Of Dogs and Idiots:
Tropological Confusion in Twentieth-Century U.S. Fiction

by

David G. D. Oswald

Hons. B.A., University of Toronto, 2005
M.A., University of Victoria, 2009

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines dog and idiot tropes—and, specifically, the conflation thereof—in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian, Or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985). In addition to illustrating the key roles the idiot/dog figure plays in canonical works of twentieth-century U.S. fiction, it argues that this conflation is too often presumed to signify denigration (i.e. a social, political, and ethical exclusion) and degeneration (i.e. a biological threat). Around the turn of the century, the idiot/dog emerges as an aesthetic figure in conjunction with contemporaneous practices of dog breeding and eugenics, as well as co-extensive discourses of national progress and racial purity. In this context, literary idiot/dogs can be read as enciphering a violent historical subtext. Yet, rather than simply condemn this figure as a dehumanizing stereotype, this dissertation challenges such a reductive approach on the grounds that it risks reproducing a hermeneutic that is both ableist and speciesist. A new approach is proposed: reading for the *tropological confusion* of idiocy and caninity and the destabilizing affective and epistemological effects this poses for liberal subjectivity.

Reading for tropological confusion in the fictions of Faulkner, Steinbeck, and McCarthy not only develops new interpretations of three canonical works; it unlocks the idiot/dog figure as a site of textual excess. In so doing, this dissertation makes original contributions to twentieth-century U.S. fiction scholarship, Disability Studies, Animal Studies, and biopolitical theory. The idiot/dog figure's in/determination—a paradoxical embodiment of humanized canine animality and animalized human mental disability—catalyzes hermeneutic and affective uncertainties. Ultimately, both impinge upon questions of readers' own abilities to: (i) fully parse the fictions idiot/dogs appear in, and (ii) self-reflexively understand themselves as autonomous, human(e) subjects. Each chapter carefully elaborates this figure's centrality to the textual operations of,

respectively, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Blood Meridian* in terms of their narrative and meta-narrative dimensions; this reveals under-examined continuities. By arguing for idiot/dogs' disruptive potentials (i.e. affective, epistemological, and ethical), this dissertation bridges and extends previous Disability Studies and Animal Studies interventions that link literary representations to social and material contexts. Also, it further intervenes in these subfields by elaborating the biopolitical reasons for and ramifications of the idiot/dog figure's emergence in twentieth-century Anglo-American fiction. Each chapter outlines how and why idiot/dog figures constitute a means for harmonizing readers' experiences, thoughts, desires, and feelings with the normative U.S. social and symbolic order—a national order that hinges on recognitions and denials of human subjectivity, as well as on the production of subjectivity in which fiction is implicated. Ultimately, by closely analyzing literary idiot/dog figures, this dissertation contributes a biopolitical critique of the ontological production and governability of readerly subjects themselves.

Keywords: William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, Cormac McCarthy, Anglo-American literature and culture, twentieth-century U.S. fiction, idiot figure, dog figure, tropes, eugenics, dog breeding, hermeneutics, affect theory, biopolitics, liberal subjectivity, Disability Studies, Animal Studies.

Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee…………………………………………………………………...ii
Abstract………………………………………………………………………………...iii
Table of Contents………………………………………………………………………v
Acknowledgements……………………………………………………………………vi
Dedication……………………………………………………………………………viii
A Note on Terminology………………………………………………………………ix
Introduction
A Prologue: The Idiot/Dog Figure……………………………………………...1
"Other" Cases: The Ubiquity of the Idiot/Dog Figure…………………….....9
More Than a Degrading Analogy……………………………………………..13
Tropological Confusion: Toward a Practice of Hermeneutic Undecidability…………...21
The Outlines of a Cultural Genealogy of Idiocy: Isolation, Innocence, Institution, Insult, and Indeterminacy……………………………………………………..24
The Outlines of a Cultural Genealogy of Caninity: Disciplined, Degraded, Humanized, and Humanely Loved…...……………………………………………36
Against Ableism and Speciesism: Bridging Disability Studies and Animal Studies……41
Chapter Outlines……………………………………………………………...52
Chapter 1. Otherwise Undisclosed: Benjy Compson's Idiocy, Species, and "Bad Blood"
1.1 Introduction: A Tale Told by a Blood Test, Full of Sound and Fury……………… 56
1.2 In a More Literary Vein……………………………………………………. 60
1.3 Contextualizing *The Sound and the Fury*……………………………………64
1.4 Another Look at Benjy……………………………………………………67
1.5 A Timely Reminder………………………………………………………70
1.6 Idiocy as Ontological Disorder……………………………………………77
1.7 Appending Caninity to Idiocy…………………………………………..79
1.8 Another Look at Benjy's "Bad Blood"……………………………………84
1.9 A Hermeneutic of Hemophobia and Zoophobia…………………………89
1.10 Beginning to Read Otherwise……………………………………………94
Chapter 2. Why Reconsidering Lennie Small Can Teach Us New Tricks
2.1 Introduction: *Of Mice and Men* and a *Merrie Melodie*………………………99
2.2 Abjection and Affection: Reconsidering *Of Mice and Men*……………..…106
2.3 All Mixed Up: Reintroducing the Idiot/Dog Figure………………….…115
2.4 Critical Context: Is Lennie a Bad Thing?...128
2.5 Learning to Feel Superior: Steinbeck's Invitation to Human(e) Subjectivity……...137
2.6 Why Lennie Still Matters…………………………………………….…149
Chapter 3. "What Is It?": James Robert Bell, Hybrid Freaks, and the Perils of Curiosity in *Blood Meridian*
3.1 Introduction: Ambiguous Identity and Hermeneutic Undecidability………………158
3.2 Two Missing Links……………………………………………………166
3.3 The Idiot/Dog: A Troublesome Inheritance………………………...…177
3.4 Hermeneutic Humbug…………………………………………………186
3.5 Curious Looking: An Aesthetic Provocation to Interpret…………………..192
3.6 The Perils of Curiosity………………………………………………...199
In/determinate Conclusions: Toward a Critical Practice of Confusion………………...208
Works Cited……………………………………………………………….…221

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Lastly, I acknowledge that portions of this project have been, or will shortly be, published in other venues. A much shorter version of Chapter One, originally titled “Otherwise Undisclosed: Blood, Species, and Benjy Compson’s Idiocy,” appears in “Blood Bound,” a special issue of the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 10.3 (Fall 2016). It is reproduced here by permission of Liverpool University Press. Chapter Two’s argument appears in slightly different form in my contribution to David Mitchell, Sharon Snyder, and Susan Antebi’s forthcoming edited volume, *The Matter of Disability: Biopolitics, Materiality, Crip Affect*, which is slated for publication in 2018. It appears here by permission of University of Michigan Press.

Dedication

To Bobby James Moore, who survived *Ex parte Briseño* in Texas.

To Susan Brown, my first cousin once removed,
who survived the Southwestern Regional Centre in Ontario.

To Molly and Tess, the dogs of my heart, who survive always in memory.

To Amanda Hoffman, my love and my future, who reminds me the impossible is possible.

A Note on Terminology

I use the term "mental disability" throughout this dissertation to indicate a condition that was historically labeled "idiocy" around the turn of the twentieth century in the United States. Later, "idiocy" was variously referred to as "feeblemindedness," "mental retardation," and—much more recently—"intellectual disability" (Noll and Trent 3). Following the work of disability scholar Jessica Waggoner, I have chosen to adopt "mental disability" here even though many other "scholars and activists have adopted the term *intellectual disability* to distance cognitive disability from the stigma of 'mental retardation,' which 'mental disability' risks echoing. However, this term's focus on 'intellect,' defined as the capacity to reason, risks recentering liberal humanist rationality, a dangerous category for disabled and racialized people alike" in the context of contemporary U.S. civic and economic life (91; original emphasis). Despite my reservations about using terms like "idiocy," "feeblemindedness," and "mental retardation" in light of the medical histories and discourses that have cast these labels as pathological and homogeneous taxonomies, as well as invectives in popular discourse, I do so advisedly in this project in order to reflect the terms employed in a specific context, denoting a historically defined condition. Yet I recognize—and emphasize from the outset—that all terms remain discursively unstable.

Introduction

> …in order to be able to draw a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the limit thinkable (i.e. we should have to be able to think what cannot be thought).
>
> It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense.
>
> – Ludwig Wittgenstein (3-4)

> The animal scrutinizes across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension. This is why the man can surprise the animal. Yet the animal—even if domesticated—can also surprise the man. The man too is looking across a similar, but not identical, abyss of non-comprehension.
>
> – John Berger (3)

> For who knows what the idiot knows?
>
> – François L. Pitavy (103)

A Prologue: The Idiot/Dog Figure

This dissertation critically attends to the many idiot/dog figures—hybrids of human mental disability and canine animality—that populate canonical works of twentieth-century Anglo-American fiction. At moments, it also glances at conflations of idiocy and caninity (or "doggishness") in other genres and media from this period. My main objective, however, is to introduce literary idiot/dog figures into a larger critical conversation regarding the ways fictions risk reproducing national and normative ideals of liberal U.S. subjectivity, a conversation that is especially relevant for Disability Studies and Animal Studies scholars.

Significantly, my aim is not to merely identify and condemn degrading cultural stereotypes. In other words, I do not limit my study to the ways idiot/dog figures are routinely framed as ontologically inferior objects opposed to fully human Cartesian subjects. I also question how a reader's very own sense of identity and self-governing ethical agency—in short, a fantasy about an ethically responsive readerly subjectivity—are both disrupted and, paradoxically, generated in relation to this confusion of tropes. However, as I will show, this dimension is not necessarily redemptive because the production of a reader's biopolitical

subjectivity is also occasioned by such reader-figure encounters—a production that a strictly ethical analysis risks bracketing off and occluding.

Here, I set out to situate these literary idiot/dog figures in the context of recent biopolitical scholarship that elaborates the potential imbrications of reading fiction—an activity that might seem relatively solitary, private, or "subjective" at first—with the regulatory agendas and institutional powers of the U.S. state. To this end, my project closely follows the influential American Studies scholar Donald E. Pease's elaboration of *novel governmentalities*. Pease's concept—one that announces his debt to the biopolitical theory of Michel Foucault—refers to the way that fiction has been used as a cultural technology in the U.S. during the twentieth century, interpellating readers as subjects into a cultural imaginary and a doctrine of American exceptionalism and capitalism.[1] More specifically, Pease argues that acts of interpreting fiction urge readers to understand themselves as freely self-determining, self-regulating, and unique individuals, which mirrors the principles of the nation's liberal economy and democracy "as opposed to the social imaginaries it attributed to the Soviet Union, to Europe, and to the so-called third world" (*The New American Exceptionalism* 10). Ironically, this self-identification has the effect of producing both a readerly conformity and a national coherence, which brings the U.S. population further under the regulatory control of the state—and without forcing that governing power's hand to make sovereign interventions or acts that would seem to violate the liberal, egalitarian ideology it espouses. As Pease writes, works of fiction prove to be especially helpful tools for achieving a harmony between self and state because they have "the capacity to take hold of the processes of behaving, thinking, and feeling immanent to their readers' conduct to

[1] For the now-classic theoretical elaboration of "interpellation" (i.e. the hailing of individuals as subjects of capitalist society), see Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses."

create structures of desire and affective protocols that introduced, secured, and valorized new forms of life" (*Pip* 328). Thus, it helps to link the government's goal of managing its population—and in a democratic way no less—with the individual reader's own sense of and desire for self-government—or, in a word, "ethics" (328).

This dissertation pulls tropes of caninity and idiocy from the margins of three canonical works of U.S. fiction—namely, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian; Or the Evening Redness in the West* (1985)—and brings them into view as too often reduced to symbolically marking the limits between order and disorder, rational coherence and irrational nonsense, and the normative American liberal subject and so-called minority "others." Although these three canonical works are routinely approached as paradigmatic examples of American high modernism, late naturalism, and late (or post-)modernism, respectively, I pursue their similar deployment of idiot and dog tropes from a biopolitical perspective.[2] With each chapter, I delve into the ways that this confusion of idiocy and caninity invites hermeneutic and/or affective responses from readers, and then I proceed to outline the life-and-death stakes of the idiot/dog figure. I propose that this figure's literary-aesthetic portrayal as a hybrid of both animality and disability emerges as a potent rhetorical resource for involving readers in cultural scripts about U.S. identity and national community in the twentieth century; in turn, this species hybrid risks naturalizing and neutralizing a discourse of American self-making alongside—and often in

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[2] For examples of *The Sound and the Fury*'s classification as a high modernist text, see Walter Benn Michaels' s *Our America* and Noel Polk's *New Essays on The Sound and the Fury*. For *Of Mice and Men* as a late naturalist text, see Louis Owens's *John Steinbeck's Re-vision of America* and Donald Pizer's *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism*. For *Blood Meridian* as a postmodernist text, see Robert Jarrett's *Cormac McCarthy*, or—in a more compelling assessment—as a late modernist text in postmodern times, see David Holloway's *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*.

concert with—more familiar figures for embodied difference and social dispossession, such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, and sexuality.

Similar to how racial constructions of African American subjects have operated through simian figures in U.S. culture (Gates 52),[3] the conflation of idiocy and caninity constitutes another under-scrutinized trope in an arsenal of figures for shoring up the full humanity of the American subject as white, male, adult, heterosexual, and abled. According to Mel Y. Chen's recent ground-breaking critiques of anthropocentric and ableist conceptions of biopolitical life, "nonhuman animals, or humans stereotyped as passive, such as people with cognitive or physical disabilities" have historically been forced to serve as "partners in definitional crime" to the extent that they are deemed less lively—that is, existing in closer proximity to death—than able-bodied humans (Chen 3). Here, I add specificity to Chen's claim by elaborating how and why tropes of idiocy and caninity jointly produce normative ideals of "humanness" (3).

Yet my project also demonstrates that the idiot/dogs in the work of Faulkner, Steinbeck, and McCarthy are not simply figures of exclusion or tropes for abjection. They are complex, mutable sites for the shifting meanings, values, anxieties, and fantasies surrounding human disability and nonhuman animality. Each instance of the idiot/dog, then, is not necessarily or self-evidently derogatory, although their manifestations often come burdened with negative connotations. Instead, each constitutes its own rich textual nexus worthy of closer study. While I recognize that many western readers have been rhetorically conditioned to understand tropes of

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[3] See Henry Louis Gates, who has elaborated this historical and racist association between African Americans and monkeys. Gates also shows that simian signs can signify in unexpected and ironic ways, reversing "a received racist image of the black as simianlike" (52). See also Christopher Peterson, who argues that the "disavowal of animality rather than dehumanization" underlies U.S. race relations since "the portrayals of blacks as 'not yet human' works to deny the inhumanity of whites: both the specific historical brutality of racial violence and the inherent animality of all humans" (4).

caninity and idiocy as co-extensive figures for natural inferiority, this dissertation strains against the automaticity of this association. Also, although *The Sound and the Fury*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Blood Meridian* are frequently positioned as vastly different fictions—indeed, as canonical exemplars of high modernism, late naturalism, and late (or post-)modernism—I intervene in the literary criticism by complicating this too tidy categorization and bringing into focus what they share. Specifically, they similarly employ the idiot/dog figure not only to explore ontological questions about nature and determinism alongside epistemological questions about representation and history; they also use it to implicate readers in the meta-narrative, ethical question of self-governed response I described above vis-à-vis the work of Donald Pease. A critical account of these complex figures in twentieth-century U.S. fiction is long overdue.

To introduce one example of the idiot/dog figure, I turn to what one critic suggests is "the most memorable" image in all of McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (Donoghue 410). It is the scene in which the novel's most fearsome agent of violence, Judge Holden, collars and leashes a so-called idiot—a man with a mental disability turned surrogate dog—to hunt down a character named, simply, "the kid" and Tobin, an ex-priest, in the Colorado Desert. In Chapter Three, I offer a much more detailed analysis of McCarthy's novel. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this introductory glance, allow me to provide some context before citing this scene in full.

As critics familiar with *Blood Meridian* are well aware, its plot follows the historical exploits of the Glanton Gang, a group of American-led scalp hunters whose gruesome entrepreneurial enterprises (i.e. collecting bounty for scalps) capitalized on political and territorial animosities in the wake of the Mexican-American War (1846-1848).[4] In McCarthy's

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[4] For a detailed account of this novel's historical correspondences, see John Sepich's invaluable *Notes on Blood Meridian*. For a convincing account of how the Glanton Gang's scalp hunting is a historical harbinger of U.S. empire, refer to Dan Sinykin's "Evening in America." In short,

rendering, the gang is enjoined by Judge Holden, not the eponymous Captain Glanton, to enact greater material and moral chaos. As they ride westward, they rape, pillage, plunder, and murder indiscriminately. Once they commandeer a ferry operation at Yuma and double-cross the local Yumans, their industrious, predatory advance finally grinds to a halt. The Yumans take their revenge, launching a surprise attack and slaughtering most of the gang.

After the Yuma massacre, Judge Holden—the scalp hunters' de facto leader, not to mention one of the most terrifying characters in all of twentieth-century U.S. fiction—manages to escape into the nearby desert with the idiot, James Robert Bell. Together, they hunt down two other surviving gang members, the ex-priest and the kid. At one point during this chase, the kid and the ex-priest scramble down a ridge and take refuge in a pile of sandblasted mule skeletons. They rivet their eyes to the ridge above, awaiting their trackers' arrival. Then, this mirage-like image—a nightmarish tableau—takes shape:

> [The judge] appeared upon the rise and paused momentarily before starting down, he and his drooling manciple. The ground before him was drifted and rolling and although it could be fairly reconnoitred from the rise the judge did not scan the country nor did he seem to miss the fugitives from his purview. He descended the ridge and started across the flats, *the idiot before him on a leather lead*. He carried the two rifles that had belonged to Brown and he wore a pair of canteens crossed upon his chest and he carried a powderhorn and flask and his portmanteau and a canvas rucksack that must have belonged to Brown also. More strangely he carried a parasol made from rotted scraps of hide stretched over a framework of rib bones bound with strips of tug. The handle had

---

Sinykin argues that McCarthy's novel illustrates how this scalp-hunting expedition "worked to institute" American imperialism "more than forty years before Frederick Jackson Turner declared the closing of the frontier and the turn to Asian markets" (363).

> been the foreleg of some creature and the judge approaching was clothed in little more than confetti so rent was his costume to accommodate his figure. Bearing before him that morbid umbrella *with the idiot in its rawhide collar pulling at the lead* he seemed some degenerate entrepreneur fleeing from a medicine show and the outrage of citizens who'd sacked it. (McCarthy 297; emphasis added)

Considering that violence is legion in *Blood Meridian*, what makes this image so "memorable"—so hermeneutically confounding and affectively charged (Donoghue 410)? For starters, McCarthy presents readers with a troubling idiot/dog figure. Leashed to the judge, James Robert comes into focus as both human *and* animal. He does not merely assume the generic form of animality; that is, he is not *the animal* so often generically opposed to *the human* in western cultural discourse.[5] Rather, he is depicted as a grotesque confusion of drooling idiot and leashed domestic dog. He appears at once to be dominated by the judge and used as a tracking tool, as well as a willing accomplice and obedient working companion on their terrifying manhunt.

The complexity and mutability of idiot/dog figures, which is on display in this image of James Robert, tend to be interpreted in reductive ways or overlooked altogether. Following the rise of Disability Studies in the 1990s, such figures have too often been condemned as indexing the prejudicial assumption that humans with mental disabilities are defined by their retrograde "animal" natures. From this angle, they are read as degrading metaphors for atavistic decline and poor health. As such, idiot/dog figures are hermeneutically presumed to represent a passive, disabled, not-quite-human-or-animal ontology that threatens U.S. national scripts of progress. Once critically explained away as a simple figure of retrogression, this risks imputing and

[5] In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida argues this human/animal binary reductively homogenizes the "heterogenous multiplicity" of other species life and, at the same time, serves to disavow human animality (31).

reifying a superior agency and power to the "fully" human characters, including the horrifying Judge Holden—the very figures with which idiot/dog hybrids are contrasted. This presumption, in turn, risks reducing the idiot/dog to a single function: that is, serving as the negative condition of possibility for the self-image of the sovereign subject or national ideal; in other words, "delineat[ing] the corresponding abstract cultural figure of the self-governing, standardized individual emerging from a society informed by consumerism and mechanization"—the ideal figure of U.S. liberal individualism (Garland-Thomson *Extraordinary* 41). As my chapter-length studies of *The Sound and the Fury*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Blood Meridian* will each show, this single-minded approach to idiot/dog figures perpetuates superficial interpretations of the literary texts in which they appear. To invoke an idiomatic expression derived from nineteenth-century U.S. discourses of the hunt, to approach an idiot/dog figure in such a reductive way risks barking up the wrong tree (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

On the one hand, I grant that this figure's degrading effects can be traced back through U.S. cultural discourses of the twentieth century. As I have also suggested, the historical prevalence of these negative meanings predispose some readers to perceive idiocy as inherently dog-like and, conversely, caninity as idiotic—an exchange or blurring of tropes that has become almost habitual for reasons I explore in this project. Moreover, insofar as idiocy and caninity carry connotations of stigma and shame, when they are critically taken to be analogous they are further forced to serve as mutually reinforcing tropes. On the other hand, the idiot/dog figures I study in the work of Faulkner, Steinbeck, and McCarthy invite another interpretation: they encode a more constitutive transference between "idiocy" and "caninity" than one suggested by a mere likeness, reflecting a supplementary relationship between human idiocy and canine animality that irrupts without the promise of a stable, non-linguistic ground from which to judge

the two tropes' shifting significations. By hauling this labyrinthine loop of troping into view, I demonstrate the different ways that *The Sound and the Fury*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Blood Meridian* defer any final determination of what idiot/dog figures mean or how they matter. In other words, these texts make it difficult to affix stable meanings to this hybrid figure and, instead, suggest it constitutes a key site of aesthetic, affective, and hermeneutic excess.

"Other" Cases: The Ubiquity of the Idiot/Dog Figure

Although the majority of this project is devoted to discussing the appearance of idiot/dog figures in twentieth-century U.S. fiction, many other idiot/dog figures populate other texts, genres, and mediums as well. They, too, cry out for closer study. At times, it will be necessary to invoke some of them to illustrate this figure's larger cultural currency and implications. A more fulsome cultural study of the idiot/dog figure exceeds the scope of the literary analyses I initiate here. Still, it is worth observing that the aesthetic proximity and blurring of dog and idiot tropes is nothing short of ubiquitous in U.S. popular culture from the end of the nineteenth century onwards.

