the ghost's body,

it is the body of the definitively living human that is rendered grotesque through this spectral logic” (2010, 138). Roy points us to a powerful depiction of the postcolonial uncanny, in which the haunting spirits of the conscience press on Singh in ways he cannot comprehend. The narrative concedes that these unbelievable human bodies *must* finally be believed, that the lines between fact and fiction can no longer be upheld in his consciousness: “Because if this is true, then all else is false. The universe according to Copernicus, science, this century, this freedom, plan after plan. So the *relief officer* reiterates—*Na! Na! Na!*” (Devi 1998, 19). Singh’s articulations of disbelief are quickly silenced by the terrifying spectacle and sexual confrontation of the renegade bodies. In the final moments of the story, he is rendered speechless as he struggles to locate himself within a scale of global oppression, wishing to extricate himself from the role of oppressor: “The logical arguments *motor-race* through the *relief officer*’s mind. He wants to say, why this revenge? I’m just an ordinary Indian. Not as well-developed or tall as the Russians-Canadians-Americans. I’ve never eaten the kind of calorie-rich food required for the development of a strong human body, the failure to consume which is construed as a crime by the World Health Organization” (20). Ultimately, Singh’s attempt to position himself as an “ordinary Indian”—and as therefore somehow innocent or exempt—cannot be sustained. He can no longer deny that the crime of disallowing the human body the right to eat well is as much his own crime as it is the crime of public policies that ensure that he eats and that the adivasi cannot do so sufficiently.⁷ In this instant of recognizing his own complicity, Singh struggles to characterize himself as likewise underfed.

The story ends with a scene of fascinating performativity between Singh and the “little ones.” As Singh silently proclaims his own guilt, the tribals surround him with their abject bodies: “He can’t say a word. Standing under the moon, looking at them, hearing their laughter, feeling their penises on his skin, the undernourished body and laughable height of the ordinary Indian male appear a heinous crime of civilization. He feels like a criminal sentenced to death. Pronouncing his own death-sentence for their stunted forms, he lifts his face up to the moon, his mouth gaping wide” (Devi 1998, 20). While the renegades force their abject bodies on his, Singh’s self-proclaimed condemnation registers as a profound and penetrating recognition of his complicity—as a liberal democratic subject, as a humanitarian worker, and as a healthy human being—in the subjugation of other human

lives. His silence is finally a pronouncement of metaphysical guilt, of what Karl Jaspers (2001) defined as the guilt of staying alive despite the other's suffering or death. By elaborating this form of guilt, Jaspers (notably a liberal himself) specifically attempted to make sense of the German situation by charting the registers of German guilt and responsibility in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Metaphysical guilt is a universal guilt shared by those who chose to live rather than to sacrifice themselves in protest of Nazi atrocities. For Singh, his own guilt is born from the realization of his largely unconscious decision to thrive despite the state sacrifice of the adivasi tribes. In this sense, the story represents the argument advanced by Hannah Arendt (1976) and Giorgio Agamben (1998) that we come to understand the human only when it is deprived of every other thing but bare life.⁸

Witnessing bare life, Singh registers the force and paradox of humanity only at the moment when the unthinkable body of the other reveals to him the forms of oppression that constitute his own suddenly estranging body. He relinquishes his claims to knowledge and truth, staging a radical act of antimastery by submitting himself both physically and psychologically to the thoroughly dehumanized "objects" of his humanitarian aims. Singh's desperate desire at the end of the story is to utter "the howl of a demented dog," a howl that would signify his "liberation" by becoming animal and descending into madness. It is important here that this submission is also a desire for transspeciation; he does not submit himself to becoming other as a pygmy human but to becoming animal. His desire to howl is therefore a desire to escape altogether the psychic structures of dehumanization by leaving the human behind completely. But Singh's muteness disables this descent; he is left in the final moments of the story with an inability to claim (through the howl) an "inhuman" psychic life and an inability to continue verbally to sustain his own alibi. Surrendering himself to the sound and touch of his ghosts, Singh brings us to the threshold of other psychic and narrative possibilities.