Consider the example of Fedor Jeftichew, a circus performer more popularly known as "Jo-Jo the Dog-Faced Boy." As one of P.T. Barnum's star freak show attractions, Jo-Jo began touring the United States as a part of the "Greatest Show on Earth" in 1884, exhibited as a "missing link"—a so-called species hybrid or "wild man [who] was said to come from a lost species located somewhere on the developmental chain between human and beast" (Adams 167). In the wake of the popularization of Darwinism and evolutionary theory, Jo-Jo was cast as a marvellous, exotic case of ontological disorder and ambiguity: since he presented as a hirsute individual, his face was billed as resembling "those of King Charles spaniels" (Snigurowicz 68). Rather than acknowledging that a condition known as hypertrichosis was what produced the hair

on Jo-Jo's face and body, Barnum promulgated the quasi-Darwinian narrative that Jo-Jo had been discovered in a state of troglodyte idiocy instead.[6] Specifically, he claimed Jo-Jo was discovered living in a cave in the Russian wild before being brought to America. Barnum's spiel played on the slippery connotations of "idiocy": the term suggests a clinical classification used by the eugenicists of the late-Victorian era, which equated human mental disability with atavistic degeneracy and retrograde pathology; however, it also carries older social meanings, including uneducated, uncivilized, or pre-political, recalling that "[t]he word 'idiot' is derived from the Greek *idiotes*, denoting a private person without professional knowledge, and the Latin *idiota*, an ignorant person" (Halliwell 6-7).

Almost a century later, echoes of Barnum's "Jo-Jo the Dog Faced Boy," an idiot/dog figure, re-appeared across different popular media, including Hollywood films and video games—and in very telling ways. In the Chris Farley and David Spade-starring comedy *Tommy Boy* (1995), for example, the titular character of Tommy (portrayed by Farley) compares himself to "Jo-Jo the Idiot Circus Boy." This shift from "dog" to "idiot" is not a mere coincidence. In fact, it is the very same name of a character in *Blood* (1997), a popular first-person shooter game developed by Monolith Productions at the same time. Evidently, this transition from the late-nineteenth century figure of "Jo-Jo the Dog-Faced Boy" to these later re-configurations of "Jo-Jo the Idiot Circus Boy" in the twentieth century is suggestive of an increasing ambivalence about the two key terms themselves—one that reveals the interchangeability of caninity and idiocy in the U.S. lexicon.

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[6] Between 1877 and 1920, as Kimberly A. Hamlin observes, the "etiology and treatment of hypertrichosis" was both "hotly" researched and reported on by prominent American dermatologists, including Dr. Louis Duhring, a founding member of the American Dermatological Association (955). Despite being recognized as a medical diagnosis, individuals with hypertrichosis were routinely capitalized on and exhibited as freaks bearing names like "Darwin's Missing Link" or "The Bearded Lady" by enterprising showmen like Barnum (955).

Other cases of this confusion can be pinpointed in the countercultural context of U.S. rock and roll music during the 1960s and 1970s and, flagrantly, in the oeuvre of punk legend Iggy Pop. Whether taking the stage as lead vocalist for the influential American punk band The Stooges, screaming the mantra "I wanna be your dog"— the repetitive chorus to their debut single of the same name (1969)—or, in the next breath, assuming the stance of the writhing solo artist who graces the album cover of *The Idiot* (1977), Pop's performances continue to fashion his persona as anomalous—or even "ambivalent"—by appending canine and idiot figures to himself (Stratton 88).

There are also many popular animated characters who have played a part in establishing the currency of the idiot/dog figure in the U.S. cultural imaginary, including the oblivious Odie in Jim Davis's comic strip *Garfield* and the dim-witted sleuth Scooby Doo in the Hanna-Barbera franchise. The most iconic idiot/dog cartoon character of all, arguably, is Walt Disney's Goofy. First introduced to Depression-era audiences in *Mickey's Revue* (1932) as an annoying country bumpkin named Dippy Dawg, Goofy evolved from a guffawing minor character into the talking, bipedal, and clumsy dog-headed human with whom audiences are familiar today (F. O'Brien 9). Disney's clownish and beloved idiot/dog figure also embodies a negative value commonly associated with denigration: when compared to Mickey's pet dog Pluto, "whose Classical name and quintessentially silent and sympathetic character secure his 'privileged' status as a 'personified animal,'" Goofy's anthropomorphic qualities position him "far from the ideals of human or dog" (McHugh 10). He represents both species at once, posing a kind of ontological disorder—one that the orders of U.S. subjectivity have traditionally been measured against by using a metric subtended by prejudicial biological discourses of race, gender, sex, ability, and species. As Susan McHugh points out,

> Goofy's appeal remains that of a 'degraded human', a criticism both unselfconsciously and ironically applied to dogs. Seen as a comic grotesque, Goofy is akin to the stock 'animal' characters of American blackface minstrelsy such as Zip Coon, which were rapidly being relocated from stage to cartoon at the time of their inception. Today, as Disney products find markets across the world, these interlocked extremes—Goofy's Rover and Pluto's Fido—not only evoke strong emotions about dogs but also bear histories of cultural differences that color viewers' relationships with other animals as well as each other. (10-11)

The above sampling of idiot/dog figures reveals that idiocy and caninity's ostensibly twinned abjection, as well as the figurative merging of the two terms in U.S. popular cultural discourse, is both more common and complex than readers might suspect.

Compared with these popular examples, when idiot/dog figures crop up in literary texts it can be in subtle, more peripheral ways. In an effort to gesture at the sheer ubiquity of the idiot/dog figure in twentieth-century canonical U.S. fiction, after analyzing *The Sound and the Fury*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Blood Meridian* in detail, this dissertation will conclude with brief observations regarding this figure's subtle appearances in George Saunders's short story "Puppy" (2013) and Djuna Barnes's queer modernist classic *Nightwood* (1936). With respect to "Puppy," I raise the complex issue of class in relation to the idiot/dog—an issue that by and large remains beyond the scope of this project. Meanwhile, *Nightwood*, a novel that has been variously celebrated for its "feminist, lesbian, and antiracist features" (Davidson "Pregnant" 137), assists me in considering ways that tropes of gender, sexuality, and race are inextricably bound up with tropes of disability and animality. Gender, sexuality, and race invariably impinge on this

dissertation's close readings of the idiot/dog figures in Faulkner, Steinbeck, and McCarthy. Nonetheless, I aim to limit my focus to tropes of disability and animality.

More Than a Degrading Analogy

Let me double back to the opening epigraphs by Wittgenstein, Berger, and Pitavy. When read in tandem, a correspondence—if not an outright equivalence—seems to emerge between "idiot" and "animal." Setting aside each term's unique literary and cultural connotations for the moment, both can be said to register epistemological limits: they mark the other side—or what Wittgenstein calls the "nonsense" side—of what can be thought, known, and claimed as such through language. In effect, they serve as *comparable* marginal figures to a large extent because they are denied the ability to enter language—or, in other words, to represent themselves in their own terms. The epigraphs hint at one of my main contentions: if tropes of idiocy and animality carry overlapping negative meanings and values in U.S. literary and cultural discourses of the twentieth century, this is largely due to the fact that they are treated as interchangeable markers for an unknowable, abject alterity.

This analogical relationship between human disability and nonhuman animality helps to shore up the "boundaries" of a subject position that Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls "the normate" (*Extraordinary* 8). Specifically, for Garland-Thomson, the normate is conceived as "the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings" (8). As a pioneering scholar of Disability Studies, Garland-Thomson coined this term to call attention to the myriad ways that disability has been constructed as deviant in America. Nonetheless, her term also provocatively hints that the human/animal binary plays a key role in constructing this deviance in U.S. culture: the normate projects the luminous value of being human—that is, the value of being definitively identified as a representative of *Homo sapiens*—

over and against the presupposed inferiority of all others—whether nonhuman animal or animalized human.

Winding back to the epigraphs, the terms "animality" and "idiocy" similarly—albeit separately—gesture toward sites of non-linguistic excess within literary language. They both invoke something beyond the reach of human subjectivity, knowledge, and communication: an otherness or an "outside" to that order that is, paradoxically, represented from within.[7] Despite the sympathetic perspectives of critics like Berger and Pitavy, "idiot" and "animal" clearly remain positioned as ontological categories on the far side of an "abyss" or impasse of human comprehension. Inasmuch as they fortify this impasse, they also arguably protect a critical indifference when it comes to cognitive and embodied difference: they impute "mindedness" and an accompanying interpretative ability to a fully human readerly subject—indeed, a normate—who is epistemologically sealed off from the otherness of idiocy and animality. In turn, these two terms are relegated to an otherness external to subjectivity, an objectivity that may or may not be animated by self-reflexive psychic lives. This subject-object dichotomy suggests the enduring prevalence of an underlying Cartesian order in the Humanities, and neither idiot nor animal

[7] See Thomas Nagel's "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" for how nonhuman animality provides a potent figure, especially in western cultural discourse, for demarcating the phenomenological limits to human subjectivity—though, ironically in Nagel's case, via an abstract notion of what animality entails. In addition, Erving Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* and Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies* similarly account for how humans framed as "other" and "inferior" on the basis of "sex, race, ethnicity, and disability" provide potent figures for "legitimat[ing] the status quo, naturaliz[ing] attributions of inherent inferiority and superiority, and obscur[ing] the socially constructed quality of both categories" (Garland-Thomson 31). Regarding the comparison of dogs and mental disability, specifically, consider how they are directly linked in Anthony Woozley's "The Rights of the Retarded": "A dog can look at you pleadingly, or even perhaps accusingly, but to say that he is pleading for justice, or accusing of you of injustice, is to attribute to him a concept which it would be rash to suppose that he has; the same must be true of many of the retarded" (50-51).

whether "domesticated" or not can militate against this segregation because they are further denied the power to respond or represent themselves.

By conjuring such epistemic assumptions about how human minds and cognitive capacities are accessible to one another, Berger and Pitavy risk paying only rhetorical lip service to a curiosity about otherness, falling short of the material curiosity that Donna Haraway theorizes as a prerequisite for "autre-mondialisation" and, in turn, re-inscribing a human/animal order that is haunted by the material-semiotic sacrifice of the very figures they locate and discuss (*When* 22).[8] When it comes to a reader's or a critic's hermeneutic enterprise, to adopt this merely rhetorical curiosity risks perpetuating prejudices and freezing potential empathic interactions and material interrelationships between species.

Finally, these epigraphs introduce my claim that insofar as idiocy and caninity can be linguistically *figured* at all, their literary conflation as the idiot/dog figure highlights an excessive disorder immanent to narrative orders of twentieth-century U.S. fiction. Haraway's understanding of the "figurative" helps to clarify my use of this term, formulating the way tropes can have life-and-death stakes. She argues: "Figures are not representations or didactic illustrations, but rather material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another. For me, figures have always been where the biological and literary or artistic come together with all of the force of lived reality" (*When* 4). Given this relational understanding of the figurative, the way in which idiot/dog figures end up being interpreted by human readers is paramount.

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[8] See Haraway's *When Species Meet*, which explains that her use of this expression refers to "nurturing a more just and peaceful other-globalization" through everyday practices like asking questions. For example: "Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog?" and/or "How is 'becoming with' a practice of becoming worldly?" Following Haraway, I envision my dissertation as a similar attempt to retie "some of the knots of ordinary multispecies living" (3).

Once confused, idiot/dog figures function not only mimetically—not even just figuratively *per se*. They also produce *readerly confusion* through catachresis. What is meant by "catachresis"? The etymology of this term carries the ancient Greek sense of disorder, of an improper or abusive use: "*Kata*: against; *chresis*: use" (Berger *The Disarticulate* 28). As such, catachresis suggests the unconventional because it exceeds the legibility of pre-established meaning. When an instance of catachresis manifests, it is characterized by a taxonomic and referential breakdown—one that cannot be easily understood or hermeneutically deciphered. For example, the idiot/dog's hybridity simultaneously epitomizes a form of cynomorphism—when dog-like characteristics are ascribed to humans—and, at the same time, anthropomorphism—when human-like characteristics are ascribed to nonhuman species. Since dogs have historically occupied a space of intimate contact—or "propinquity" (Kuzniar 3)—with humans, especially as domestic pets or companions (a trend that exploded in popularity from the nineteenth century onwards), they are now one of the most anthropomorphized nonhuman animals of all in the U.S. (Kuzniar 6). From this angle, it is impossible to untangle, at least in any definitive sense, what the idiot/dog is meant to figure. The figure is, in a word, chimerical. Consequently, neither the binary of human/animal nor the dialectic of humanization/dehumanization provides an adequate approach.

Catachresis, according to Jacques Derrida, can also be thought of as a "forced trope"—one without clear reference or consensus of meaning that still invites interpretations and "produces with the same [linguistic] material, new rules of exchange, new meanings" ("White" 59). Applying this understanding of catachresis to the idiot/dog figures in Faulkner, Steinbeck, and McCarthy, my dissertation attempts to address (albeit not definitively) the new hermeneutic

possibilities and impossibilities that manifest as a result of their specific conflations of idiot and dog tropes.

To the extent that idiot/dog figures hint at untapped vectors of meaning in U.S. cultural discourse, they also verge on Derrida's notion of the *idiomatic*. For Derrida, "idiom" connotes a linguistic field of meaning that is irreducibly contextual or, in his word, "untranslatable" (*Beast* 174). He writes,

> where we are dealing, precisely, with the idiom . . . there is a remnant, a remainder that is untranslated and untranslatable. . . . What remains absolutely untranslatable . . . is the totality of the idiomatic network that coordinates all these values, all these connotations, all these quasi-synonymies or even homonymies (174).

If the idiot/dog's meaning can never be totally or fully present in a given moment, then its legibility depends on, and conforms to, what has come beforehand. In other words, when interpreting a literary text, there is always a relationship of contingency with the past—even in the case of catachresis. Despite being a forced trope promising something new (albeit hard to pin down), the idiot/dog figures in Faulkner, Steinbeck, and McCarthy arguably conform to previous iterations. Otherwise, they would not be legible at all. Following Derrida, I propose that there is an irreducibly contextual element encrypted within these figures. That is to say, their meanings necessarily correspond to the American cultural context enciphered in the texts in which they are embedded.

This quasi-idiomatic quality of the idiot/dog figure is also signalled by an etymological link between "idiom" and "idiocy." The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces "idiocy" to the ancient Greek term *idiōtēs*, denoting a private individual "without learning; an ignorant, uneducated man; a simple man." This Greek understanding suggests a figure outside the common ground

that is shared (and presumably enjoyed) by the educated, literate citizens of the *polis*. The terms' shared root *idios*, meaning personal, carry forward this sense of privacy, particularity, and peculiarity in more recent English uses (e.g. idiosyncratic). On top of that, it carries the connotation of being "separated"—a sense of loss or exclusion from a shared language and consensus of meaning (Halliwell 7). The notions of privacy and privation encoded by "idiocy" symbolically fuse with the connotations of the untranslatable singularity of a given cultural context that Derrida elaborates vis-à-vis his notion of "idiom."[9] When it comes to *The Sound and the Fury*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Blood Meridian*, the idiot/dog figure will thus be approached as a unique and reoccurring feature of twentieth-century American narrative orders—a quasi-idiomatic element—that "runs the risk of resisting translation" into an absolute or universal *ur*-language (Derrida *Beast* 149). By the same token, it resists hermeneutic stabilization of its meanings once and for all.

Nevertheless, I hazard the following hypothesis: a key component of the twentieth-century U.S. context enciphered by the idiot/dog figure is the historical enmeshment and cross-pollination of eugenics and the purebred dog fancy at the turn of the century. I understand the term "eugenics" to broadly refer to the social scripts and material practices used to curb so-called reproductive, hereditary, and biological defects in a human population.[10] In eugenic discourse,

[9] This point is also indebted to Derrida, who briefly discusses a potential "link" between "idiom" and "idiocy" in *The Beast and the Sovereign*. Therein, he addresses the various (and essentially untranslatable) connotations carried by the French term "bêtise"—ones that can only be approximated by English terms like "stupidity," "beastly," and "idiotic." Derrida provocatively suggests that such associations gesture towards "a field of meaning and uses that link in Greek the *idios* of the particular or singular idiom to the *idiotes*, the idiocy of the *idiotes* who can be the indigenous inhabitant, the simple citizen, and also the ignorant man, without experience, naked, savage, innocent . . ." (175).

[10] There is neither space here, nor is there a perceived need, to write another historical overview of the U.S. eugenics movement. As Gerald V. O'Brien notes, "a rather large number of books focusing on the American eugenics movement have been published. These have covered

"idiocy" refers to the reproductive threat of "inferior intelligence and functional capacity"; arguably, it symbolizes the "foundation for all human dysfunction" (Snyder and Mitchell 76). Meanwhile, the establishment of the American Kennel Club in 1884, as well as the specific breed clubs that followed, precipitated a corresponding cultural emphasis on the codification of canine pedigree and heritable traits, thereby attributing superior moral and material value to the pure-bred dog (Lovett 80-81). Haraway highlights the relationship between dog breeding and human eugenics, claiming that "[t]he institutionalized dog breed came into the world branded with typological thinking about race, quality, purity, and progress. . . . The nonisomorphic codes of 'individual merit' and 'pure blood' were written into the script for the ideal dog" (*When* 257). Nevertheless, this link was not merely a matter of putting eugenics discourse into material practice in the world of canines. Rather, it cut both ways. As Gerald O'Brien argues,

> Many of the early supporters of eugenics noted that the gains that had been made through the planned breeding of non-human animals [during the nineteenth century] should be carried over to the human species. If, as with these other animals, nations could develop methods to ensure that those with desired characteristics bred in greater numbers (a principle termed 'positive eugenics') while at the same time diminishing the breeding of those with undesirable characteristics (termed 'negative eugenics'), the species would

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virtually all aspects of the movement, including, for example, its antecedents and evolution, the major personalities involved, the relationship of American eugenics both to the Nazi race hygiene programs and contemporary genetic and bioethical developments" (1). For a sense of the sheer proliferation of recent book-length studies about American eugenics, I urge readers to refer to: Stern's *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontier of Better Breeding in Modern America* (2005); Kline's *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (2001); Lombardo's edited collection *A Century of Eugenics in America* (2011); Largent's *Breeding Contempt: The History of Coerced Sterilization in the United States* (2008); Cuddy and Roche's edited collection *Evolution and Eugenics in American Literature and Culture, 1880-1940* (2003); Christian Cogdell's *Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s* (2004); Baynton's *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics* (2016); and Snyder and Mitchell's *Cultural Locations of Disability* (2006).

> presumably be improved. . . . In the United States, early eugenics was inextricably connected to care and treatment of disabled persons, and especially those who were diagnosed as "feeble-minded." (7)

I focus, then, on the supplementary and co-extensive discourses—and biopolitics—of eugenics and dog breeding in the U.S. from the turn of the twentieth century onwards.

The twinned historical emergence of eugenics and the purebred dog fancy established in material and discursive terms the typological foundation—not to mention medical and moral panic—that allowed for tropes of idiocy and caninity to overlap in literary and cultural discourses. Granted, I am not the first scholar to point out that in this context widespread notions of desirability and undesirability, as well as normality and abnormality, were problematically premised on "white, Christian, heterosexual, male superiority" (Cuddy and Roche 47). Nor am I the first to point out that the material and discursive components of dog breeding and registration played—and continue to play—key roles in the perpetuation of eugenic scripts and social hierarchies. That said, my study is the first account of how the conflation of idiocy and caninity subtly encodes this troubling chapter of U.S. history in the canonical works of Faulkner, Steinbeck, and McCarthy.

When the idiot/dog figure is isolated and viewed mimetically, it can simply be explained away as suggesting a degrading synonymy or analogy between idiocy and caninity. Something along the lines of: the abject otherness of idiots is *equivalent* to dogs, and vice-versa, because they do not communicate, think, or exist like "normal" humans do. However, recalling Derrida's discussion of the idiomatic, the contextual meaning of their literary correspondence is arguably more complexly encrypted in their linguistic representation in American English. Despite the impossible task of total decipherability, the idiot/dog's quasi-idiomatic reoccurrence in U.S.

fiction can still be approached as a trope, at least for pragmatic purposes in this dissertation. Nevertheless, it is a forced trope—one steeped in the excess of ambiguity.[11]

Tropological Confusion: Towards a Practice of Hermeneutic Undecidability

When a novel convokes and fuses caninity and idiocy in a single figure, this triggers aesthetic—that is, affective[12]—*as well as* hermeneutic confusion. I call this blurring of tropes and the readerly uncertainty that it activates *tropological confusion*. This term names the critical lens or method that I will bring to bear in my close readings of the idiot/dog figure.

The confusion embodied by idiot/dog figures is distinct from a more capacious model of tropological confusion. They are specific instances. A less specific study of tropological confusion need not focus on idiots and dogs at all, but could focus on any number of fused tropes. There are an irreducible number of possibilities with respect to the kinds of tropes that may be involved and, as a result, any number of confusions. I develop this critical concept to anchor my dissertation's larger effort to abjure typological models that maintain that a trope can only ever have a singular, programmatic function or meaning. An example of the former case would be that a metaphor merely substitutes for a proper name, while an illustration of the latter case would be that if a human is configured as animal, then this is necessarily degrading.

[11] As James Berger elaborates, all language is essentially comprised of tropes, a particular field of which constitutes a larger idiom: "One uses the language [and tropes] one inherits, and while no original or final meanings can be determined, even as one deconstructs all pretences to such meanings, one must employ the meanings at hand. This is Derrida's notion of the 'double gesture': one simultaneously reveals and critiques the violence and infinite instability of language, and yet continues to use that language because there is, after all, no other" (Berger 217). See also Derek Attridge for a discussion of how the tropological basis of language makes it prone to excess—it is, in his words, always "more than a language"—because "the idiomaticity of a language . . . is premised on its having porous borders, both to other languages and to what Derrida has called 'the other of language'" (*Reading and Responsibility* 153).
[12] See Tobin Siebers's elaboration of how "aesthetics" names an "affective relation" between different bodies (1).

That said, I narrow down tropological confusion's capacious scope to focus my methodological concept on figures of idiocy and caninity. This helps me elaborate the *specific* life-and-death stakes that this particular confusion of tropes implies, as well as to examine how and why these two tropes appear uniquely mixed within twentieth-century U.S. fiction. Before I continue, however, one point bears repeating: whenever I employ the term "tropological confusion" I am referring to: (i) a blurring of tropes at the narrative level of *aesthetic* inscription, and (ii) the confusing *affective* and *hermeneutic* effects activated at the meta-narrative level by such blurring. Keeping this in mind, when a literary text convokes and fuses—or *tropologically confuses*—caninity and idiocy, the resulting idiot/dog figure and the interpretive incertitude that it activates presents readers with a unique case of tropological confusion. Each case needs to be closely considered in relation to the aesthetic structure of the text in which its appearance is embedded.

This dissertation argues that the tropological confusion of idiocy and caninity in twentieth-century U.S. fiction paradoxically appears to perpetuate a discourse of human exceptionalism and, at the same time, exposes instability in the field of representation that blocks or undermines the full predication of the anthropocentric social-symbolic order it seems to promulgate in the first place. Moreover, to the extent that tropological confusion defers hermeneutic decidability or closure, this effectively "disables"[13] the narrative's resolution and confuses readers (undermining their mastery as subjects of interpretation). This potentially

[13] I align my argument with the recent disability scholarship of Michael Bérubé, who argues that the use of "disables" need not carry the sense of a stigmatized cognitive or physical disability identity or experience. For instance, he argues that a narrative, like a computer function, can be disabled without necessarily "impl[ying] normative judgments about what a narrative [or a computer function] ought to be" (*Secret* 56).

compels a readerly openness to ethical, social, and political alternatives to a masterful or sovereign subjectivity in their everyday lives.

From this angle, while the possibility of denigrating representations remains (and I have no intention of exonerating either Disability Studies or Animal Studies from taking on political and moral considerations in relation to interpretations of tropes), violence does not necessarily *inhere* in aesthetic representations. Rather, it stems from clichéd presuppositions that inform an interpreter's critical practice. While representations of the idiot/dog figure need to be considered as always potentially engendering problematic socio-political effects, it is a mistake to too literally presume that this figure is the cause of extra-textual effects.

Despite the superficial appearance of idiot/dog figures as simply degrading in their effects, inasmuch as they can be read to flag the protocols of representation subtending their own aesthetic manifestation—their own tropological status—they can be seized upon to disrupt anthropocentric mini-dramas of domestication, and of lordship and bondage, in twentieth-century U.S. fiction. As such, these figures unsettle rather than affirm the superior value and agency of a standardized, normative human—or, indeed, fully human *and therefore* American—subject. I pursue this alternative interpretation of idiot/dog figures for the following reasons. First, critically limiting idiot/dog figures to examples of "dehumanization" (i.e. social, political, or ethical) risks recurring to the humanist tradition's disavowal of human animality and, in so doing, dovetailing with the dialectical logic fortified by the reductive human/animal division. By questioning widespread assumptions about what it means to be treated like a nonhuman animal, my dissertation aligns itself with scholars like Glen Elder, Jennifer Wolch, and Jody Emel who "argue for the rejection of dehumanization as a basis for cultural critique, given its role in

perpetuating racialization and violence toward both human and non-human animals" (183).[14] Second, it glosses over the multiple, contradictory, and potentially inexhaustible meanings and affects historically sedimented in idiot and dog tropes. Third, it disregards—and thereby helps to occlude—the sheer ubiquity of idiot/dog confusions within twentieth-century U.S. literary and cultural discourses. Finally, reading the idiot/dog exclusively as a degrading figure often does not attend closely enough to the aesthetic structure of the text in which the idiot/dog conflation appears. My aim here, in short, is not simply to re-humanize idiot/dog figures, but to explore other responses to the tropological confusion they instigate.

The Outlines of a Cultural Genealogy of Idiocy:
Isolation, Innocence, Institution, Insult, and Indeterminacy

When considered in isolation, idiocy emerges as a remarkably unstable trope. As the historical overviews written by Patrick McDonagh and Martin Halliwell sufficiently attest, the myriad meanings and values attributed to the idiot figure have oscillated indeterminately across various discursive contexts; this precludes it from ever attaining a timeless or "objective state" (McDonagh 17). Given its multivalent character, idiocy emerges in twentieth-century U.S. literary and cultural discourse not only as a sign of heritable mental deficiency, but also as a site of aesthetic excess and elastic hermeneutic potential. This excess indicates a genealogy that spills over the national and historical parameters of this dissertation. Due to spatial constraints, however, such a genealogy can only be outlined, not comprehensively traced here.

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[14] See also Lisa Guenther's arguments for rejecting "dehumanization" as a critical tool on the basis that it perpetuates a hierarchical discourse complicit with the abuse and shaming of humans and nonhuman animals. For example, "the abuse of prisoners may well be described as a dehumanization in which prisoners are treated like animals. But this is only because animals themselves are being de-animalized . . . . In order to find more fruitful ways of critiquing the abuse of both systems, in which human and nonhuman animals are confined to cages, pens and cells across the world, we need to think beyond dehumanization, and beyond the anthropocentric worldview that supports it" (60).

In ancient Greece, *idiōtēs* figured a person without a community; this association with lack is not a psychological or physiological state of being, but a *social* and *political* designation. It "expresses social and political inferiority; it is not a certificate of citizenship—the idiot is the one who is not a citizen" (Ronell 41). Once translated into the Latin *idiota*, the idiot figure retains these implications of ignorance, privacy, and isolation. In the context of ancient Rome, it invokes "rustic" or geographically "secluded individuals" holding no "public function" (Saward 12). Even during the eighteenth century in England, when Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) defined "idiocy" as "a 'want of understanding'" (Halliwell 7), the idiot figured an uneducated or unworldly individual. The commonality extending from these wide-ranging historicized definitions is that idiot figures are inferiors, casting doubt on their rational competencies; however, what remains noteworthy is that idiocy was thought to be qualitatively dynamic—even potentially teachable. In other words, idiot figures were not yet saddled with the biological connotations of arrested development, nor were they considered a biological threat in need of custodial isolation and institutionalization.

In U.S. fiction, according to Dana Heller, idiocy is "a hybrid concept which grows out of the crossings of numerous discursive currents and traditions, both secular and non-secular, none of which are themselves utterly monolithic" (3). Although this figure plays a key cultural role in popularizing eugenic science in the early decades of the twentieth century (a point to which I will shortly return), it simultaneously enciphers more positive meanings and affects derived from the Christian tradition of holy foolishness. As McDonagh suggests, this particular theological resonance invites readerly reverence or wonder, not anxiety and fear: that is, the idiot is presumed to be capable of confounding the order of the status quo with its innocent wisdom of the divine, thereby transcending the totalizing narratives or epistemes of the particular culture in

which it is embedded (133).[15] These roots in a discourse of holy foolishness and innocence support the literary-aesthetic tradition of ascribing moral goodness to the "natural and/or rural divine idiot of Romanticism" (Heller 3), including Wordsworth's titular "The Idiot Boy" (1798) and, later, Fyodor Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin in the *The Idiot* (1868).

As Michel Foucault argues, by the eighteenth century in Europe, idiocy had come to be considered synonymous with madness: "what was called imbecility, stupidity and, already, idiocy, had no distinctive features in comparison with madness in general. It was nothing other than a species of madness" (*Psychiatric Power* 203). Foucault pinpoints the subsequent division between the idiot and the madman in the nineteenth century—a delinking that he argues occurred due to the disciplinary coupling of health and pedagogy: at this point, *human development* "became the criterion" for their distinction (205). Idiocy was thus specified as: (i.) a total absence of development, it "appears at the outset" of childhood; (ii.) unlike the curability and evolutions of madness, it "is stable and acquired once and for all"; (iii.) "idiocy is always linked to organic defects of constitution"; and (iv.) the idiot "has no past" to contribute to anamnesis (207). Along these lines, the vestigial boundary between an acquirable madness and a congenital idiocy is glimpsed. Foucault argues that the temporality intrinsic to the criterion (i.e. development) helped universalize its applicability as a diagnostic for physicians; that is, it provided a normative yardstick for psychology to measure individual cases, thereby suggesting that a body's maturation translates as "passing more or less quickly through the degrees of idiocy, debility, or mental retardation" and, before the end, adulthood (208). According to this yardstick, the idiot marked a lowly ontological state of arrested development, a null-point or state

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[15] See McDonagh for how the holy fool embodies a form of divine logos that exceeds the limit of mere human epistemology: "When the wisdom of God confronts the wisdom of the world, it appears as folly; thus, if Christians follow the wisdom of God, they will appear as fools according to the wisdom of the world" (133).

of “instinct,” and this required treatment that was both pedagogical and moral (210). Significantly, Foucault sees this as *the historical emergence of an abnormality-normality binary*, which was taken up and widely dispersed institutionally when asylums were linked to schools in the mid-nineteenth century. However, “when the institutionalized populations had largely demonstrated their failure to become cured, psychiatrists organized themselves around a humanitarian premise of scientifically supervising ‘defective’ humanity” (Snyder and Mitchell 71-72). No longer simply a figure for rural isolation or divine innocence, idiocy began to carry connotations of the institutionalized and medicalized social pariah.

In the United States, the onset of the Progressive Era at the turn of the twentieth century saw an unprecedented increase in urbanization, immigration, and industrialization—and these rapidly changing social conditions inflected the rhetoric of U.S.-based eugenicists, who sought to stoke public paranoia about an impending social crisis brought on by careless reproduction (Snyder and Mitchell 84). At the same time, according to Wendy Kline, although “the western frontier of the United States was closing, Progressivism emphasized a new natural resource that required not land but mental cultivation: intelligence” (21). Eugenic science was promoted, in turn, as an empirical means of singling out threats to this most valuable national resource. In 1910, Charles Davenport and Harry Laughlin established the Eugenics Record Office at Cold Springs Harbor, New York, which served as the hub of the burgeoning movement. American eugenicists proceeded to proclaim that so-called social maladies, such as alcoholism, poverty, crime, and sexual promiscuity, were heritable traits—and quantifiable, too, inasmuch as they were “the product of human [biological] deficiencies” (Snyder and Mitchell 69). Shortly thereafter, there was a massive rise in eugenic science’s authority, as well as the cultural currency of so-called “race betterment”—that is, improving the American stock through state

intervention over its citizens' reproductive health. Interventionist methods were not limited to enforced institutionalization; they also came to include involuntary sterilization. In 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Buck v. Bell* allowed states to mandate sterilizations of the feeble-minded (G. O'Brien 8). Idiocy initially served as the "catchall" category for bracketing mental defectives (Snyder and Mitchell 77-78). Insofar as it was also deemed "a deficiency of the will, self-control, and capacity," it took shape "as a scourge that needed to be handled more directly" for fear that it would "lead to the spread of human debasement and a deterioration of the American people" (Snyder and Mitchell 69-70).

Now that the idiot trope was linked to eugenic scripts and a supposedly heritable type of retrogressive inferiority in the U.S., it came to figure a threatening atavism based in familial bloodlines. One American eugenicist, Henry Goddard, was instrumental in establishing a standardized diagnostic system, which served to promote this sense that idiocy was a measurable, ontological form of degeneracy. Goddard adapted the French psychologist Alfred Binet's Measuring Scale for Intelligence—the IQ test—to diagnose an individual's degree of deviance from the norm (or not). However, not only did he employ Binet's original categories—namely, "the idiot, who had a mental age of two or younger, and the imbecile, who had a mental age of three to seven years"—he also broadened the scope of "feeble-mindedness" to include a newly minted category: the moron, who had a mental age of eight to twelve and whose budding sexuality made him or her a moral concern (Kline 22).[16] At the same time, Goddard elaborated on the prolific reproduction and threat of morons in his best-selling genealogy, *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness* (1912). Therein, Goddard outlines how "bad blood" is passed down generationally often without detection, increasing the number of

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[16] "Between 1908, when Goddard first translated a version of the Binet scale and had it published in America, and 1930, over nine million adults and children were tested" (Kline 22).

defective offspring in the nation's reproductive pool. Family studies and the IQ test were the foremost techniques used by eugenicists to make mental deficiency more legible.

At this point, the meaning of "idiot" was transformed from impoverishment to a threatening contagion of incapacity. This shift firmly established a binary coding system of normal and pathological, and this concurrently categorized those "fit" and "unfit" to reproduce (Snyder and Mitchell 79). In light of this system, the increasing number of bodies incarcerated in asylums was part of a larger, insidious biopolitical design to control human breeding and to create an exceptional American race and body politic.[17] The infantilized idiot figure had thus come to be clinically constructed "as having an IQ of less than 20: that is, less than a normally functioning two-year-old child" (Halliwell 11). Yet, as Stephen J. Gould counters, "no single number could possibly express general human worth, and the entire concept of IQ as a unitary biological property [is] nonsense" (22). As Gould's critical comments suggest, America's widespread implementation of Goddard's version of the IQ diagnostic was responsible not only for a justifying a violent chapter in its history, which was based on a fallacy about the superior status of the so-called American race. On top of that, Goddard consolidated another fallacy about human superiority by promoting an intelligence norm for the species. As my chapters elaborate, both fallacies are arguably ongoing in new ways.

Though more acclaimed for his tales of Klondike adventure and his canine narrators, Jack London's "Told in the Drooling War" (1914)—a short story originally conceived under the title "Autobiography of an Idiot" (Keely 209)— reflects how eugenic classifications held great aesthetic interest for twentieth-century Anglo-American authors, particularly how Goddard's degrees of mental deficiency stoked larger cultural anxieties about controlling sexual

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[17] Eugenics held that mental disability stemmed from hereditary transfer "particularly among immigrant groups" (Snyder and Mitchell 79).

reproduction. London's story prefigures Faulkner's experiments in *The Sound and the Fury* with an idiot's first-person narration by well over a decade, suggesting London's potential influence on Faulkner's canonical novel.[18] London employs his own first-person narrator, Tom, a self-described "high-grade feeb"—or, in Goddard's terminology, a moron—to blur the distinction between pathological and normal. Hinting that he intentionally acts the part of the idiot to avoid the outside world, Tom introduces indeterminacy into his own tale that, in effect, ironizes the static, measurable taxonomy put forward by eugenicists like Goddard. As a narrator, he happily details his daily routine within the walls of the institution (based on the real-life Sonoma State Home for the Feeble-Mind located next to London's California ranch). Yet he is also quick to differentiate himself from the other inmates:

> Me? I'm not a drooler. I'm the assistant. I don't know what Miss Jones or Miss Kelsey could do without me. There are fifty-five low-grade droolers in this ward, and how could they ever be all fed if I wasn't around? . . . I can walk, and talk, and do things. . . . That's going some for a feeb. Feeb? Oh, that's feeble-minded. I thought you knew. We're all feebs here. But I'm a high-grade feeb. (London 945)

Tom uses his storytelling talents to situate himself atop the ward's social hierarchy; in fact, he places himself in a position of narrative authority over his audience by having to parcel out the in-house slang. He insists that "[n]obody's crazy in this institution" and, by extension, insinuates that it is the outside world of "politics" that is, in fact, "crazy" (946).

The amiable tone of Tom's narration exemplifies how idiot figures invite sympathetic identifications from their readers—even during this anxious period of eugenic institutionalization and sterilization. To the extent that Tom is made to labour in ways that serve the purposes of the

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[18] See Keely for a brief discussion of the similarities between London's story and Faulkner's novel.

institution, this sympathetic identification shades into pity as he details—perhaps, unwittingly—his own exploitation by the staff. Moreover, his interest in the female nurses suggests an unrequited romantic fixation. A subsequent flight of fancy more explicitly confirms as much: "Sometimes I think I'd like to get married. I spoke to Dr. Whatcomb about it once, but he told me he was very sorry, because feebs ain't allowed to get married" (London 948). So, Tom simply imagines talking his way out of his diagnosis:

> Some day, mebbe, I'm going to talk to Doctor Dalrymple and get him to give me a declaration that I ain't a feeb. Then I'll get him to make me a real assistant in the drooling ward, with forty dollars a month and my board. And then I'll marry Miss Jones and live right on here. And if she won't have me, I'll marry Miss Kelsey or some other nurse. There's lots of them that want to get married. (London 950)

As Karen Keely suggests, this vain "daydream" of getting his diagnosis revoked is no doubt compelled by Tom's desire for a relationship; nevertheless, given that the story's setting is California—a state that "quickly took and retained the national lead in numbers of sterilizations"— it is also implied by the context that "Tom's reproductive abilities have [already] been eliminated for the comfort and ostensible protection of his fellow Californians" (210-11). If London's story reflects the historical effects of institutionalization (and potentially sterilization), the complexity and ambiguity of its idiot figure troubles the naturalization of eugenic taxonomies—and even the normal-pathological binary.[19]

Published in 1937, Eudora Welty's short story "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies" also reflects on the historical presence of the modern eugenic institution in the U.S.—albeit at a far

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[19] As Keely observes, London supported eugenics: "[He] approved of the social and legal movements that increasingly denied reproductive power to those people on the bottom rungs of the traditional mental hierarchy, but he questioned the accompanying denial of narrative authority to these same unfortunates" (209).

greater distance. Whereas London's story engages directly with Goddard-style eugenic classifications and the institution's disciplinary power to frame its central idiot figure as such, Welty's fiction focuses instead on the role social perceptions of idiocy play in the determination of her protagonist's fate. Specifically, this story engages the moral crisis and paranoia surrounding the conjunction of female sexuality and mental disability as a potential "dysgenic" threat (Kline 19). Within the small community of Victory, Mississippi, the three ladies—Mrs. Carson, Mrs. Watts, and Aimee Slocum—have assumed primary responsibility for Lily Daw, whose mother is dead and whose father is abusive. They have collectively determined it best to send her to "the Ellisville Institute for the Feeble Minded of Mississippi" (16). As the narrative progresses, however, Lily's burgeoning sexuality—not a clinical diagnosis—emerges as the criterion that makes her a candidate for institutionalization. It is what casts her own status as a "lady" in doubt—a doubt inscribed by Welty's juxtaposition of the protagonist against the collective of ladies in the title. They seem obsessed with monitoring her behaviour:

> "The point is, what did she do after the show?" asked Mrs. Watts practically. "Lily has gotten so she is very mature for her age."
>
> "Oh, Etta!" protested Mrs. Carson looking at her wildly for a moment.
>
> "And that's how come we are sending her to Ellisville," finished Mrs. Watts. (16)

Exacerbating this subtext about Lily's sexuality, it is subsequently revealed that she has met a xylophone player whom she intends to marry. Thus, the story counterpoises her confinement in the institution at Ellisville with her confinement in the institution of marriage. Moreover, inasmuch as the three ladies ultimately determine that it is best that Lily marry the showman so as to immediately release them from their assumed care-giving responsibilities (despite the prospect of dysgenic reproduction), the story highlights their own moral turpitude. Though

framed by the institutionalization of eugenic ideology, Welty's narrative is therefore much more concerned with targeting the hypocrisy of traditional southern culture in relation to female sexuality than it is in resisting eugenic ideology. In the end, this arguably hints at a fundamental arbitrariness underlying the ladies' social construction of idiocy as inferior moral intelligence: is eugenics merely a convenient overlay that permits them to divest themselves of their responsibility to Lily? Welty thus reminds readers that the idiot figure in U.S. fiction is too often explained away as an irrational human who is locked in a permanent and natural opposition with the ideal American citizen—a subject who is considered superior and sovereignly capable of intelligent, independent judgments. Both London and Welty's short stories suggest that idiocy largely concerns the biopolitics of reproduction in the twentieth-century United States.

Who counts as an American idiot today? In 2004, the popular punk band Green Day released a smash hit single under that very title. "American Idiot" opens with their bold declaration: "Don't wanna be an American idiot! / Don't wanna nation under the new media. / And can you hear the sound of hysteria? / The subliminal mind-fuck America." Despite its propulsive sense of urgency, the lyrics are arguably more ambiguous than revolutionary. Whereas punk icon Iggy Pop explicitly identifies himself with the idiot figure in the 1970s, Green Day ostensibly rejects idiocy *tout court* at the start of the twenty-first century. They use the idiot trope to express contempt, to negatively delineate someone who lacks the independence and intellectual rigour presumed necessary to combat the stupefying onslaught and manipulations of a "new" corporate media. In other words, the idiot belongs to that vast segment of the U.S. population sunk into zombie-like trances in front of television or computer screens and reduced to puppet-like hysterics: the average U.S. citizen (i.e. not Green Day or their audience). "American Idiot" can thus be approached as drawing on a discourse of degeneracy in

a flimsy attempt at irony. Though Green Day's invocation of a threatening, zombie-like plague on the U.S. might serve as an impactful trope, it comes with insidious precedents.

Today, "idiocy" is colloquially presumed to be a simple synonym for "stupidity." This association is "now so entrenched in the vernacular of invectives that few people recognize [idiocy's] technical status" in the annals of eugenic science or in the practices that emerged around the turn of the twentieth century (Gould 188). Even if unintended, Green Day's use of "idiot" is connotatively linked to the development of hereditarian theories and quantifiable tests for intelligence, as well as interventionist biopolitical techniques like the sterilization and institutionalization of people with mental disabilities in America's effort to improve the "home-grown" population (Gould 187). And yet, in addition to harnessing the negative connotations of "idiot" to represent how the contemporary American status quo is contemptible and retrograde, the lyrics can be read to evince a thinly veiled nostalgia for an uncorrupted America. In other words, by explicitly declaring that *they do not want* this "new" national norm, Green Day risks revering a time and place before the rise of this evil "new media" and its idiotic horde of followers. At the very cusp of the twenty-first century, then, Green Day proposes that idiocy continues to threaten the nation from within. From this perspective, this popular song's aesthetic recapitulation to idiocy as a trope for retrogression vitiates its attempt to ironize the normative subject and, by extension, defuses its purported progressiveness.

Consider, lastly, Tina Nguyen's recent article "A Brief History of Trump's Allies Calling Him an Idiot," published in *Vanity Fair* in February 2018. As Nguyen profiles a number of the current U.S. President's allies-turned-detractors (an ever-growing legion), "idiot" emerges as rhetorical shorthand for the consensus that Trump is not mentally "fit for office" and, therefore, not a representative leader (Nguyen). And yet how shared is this understanding of "idiot"? On

the one hand, to call Trump an "idiot" no doubt is meant to signal his ineptitude; it serves as a trope for political and ethical disqualification. However, on the other hand, it can also be understood as a social insult or slur. In the latter sense, "'idiot' is not so much a label as it is an expression of feeling, ordinarily an angry feeling. As such, human beings use 'idiot' when they feel offended or feel their space or rights violated, even if the one named never hears the outrage" (Noll and Trent 1). This uncertainty indicates that the meaning of "idiocy" is not straightforward.

As Steven Noll and James Trent argue, "'[i]diocy' and other words that followed it—'imbecile,' 'feebleminded,' 'moron,' 'defective,' 'deficient,' and 'retard'—represent sets of cultural meanings over time" that are prone to shifts (1). Once one considers idiocy from the vantage of its rich complexity, the idiot figure comes into view not as marking sequential developments that accord with an ongoing definitional history; rather, it constitutes a node of convergence between multiple, even potentially competing discourses. I propose that the currently widespread presumption about the equivalence of "idiocy" and "stupidity" invites superficial interpretations, boiling this figure down to an absolute antithesis to rational progress and order. Having briefly outlined some of the ways that different cultural texts articulate the trope of idiocy at different historical junctures, I reiterate that its meanings can never be simply identified or hermeneutically secured, especially not in a trans-historical dichotomy that privileges rational beings over irrational others. With this in mind when I turn to the literary fiction of *The Sound and the Fury*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Blood Meridian*, I follow Halliwell's claim that idiocy encodes a complexity that is "amplified in [its] twentieth-century representations" (5-6).

The Outlines of a Cultural Genealogy of Caninity:
Disciplined, Degraded, Humanized, and Humanely Loved

Just as the meanings and values accruing to idiocy are indeterminate, the meanings and values accruing to the trope of caninity are also incredibly vast, complex, mixed, and paradoxical. Despite the historical relationship between humans and canines being nothing less than ancient, the last two hundred years witnessed especially rapid changes in dogs' cultural roles in the U.S. due to "the formation and maintenance of breeds through strong artificial selection and closed breeding systems imposed by humans" (Freedman and Wayne 282).[20] Thus, in this next section, I attempt to narrow my scope to sketch the outlines for a genealogy of the modern figure of the dog in the United States.