After the Humanitarian

Posthumanitarian fictions uncover humanitarian fetishism by refusing to separate the ideological fantasies of "doing good" from the material supports and consequences of those actions. They compel readers to linger with dehumanization, not to repudiate it uncritically but to abide by it,

activating the potentialities of dehumanism through which we might let ourselves be haunted by those we have (in more and less overt ways) aggressed. These fictions ask us to become haunted, to listen to our hauntings even when we cannot translate their ghostly messages.

Across posthumanitarian fictions, the ability to be a “good” human is afforded to humanitarians precisely through their material participation in dehumanization; the humanization of the humanitarian and the work of dehumanization turn out to be inseparable practices. While posthumanitarian fictions do not proscribe radically new forms of political being, their representations of humanitarian actors ask us whether it is possible to imagine a humanism that would not structurally and materially (re)produce mastery and dehumanization. My desire is to engage dehumanism as a recuperative practice that casts ourselves as vulnerable to the ways that other beings—“human” and otherwise—have been subjected to dehumanization. These ways of living in exile from the realm of “Man” can become, as Alexander Weheliye (2014) argues, critically instructive in the imagination of alternate forms of collective life and being. If we can learn how to recognize our own surprising complicities with dehumanization, we can also learn how to abide with others (human, inhuman, and dehumanized) that have enabled us to become particular kinds of masterful subjects. Precisely in this abiding, in consciously reading ourselves and attaching ourselves to that which we have subjected, we can begin to learn how to become differently relational with others. Perhaps more radically still, we might also learn how to become relational with ourselves as intimate others.

What comes after Singh’s failure to howl? What forms of ethical action might circumvent the need to undo oneself completely in the face of one’s own complicity? If we can stall the disavowal of our masterful complicities and stay with dehumanization as it presents to us other forms of human being, we might offer ourselves new ways of becoming human. What is vital to this becoming is to revise our own narrative formations, making our narratives infinitely more dynamic than we have yet let them become. Embracing Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) summons to elaborate the infinity of traces that have been left on and through us as particular psychic and embodied subjects, we can begin to discover the limits of our own narrative formations and to layer and unfold them as we shape ourselves into new kinds of subjective beings.

Like the medical officer and like Singh, in my own inaugural moment as a humanitarian in a house of hybrid Singhs, I was caught up in a series of complex power relations that shaped my actions and reactions. Of course, as a child I could not have understood, as I would later begin to, the complex power relations and forms of mastery that were mapping the scene of this inauguration: I was a child privileged enough to intervene on behalf of a grown man; I was comparatively wealthy and he was undoubtedly poor; I was able-bodied and psychically sound, while he—at least by my childhood memory—was both physically and mentally ill; I was a mixed-race child staging an intervention in a neighborhood in which neither of us were wholly welcome, or welcome at all.

The absolutely formative (and at times for me instrumental) narrative of my emergent humanitarianism did not include these complexities, and, like the protagonists of posthumanitarian fictions, I have hit up against the limits of my own narrative. In place of sheer frustration or the howl of madness, instead of throwing up our hands, tearing out our hair, or succumbing to a dialectic between humanitarian fetishism and madness, I am proposing a praxis of dynamic narration that not only avows the inescapable complicities of the “good” subject but also refuses the ability to neatly separate my humanitarian impulses from those less redemptive and messier qualities that have shaped me through the power of narrative structures. Recalling Sanders’s etymological formulation of complicity as “a foldedness in human being that stands as the condition of possibility for any opposition to a system that constantly denies it” (2002, x), complicity becomes not something negative to be resisted and disavowed but something to be affirmed in order to assume responsibility. By elaborating, upturning, and reshaping those narratives that have cast us as particular kinds of subjects, dynamic narration moves us beyond dialectical formulations toward a politics of entanglement from which other world relations can begin to flourish. Dynamic narration is therefore a gesture toward dehumanism—an act of narratively inhabiting the gaps and fissures of our own subjective constructions in an effort to refuse the violence of splitting ourselves off from the less agreeable aspects of our being.