In the twentieth-century U.S. cultural imaginary, the species *Canis familiaris* tends to inhabit a unique symbolic position as a household possession and commodity fetish, which owes much to the popularization of the so-called "dog fancy" of the late-nineteenth century (McHugh 79). In 1878, the *American Kennel Club Stud Book* was first published, and it purported to stabilize the bloodlines and pedigrees of the dogs recorded therein; in effect, this "served to stabilize the economic and emotional investments of humans in dogs as much as the reproductive patterns of dogs themselves" (McHugh 91). The consequences of this explosion in modern dog breeding practices and industries were widespread. Consider Haraway's summary:

> Urban middle-class Victorians celebrated the power to manipulate the raw material of breeding dogs to 'invent' a breed with standards divorced from the utilitarian. Such

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[20] For an evolutionary and ecological perspective on the ancient origin of dogs and domestication, refer to Adam H. Freedman and Robert K. Wayne's "Deciphering the Origin of Dogs." See Marion Schwartz's *A History of Dogs in the Early Americas* for a sampling of the cultural roles of dogs in the U.S. prior to European colonization. See also Colleen Glenney Boggs's *Animalia Americana* for a biopolitical analysis of U.S. bestiality trials in the seventeenth century and the subsequent capital punishment of humans and other animals, including dogs (54-56, 210).

> power reinforced discourses of instrumentalism, progress, earned wealth, and meritorious leisure. The current commercial technophiliac celebration of the 'invention' of genetically engineered organisms has an ancestral tie to Victorian middle-class adulation of its control over nature. The power to mold dog flesh symbolically destabilized rank and status based on nature; added weight to the appreciation of the achieved status of the business and professional classes; and at the same time reinforced the nexus tying together race, blood, genealogy, merit, and purity in "good breeding." This contradictory brew was stabilized by blending the arbitrary standard and instrumentalism with hierarchical merit fairly judge and purity of lines assiduously maintained. This solution jelled in the ideal types that molded modern purebred dogs. ("For the Love of a Good Dog" 257)

The advent of the modern dog breed thus helped shape an ideological fantasy about human masters' control over dogs' sexual reproduction as purely natural (a fantasy that was not limited to U.S. culture). In turn, this also inspired a surge in bourgeois pet ownership, which secured the dog's place in the modern human family. In other words, the dog increasingly came to be humanized and sentimentalized on an unprecedented scale at the turn of the twentieth century.

At this time, the conditions were also ripe for the rise of the "dog (auto)biography" novel, texts narrated by anthropomorphized canine protagonists. Margaret Marshall Saunders's best-selling *Beautiful Joe* (1893), which was endorsed by the American Humane Education Society, epitomizes this particular development in the novel as genre and in canine literary figures (Fudge 50). The humanitarian aim of Saunders's novel is clearly pedagogical, targeting young readers. *Beautiful Joe* introduces its canine narrator in no uncertain terms: "My name is Beautiful Joe, and I am a brown dog of medium size. I am not called Beautiful Joe because I am a beauty. . . . I

am not a thoroughbred. I am only a cur" (Saunders 53). This dog is constructed to speak in distinctively human terms, and yet he is also made to insist on his caninity. This paradox plays a key role in his ability to rouse an affective response from readers: this humanized animal figure affectively (re)produces inter-species relationships and ideals based on sympathetic feeling, functioning as a "middle ground" between the two poles of the human/animal division (Boggs 19). Joe also routinely confirms human superiority in his narration, and despite being "only" a cur he is humanely treated by the family that rescues him from an abusive master who violently chops off his ears with an axe. To some extent, this novel indicates how anthropomorphized pets support humans' anthropocentric views of the world: "We [humans] construct animals as beings like us in order to show how powerful we are in our control over them and simultaneously we make it appear that our power is natural in that it is given by animals that we have also constructed as instinctive and not rational" (Fudge 51). At the same time, as Colleen Glenney Boggs argues, "loving" human-pet relationships like Joe's relationship with his adoptive family help to signpost why there is no essential bifurcation of "the human" and "the animal" after all, only a shifting dividing line:

> A problematic double articulation emerges of what we mean by 'animal': ('the') animal is the binary opposite of ('the') human. But animals, especially when figured as pets, also function as a middle ground between sets of binaries that oppose the subject and the object, the human and the nonhuman, the psychological and the physiological, and the real and the symbolic. In that sense, animal representations are mediators. . . . [They] mark the limit of the subject and reveal the mechanisms of its functioning. (19)

In light of this double articulation, the trope of caninity conjures not only forms of debasement via "metaphorical meanings" associated with "various human vices" (McHugh 38), but also

positive meanings and feelings associated with one of the most popular and anthropomorphized species in U.S. pet culture.

As a domestic species, dogs are imagined to incarnate "fidelity" and to figure "man's best friend" (Taussig 213). Michael Taussig elaborates how a "double meaning to fidelity"—accuracy and loyalty—suggests that dogs also have a mimetic faculty: they are "astute being[s]" who can discern "copy from original" (213). This acumen also suggests their obedience to an original, instinctual order that privileges human being. Not only do Jack London's well-known novels *Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906) and Paul Auster's lesser-known novel *Timbuktu* (1999) mark opposite poles of twentieth-century U.S. fiction, they also consolidate this long-standing association between the tropes of caninity and fidelity.

In *Call of the Wild*, the once-civilized dog from California, Buck, ultimately joins and leads a Klondike wolf pack; however, this return to nature occurs only once his beloved human companion, John Thornton, has been killed. In addition, Buck the dog dutifully returns to the site of Thornton's death each summer to pay his respects, howling "mournfully" (101). Conversely, *White Fang* charts its eponymous hero's progress from a state of nature learned as a pup, which is called "the law of meat" (49), to a mature and stately position of emergent civility, referred to as his "taming" at the hands Weedon Scott, his very own human companion and "love-master" (122). This narrative arc, capped off by a modern medical intervention to prolong White Fang's life, suggests his compliance with the domestication that turns him from wild wolf into civilized dog. [21] Auster's *Timbuktu* is a novella that is also primarily concerned with human-dog

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[21] During the peak of the breed fancy in the U.S., the natural dominance of the human master was thought to be the key lesson in a dog's training and development; in fact, this was the goal touted by virtually every American domestic training manual published around the turn of the twentieth century. For more on this topic, see Katherine C. Grier's *Pets in America*: "This idea of 'raising' the dog into civility carried into discussions of dog training as late as the 1920s. It even

companionship, and is focalized through the canine perspective of Mr. Bones. After his beloved human, Willy G. Christmas, passes away, Mr. Bones sets out to find new humans. The omniscient narrator slides into the dog's consciousness, determining that "[h]e was a dog built for companionship, for the give-and-take of life with others, and he needed to be touched and spoken to, to be part of a world that included more than just himself" (140). A later scene, which details Mr. Bones's neutering (or, in other words, castration) at the hands of his new suburban family, the Joneses, subtly denaturalizes this association between fidelity and caninity; specifically, it illustrates that a dog's obedience is not necessarily freely given, but often disciplinarily extracted, which ensures readers reckon with the dominance inherent in the human-dog relationship.

Yet it is also worth recalling that the domestication of dogs is not something realized exclusively by human agents either. Genetic studies indicate that the origin myth most commonly circulated about dogs—namely, that the species *Canis familiaris* was produced when humans tamed wolves and then selectively bred them into compliant creatures—is far from historically accurate. The original dogs—or "proto-dogs" as Stephen Budiansky calls them—"were animals that chose to hang around humans, and in so doing to isolate themselves from their wild counterparts" and, subsequently, from their wolf gene-sharing (22-24). Though the history of canine domestication is hotly debated, recent studies of the fossil and genomic records by Adam H. Freedman and Robert K. Wayne suggest these ancient evolutionary branching events took place in multiple geographic locations over 11,000 to 35,000 years ago (303). Nonetheless, Budiansky's point remains: dogs play an active, under-appreciated cultural role in

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included an argument paralleling an old idea about human development, that the very physiognomy of the dog was transformed for the better by civilization: '…[the dog] develops a keen, intelligent expression as compared with the dull, stupid, sleepy look of the undeveloped dog'" (76).

the ongoing production of dog-human domestic relationships. The anthropocentric presumption that domestication hinges on human action alone—and, on top of that, that dogs' bodies are bred by and for *Homo sapiens*—emerge as cultural constructions, albeit ones with material-semiotic histories worthy of closer study.

If the confusion of idiocy and caninity in canonical works of U.S. fiction evokes a denigration popularly associated with mental disability and nonhuman animality, then it also recalls how positive sympathetic feelings and meanings enciphered by pet dogs and holy fools accrue to idiot/dog figures. Thus, the paradox remains: how should the idiot/dog figure be interpreted when the animalizing trope being used to frame a disabled human character is itself a frequently "loved" and humanized animal—namely, the dog?

Against Ableism and Speciesism: Bridging Disability Studies and Animal Studies

This brings me to another key methodological question: how can idiot/dog figures in twentieth-century U.S. fiction be contested as potentially discriminatory (*potentially*, as I have indicated, is non-isomorphic with *necessarily*) without repeating or reproducing the denigration of nonhuman animality that currently preconditions the force of the critique of "dehumanization"? This quandary announces the knots and contours of my approach to the idiot/dog hybrid in *The Sound and the Fury*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Blood Meridian*. The term "dehumanization," a well-used critical tool and tactic in the mainstream of Disability Studies, might seem to proffer forward-thinking critiques of the discursive frames of liberal U.S. identity and power encoded by the normate (Garland-Thomson *Extraordinary* 8). However, I argue that such criticism risks falling back on the very same frames to serve as instruments of critique,

thereby extending—inadvertently, perhaps—the normative meanings of subjectivity that were targeted for reimagining.[22]

Some prominent Disability Studies scholars, such as Amy Vidali and Tanya Titchkosky, have made compelling cases about how direly "a disability approach to metaphor is needed" to challenge the underlying ableism in literary studies (Vidali 42).[23] I sympathize with Vidali and Titchkosky, and I likewise recognize the need to reconsider rhetorical tropes from a wider array of embodied perspectives. Yet even such progressive arguments risk being ineffectual as long as they continue to draw on, and implicitly endorse, the theoretical, methodological, and rhetorical tools of a humanist tradition that allows for the wholesale repudiation of nonhuman animality.

If the canine component of the idiot/dog figure is assumed to categorically signify abjection, what more is there to say? According to Animal Studies scholar Cary Wolfe,

> the full force of animal studies . . . resides in its power to remind us that it is not enough to re-read and reinterpret—from a safe ontological distance, as it were—the relation of metaphor and species difference, the cross-pollination of speciesist, sexist and racist discursive structures in literature, and so on. That undertaking is no doubt praiseworthy and long overdue, but as long as it leaves unquestioned the humanist schema of the knowing subject who undertakes such a reading, then it sustains the very humanism and

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[22] My point resonates with Derrida's critique of Foucault's *History of Madness*: namely, that Foucault did not simply fail in his attempt "to write a history of madness itself. Itself. Of madness itself. That is, by letting madness speak for itself – [or] speaking about itself," he highlighted the paradoxical nature of aiming to critique logocentrism by using reason as the main tool for that critique ("Cogito and the History of Madness": 33-34).

[23] See Vidali's argument against the theory of cognitive metaphor and metaphor acquisition developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson on the grounds it reinforces ableist discourse and values (34). See also Titchkosky for the conventional use and calcification of disability as a "dead metaphor," and how "impairment rhetoric [is] an intoxicatingly easy way to gear into a diagnostic moment" for social justice criticism (5).

> anthropocentrism that animal studies sets out to question. ("Human, All Too Human" 389)

These questions of metaphor, species, epistemology, hermeneutics, and subjectivity that Wolfe invokes need to be brought to bear on analyses of disabled human figures.

Following Mel Chen's rethinking of biopolitics as a greater-than-human relational field, I advance an Animal Studies critique of Disability Studies' limited focus on the human; at the same time, I "crip" Animal Studies to broaden its scope regarding whose bodies and minds qualify for full species-identification and membership (i.e. not only the most abled).[24] For Chen, a more capacious hermeneutic approach begins with a basic question: "what are the creditable bodies of import, those bodies whose lives or deaths are even in the field of discussion?" (6). My critical intervention aims to show that readers' interpretations of and interactions with idiot/dog figures come with life-and-death stakes for humans and canines alike, contributing to the ethical, social, and biopolitical determination of whose bodies and identities matter in U.S. society and, conversely, whose do not. Signalling a slight departure from Chen, however, I call into question the subject's purportedly inherent auto-affective power to perceive and identify itself as something fixed and knowable, regardless of whether the means chosen are rational or affective.

To further establish the parameters of tropological confusion, I now turn to two Disability Studies texts that have inspired my interest in aesthetic disruption and hermeneutic undecidability (i.e. interpretive possibilities and impossibilities): namely, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis* and Ato Quayson's *Aesthetic Nervousness*. Whereas Mitchell and Snyder are primarily concerned with the socio-political effects provoked by

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[24] See Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory*, an influential contribution to Disability Studies for its elaboration of a queer theory-informed "crip" approach. In short, this is an effort to denaturalize the re-consolidation of able-bodiedness as both desirable and compulsory.

disability figures as "the master trope of human disqualification" (3), Quayson is more interested in the ways such figures disrupt literary form—that is, "the devices of aesthetic collapse that occur *within* literary frameworks themselves" (25). For my part, tropological confusion forges a conceptual and methodological middle ground between the socio-political efficaciousness emphasized by Mitchell and Snyder and the formalism pursued by Quayson. Inasmuch as tropological confusion bridges Disability Studies and Animal Studies, it also expands both of their purviews.

Mitchell and Snyder argue that the lived experience of human disability has been subordinated to its prosthetic function within literary aesthetics. To redress this subordination, they promote the disabled figure's transgressive power to defamiliarize and disrupt. As with tropological confusion, their method is deeply informed by poststructuralist theory, which aligns their framework in unintended ways with the animal theories laid out by Derrida and Wolfe. For example, Mitchell and Snyder put forward that no meanings inhere in matter: a body requires the supplement of language. For his part, Derrida argues that the ideal of humanist subjectivity as self-possessed, autonomous, and rational—the self-same "humanity of man" (Derrida *Beast* 71)[25]—can be displaced *from within* once readers recognize their own vulnerability to "inability," that is, to "a non-power at the heart of power" that "we share with animals" (*The Animal That Therefore I Am* 28). Wolfe elaborates Derrida's "inability" as a double articulation to further undermine notions of this "abled" readerly subject as human:

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[25] See Derrida's *Rogues* for a discussion of how the masterful and sovereign powers associated with this "humanity of man" form an autoaffective relation he calls "*ipseity*": "By *ipseity* I thus wish to suggest some 'I can,' or at the very least the power that gives itself its own law, its force of law, its self-representation, the sovereign and reappropriating gathering of self in the simultaneity of an assemblage or assembly, being together, or 'living together,' as we say" (11).

> the first type (physical vulnerability, embodiment, and eventually mortality) is paradoxically made unavailable, *inappropriable*, to us by the very thing that makes it available: namely, a second type of 'not being able,' a second type of finitude that we experience in our subjection to the radically ahuman technicity of language (understood in the broadest sense as any semiotic system). (*What is Posthumanism?* 118-19)[26]

For their part, Mitchell and Snyder propose that literary narratives conceal this epistemic and hermeneutic limit at the corporeal level of "the human" (*Narrative Prosthesis* 6). In fact, they claim that *all narratives* follow this compensatory logic (53), which arguably leads them into a far too programmatic analysis of figures of disability. To wit, they maintain that the gap between language and embodiment is illusorily mediated—or, in their terms, prostheticized—exclusively by disability figures. To put their argument formulaically, representations of disabled bodies suggest that biology is what determines identity (i.e. nature determines culture), and this gives aesthetic discourse a "foothold" in the corporeal world (64). They proceed to expound on how social norms rely on this contrivance: the representation of disability results in its own discursive subjugation, allowing the illusion of an original identity for the normative human subject to persist in textual effect *and* social practice. Mitchell and Snyder consider these meanings an obstacle to the real-life, socio-political inclusion of disabilities.

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[26] Although Derrida and Wolfe are commonly construed as making a case for humanity's identification with animal being, both are careful to stress the questionableness of that possible ethical discourse. As Wolfe argues, inasmuch as "the incalculability of the difference between reason/the human and its other/the nonhuman (animal) [remains open], we may begin to approach *the ethical question* of nonhuman animals not as the other-than-human but as the *infra-human,* not as the primitive and pure other we rush to embrace as a way to cure our own existential malaise, but as part of us, *of* us—and nowhere more forcefully than when reason, 'theory,' reveals 'us' to be very different creatures from who we thought 'we' were" (*Animal Rites* 17; emphasis added).

Despite their programmatic claims, I share with Mitchell and Snyder the view that figures of disability cannot be reduced to a biologically determined meaning. Indeed, they exceed their textual containment because they have both aesthetic and hermeneutic effects. Also, Mitchell and Snyder's work helps me to critically articulate why disabled figures can be seized upon for deconstructing "cultural ideals of the 'normal' or the 'whole' body. *At the same time, disability also operates as the textual obstacle that causes the literary operation of open-endedness to close down or stumble*" (50). Put another way, insofar as figures of disability invite a hermeneutic response through this disruption, it makes them a focal issue because they potentially invite any number of different interpretations and responses (60). Disability's invitation to dialogue with this critical undecidability—the impossibility of hermeneutic certainty—is thus a potential "fulcrum" to leverage for the social empowerment of people living with disabilities (45). However, as long as these figures continue to be read as "the materiality of metaphor," they will appear as "the 'hard kernel' or recalcitrant corporeal matter that cannot be deconstructed away" and, consequently, will support normative social order and agendas (49).

More recently, Ato Quayson's influential *Aesthetic Nervousness* argues that the disruptive effects occasioned by disabled figures are, formally speaking, much more multifaceted and specific than *Narrative Prosthesis* admits. Quayson agrees that textual encounters with disability produce destabilizing effects for readers, but he outlines how they precipitate the "suspension, collapse, or general short-circuiting of the hitherto dominant protocols of representation that may have governed [a] text" on a case-by-case basis (26). This point is crucial because it stresses that a formal breakdown can occur in myriad ways and across "different levels of the text" at once (25). Figures of disability impact and refract upon multiple levels of meaning. As such, they not only catalyze a "hermeneutical impasse," they can perform other

functions like standing for a “moral test” for other characters or as an “interface with otherness (race, class, and social identity)” (52).[27] For Quayson, the key point—and I agree with him—is that no literary figure can be entirely dislodged from its complex textual relations. By employing figures of disability as a “threshold” (28), this helps to focus my own close readings of idiocy and caninity and, by extension, reveals how these figures exist in relation to “other characters and to the images, social settings, and broader spatiotemporal concepts that are manifest within the text” (34).

Though Quayson agrees with Mitchell and Snyder’s characterization of the disruptive hermeneutic potential of disability, he does so primarily as a means of marking his departure from their “nonaesthetic” turn (35). Even though representations of disability have played an indisputable role in the historical violence committed against people living with disabilities, the breakdown of a literary text as it accommodates its form to such figures is arguably not deterministically bound to a social category of identity. In Quayson’s words, “even if programmatic roles were originally assigned these roles can shift quite suddenly, thus leading to the ‘stumbling’ [Mitchell and Snyder] speak of” (25). In his estimation, then, recovering the “active ethical core” of literature requires another interpretative method: it “entails reading disability not as a discrete entity within the literary aesthetic domain, but as part of the totality of textual representation” (210). He proposes a resolutely formalist approach.

Quayson reminds me that the aesthetic structures of the fictions I study are more complex than allowed for by Mitchell and Snyder’s claim that disability operates alone in mediating the gap between culture and nature. With this in mind, an effort to resituate the idiot/dog figure as a prosthesis straddling the gap between bodies and discourse might correspond to a progressive

[27] See Quayson’s “provisional … categories of disability representation” (52).

theoretical or socio-political imperative, but it risks not saying very much about *The Sound and the Fury*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Blood Meridian*.

Arguably, however, by cordoning literary aesthetics off from the socio-political aspects of disability, Quayson in turn risks granting texts an autonomous, abstract existence. This reveals a problematic strain of idealism—one that is exacerbated by his Kantian framework. For Quayson, disability joins Kant's "sublime" in marking the constitutive points of "the aesthetic field *as such*" (22; emphasis added). Thus, the hermeneutic breakdown occasioned by disability not only produces "a contradictory semiotics of inarticulacy and articulation," but also indexes a metaphysical dimension: disabled figures produce a super-sensible feeling that the Absolute exists, though it remains ineffable (23). Quayson's adoption of this Kantian framework arguably does not encourage an active political construal of disability, nor does it allow for an ethical pluralism; instead, he seems to promote an absolute, essential ethics—an understanding at odds with my poststructuralist-informed methodology and biopolitical critique.

Whereas Quayson's guiding metaphor of the "short-circuit" describes an internal disabling "function" that disrupts readers' extra-textual comprehension exclusively in relation to disability representations (Bérubé *Secret* 58), the hermeneutic of tropological confusion is more capacious yet. As I suggested above, it indicates a potential blurring and destabilization of manifold tropes at once. Once readers approach aesthetic conflations of idiocy and caninity as rhetorically attesting to the innovative power of troping, the idiot/dog figure need not be denounced as categorically damaging to those "others" who have historically been excluded from the community of "the human." This figure is neither an analogical substitution (based on

similarity), nor a mimetic duplication (of the literal into the figurative); rather, it becomes a *discursive extension*—a vehicle for reconfiguring and re-cognizing meaning and value.[28]

According to Marjorie Spiegel, the conflation of nonhuman animal and oppressed human figures remains "offensive only to the speciesist: one who has embraced the false notions of what animals are like" (30). Spiegel's approach might be challenged as an incipient form of iconoclasm—that is, on the basis that it is an activist agenda that explicitly prioritizes animal rights over human minority rights. Yet her claim is worthy of further consideration: the negative values and meanings associated with nonhuman animals in dominant cultures of the West pre-conditions the dispossession of human others *only to the extent that animality is presupposed to function as trope of disqualification*. Spiegel's work draws on the philosophy of Peter Singer—the renowned moral philosopher who first popularized the term "speciesism" in *Animal Liberation* (1975).[29] Therein, Singer notoriously suggested that since "some severely retarded infants can never achieve the intelligence level of a dog" (18), these human do not have any more claim to a "right to life" (18). For Singer, such a right qualifies as speciesiest inasmuch as it derives from an abstract human/animal division, a reductive opposition put forward to avow human rationality and language use while disavowing human "animal" biology (18).

Licia Carlson, a philosopher of disability, has singled out Singer's juxtaposition of "dog" and "retard" figures, claiming his rhetoric is responsible for engendering harmful socio-historical effects. According to Carlson, Singer contributes to a pervasive "prototype effect" regarding

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[28] James Berger argues, "catachresis is not just rearranging the verbiage in either a witty, illuminating, or ridiculous way. It means rather to *extend* the implied function of metaphor to its limits—to 'bear across' not just from one verbal context to another, but from the inexhaustible, and inexhaustibly desired, realm of not-language into language" (29; emphasis added).

[29] Singer defines "speciesism" as the arbitrary privileging of a biological species designation over all others. Also, he claims that in virtually all cases of life and death the privileged designation that wins out, historically, has been *Homo sapiens* (18-19).

human mental disability forged in the twentieth century (142). This prototype effect is characterized by three key features: “severe cases are usually compared with animals; this type is often placed in a moral category below normal humans (adults and infants) and many non-humans; and in addition to being viewed as static, the severely retarded individual is designated as a *qualitatively different kind* of being” (142). Carlson’s rejoinder is that Singer’s disability-animality comparison is a reductive homogenization that elides important differences in order to elevate the status of animals. Further, insofar as Singer’s text remains a classic in animal rights discourse, it arguably risks reproducing this comparison within readers’ imaginations today and, thus, a perpetuation of the historical abuse suffered by disabled populations. Though Carlson grants there might yet be ways for scholars “to argue against multiple forms of oppression wherein the intellectually disabled do not become our philosophical pets” (157) while still “theorizing disability and animality together” (159), her work trenchantly advocates for retaining “dehumanization” as a critical term and rhetorical tactic for denouncing ableism (160).

I argue, on the contrary, that approaching literary idiot/dogs as “dehumanizing” figures—and, thus, reducing their animalization to a mere “cover” for ableism (Wolfe *Animal* 124)—fails to appreciate the aesthetic complexity of the works of fiction I study. Specifically, it would miss the way literary idiot/dog figures display the mechanisms undergirding their own representations and, ironically enough, their invitation to be read otherwise. This not only limits sophisticated authors’ aesthetics; on top of that, it risks hermeneutically projecting an implied typology about tropes themselves onto texts—one that assumes to know how various rhetorical figures (e.g. analogy, simile, metaphor, metonymy, figure, image, catachresis, and so on) properly function.

As Michael Bérubé argues, the critical perpetuation of such a hermeneutic ability risks promoting a “censorious literalism” that restricts the operations and meanings of tropes and

narratives ("Disability and Narrative" 570). To illustrate Bérubé's point, this would be tantamount to readers accepting in advance that an idiot figure must be utterly defined by his mental disability and, further, that the literary trope of idiocy is always already limited to a mimetic correlation between its signs and referents—regardless of whether the referent is defined as a physical impairment or a lived experience of mental disability.[30] And so, when caninity is appended to idiocy, this would emerge merely as an aesthetic overlay, implying a substitutive relationship (as well as a resemblance) between "idiot" and "dog." On the contrary, as I have shown, "idiot" and "dog" are multivalent tropes with a diverse array of symbolic connotations and even excessive aesthetic effects and affects.

My own position on the relationship between cultural critiques of ableism and speciesism is neatly encapsulated by James Berger:

> It is legitimate to criticize representations of disability that are clearly hostile and derogatory, but it is not always easy to know when this occurs. Moreover, as virtually all sophisticated views of language agree, it is impossible to avoid the use of tropes; there is no language that might depict disability, or anything else [including caninity], "as it really is." (11).

Berger's cautionary words are especially relevant when asking hermeneutic questions about how to engage with literary representations.

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[30] The distinction between "impairment" and "disability" is commonplace in Disability Studies. The former "refers to the specific physical or cognitive deficiency that leads to a reduced capacity to fully actualize all aspects of one's life" without dependency (e.g. requiring assistance for mobility), whereas the latter refers "to socially regulated parameters that exacerbate the effect of the impairment" (e.g. buildings that are not wheelchair accessible) (Quayson 3). Yet "it is almost impossible to keep the two separate, since 'impairment' is automatically placed within a social discourse that interprets it and 'disability' is produced by the interaction of impairment and a spectrum of social discourses on normality that serve to stipulate what counts as disability in the first place" (4).

Chapter Outlines

In Chapter One, I examine how and why Faulkner's tropological confusion of idiocy and caninity in the figure of Benjy Compson strengthens and extends eugenics-inflected stereotypes and at the same time, paradoxically, exceeds such meanings and values by supporting a transgressive hermeneutics—one that destabilizes stigmatizing ableist and speciesist interpretations. From this latter angle, Faulkner's novel promises to disrupt more conventional critical practices, suspending and, in turn, providing an opportunity for critics to contest the reproduction of a U.S. social imaginary that is responsible for subordinating, immobilizing, and excluding "disability" and "animality" at once by relegating both "idiot" and "dog" to signify exceptional, irrational figures for social otherness—or, to be even more specific, figures whose exceptionality is reductively defined as biological. Regarding Faulkner's representation of Benjy as an idiot/dog hybrid, his disruptive potency can be characterized as epistemic. In short, Benjy's excess overturns the powers and prerogatives of the rational human subject (i.e. the *cogito* of Enlightenment humanism) both in terms of his textual representation—*aesthetic confusion*—and his hermeneutic effects—*readerly confusion*. This two-pronged disruptive capacity is ideologically and phenomenally relevant, providing critics with the rhetorical effects to establish a counter discourse to the novel's subtext of "bad blood" and biological determinism, and thus moving beyond an interpretation of this figure merely as a metaphor for degeneration, disqualification, or dispossession. As I outlined earlier, these negative meanings and values have historically accrued to tropes of disability and animality alike. I do not deny their historical circulation; rather, I develop here a set of critical tactics to better challenge them.

In Chapter Two, this analysis of Faulkner is supplemented—and further complicated—by a close reading of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, focusing on its use of the idiot/dog's

ambivalence to produce *readerly affect*. Here, I propose—at least once tropological confusion is adopted as a hermeneutic strategy for reading this novella otherwise—that Steinbeck's depiction of Lennie Small as an idiot/dog hybrid can be recognized (or, indeed, re-cognized) as effecting vicarious, sympathetic feelings. Far from a cause for celebration, however, these "gut" feelings of sympathy for the idiot/dog figure are prone to being seized upon—or, more accurately, governmentalized—for a normative biopolitical end: namely, the insidious perpetuation of a liberal fantasy not only about the human subject's superior powers of rationality, but also of its affective sense of autonomous agency, self-extension, and—most of all—humane benevolence. Ironically, this liberal humane fantasy is shown to also require the dispossession of an animal(ized) other—in this case, Lennie as the idiot/dog—to serve as an index of these presupposed "natural" readerly powers.

On the one hand, this fantasy adheres to the circular logic of an auto-affective proof (i.e. I feel; therefore, I am). On the other hand, it occludes the more innovative potentials that come with the shared vulnerabilities, embodied interdependencies, and greater-than-human relationships that this novella puts forward. As David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have shown, this kind of individualistic fantasy is rampant in contemporary U.S. society, and it is continually reproduced through a Foucaultian microphysics of power/knowledge: it is supported by systems of control and governmental structures that now must be understood as both institutionally diffuse *as well as* endemic to particular biological and quotidian reproductions of liberal citizen-subjects (Mitchell and Snyder *Biopolitics* 7). Nonetheless, I claim that tropological confusion suspends a readerly invitation of this kind and, thus, constitutes one option for challenging the fantasy, at least from within the fields of literary study.

In Chapter Three, I turn to untangle another complex thread that is tied up in the idiot/dog figure of *Blood Meridian*. Why does Judge Holden, a cold-blooded and scalp-hunting killer, adopt the idiot and let him survive so long as he serves as his surrogate dog? My analysis of idiot/dog confusion pinpoints a key element of this puzzling novel that remains largely overlooked by McCarthy's critics: it explicitly acknowledges an aesthetic debt to the mesmerizing conventions and visual rhetoric of the nineteenth-century U.S. freak show and, more specifically, P.T. Barnum's "What Is It?' figure. McCarthy's idiot/dog figure thus helps to peel back the mystifying veil of the novel's aesthetics to bring two biopolitical layers into sharper focus: one focuses on the pairing of Judge Holden and James Robert, and the other focuses on the narrator's style and its readerly effects.

It is not shocking that Judge Holden would violently discipline and regulate another character—even with a collar and a leash. He is a cruel and resourceful monomaniac who routinely professes to have "offered himself entire to the blood of war" (McCarthy 331). It is crucial to note that the violence he displays is rhetorically reminiscent not only of master-slave relations, but of master-dog domestication. Also, it makes some sense that James Robert would appear to embody dog-like submissiveness and obedience, testifying mutely to the judge's masterful sovereignty. His life is at risk. However, my reading of the idiot/dog figure alongside the narrator's intense visuality challenges interpretations of *Blood Meridian* that posit the judge as its undisputed masterful agent—as a character capable not only of domesticating dogs, but of acceding to a higher level of power, like a Nietzschean superman, so that he can also transform the idiot into an obedient pet (McCarthy 223). At the same time, the narrator's omniscient vantage does not take precedence over the judge's performance either. As with the judge, when critics latch onto the narrator as *Blood Meridian*'s hermeneutic key, they risk biopolitically

reproducing their own liberal subjectivity as autonomous and abled interpreters vis-à-vis the idiot/dog as a figure of abjection.

The Sound and the Fury, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Blood Meridian* each engage the cultural scripts of eugenics and dog breeding, albeit in slightly different ways and to various ends. They also similarly reflect how questions of disability and species are inextricably entangled in that very biopolitical nexus. Thus, these texts come into view as of greater-than-human concern. Furthermore, since these three canonical works of fiction continue to be widely assigned and institutionally disseminated throughout schools in the U.S., it is possible that these cultural scripts continue to have a consequential bearing. Here, I ask: what happens when readers approach the idiot/dog figure less as a transparent or mimetic *representation* of the animalized degradation of a disabled human and more as a glimpse of the as-yet-untold story of the idiot/dog figure?

– Chapter 1 –
Otherwise Undisclosed: Benjy Compson's Idiocy, Species, and "Bad Blood"

A Tale Told by a Blood Test, Full of Sound and Fury

Before I begin my analysis of William Faulkner's canonical novel, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)—a literary analysis that will comprise the bulk of this chapter—permit me a brief detour. In January 2014, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) cleared CytoScan Dx Assay for the domestic market. Originally produced by Affymetrix, Inc., an American biotechnology company acquired in 2016 by Thermo Fisher Scientific, CytoScan is a post-natal test that professes to detect the causes of mental disability at the chromosomal level with a mere blood sample. The promotional brochure for this test begins with a warning to parents: "children with special needs can have lifelong challenges, including various medical conditions as well as difficulties with physical movement, learning, and social interaction" (Affymetrix). This warning is closely followed by a more direct ethical appeal, which suggests that not only will scanning an infant's genetic make-up with CytoScan save parents' money and time, especially since a "diagnostic odyssey" might ensue, but also that "[e]arly intervention is key to providing better outcomes" for the children themselves (Affymetrix). In the brochure, "good health" is equated with a sound financial investment for sympathetic parents. This kind of rhetorical one-two punch might seem par for the course, especially given that it appears in an advertisement for a medical product aimed at new parents. After all, such appeals help the corporation reap more profits from the marketplace.

What is more insidious, however, is that *The Huffington Post*, the popular online and politically liberal news aggregator, immediately heralded CytoScan's arrival with a laudatory headline of its own: "FDA Approves First-Of-A-Kind Intellectual Disability Blood Test For

Infants." In this case, the news headline likewise hails the blood test as a cutting-edge development in biotechnology, early diagnostic intervention, and family-oriented medical care. It optimistically casts CytoScan as a helpful tool for American families to better identify and manage a child's potential experience of disablement. Yet it is crucial to observe that the headline's more insidious quality is not fully revealed in its sanctioning of a medical model of disability under the guise of sympathy and care for families. Rather, it is more clearly glimpsed in the announcement that the "FDA Approves" this so-called blood test. Evidently, this is a story not just about promoting particular individuals' health; it is also about U.S. state approval. The news about the government's approval of CytoScan gives lie to any notion that disability is a private, family affair. On the contrary, the management of disability is a biopolitical priority in the United States.

Carrying overtones of an enthusiastic snake oil pitch, *The Huffington Post*'s headline, intentionally or not, contributes to and extends the eugenics-inflected cultural script that runs throughout Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*: that is, *mental disability is a biological and hereditary defect worthy of intervention and moral panic because it leads not only to individual and familial suffering, but social inadequacy and economic burden upon the U.S. nation*. Insofar as Faulkner's portrayal of Benjy Compson stands as "the classic literary attempt to represent an idiot" (Halliwell 19), at least in twentieth-century Anglo-American fiction, this figure's biopolitical effects—both in terms of its narrative *and* meta-narrative (or readerly) effects—are crucial to address, and the latter have arguably remained overlooked until now. At the level of narrative, Faulkner's depiction of mental disability as an inheritable condition and biological threat are anchored in the trope of blood. For as I will elaborate, even Benjy's mother, Caroline Compson, announces that his idiocy is the direct result of the family's biological deterioration—

or, in her words, their “bad blood” (Faulkner 64). Such a script remains all too prevalent in the present.

In this respect, the recent rhetorical framing of CytoScan in *The Huffington Post* is cause for concern. The test is made to appear like a long-awaited godsend: the first effective line of defence for the nation’s population against individuals’ disabled minds (and the potential proliferation thereof), which it subtly suggests constitute a kind of biological flaw that can be detected in their bloodstreams. When considered alongside Faulkner’s novel, this headline comes into sharper focus as implying that mental disability is something dangerous that gets carried in the veins; some hidden, heritable *thing* that CytoScan will finally help locate. There is a slight problem: it isn’t.

Disability Studies scholars, ranging from social model adherents like Mark Rapley to cultural model proponents like Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, have long-established that this is not the case. Rather than presuming that mental disability exists as an *a priori* identity or ontological category that some individuals are tragically born into (and potentially reproduce), Rapley advocates for an interactional model of mental disability. He addresses the “maintenance and exploitation of power asymmetry in [social] interactions” that give rise to—or bring “into being”—identities and values that accompany diagnoses of mental disability, much like the ones CytoScan offers (2). For Rapley, these inhibiting social constructions are too often conflated with organic, physical bodies. In turn, this kind of conflation serves to naturalize social hierarchies and, at the same time, promote the stigmatization of so-called abnormal bodies and minds (2). Diverging slightly from Rapley and other strict social constructionists, Snyder and Mitchell adopt a more robust compatibilist position. They agree with social model disability theorists about the necessity of analyzing social interactions and power dynamics, as well as

advocating for the removal of ideological and physical barriers for people living with disabilities in United States—barriers erected by and large during the historical rise of clinical medicine during the nineteenth century. However, on top of that, Snyder and Mitchell call for sustained reconsideration of how experiences of disablement—or impairment effects—"productively create new forms of embodied knowledge" (*Biopolitics* 2). Put another way, they propose that people identified as disabled have something unique and positive to contribute to epistemological discourses and, moreover, that in spite of the fact that one's experience of mental disability comes with undeniable hardships, it is not simply a negative, static, or deficient state of being. As cultural model supporters, Mitchell and Snyder maintain that "mental disability" is not without its scientific or material realities, nor is it synonymous with a free-floating form of social stigma. Instead, the term refers to a complex, inextricable amalgam of bodies and ideologies—of nature *and* culture. This complexity has epistemological ramifications that too often go unexplored.

Despite the differences between these scholars' presuppositions and methodological approaches to mental disability, a common contention unites them: mental disability cannot be apprehended, hypostatized, or identified so simply as a biological defect polluting the body's tissues or fluids. Under their influence, I likewise understand and use the term "mental disability" to describe *effects*, neither purely material nor fully social, triggered by an agent within any number of specific, situated contexts.[31] As such, the rich heterogeneity of lived experiences of mental disability constitutes an embodied knowledge that accrues within various contexts *over time*. Such a high degree of variability can never be reductively accounted for, nor

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[31] These effects are not limited to forms of social disablement. The heterogeneity associated with "mental disability" does not necessitate social constructionism in the form put forward by Rapley. I follow Snyder and Mitchell more closely, who distinguish their cultural model of disability from the social model's neutralization of embodied, material differences (10).

can it be calculated in advance by taking blood from a baby. Whereas I agree that "mental disability" does not prescribe or denote an inherited identity, *The Huffington Post*'s headline by contrast risks re-inscribing an "old" eugenics fantasy that blood can function as a natural and legible sign for mental disability's otherwise undisclosed biological origin.

In A More Literary Vein

I pursue how this eugenic cultural script about blood is complexly woven throughout the narrative fabric of *The Sound and the Fury*—a novel that continues to be widely assigned on post-secondary syllabi and revered as "the quintessential American high modernist text" (Polk 1). As I suggested above, this novel deeply concerned with heredity and family bonds. Its narrative follows the fragmentation and decline of the once-sovereign Compson family within the fictional milieu of Jefferson in Yoknapatawpha County. More specifically, as Michael Millgate writes,

> The Compsons with whom the novel deals . . . are those of the last generation, an *enfeebled* remnant of the old stock. They are Quentin, who commits suicide; Caddy (Candace), who ends as the mistress of a Nazi general; Jason, who becomes a soulless petty-businessman; and Benjy (christened Maury), who is an idiot. The parents—Mr. Compson, sententious and ineffectual, and Mrs. Compson, a whining hypochondriac—provide a domestic environment (presented vividly throughout the book in brief impressionistic vignettes) which combines readily with the effects of heredity to drive the children along their terrible paths. (26-27; emphasis added)

In short, the Compson family is disgraced. Faulkner, like many of his fellow literary modernists, uses multiple character perspectives and formal experimentations throughout, including stream of consciousness narration, to disorient his readers' sense of a universal or uniform temporal-

spatial order, thereby exposing the "artifices of formal structure and human design" (Brooks 113-14). His modernist experiments with form, in conjunction with the novel's portrayal of the shifting class and racial power dynamics in the U.S. South in the wake of slavery, combine not only to destabilize and subvert previously held orders; in other words, this emphasis on aesthetics is not simply redemptive. The novel can be read to subtly re-inscribe fetishistic notions about the purity of the body of the white, male subject of the nation.

Most famously, Faulkner's depiction of the idiot, Benjy Compson, serves as *The Sound and the Fury*'s *genius loci* and, arguably, its grounding rod. Benjy is the figure of ontological otherness against whom all other characters are contrasted. As the titular allusion to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* suggests, his narrative is given priority: the idiot's tale is the first of four sections in the novel. In it, he emerges as an enigmatic figure whose mental disability appears to render him a wordless observer and mere recorder of the narrative action, which is augmented by Quentin, Jason, and the third-person narrator in the remaining sections. Though Benjy's stream of consciousness is difficult for readers to decipher because it does not proceed chronologically, it nonetheless serves as a guide for what follows. According to Millgate, Benjy lacks an interpreting intelligence, so he is relegated to simply relaying the gradual dissolution of the Compson family in a manner unadorned with symbolic abstraction; his is a narrative of experience or "pure sensation" (27). To this extent, Benjy invokes the possibility of an outside to the cultural order of American rational subjectivity.

But why would Faulkner construct Benjy as ontologically other—a difference that, in effect, bars him from American subjectivity and cultural belonging? Walter Benn Michaels's influential reading of the trope of blood in Faulkner's novel suggests one possible answer: Faulkner's modernist aesthetic is deeply invested in constructing American identity as

inheritable, biological, and racial—even though American identity itself is reconfigured, paradoxically, as cultural identity (i.e. performative). For Michaels, Faulkner's literary-aesthetic "ambition" aligns with a widespread "nativist" project—an effort to distinguish between American subjectivity and its others—in the U.S. during the 1920s, which sought to realize:

> the perfection not of racial identity but of what would come to be called cultural identity. Another way to put this would be to say that the emergence of race as the crucial marker of modern identity was accompanied almost from the start by an acknowledgement of the limitations of race as bearer of identity—*it is these limitations that the technologies of blood supplementation were designed to overcome*. (13; emphasis added)

From this angle, Faulkner's deployment of the trope of idiocy functions as an aesthetic technology of blood supplementation. For as Michaels puts it, "blood isn't enough" to secure the purity of American identity from the contamination of otherness (12). Thus, Faulkner's emphasis on aesthetic convention and form is something of a modernist feint that seems to prioritize cultural practices, but surreptitiously re-grounds identity in an essentialist biological fantasy.

Once approached from Michaels's compelling angle, *The Sound and the Fury* appears to answer questions of American identity in the very first instance by introducing a character who seems to be excluded from practicing American culture himself—from its *logos* and conventions—by virtue of not only being a human with a mental disability, as Millgate suggests, but by also being framed as a species hybrid: an idiot/dog figure. On the one hand, along the lines charted by Michaels (though he does not discuss tropes of disability or species), I agree that Faulkner's idiot/dog figure qualifies as an aesthetic supplement to protect—that is, a way of "insisting upon"—the purity of being American (13). However, on the other hand, what is crucially lacking in Michaels's account of this novel's depictions of biological tropes of blood

and race is a consideration of how the tropological confusion of idiocy and caninity embodied by Benjy opens up a metanarrative dimension to this novel that has a biopolitical function for readers.

For first-time readers, *The Sound and the Fury* is a dizzying, confusing experience. It might seem scrambled or even disorganized, starting with Benjy's stream of consciousness monologue and proceeding to weave in the impressions of the other Compson brothers; it also detours and loops through different time periods, experiences, memories, personal fantasies, and episodes. Nevertheless, there is still a distinct logic at work throughout that propels a readerly sense of meaningful revelation or, in other words, hermeneutic order. For Halliwell, the trope of idiocy is key to this logic because it anchors the "genetic and moral . . . decay of the Compson family" and translates it into a larger, more abstract theme about the decline of "the white Southern landed aristocracy" in the U.S.:

> the alcoholism and invalidity of the Compson parents are signs of such decay that manifests itself in the three brothers as idiocy (Benjy), insanity (Quentin), and brutal sadism (Jason). Each brother represents the end of the dynastic line: Jason castrates Benjy; in his incestuous wanderings and eventual suicide Quentin reveals an unwillingness to look outside himself; and Jason is only interested in sexual exchange with prostitutes. Even their sister, Candace (or Caddy), is thought to be promiscuous as Jason rails against her whorish activities. Caddy's daughter [also named Quentin] is the product of casual copulation and is described by Faulkner in his 1945 appendix as 'nameless at birth and already doomed to be unwed from the instant the dividing egg determined its sex.' Although the novel treats Benjy more sympathetically than the other

> brothers, . . . his idiocy is a symptom of the decline of his family and culture, rather than a moral antidote to it. (Halliwell 19-20)

Without a doubt, the legibility of *The Huffington Post* headline with which I began comes nowhere near the complexity and difficulty posed by Faulkner's fiction—one of the most canonical Anglo-American novels riddled through with an idiot/dog figure. Still, the issue at stake is: why would Benjy's idiocy be figured as partly canine when he is not a dog? By pursuing a reading of this idiot/dog figure as an under-examined issue of biopolitical consequence, my analysis does not simply advance an argument that idiot/dog tropological confusion is a dehumanizing stereotype or stigmatizing exclusion that provokes a hermeneutic of hemophobia (i.e. anxious interpretations of blood) and zoophobia (i.e. anxious interpretations of species). Ultimately, it diverges from Michaels's argument about this novel's nativist modernism by claiming that *The Sound and the Fury* opens up the disruptive epistemological potential of idiot/dog tropological confusion as a way to destabilize the reproduction of readers as rational, liberal U.S. subjects. As such, the idiot/dog figure can be read both as an aesthetic technology of biopolitical regulation—what Donald Pease refers to as an instance of "novel governmentality" (*Pip* 328)—and, paradoxically, as key to an immanent critique thereof.

Contextualizing *The Sound and the Fury*

At the time of *The Sound and the Fury*'s composition, evolutionary theories about biological heritability had gained widespread traction in the U.S. imaginary. In turn, "[t]erms such as 'handicapped,' 'retarded,' 'abnormal,' 'inefficient,' 'defective,' and 'degenerate'" circulated with increasing frequency, thereby lending "scientific" basis to a discursive terrain that framed idiocy—or, as it was also frequently referred to at the time, "feeblemindedness"—as a reproductive threat to the American national stock (Baynton 48). This threat was deemed to be

in dire need of containment. When Darwinian "natural selection" discourse coupled with U.S citizens' personal experiences of competition for physical resources in the free-labour market, this arguably catalyzed a shift in the signifying practices and epistemic perspectives on idiocy. More specifically, the idiot trope's previous, more positive connotations of "socio-existential" privacy and Edenic innocence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (McDonagh 19) were eclipsed by connotations of an "unhealthy" and "unfit" figure of biological retrogression or decline (Noll and Trent 7).

As I outlined above in this dissertation's Introduction, Faulkner's was a time when books like Henry Goddard's family studies, including the influential *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness* (1912) were national bestsellers. Eugenicists like Goddard and Charles Davenport advocated for the regulation of the bloodlines of the national population, calling on the U.S. government to exert greater state control over the bodies and reproductive capacities of so-called degenerate individuals by placing them in institutions or subjecting them to involuntary sterilization. Their eugenic theories were distorted popularizations of Darwinian evolutionary theory. As Nicole Rafter writes,

> Nineteenth-century thinking about evolution reinforced the degenerationist association of socially problematic behaviors with reversion to a lower form of life. Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) seemed to depict a titanic ubiquitous struggle between primitive and complex organisms. In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin explained that evolution creates hierarchies of intelligence, morality, and other human characteristics. 'The several mental and moral faculties of man have been gradually evolved,' he writes, so that 'we may trace a perfect gradation from the mind of an utter idiot, lower than that of an animal low in the scale, to the mind of a Newton.' Herbert Spencer and other so-called social

> Darwinists advised that socially problematic groups should be left to die out, like inferior species. (234)

It was deemed paramount that so-called idiots should be prevented opportunities to reproduce. Thus, with the onset of the twentieth century, the idiot figure gradually emerged as neither fully human, nor fully animal; specifically, it stood for the very antithesis of American development and efficient nation building.

Derived in part from this burgeoning eugenics movement, *individual progress* became a defining feature of American subjectivity at the time of *The Sound and the Fury*'s composition. Progress was celebrated as both the natural order for survival and a social necessity within the context of the nation's free-market economy. Yet these notions were also underwritten by cultural presuppositions about race, sex/gender, and the necessity of population management. As Lois Cuddy and Claire Roche point out, "The American fascination with progress is not unique to Darwinian theory or to the eugenics movement. . . . [Nevertheless,] eugenics was hailed as the method to insure that progress in the Anglo-Saxon race and, in fact, we might safely invoke 'progress' as both the trope and the obsession in the eugenics movement . . . in the United States" (11-12). In 1914, as Douglas C. Baynton observes, "the eugenics section of the American Breeders' Association warned that the alarming number of Americans who carried an 'inherent defect' were an 'industrial and social handicap,' a 'danger to the national and racial life,' and a 'drag on society.'" (58). Benjy's ultimate fate in the novel—he is castrated and committed to an asylum by Jason—reflects how the sterilization and institutionalization of those deemed mentally disabled were considered necessary forms of intervention. And by the 1920s, such eugenic scripts were not only a part of popular discourse, but were enshrined into various laws. Most notably, perhaps, is the Supreme Court's ruling in *Buck v. Bell*:

> In this atmosphere of national fear, the 1920s saw legislation legalizing involuntary sterilization in Virginia, California, and twenty-two other states. In the Supreme Court decision in *Buck v. Bell* in 1927, the Court upheld a Virginia statute that allowed for the involuntary sterilization of Carrie Buck, a young woman institutionalized at the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feebleminded. (Cuddy and Roche 14)

"By the early 1960s," Mark Largent writes, "more than 63,000 Americans were coercively sterilized under the authority of these laws" (1).

In light of this thumbnail sketch of the cultural context in which Faulkner's novel was both composed and unleashed on its reading public, I reiterate that the recent *Huffington Post* headline I glanced at above risks reinforcing a similar typological way of thinking that links cognitive difference to historical notions about blood purity, breeding, genealogy, sex, gender, race, and even species. For, as I will elaborate and as Rafter's discussion of the popularization of Darwinian theory hints, "mental disability" continues to connote a state of biological inferiority today in large part because it is conflated, sometimes implicitly but often explicitly, with an atavistic animality deemed abject and beyond the pale of ethical responsibility. What at first blush might have seemed a fairly benign introduction to the medical technology of CytoScan increasingly appears to be a pernicious promotion of identity policing and biological determinism.

Another Look at Benjy

In this section, I will start to shift from troubling the promise of a blood test capable of disclosing the chromosomal reality of mental disability as a category or *type* of human (i.e. a mentally disabled human as opposed to a human with a mental disability)—or, more precisely, a kind of sub-humanity—to probing the anxious admixture of blood and species within the literary

figure of Benjy Compson. By undertaking close readings of the symbolic significance of his physical appearance, animalization, and blood, I begin to unpack his aesthetic effects and influence; this answers a Disability Studies challenge first levied by Maria Truchan-Tataryn, and more recently repeated by Taylor Hagood, "to take another look at Faulkner's famous 'idiot'" through the lens afforded by the critical subfield of Disability Studies ("The Secret" 93).

Truchan-Tataryn argues that literary critics regularly fail to challenge Benjy's construction as an idiot type. She charges them with sustaining "a naturalized correlation between subhuman existence and intellectual disability" (165) and perpetuating "idiot myths" by persistently failing to address how he merely reflects "imaginings projected upon a population denied agency and voice by authors of public policy as well as narrative texts" (163). Nevertheless, as Hagood puts it, Truchan-Tataryn does not "roll up her sleeves and undertake [the] messy textual exploration" she claims is lacking ("The Secret" 93). For his part, Hagood returns to Benjy's narration—the novel's first section, entitled "April 7, 1928"—to make good on her challenge. Regarding this section, he argues that Benjy can be read as "not only much more intellectually complex but also more prescient, conscious, and skillful as a narrativist than Faulkner scholarship has conventionally thought" ("The Secret" 92). While I agree that this is a commendable start, the reinvigorated criticism that Benjy requires should not be limited to the novel's first section alone.

Michael Bérubé has also addressed Truchan-Tataryn's provocative analysis, offering a divergent reading of his own. He offers a rejoinder to her suggestion that "interpretations of Benjy perpetuate oppressive stereotypes of disability as diminished in function and therefore in human worth" (Truchan-Tataryn 165). Against Truchan-Tataryn's understanding of Benjy's dehumanizing and stigmatizing representation, Bérubé reminds Faulkner's readers that "nothing

is gained by denying that some disabilities do entail diminishments in function … [whereas] everything is to be gained by disarticulating 'degree of function' from 'degree of human worth'" (*Secret* 57). Bérubé's disagreement with Truchan-Tataryn aligns his work with Mitchell and Snyder's cultural model of disability, particularly inasmuch as he insists on an embodied component to Benjy's disability—or, in other words, that this figure evidently exhibits impairment effects. Furthermore, Bérubé continues, the matter of Benjy's disability (i.e. his embodied experience of those impairment effects) remains inextricable from the social values that structure others' perceptions of it (Bérubé *Secret* 57).

That being said, Bérubé's insistence that Benjy's "human worth" should not be "measured" in relation to functionality arguably risks accepting the inherent value of "human worth" relative to the ostensibly inferior worth of other nonhuman animal species. As I have already suggested, to the extent that the critical charge of dehumanization contributes to a discursive-cultural history in which animality signals an abjection or a denigrating stereotype, I avoid proposing here that Faulkner's portrayal of Benjy reinforces "dehumanizing" effects. Also, in an effort to circumvent the potential pitfalls of what Donna Haraway has decried as "species chauvinism" (*When* 60), I set out in the remainder of this chapter to demonstrate how Faulkner's novel renders mental disability as a biological type by supplementing tropes of blood and breeding with a generic animality emblazoned by the figure of the dog. And yet, paradoxically, this technology of blood supplementation ultimately enciphers textual excess and, thus, offers a counterhegemonic opportunity for reading otherwise.

As Jacqui Griffiths attests, Benjy is most famous for effecting mental cramps: "my first reading was dominated by thoughts about whether he was an infant or a dog. In a sense, I was not wrong in either of these assumptions" (171). I explore the dangers of Griffiths's controversial

reading later on, but she is nonetheless right to aver that Benjy appears as both human and animal at once. Faulkner *convokes* and *fuses* tropes of idiocy and caninity in a single figure: an idiot/dog hybrid. Although Truchan-Tataryn makes passing reference to Benjy's "canine analogues," his animalization has held little critical interest up to this point in U.S. literary criticism (166). Griffiths's controversial psychoanalytic reading is the notable exception. With my close reading, I attempt to add nuance to Griffiths's observation about Benjy's tacit caninity by proposing that Faulkner uses this idiot/dog figure to naturalize human mental disability as a mongrelized, blood-based identity that is reproducible and heritable. Then, I theorize this confusion of tropes, as well as the hermeneutic and epistemological uncertainty that it activates, under the banner of *tropological confusion*. To gain better critical purchase on this figure's confusing effects, I will channel my interpretation through several key analyses and critical commonplaces, elaborating by the end why Benjy provokes a hermeneutic of hemophobia and zoophobia that persists to this day; this, in turn, illustrates how contentious issues and figures of blood and species are routinely superimposed onto and "stabilized" in bodies deemed inferior. Finally, in my greater effort to develop tropological confusion as a critical rubric for future analyses that bridge Disability Studies and Animal Studies, I will conclude by suggesting that even though Benjy's animalization serves as a literary-aesthetic attempt to produce readers who (re)produce mental disability as an unambiguous matter worthy of pity and terror—that is, as metanarrative invitation to self-identify as a fully human, able liberal reader—this novel's ethical and biopolitical effects exceed that programmatic, eugenics-influenced objective.

A Timely Reminder

Why, then, would I choose a headline about a new blood test for mental disability as the lead-in to what seems to be, at least at first glance, a distantly related literary analysis? Because

the rhetoric framing the test's arrival proffers a timely reminder that the trope of blood—a literary-cultural convention that Faulkner's novels helped to develop—still cuts to the heart of how the American body politic is differentiated along lines ostensibly anchored in blood, including race, sex, gender, ability, and even species. In effect, this seemingly inconsequential headline serves as my first case study, illustrating how the trope of blood uniquely endures as this "matrix" for "fantasies of identification"—a term Ellen Samuels defines as the desire "to definitively identify bodies, to place them in categories delineated by race, gender, or ability status, and then to validate that placement through a verifiable, biological mark of identity" (2). Such a fantasy gains traction in the present not only by sedulously touting blood as a portal to the hidden explanatory power of DNA—that is, the inherited master code of identity. At the same time, it covertly rouses an essentialist framework reminiscent of blood quantum laws like the Dawes Act of 1887 and the Jim Crow South's pervasive one-drop rules against miscegenation like Virginia's Racial Integrity Act of 1924, whereby identity could be certified, regularized, and assigned value according to ancestral bloodlines.[32] With *The Huffington Post*'s recent "biological framing" of mental disability, then, blood's powerful connotations make a diagnostic category appear substantiated, readable, and knowable. Rhetoric of this sort is insidiously tautological: the appeal works by positing blood as an incontrovertible physical fact "to obscure the pure discursiveness of the supposed proof" (Samuels 142). This excites desires for an identificatory order that is both pre-given and certain.

However, as Walter Benn Michaels suggests in his cogent analysis of *The Sound and the Fury*, biological identity is never so simply determined: "because blood is blood—blood isn't enough," meaning that investments in the ontological "primacy" or "purity" of biological

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[32] See Haraway for how a racial discourse based on blood extends to one of genes in contemporary times (*Modest_Witness*, 219-29).

identity are already repackaged by and through cultural and symbolic supplements—"technologies of blood supplementation" (12-13). According to Michaels, the eugenics-inflected desire to consolidate U.S. national identity, which characterized early-twentieth America under the government of President Calvin Coolidge, has not been eradicated or superseded so much as reconfigured as the very *foundation* for a pluralist paradigm in the U.S. (142). For Michaels, *The Sound and the Fury* can thus be read as a reflection of a significant historical shift from the Progressive Era's dominant fantasy of a melting pot citizenry to the emergent cultural pluralism of the 1920s, which was arguably marked by an intensification regarding the national significance of biological prescriptions. Moreover, since "one's beliefs and practices" were no longer equated with but supposedly *derived* through inheritance and consanguinity, one could be determined to be more or less American: "Because [U.S.] culture cannot simply be equated with whatever you actually do and believe, it now becomes something that can be lost or stolen, reclaimed or repudiated" (15-16). Like Michaels, I argue that essentialist identity politics prevail in the United States, and this is due in no small part to textual efforts, like Faulkner's classic novel (and even the example of *The Huffington Post* headline), which posit the reproductive family as the determinant of what it means to be American, to make that meaning appear biologically legible, and to maintain its intelligibility.

The subjugation and discrimination experienced by people living with a mental disability in the U.S. are inextricably mixed up with racism based on blood.[33] That being said, this vital fluid cannot be purified of its sex, gender, or species implications either. In Faulkner's novel, the Compson family's various obsessions with the maintenance of their bloodline and their social class directly correlate to patronymic norms of subjectivity and biological futurity—hegenomic

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[33] See Samuels's insightful elaboration of the "enmeshed histories of blood quantum and disability categorization in the United States" (161).

norms that require the construction and subordination of figures of otherness.[34] This is precisely why, as Hagood recognizes, Benjy's mental disability is cast as a form of marginalization that cannot be separated from issues of gender and biological sex: "his disability emasculates him practically (he does not possess the power of other white men) and literally (by way of his castration)" (Hagood *Faulkner* 92). It is no surprise to observe here that the blood ideology reflected by Faulkner's novel is as problematic as it is paramount in the "old" postbellum American South, especially during the peak of the eugenics movement; nevertheless, the prevailing view today is that these "older" values have been supplanted by a superior scientific understanding.

For example, such a presumption problematically underlies Michael Wainwright's recent, and frequently insightful, reconsideration of Faulkner's oeuvre. Wainwright argues that pangenesis, Darwin's long-discredited theory that biological inheritance and reproductive health are determined by the compatibility of blood strains and the appropriate blending thereof, not only justified postbellum racism, but "impelled Faulkner's artistic vision" and ballasted his entire aesthetic project (93). Pangenesis, in Wainwright's account,

> complies with a convoluted form of hematological taxonomy. Strain, species, genus, and family constitute this system of classification. Each individual embodies a strain of blood according to speciation. A species is a group of individuals associated in a continuous reproductive sequence; related species belong to a genus; affiliated genera constitute a

[34] For an analysis of gender and sex in Faulkner's novel, see Dana Medoro's argument that menstrual blood is a crucial subtext. For example, Caddy and Miss Quentin's menstruation evokes "a cycle of regeneration connected to, and disconnected from, maternity" (114). By unlocking a counter-narrative couched within this novel's more legible blood ideology, Medoro leads the way for more resistant readings.

> family. The degree of separation on this taxonomic tree is vital to procreative success. (77-78)

Accordingly, "healthy" or "successful" reproduction translates as a sex act that results in a compatible blend and the continuation of a particular species. In contrast, "unhealthy" or "unsuccessful" breeding translates as a less-compatible blend, producing a "blighted" offspring of indeterminate species status (98). It is not surprising that Wainwright zeros in on Benjy's figuration to illustrate his case. In his reading, insofar as Faulkner's idiot serves as an end-point of biological futurity in the narrative—that is, insofar as he is ultimately sterilized and institutionalized, he cannot lay claim to his species membership, to being fully human. Instead, he emerges as a monstrous enigma: he is "the pangenetic near inarticulation of body, mind, and language," evincing an "apocalypse immanent in [the Compsons'] blood" (101). When viewed through Wainwright's lens, Faulkner's focus on "hematological strain provid[es] an ample resource by which to explore pangenetic questions," including the ramifications of indeterminate offspring (93, 89). By viewing the Compsons' pretensions to controlling the purity of their bloodline through this lens of pangenesis, Wainwright suggests how deeply Faulkner's aesthetic is suffused with a hematological discourse of pure breeding.

Another important illustration of this discourse, albeit one that Wainwright does not explore, appears in Quentin's monologue, the second section of this novel. In it, Quentin uses the term "cur" to explain away the "blood horse" that breaks his arm during his youth (Faulkner 68). This term appears amidst a stream of fragmented memories on the last day of his life as he walks through Cambridge toward the river to, presumably, to commit suicide. More specifically, it surfaces as he ruminates on his sister's sexual desire and her out-of-wedlock pregnancy, which Quentin characterizes as a great disgrace for their family, and his vivid memory—or, perhaps, a

fantasy—of berating Caddy and disparaging the father of her child as a "blackguard" (68). This insult connotes "the lowest class of household servants" (*Oxford English Dictionary*), and for Quentin at least, its root meaning would also likely conjure racial associations with African-Americans. Suddenly, his mind jumps to the horse incident and the broken bone, and he avers that despite appearing to be a purebred when inside "the stable," this horse was actually a "cur" that could not be trusted once saddled (Faulkner 68). The subtext underlying Quentin's anxious associations between these two memories and insults, as Jay Watson hints, is one of incompatible blood blending and miscegenation: "As with the Compson horse that breaks Quentin's arm . . . an elite pedigree is no guarantee of eugenic fitness in Faulkner's version of the family study" (42). Even more specifically, the "cur" invective equates Caddy's unborn child and the "blood horse" with a mongrelized caninity, casting doubt on the purity of their bloodlines (68). "Cur" derives its derogatory meaning from Darwinian pangenetic discourse, as well as from notions of pedigree that emerged in the breeding practices used for domestic animals like dogs. Though subtle, Quentin's use of this term is instructive because, as Martin Wallen points out, whereas some dogs are recognized as valuable, "[t]he unwanted cur lacks the character attained by breeds through their historicizing narratives, and thus embodies the indeterminate variability that holds no kinship and threatens the discourse of aesthetic bonding through which 'man' continues to conceal his technological manipulation of animals" (147).

In the early twentieth century, many dogs did not fare any better than so-called idiots: American breeding manuals of the era were "full of exhortations to eliminate 'weaklings' and to invigorate the race by maintaining the purity of its bloodlines. There was much excoriation of 'mongrels' and 'curs' and 'half-castes,' and much talk of the evil tendencies of the 'badly bred' specimen" (Budiansky 34). As I outlined in my Introduction, dog breeding and eugenics are co-

extensive practices. In fact, Leon F. Whitney, renowned American veterinarian, member of the Kennel Club, and author of many dog books around the time of *The Sound and the Fury*'s publication, also authored *The Case for Sterilization* in 1934—a treatise advocating for the elimination of the "feebleminded and insane" from the national population (Budiansky 35). This links the dog's validation of human superiority to the artificial selection entailed in breeding practices, which appears, in turn, as a "natural" index of human civilization and power.

To return briefly to the work of Michael Wainwright, I argue that his interpretation of Benjy Compson—part atavistic throwback and part threat of biological disorder-to-come—remains critically valuable because it provides readers with crucial insight regarding the supplementary roles that blood *and* species play in Faulkner's aesthetics. That said, Wainwright problematically characterizes today's genetic science both as the "more accurate" proof of identity, as well as the goal that Faulkner's aesthetic development, "ahead of its time" as it was, vainly sought to realize (209-10). Conceived in this way, genetics becomes the justification for identity *and* the fulfillment of the desire for a fixed biological marker thereof. In this sense, at least for a critic like Wainwright, Faulkner's novel functions somewhat like a proto-CytoScan blood test: both aim to biologically determine mentally disability. However, arguably, his analysis evidences Samuels's claim that genetic discourse is not so much "being used to undermine fantasies of identification, [rather] the fantasies are increasingly taking over the realms of science" (191). With *The Huffington Post* headline, blood is evidently swapped out for chromosomes accessed through blood. Nevertheless, both claim to identify a stable biological marker for mental disability. In the remainder of this chapter I will focus my critical attention on Benjy, considering more specifically how his depiction as an idiot/dog transforms the meanings

of blood—meanings that extend to today's technologies of biological identification of mental disability.

Idiocy as Ontological Disorder

At this point, I shift to *The Sound and the Fury*'s fourth section to view, as it were, intractable images of Benjy's physical body. Faulkner's first three sections parlay each of the Compson brothers' interior monologues as unique renditions of their psyches. The fourth section, however, tries to mimetically capture a more objective or universal reality. As soon as Benjy enters the scopic field of the narrative, readers are directed to "see" his idiocy as a gross physical incoherence. He is "shaped of some substance whose particles would not or did not cohere to one another or to the frame which supported it" (Faulkner 164). This initial image is followed by a detailed depiction of his face: "His eyes were clear . . . his thick mouth hung open, drooling a little" (164). These stigmatizing portraits, delivered by a third-person narrator, mark Benjy's physical difference from other characters. Moreover, whereas Benjy is assigned a "vague gaze" (164) because he has "empty" eyes (191), the narrator's gaze, through which readers observe him, is conversely attributed with the incisive power to identify the surface of the idiot's body as a sign of ontological disorder.

This fourth section is rife with narratorial accounts and visual cues that stigmatize Benjy, suggesting that he is biologically inferior. Consider, for example, the scene in the Compson kitchen when a servant, Luster, feeds him breakfast: "It was as if even eagerness was musclebound in him too, and hunger itself inarticulate, not knowing it is hunger" (165). The narrator's description of Benjy as instinctual connotes a privation that verges on animality.[35] By

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[35] Inasmuch as Benjy cannot represent himself to other characters, this privation is reminiscent of Heidegger's distinction between animality and humanity. See Lippit for a summary of

privileging images of Benjy's body as equivalent to a lack of self-reflexivity, the cumulative effect of this depiction supplies readers with the notion that the "primal" opposition of human-animal does not hold in this particular figure. Framing idiocy in this manner, that is, as a kind of ontological impoverishment, no doubt perpetuates a fear-based politics of abnormality.[36] Still, the dramatic effects produced by this mimetic portrayal of Benjy in the fourth section frequently go unexamined in favour of assuming that the experimental virtuosity of Faulkner's depiction of the idiot's stream of consciousness in the first section accurately renders a clinical psychology.

By framing Benjy as a disordered being in this last section, the novel binds idiocy to an abject *topos.* Since Benjy cannot articulate otherwise, the self-reflexivity evinced by his earlier narration, particularly in moments of motivated "plotting" (Godden 102)—a point to which I will shortly return with a discussion of Richard Godden's convincing reading—ends up being cast in doubt and replaced by his body's "dropsical" surface (Faulkner 164). Critics have long puzzled over how to harmonize Benjy's previously accessible interiority with his abjection. Before Jacqui Griffiths expressed her own readerly confusion, Irving Howe posed the question: "But can one identify with an idiot? If Benjy's memories were tightly locked in the shell of his mind, if their quality were determined by his idiocy, it would clearly be impossible. To 'identify' with Benjy is, therefore, to abandon him as a person" (158-59). I contend that once Faulkner's novel prompts readers to visualize Benjy as a stigmatized body, it disrupts habitual modes of hermeneutic identification and authorizes "abandoning" him, retroactively, as either kin or kind; in other words, it attempts to mimetically secure his ontological otherness.

Heidegger's position: "the animal cannot interiorize the world through reflection: unreflected, the world remains exterior to its being" (Lippit 60).

[36] See Goffman for how "normal species functioning" is shored up: "By definition […] we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human" (14).

Appending Caninity to Idiocy

Turning now to Benjy's animalization as tacitly canine, I consider how typologies of disability, sex, gender, and race are rearticulated within the "off site," or shadow discourse, of species in Faulkner's novel (Wolfe *Animal* 13). On one level, Benjy's animalization is no doubt socially denigrating and invidious. That being said, it also aesthetically organizes and domesticates the epistemological excess of his idiocy inasmuch as it can be read to figure ontological disorder. To the extent that signs of Benjy's idiocy are ostensibly detected on the surface of his skin and, at least according to his mother, in his "bad blood" (Faulkner 64), the novel hypostatizes idiocy as originating in a defective biology affiliated with the animality of the mongrel or cur—a biology that is cast as the literal source for the novel's literary imitation or replication. The trope of species thus stands in as a sign for brute nature, which then supplements the literalism effects or the ontological transparency imputed by the novel's biological lures like Benjy's incoherent body and, as I will shortly show, his blood.

By encoding his idiocy as canine—indeed, as mongrel—the novel blends two figures (i.e. hypogrammatically) to strengthen the believability of Benjy's representation as natural. To put my point another way, the critical agreement about his realistic portrayal as an idiot is informed, ironically enough, by his tacit caninity—a figuration that has been widely overlooked until now. Yet Benjy's figuration as an idiot/dog is not always so tacit. In the fourth section, for example, the third-person narrator pronounces that Benjy is, specifically, "like a big foolish dog" (177). This simile is followed by a report that he is "whimper[ing]" at the Compsons' gate (178). After this animalizing depiction, the instances that imply Benjy's caninity appear to proliferate throughout the text. A subtle link between idiocy and caninity even turns up in Benjy's own narration in the first section when he recalls Roskus directly comparing him to a pointer: "'He

know more than folks thinks." Roskus said. "He knowed they time was coming, like that pointer done. He could tell you when hisn [sic] coming, if he could talk. Or yours. Or mine." (20). The structural proximation of idiocy with caninity, a frequently humanized animality, thus encourages allegorical readings of Benjy as a symbolic, sympathetic idiot; this has hitherto been neglected in debates about his disability diagnosis.

Benjy's figuration as an idiot/dog hybrid is promulgated in the following ways: his sense of smell, his obedient loyalty, his treatment by his family, and his castration. First, in the absence of language, Benjy displays an olfactory dependence that links him to the dogs that appear in the novel. As Budiansky points out,

> The olfactory bulb in the dog is dramatically larger than it is in man. The canine nose also has something like twenty times as many primary receptor cells as the human nose. . . . Some comparative studies have found that dogs can detect certain organic chemicals at concentrations a hundred times less than people are able to; for other compounds the dog's edge may be a factor of a million or more. . . . More than such a remarkable sensitivity to trace odours, it is the ability to pick out particular odours of interest from a welter of competing smells and to match and distinguish them that is the dog's most impressive olfactory feat. (119-20)

Throughout Benjy's section, his persistent refrain is that Caddy "smelled like trees" (Faulkner 12, 26, 30, 45, 46). He makes many other discerning associations on the basis of scents as well: "Versh smelled like the rain. He smelled like a dog, too" (42). Benjy's use of the word "too" here is deceptively ambiguous. Is it meant to suggest that Versh smells like the rain *and* a dog? Or does it indicate that Versh not only smells like the rain, but *also like Benjy*—that is, a human with a mental disability who carries a canine scent?

In the fourth section, after Jason discovers that Caddy's daughter (the second Quentin) has absconded with the money he stole from her, Benjy's unrelenting howl registers the domestic discord. Dilsey recognizes his keen nose and suggests that he has determined the conflict—even the mortal decline of the Compson family: "'He stop when we git off de place,' Dilsey said. 'He smellin hit. Dat's whut hit is.' 'Smelling whut, mammy?' Luster said. . . . Dilsey stroked Ben's head, slowly and steadily, smoothing the bang upon his brow" (172). Dilsey's provocative suggestion echoes Roskus's reflection in the first section that Benjy's keen nose is capable of detecting death, at least in an abstract sense, "like that pointer done" (20). In *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner's African-American characters subscribe to a folk belief that a dog's howling registers an impending death. This belief is further attested to by T.P., who explicitly links Benjy to the Compsons' dog Dan, and more specifically, to canine howling during several key death scenes (Benjy, admittedly, does not seem to clearly distinguish between the deaths of Damuddy, Quentin, Mr. Compson, or Roskus, all of whom appear conflated in his monologue). When T.P. is instructed to whisk his charge out of the Compson home on the night of Mr. Compson's death, Benjy recalls "Dan was sitting in the back yard, howling" (22). Subsequently, the howling of Benjy and Dan begins to coalesce into furious, wordless sound, and this, in turn, establishes a tacit identification between the idiot and dog figures. Picking up on their similarity, T.P. gestures to Dan and states: "'He smell it. . . . Is that the way you found it out'" (22). On the day of Roskus's funeral, Benjy's howling is likewise mirrored by Blue, another dog: "*They moaned at Dilsey's house. Dilsey was moaning. When Dilsey moaned Luster said, Hush, and we hushed, and then I began to cry and Blue howled under the kitchen steps*" (21; original emphasis). By placing Benjy in the domestic space of the African-American characters and identifying both his olfaction and howling with dogs, the novel routinely confuses figures of race, species, and

disability. Though this association bars these figures from the rational order of the fully human and American subject, it grants them a heightened sensing or affective ability.

Benjy's sensual nature, so clearly exemplified by his sense of smell, associates the trope of idiocy with a loyal and domestic, if mongrelized, animality. He is frequently depicted awaiting Caddy's return at the front gate: "She opened the gate and came in and stooped down. Caddy smelled like leaves. 'Did you come to meet me.' she said. 'Did you come to meet Caddy'" (4-5). He continues to return to the gate to loyally wait for Caddy long after she has fled Jefferson. Domestic dogs are familiar signs of loyal companionship and are often subsumed by the familial unit. Consider the behavior of the Compsons toward Benjy early in the novel: "'What is it now.' Mother said. 'He want to go out doors.' Versh said. . . . 'You, Benjamin.' Mother said. 'If you dont be good, you'll have to go to the kitchen'" (4). Griffiths argues that this scene takes on "the rhetorical characteristic of somebody asking the same question of a dog whining at the door" (172). When Benjy is threatened with exile to the kitchen, this effectively emphasizes that he occupies a different space in the Compsons' domestic sphere: to the extent that the kitchen is the domain of African-American servants, this exile not only serves to animalize him, it racializes him once again. Shortly thereafter, when Benjy and Versh go outside, their interaction repeats the structural proximity of idiocy and caninity: "'Here some hickeynuts. Whooey. Git up that tree. Look here at this squirl, Benjy'" (4). Versh's effort to get Benjy chasing squirrels in this scene early on in the novel presents another visual analogy to master-dog relations. These suggestions of Benjy's dog-like loyalty are further disseminated by reports that he moves "obediently" for Dilsey in the fourth section (164).

With regards to Jacqui Griffiths's controversial psychoanalytic reading of the novel, Benjy's "age, gender, and species" are primarily called into question by his surgical castration

(171). Arguably, what makes Griffiths's argument cause for critical concern is not her claim that Benjy's castration is highly suggestive of his "almost human" and "almost dog" status (163). The danger is that Griffiths addresses Benjy's animalization, while simultaneously assuming that he is a realistic "forever-infantile retarded character" (163). For Griffiths, in short, Benjy correlates to an original biological condition. He represents a believable "physical" and reproductive "threat" that she affiliates with an "unrestrained animality"—a threat that results in his sterilization (171). There is little doubt why this reductive interpretation might perpetuate prejudice against lived experiences of mental disability: Griffiths presupposes that Benjy's idiocy is biologically determined, pathological, and, thus, worthy of pity and terror.

The potentially insidious aspect of idiot/dog tropological confusion comes into view at this point. By appending caninity to idiocy, *The Sound and the Fury* can be read to naturalize Benjy's abjection, domesticate his alterity within the family unit, and reduce a potentially threatening animality to a sign of fidelity and obedience. From this angle, dogs are specifically deployed as animal ciphers for Benjy's idiocy *because* they naturalize an absolute power relationship of master-servant along the lines of a human-animal divide. This power is encoded as the fully human subject's "power to summon" and to demand obedience (Taussig 213). As Michael Taussig elaborates in an analysis of the famous RCA Victor logo "His Master's Voice"—appropriated by RCA in 1929, the very same year Faulkner's novel was published—dogs are virtually synonymous with mimetic fidelity in the U.S. imaginary (213). By virtue of the "double meaning [of] fidelity," namely, "being *accurate* and being *loyal*," the symbolic function of appending dog figures to Benjy organizes him as a model of mimetic faithfulness—even an obedient mimesis. Caninity connotes "astute being[s]" who can sense "copy from original" (213) and, moreover, this acumen suggests a "natural" obedience to an "original"

human-animal order. In this respect, Faulkner's dog figures can be read to perform compensatory discursive labour as mimetic detectors in the novel, securing the biological origin of Benjy's idiocy in blood.

Another Look at Benjy's "Bad Blood"

Although a lively debate surrounds the question of Benjy's diagnosis as an idiot, which suggests that he represents a case of arrested development (i.e. that he possesses the equivalent intelligence of a two year-old child), critics generally tend to agree that he is a "convincing figure" of mental disability (Hagood "The Secret" 100).[37] From this angle, Faulkner's rendition of idiocy accurately captures an original biological condition and category of identity. My concern with this critical perspective, not unlike Truchan-Tataryn's, is that acceptance of Benjy as Faulkner's realistic portrayal of a medical condition is dangerous. Hermeneutically, it approaches the contamination that he represents to the Compson bloodline—an in-built threat to its white, patronymic *logos*—as legitimate; moreover, this threat then appears to be mimetically captured by the novel and, in turn, aesthetically transmuted as a metaphor for the decline of the Old South's social order. The presupposition that Benjy's idiocy corresponds to a natural type, one that can be masterfully disclosed through literary mimesis, risks resurrecting the cultural script used to justify his castration in the novel; that is, it risks hermeneutically accepting in advance the same typology that convinces the Compsons to transform Benjy, in Jason's words, into the "Great American Gelding" (Faulkner 158) and, as the appendix Faulkner added to the novel in 1945 indicates, to commit him to the state asylum in Jackson, Mississippi in 1933 (235).

The Sound and the Fury does not frequently yield images of Benjy's blood, so why do I ultimately insist on its significance and, simultaneously, propose that the tropological confusion

[37] See also McLaughlin, Truchan-Tataryn, and Samway and Silver.

at stake with this idiot/dog figure requires unpacking how hemophobia involves a form of zoophobia, and vice versa? For starters, as Wainwright helped to elaborate, blood naturalizes hereditary transfer and kinship in this novel. It functions as the empirical family matter or raw nature that binds the Compson genealogy together. As well, as I suggested in my discussion of CytoScan, the trope of blood functions to rhetorically effect a "pure" transparency between sign and referent (Michaels 2-3). According to Walter Benn Michaels, *The Sound and the Fury*'s "repudiation of [conventional] relations is everywhere deployed in defense of a tautology that will find its definitive formulation in [Jason's] proposition 'blood is blood and you can't get around it'" (1). The novel's inordinate emphasis on this vital fluid reinscribes the eugenic-inspired social "ambition" to shore up American national identity by evoking the "purity" of bloodlines and situating reproductive biology as the determinant of national health. Although bodily fluids remain concealed, blood is nonetheless perceived as the stuff of ancestral identity in Faulkner's aesthetics: it is responsible for carrying, circulating, and genealogically disclosing the Compsons' heritage—an aristocratic family line that no longer as the mark of sovereign power in a postbellum Jefferson, Mississippi. Conversely, it can be read as indexing the Compsons' hubris regarding the dwindling social currency of their bloodline amidst the modernizing culture of the southern states. This hubristic decline is aesthetically rendered by grotesque figures of illness, addiction, incest, suicide, decay, exile, abandonment, and Benjy's depiction as an idiot/dog.

To the extent that blood serves as a trope for hereditary transfer, it permits the eugenics cultural script of biological degeneration to suggest that readers ought to diagnose Benjy as an etiological consequence of an incompatible blood blend. This is what it means for his mother, Caroline Compson, to bemoan the impure or "bad blood" she sees as a quasi-eschatological threat embodied by her offspring: "what have I done to have been given children like these

Benjamin was punishment enough . . . but who can fight against bad blood" (Faulkner 63-64). In her view, the family is already doomed. Accordingly, the novel suggests that the source of Benjy's disability is the polluted, defective blood he inherits, and insofar as he is perceived as burdensome, his idiocy becomes the family "punishment."[38] At least for Caroline, Benjy suggests a prior reproductive corruption or mongrelization in the Compsons' bloodline—past sins—*and* a disruption in the assumed inevitability of its biological futurity. Benjy hints at a broken taboo disclosed only through consanguinity: he is viewed as a sign of corruption, carrying anxious overtones of incest and racial mixing, but also potentially beastiality and species blending—a corruption that returns as and portends hamartia inscribed in blood.

One strategy, albeit a vain one, that the Compsons employ to distance the idiot's "cur" blood and body from their familial bloodline is to change his name from Maury—originally, a tribute to his mother's brother, Maury Bauscomb—to Benjamin. Directly following Benjy's recollection of the moment he arguably realized that his sister, Caddy, was exiled from the family home, he details how the Compsons' servant, Versh, once explained how his renaming was an act that also racialized him:

> *You know how come your name Benjamin now. They making a bluegum out of you. Mammy say in old time your granpaw changed nigger's name, and when they look at him, he bluegum too. Didn't use to be bluegum, neither. And when family woman look him in the eye in the full of the moon, chile born bluegum. And one evening, when they was about a dozen them bluegum chillen running around the place, he never come home.*

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[38] The script most often excited by mental disability is that it constitutes a "tragedy for both the individual and her family," historically precipitating "many of the [so-called 'management'] practices associated with it, ranging from involuntary sterilization, institutionalization, and forced rehabilitations to social marginalization, euthanasia, and 'mercy killing'" (Carlson 5).

> *Possum hunters found him in the woods, et clean. And you know who et him. Them bluegum chillen did.* (42-43; original emphasis)

For his part, Hagood contends that "[i]t is precisely [Benjy's] disability that signals the name change, the transformation into 'bluegum,' and his being placed among African Americans, making him less white" ("The Secret" 93). At this point, there is a blurring of tropes of otherness so that mental disability is, first, framed in terms of race and, subsequently, framed in terms of species difference. For as Versh elaborates, the Mississippi folktale of becoming bluegum not only connotes hereditary contamination and contagion, it activates a monstrous cannibalism associated with atavistic animality (and worse, it even means being reduced to the object-status of meat). The bluegum myth suggests that the novel's main locus of stigma is Benjy's biology, inducing interlocking anxieties about the mingling of race, gender, sex, and species types.

Yet Richard Godden suggests there is more to the bluegum folktale than Hagood acknowledges: namely, to be bluegum is also to be "a black conjuror with a fatal bite . . . [and] the gift of magic eyes" (Godden 101). As a Compson, Benjy is putatively a white male on the surface; however, once Versh explains that he has been marked as bluegum, he can also assume a "black mask" to "claim paternity over any child his sister [Caddy] may have conceived in 1909" (101). In his convincing interpretation, Godden proposes that Benjy's desire to keep his sister for himself is not all that unlike his brother Quentin's incestuous infatuation with Caddy. According to Godden, Benjy intentionally deploys this memory of being deemed a racialized bluegum in order to counteract his sister's exile from the Compson home in Jefferson. The radical consequence of Godden's analysis can be summed up as follows: by recognizing that Caddy is no longer available to him, Benjy shifts the chronology of his own narration—that is, he engages in the activity of "plotting"—in order to associate the loss of his sister in 1909—a

loss precipitated by her sexual activity outside the family—with his memory of being stripped of the Bauscomb name "Maury" in 1900 (Godden 102). In this way, Godden claims, "Caddy's sexual change is associated with Benjy's name change in an essentially cultural analogy involving two impurities: loss of virginity [which is the reason for her exile] is likened to loss of a first or maiden name" (101). As Hagood and Godden both help realize, this shift in Benjy's narrative during the bluegum episode suggests that the idiot/dog figure is not as passive or without agency as the critical consensus has previously assumed; in fact, it points to the possibility that Benjy does not merely record sense perceptions without self-reflection, as Michael Millgate suggests, but has a sense as to why his narrative takes the non-chronological form it does: it is a fantasy compelled by his desire to re-plot and re-capture the past and, thus, to hold onto his sister, the only family member who engages him in dialogue and yet from whom he is irrevocably divided.

As previously discussed, the other strategy the Compsons deploy to secure the white, aristocratic, and patronymic purity of their bloodline is Benjy's surgical castration. Although Caddy marries Herbert Head and moves away from Jefferson for good, Benjy continues to obsessively return to the fence at the perimeter of the Compson property. One day in 1913, he discovers the gate has been left unlocked, and he escapes, pursues, and hurls himself upon the young Burgess girl who lives nearby. Following this "attack" on a young, white girl, he is deemed a sexual menace, and the Compsons claim custody over his body to forcibly prevent him from sexually reproducing. Benjy's recollection of these two events—his chase and castration—overlap in his narration:

> I opened the gate and they stopped, turning. I was trying to say, and I caught her, trying to say, and she screamed and I was trying to say and trying and the bright shapes began to

> stop and I tried to get out. I tried to get it off my face, but the bright shapes were going again. They were going up the hill to where it fell away and I tried to cry. But when I breathed in, I couldn't breathe out again to cry, and I tried to keep from falling off the hill and I fell off the hill into the bright, whirling shapes (Faulkner 33).

Presumably, the presence of an anesthetist's mask is what Benjy recalls being on his face, preventing him from breathing easily. His castration occurs in 1913, and arguably constitutes "a response on Faulkner's part to the public discussion of eugenic sterilization legislation going on in Mississippi" at the time of *The Sound and the Fury*'s composition (Watson 35). Here, Faulkner emphatically reflects how idiocy was perceived to require more aggressive forms of containment than a fence enclosing the Compson property could ever provide. If Benjy's sterilization emblematizes his family's eugenic effort to prevent him from passing on tainted blood that might jeopardize their own biological fitness and social currency, it also forces him to serve and reproduce American identity norms even though he is violently prevented from physically reproducing himself.

A Hermeneutic of Hemophobia and Zoophobia

As the above close readings of Faulkner's idiot/dog figure suggest, his novel hinges on the naturalizing effects of tropes of blood and species. The "natural" significance of Benjy's blood is clearly over-determined: it is the *family matter* that makes him a Compson, and it embodies *what is the matter* with the Compson family. Benjy's animalization further contrives to secure identity norms by exciting a fear of blood and a fear of other species at once, particularly regarding the inferiority of mentally disabled and nonhuman bodies. Yet, as Donna Haraway reminds us, hemophobia and zoophobia must be approached, broadly speaking, as anxieties about the (in)stability of biological taxonomy itself: "Biology is not the body itself but a

discourse on the body" (*Modest_Witness* 217). For as Walter Benn Michaels's analysis helps to elucidate, even the corporeal matter that correlates to Benjy's "bad blood" is tangled up with arbitrary and shifting cultural conventions and histories.

As Ellen Samuels points out, the anxious management of racial purity in the U.S. pivots upon pseudo-scientific and cultural notions that blood is a reliable means for the "biocertification" of heritable identity, exemplified by the one-drop rules of Jim Crow and "the institutionalization of blood quantum identification for Native people"; moreover, she argues, discourses of race are inextricably linked to disability because the racialization of difference has historically been embedded in typological notions of a degraded, flawed biology (141). According to Michael Davidson, blood has also intersected and fused with the gendered meanings and sexist logics of AIDS discourse that emerged since the 1980s to make homophobia more virulent, thereby compounding its significations: "fear of blood or bleeders . . . annexes phobias about other constituencies for which the penetration of the bodily envelope is perceived to transgress boundaries of racial or sexual normativity" (39). "Hemophobia," as Davidson develops the notion, "represents the merging of two discourses—one of blood, the other of sexuality—in which anxieties of bodily boundaries in one are articulated through anxieties about gender binaries in the other" (*Concerto* 42). Davidson's important discussions of blood, disability, sex, and gender draw in large part on Michel Foucault's conception of biopolitics; this allows him to unpack how sovereign power is maintained in the U.S. imaginary both through consanguinity and the exercise of biopower on the body of an individual or population through the policing of sex. The shift from regimes of sovereignty to biopower that Foucault describes arguably hinged on the eugenics movement:

Foucault notes that a primary vehicle in the transition from blood to sex is the discourse

> of eugenics, the science of racial purity, which served the formation of modern nation-states. . . . [E]ugenics gained a powerful foothold in the United States as justification for immigration reform, racial exclusion legislation, and antimiscegenation statutes. In many of its formulations and uses, genetic inheritance is figured through the metaphor of blood. (Davidson *Concerto* 44-45)

Given that eugenics was the prevailing scientific discourse when *The Sound and the Fury* was first published, many critics have excavated this particular chapter of U.S. history and its resonances in the racialized portrayal of Benjy and, in the case of Michaels, in the way his "bad blood" figures a threat to the ideological foundations and descent of white, southern patriarchal society.

However, as Nicole Shukin puts it, even the most discerning biopolitical analyses frequently meet their "own internal limit at the species line" (*Animal* 11). In other words, despite the insights critics like Michaels have opened up, they have missed the opportunity to pursue how this novel's aesthetic enciphers how the very biopolitical calculus involved in reducing "modern man [to] an *animal* whose politics places his existence as a living being in question" is supplemented by another anxiety: namely, zoophobia (Foucault *History* 143; emphasis added).

Zoophobia is no less a tangle of materiality and metaphoricity. According to Maneesha Deckha, this anxiety "manifest[s] at the thought of the human body intermingling with another species at the reproductive, genetic, cellular, or other body part level, in spite of the fact that interspecies biological interface happens routinely" (22). Deckha interrogates this widespread desire to conceal interspecies entanglements in favour of a form of autonomy that is conflated with human dignity. That is to say, "human worth"—to recall Michael Bérubé's comment about Benjy's inherent value as a member of *Homo sapiens*—ostensibly requires the subjugation of

other nonhuman animals, even frequently humanized animals like dogs, to serve as the very condition of possibility for this value system: a material-symbolic token. Jacques Derrida likewise claims that zoophobia is a drama of disavowal, which stirs "an allergic passion" in humans regarding biologistic animality: "a negative interest in the animal, an allergic passion, an instinctive inflexion, identifying a significant aggravation of 'Cartesianism' that becomes a sort of 'hatred' of the animal: 'wishing' harm to the animal" (*The Animal* 101). For Derrida, the Cartesian recourse to an absolute and generic division between "the human" and "the animal"—a reductive binarization that Benjy, paradoxically, embodies—supports anthropocentrism, while symptomatically reflecting a denial of humans' shared "finitude" with other species.[39]

Once conceived as a prejudice-inspired anxiety regarding shared finitude, zoophobia emerges as that which propels speciesist practices in discursive and corporeal registers. This anxiety targets the "irrational" biology of animal others, reducing mortal bodies to the status of "means" on the basis of this pre-conceived lack, because bodies threaten to overthrow the rights and "ends" of reason; this is why Derrida characterizes zoophobia as the "aggravation of Kantian or idealist hatred of the animal" (*The Animal* 102). To fretfully demarcate humanity from animality, or to produce human subjects by delimiting them against other animal species, bespeaks a sovereign desire to harness the bodies of nonhuman animal others and those human others deemed animal—a desire to bring them under regimes of control. Zoophobia, in this sense, is a material-semiotic resource that justifies the spilling of blood. The means and meaning of blood (therefore) cannot be discretely cordoned off from the means and meaning of species, and both anxiously impinge upon the representation of Benjy.

[39] For Derrida, "finitude" is an aporetic "nonpower at the heart of power": the mortality of material bodies *and* the fundamental dependence on semiotic code and an archive of communications (*The Animal* 28).

In the United States, Garland-Thomson argues, "[d]isability's indisputably random and unpredictable character translates as appalling disorder and persistent menace in a self-order predicated on self-government" (*Extraordinary* 43). However, the freedom to self-govern does not translate merely to the rights and obligations of U.S. citizenship. Rather, it suggests *being able* to graduate to the autonomy conferred upon the rational, fully human subject—a status idealized in twentieth-century American culture and routinely denied to the nation's population of individuals with mental disabilities.

Once compared with *The Huffington Post* headline, the idiot/dog figure embodied by Benjy Compson risks exciting a more discernible confluence of readerly hemophobia and zoophobia. By appending canine animality to idiocy, *The Sound and the Fury* encourages notions that Benjy's perceived threat to the Compson bloodline is the kind of natural stuff that can be mimetically captured, scapegoated, and repurposed in the form of a tragedy about the diminution of the South. In Jason's reductive formulation, "blood is blood" (Faulkner 146) and "blood always tells" (143). And yet if "blood" appears to function as a natural or transparent sign, one that signifies automatically, or "without reliance upon a system of syntactic and semantic conventions," something which Michaels claims is characteristic of the novel's nativist modernism (i.e. an aesthetic technology for sorting of American identity from its others), then I advance the argument that the trope of species supplements this illusion of transparency (2). According to the Animal Studies theorist Akira Mizuta Lippit, nonhuman animal figures "complete or realize the idea of nature" because "they exist as manifestations of a voiceless but omnipresent nature": they "simply transmit" (21). Similarly, the trope of blood appears to manifest the empirical presence of its referent as a matter of common sense, bypassing the arbitrariness of discursive conventions. This effect is achieved due to the proximal production of

a generic animality that figures a transparent nature. Benjy consequently emerges as a site of excess—of tropological confusion—where one can read anxious demarcations of "the human" and "the animal" even as he is, paradoxically, refused such distinctions.

Beginning to Read Otherwise

To the extent that animalization remains a primary trope or aesthetic technology for permitting the abuse of humans deemed other, framing Benjy as a mongrel dog reflects a biopolitical history in the United States of violently regulating and disqualifying mental disability (Carlson 89). Yet another biopolitical interpretation of this idiot/dog figure is also opened up by Faulkner's novel: Benjy's indeterminate figuration can be read to posit and, then, to disrupt, not strengthen, the eugenics-inspired cultural script that requires his subjugation in the name of human worth. Ultimately, in my reconsideration of this idiot/dog figure, the modes of representation deployed by Faulkner's novel are key. Because this novel suggests, especially in the fourth section, that epistemic limits are contiguous with the limits of visual perception, this seems to provide mimetic clarity and to validate a link between the processes of seeing observable phenomena and accessing textual meaning. And yet, insofar as the "substance" of idiocy is rendered dog-like within the very section associated with this ostensible spike in realism, *The Sound and the Fury* raises the stakes in its own aesthetic game in the following ways: it stretches excessively across the human-animal divide to claim a foothold in biological reality; it appears to recoil from mimetic duty and to expose its own diegetic devices; and it flaunts its semantic limits metonymically through the tropological confusion of dog and idiot. As a result, with Benjy's hybrid portrayal, readers witness an instance of textual excess, of *metalepsis*: a trope multiplies, becoming a figure for figuration itself—and this tropological excess cannot be so simply contained. Thus, what previously appeared to be "a particular form of

aesthetic ordering"—specifically, the order of mimetic containment—turns out in the end to harbour a "discomposition of the putative textual order around the figure of disability"—but also, I add, around the figure of animality with which disability is intertwined (Quayson 35). The excessive animalization of idiocy attests to this discomposition because Benjy's idiot/dog figuration is, materially and metaphorically, *confusing for readers on an epistemic level*: his idiocy is figured as partly canine, and yet he is not a dog.

Benjy's animalization consequently, albeit inadvertently, exposes a precarity in the field of representation in Faulkner's novel, undermining the mimetic or biopolitical norms it can be read as helping to hermeneutically secure. As his hybrid figuration creates an open-ended glitch or disruption in this mimetic order, it also arguably produces a tropological confusion that undermines *The Sound and the Fury*'s potency as tool of biopolitical regulation—that is, what Donald Pease refers to as "novel governmentality" (*Pip* 328). Specifically, tropological confusion can be read to destabilize the biopolitical reproduction of liberal, "able" readerly subjects identified by and through a hermeneutic of hemophobia and zoophobia. Benjy's idiot/dog figuration triggers an epistemological and interpretive uncertainty; in turn, this defers—even momentarily—mimetic readings, masterful interpretations, and readerly self-possession (i.e. as freely self-determining readers). At this metanarrative or readerly level, these confusing effects can be further seized upon to deconstruct the "rational" human-animal order that Faulkner's novel appears to present as natural or pre-given within the narrative itself. Viewed from this angle, if Benjy's construction initially seems to be forced into the enabling condition for the capacity of self-reflexive minds to interpret fiction and access textual meaning, then tropological confusion provocatively reveals that the ethical and biopolitical dimensions of Faulkner's novel exceed its own aesthetic containers.

The Sound and the Fury—a text that continues to attract a vast array of critical approaches (Polk 1)—will no doubt wind up on syllabi as an example of American high modernism for the foreseeable future. As a result, it will continue to re-conjugate manifold lived experiences of mental disability by and through its contributions to a distorted discourse of pathological biological identity. In this chapter, I intervene in the extant criticism by suggesting that resistant biopolitical critiques are needed. My intent has been to bring Benjy Compson to critical attention as an idiot/dog figure in order to have his effects (and socio-cultural conditions) interrogated. As this chapter winds down, I recall Haraway's contention that "[f]igures are not representations or didactic illustrations, but rather material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another . . . [They are] where the biological and literary or artistic come together with all of the force of lived reality" (*When* 4). In the next chapter, I continue to develop the rubric of tropological confusion in the hopes that it will inspire more curious ways of approaching intersections of identity for future Animal and Disability Studies.

Although it is widely agreed that a preoccupation with the maintenance of ancestral bloodlines is a pervasive motif in the "old" fictional world of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, I claim that *The Huffington Post*'s recent biologization of mental disability capitulates to a similar fantasy: the too-simple notion that *what* somebody experiences can be understood, first and foremost, by *who* one already is. In this light, labeling CytoScan an "Intellectual Disability Blood Test" is cause for real concern. To be as clear as possible, I am not suggesting that CytoScan is precluded from detecting the empirical presence of an undivided twenty-first chromosome—the genetic marker of what is commonly known as Down syndrome. On the contrary, I am claiming that it cannot make good on a promise to pinpoint mental disability *itself*

in infant blood. The two goals are non-isomorphic. An undivided twenty-first chromosome more often than not will contribute to effects that broadly manifest as mental disability *over time*, but this is not equal to apprehending mental disability's biological origin, and it is no less than rhetorical distortion to suggest that it is. Yet, as Samuels elaborates, once such a fantasy about bodily identity has taken root in the U.S. cultural imaginary—as it so clearly has—it often persists even if it is scientifically contested or disproved (3). Bonding mental disability to blood continues to confuse its substance and, rhetorically speaking, resuscitates this anxious script about its character and consequences: it casts persons living with a mental disability as biologically destined to a "subhuman or animal-like" future replete with deficient functioning and burdensome dependence (Carlson 132).

I conclude this first chapter by emphasizing that the production of species is latently at stake in both of these cases studies. Given the material and metaphorical stakes that accrue to Faulkner's depiction of Benjy Compson, a sustained review of his animalization is belated. Once CytoScan is approached as exciting this identificatory fantasy, it no longer appears tangential to *The Sound and the Fury*. Rather, the rhetoric attending the blood testing of infants for genetic markers of mental disability risks extending the discriminatory history, logic, and language of heritable identity conveyed by, and submerged in, Benjy's depiction as an idiot/dog figure. In both cases, "healthy" reproductive biology determines cultural belonging. But on top of that, the binaries that get triggered in the process of nonhuman othering continue to supplement relations of power. What demands further critical attention, then, is how anxieties about hereditary transfer and bodily contamination are conditioned by an institutionalized anthropocentrism that supplements blood tropes and delimits who qualifies as a subject in the U.S. in the present moment. Addressing questions of species does not mean that other questions regarding the

entanglements of race, gender, sex, class, and mental disability have been settled and can be set aside. On the contrary, the highly fraught links between these identities are entangled with a humanist discourse of species that produces luminous ideas about the value of humanity by conscripting animality to signify lives that do not matter. We must learn to read otherwise.

– Chapter 2 –
Why Reconsidering Lennie Small Can Teach Us New Tricks

Of Mice and Men and a *Merrie Melodie*

On July 5, 1941, an animated short entitled *The Heckling Hare* was released in movie theatres across the United States. Today, it is usually remembered as the last cartoon that Fred "Tex" Avery would ever direct for *Merrie Melodies*, the legendary Warner Bros. franchise. A celebrated auteur from the golden age of American animation (i.e. 1928 to 1969), Tex Avery is widely credited with conceiving the wisecracking, carrot-munching icon Bugs Bunny and insinuating him into popular consciousness (White 44). *The Heckling Hare* follows that rascally rabbit as he outsmarts, evades, and mocks the pursuits of one of Avery's lesser-known creations, Willoughby the Dog. Of course, hijinks perpetrated by talking animals are the hallmark of *Merrie Melodies* and attest to their enduring appeal. At first glance, *The Heckling Hare* might seem like just another installment of unremarkable, silly entertainment for children. Yet—unexpectedly, perhaps—on top of its simple plot, fantastic characters, and comic effects aimed at the funny bones of a more general audience, this cartoon is of critical note for U.S. literary and cultural scholars. For as Robert Morsberger argues, Avery's "dim-witted dog" parodies one of the most popular—and, I add, most often imitated—figures of human mental disability in twentieth-century U.S. literature: namely, Lennie Small from John Steinbeck's 1937 classic *Of Mice and Men* (112).

Before explaining how Lennie draws attention to the contingency of a certain kind of human subjectivity—and, more precisely, American subjectivity—on tropes of idiocy and caninity, it is instructive to first discuss why Willoughby resembles another character born into a competing studio's cartoon pantheon: Walt Disney's Goofy. Introduced to audiences almost a

decade prior to Avery's cartoon, Goofy had a small role in *Mickey's Revue* in 1932 as a "lazy good-for-nothing named *Dippy Dawg*"; then, he evolved into the familiar human/canine hybrid he is recognized as today—more amiable, but still "simple" (F. O'Brien 9). As critic Susan McHugh points out, unlike Mickey Mouse's pet dog Pluto, a feeling of "ambivalence … comes to the fore" with Goofy (10). McHugh claims that Goofy's capacity to excite ambivalent feelings and meanings stems not only from his failure to meet a particular species-related ideal or his indeterminate identity (i.e. is he a dog or human?), but his complex embodiment of the contradictory affects and meanings that have historically sedimented in dog bodies and canine signs (10).[40] In the U.S. (and indeed throughout Western culture more generally), dogs are commonly perceived and personified as sympathetic figures: as pets, they are believed to guarantee love and loyalty to their human masters (10). Yet, at other times, they signify abject figures of abhorrence or fear, ranging from vicious warrior-guardians to unruly strays to even "degraded humans" (10). Regarding the latter example, one need only consider the derogatory

[40] My understanding of the term "affect" is informed by the overlapping theories of Sara Ahmed and Mel Chen. Building on intersectional theories of queer and racial identities, Ahmed and Chen both forge a *non-subjective* understanding of affect—one that potentially includes nonhuman animals as well as nonhuman objects. For both, affect is not something that inheres in individual bodies; instead, it names what is actively *produced* between bodies. The term thus refers to a relational or contingent activity. By invoking this interdependence as key to each of their conceptualizations, Chen and Ahmed destabilize the more conventional binary that "affect" refers to—or can be ontologically identified with— a physiological state in an individual's body, whereas "emotion" is reducible to a psychological one: "affect is something not necessarily corporeal and … it potentially engages many bodies at once, rather than (only) being contained as an emotion within a single body. Affect inheres in the capacity to affect and be affected" (Chen 11). Regarding emotion, Chen agrees with Ahmed's influential economic model of emotion, which illustrates that the continental (i.e. Western) hermeneutic tradition erroneously posits emotions as "positively resid[ing]" in individuals and, in turn, as moving outward in the form of expressions (Ahmed *Cultural* 120). For Ahmed, emotions are mobile and "produced only as *an effect of [their] circulation*" (120; emphasis added). As with conceptions of affect, then, it would be a causal fallacy to posit emotions as naturally inhering in bodies, or as subjective possessions, since they operate in accordance with "concealed" or obscured conventional histories—histories that one cannot help but participate in because they precede the hermeneutic subject (119).

connotations of a term like "bitch" to recall why being framed as dog-like connotes a gendered form of social degradation for humans. But to return to *Merrie Melodies* and Willoughby the Dog, Avery's decision to parody Lennie—Steinbeck's popular "idiot figure" (Halliwell 142)—by transforming him into a cartoon dog rhetorically reproduces the same ambivalence that McHugh proposes for Goofy.

There is a telling moment in *The Heckling Hare* when it is explicitly revealed that Willoughby is a thinly disguised Lennie Small. The scene begins with Bugs taking refuge behind a hollow tree. When the dog plunges his paw through its trunk in hot pursuit, the rabbit proceeds to tempt and torment him from the other side. First, he pokes Willoughby's outstretched paw to entice his over-eager tracker, and then he plops a giant tomato into his grasp. At this moment, as Morsberger notes, the dog starts to speak in Lennie's unmistakable idiom:

> Willoughby promptly squashe[s] the tomato and withdr[aws] his hand, to find it covered with red pulp and juice, which he mist[akes] for blood. "I crushed him," wail[s] Willoughby. "I done a bad thing. I didn't mean to crush him. I done a real bad thing." … [T]he refrain "I done a bad thing" comes verbatim from Steinbeck. (112)

To be more precise, this ill-formed phrase crops up eleven times in *Of Mice and Men* (albeit occasionally with slight variations).[41] The intertext is emblematic of the way Avery's cartoon confuses—convokes and fuses—canine and idiot tropes. It implies and reproduces an analogous stupidity and potential unruliness for the two figures: like Lennie, Willoughby appears to lack the verbal sophistication, understanding, and even self-regulation that would permit normative or so-called "desirable" sociality.

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[41] The phrase "I done a bad thing" belongs to Lennie Small, but his caregiver and companion, George Milton, also uses versions of it when attempting to impart moral lessons to his friend (Steinbeck 16, 20, 24, 147, 151, 158, 159, 165, 175, 178).

Alongside such negative connotations, however, there is also the positive affective value of fidelity. Recall Michael Taussig's contention that fidelity has a "double meaning … being *accurate* and being *loyal*" (213).[42] Taussig's point regarding this double entendre is that as long as dogs—and I would add humans with mental disabilities here as well—obediently "follow" (i.e. embody loyalty and accuracy), they appear sympathetic. To put it more positively, they remain contenders for the title of "man's best friend." However, this title is code for the validation of the normative human subject *himself* (i.e. adult, white, rational, able-bodied, heterosexual, and male)—one that seems "natural" because it appears to "exceed" human constructs and relationships (Boggs 3).

Amidst the thickening tension between these conflicting cultural values and meanings, Avery's cartoon stages a mini-drama about fidelity, employing dramatic irony to mark the otherness of the idiot/dog as worthy of the audience's "pity and terror" (Bérubé *Secret* 128).[43] On the one hand, Willoughby is a figure of the "dumb" animal and hints at a possible threat or pathology; this is emphasized each time Bugs evades the dog's capture and winks knowingly at the audience. In this respect, the idiot/dog represents a form of *abjection*. On the other hand,

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[42] This reading of Avery's cartoon owes much to Michael Taussig's analysis of the RCA Victor logo "His Master's Voice," which features a dog named Nipper as an emblematic test or benchmark for sensing phonographic fidelity (i.e. mimetically capturing and technologically copying nature): "Everything turns on the double meaning of fidelity (being *accurate* and being *loyal*), and on what is considered to be a mimetically astute being" (213). Taussig's analysis underscores how sympathetic inter-species "love bonds" between humans and their pet dogs naturalize a less-obvious history of power and, moreover, how the logo does so surreptitiously in this particular case by extending a compliment to Nipper at the same time. Despite this ostensible valorization of caninity, there is ultimately no question that humanity's culture and its attendant "technology of reproduction triumphs over the dog"; in other words, the compliment is paid merely because the masterful human subject "needs the dog's *validation*" (213; emphasis added).

[43] Drawing on Aristotle's notion of *catharsis*, Bérubé argues that pity and terror are produced by this form of narrative irony: when, as an audience, we find ourselves "watching our fellow humans flail about in a world they do not fully understand … But our fellow humans with intellectual disabilities are more vulnerable" (128).

Willoughby's capacity to track and follow Bugs, the object of his desire, with exuberant pleasure and dogged determination, coupled with his despair when he believes he has crushed him, offers sympathetic—even complimentary—signs of dogs' "*feeling power*, and more specifically their capacity for loving attachment" (Shukin "Security Bonds" 178). In this respect, the figure equally represents *affection*. Nevertheless, according to the cartoon's logic, this idiot/dog's "loving" or positive values are still indispensible to the realization of Bugs's superior power, which is associated with the capacity to imitate and represent nature. Owing to Willoughby's keen sensual nature, he is able to dumbly sniff out and accurately track down the rabbit, but he is also easily tricked into believing tomato juice is blood. Presumably to the delight of the "knowing" audience, then, the idiot/dog is mastered because he ultimately cannot distinguish the symbolic copy or substitutive analogue (i.e. the tomato) from the original (i.e. blood). He is no match for the crafty artificer Bugs. As a result, the idiot/dog gets cast as too natural to be "in" on the joke and, by extension, he is excluded from the laughter that affectively unites and validates the cultural collective made up of the cartoon's audience and its protagonist.[44]

Yet this chapter's excavation of the idiot/dog's ambivalent effects re-evaluates such a response, arguing that this figure's pathetic appeal conceals or disavows his aesthetic excess[45] and corporeal consequences.[46] No doubt a critic like Morsberger is correct to highlight the

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[44] Especially relevant in the case of Willoughby the Dog is Julia Kristeva's argument that "laughing is a way of placing or displacing abjection"—that is, a form of censorship regarding a pre-symbolic excess that threatens the self-same subject (8).

[45] To reiterate, my use of the term "aesthetics" follows Siebers's understanding, which emphasizes its "underlying corporeality" and phenomenality (1). In this definition, "[a]esthetics tracks the sensation that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies" (1).

[46] It's also worth noting how power works on a meta-representational level here: if the cartoon's audience fails to realize that Willoughby the Dog is a parody of Steinbeck's Lennie, then they are similarly duped and rhetorically bested by another cultural artificer, namely, Tex Avery. Of course, the reverse holds true: if they do recognize this literary borrowing, then they qualify as

literary source of Avery's "dim-witted dog" (112). However, I strongly disagree with his conclusion that such a glaring confusion of caninity and idiocy bears little consequence or, in his words, that it "does not signify anything more profound than Steinbeck's being adopted by popular culture" (112). On the contrary, whereas Morsberger claims that Willoughby is merely a silly anthropomorphic spoof, I argue that such an assessment papers over how this cartoon is a more invidious capitulation to—and extension of—Steinbeck's own deceptively "simple" portrayal of Lennie's idiocy *as canine*. There will be opportunities to refer to *The Heckling Hare* again later, but the majority of this chapter will involve close readings of Steinbeck's aesthetics, the animalization of Lennie's mental disability, and his extra-literary effects.

That said, rather than focus on the representation of Lennie as a *character* as such, I set out to trace the meanings and affects that accrue to him as an idiot/dog figure—meanings and affects that overflow the narrative he inhabits. I also articulate why these are far from silly, simple, or benign. I continue to refer to the literary-aesthetic conflation of idiot and dog tropes, as well as the extra-literary ambiguity that it activates for readers, as *tropological confusion*. Tropological confusion remains a core hermeneutic practice for bridging work in Disability Studies and Animal Studies, which I develop in more detail vis-à-vis Steinbeck's text below.

I begin with close readings of Lennie, and then locate and unpack in greater detail the overlooked tropological confusion of idiocy and caninity in *Of Mice and Men*. By refusing to submit that mental disability or nonhuman animality programmatically signifies an inferior being or identity, I draw out how Steinbeck's literary-aesthetic conflation of idiot and dog tropes produces catachresis and, moreover, why this particular figure should not be reduced to a character who corresponds to a "real world" identity. Recall that catachresis names a "distortion"

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being "in" on the joke and, moreover, their inclusion in the cultured collective is presumably "confirmed."

or glitch that gestures towards something ineffable or not-present; it is not a mode of transparent representation, refusing to be contained by linguistic-based signification (Berger *Disarticulate* 36). Likewise, tropological confusion overflows the form of Steinbeck's narrative, serving as an aporetic enigma that inter-implicates Lennie's textual and terrestrial effects. Such an aporia provides literary critics with the occasion to reconsider this widely read novella in relation to its untapped hermeneutic, epistemic, and affective possibilities. From there, I review the ways Lennie has been critically interpreted to date, especially by Disability Studies scholars.

Next, hewing closely to recent biopolitical theories regarding social affection, I address how *Of Mice and Men* has been interpreted to reinforce a fictive discourse of normative U.S. subjectivity, which was wrought within the primary eugenics period of the early twentieth century. As with *The Sound and the Fury*, this work of fiction doubtlessly serves as a register of the tragic fate faced by many Americans who were identified as idiots and, in turn, cast as biologically and socially degenerate during the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time, Steinbeck's aesthetics capitulates to a sentimental moral pedagogy that is reliant on animal figures, especially pets. The depiction of Lennie as akin to George's pet dog promulgates the notion that humane and loving social attachments are the proper way for readers to learn "our humanity"—the apex of an anthropocentric order (Boggs 116). As this pathetic readerly identification with Lennie is cultivated (alongside pathetic identification with George), the novella supports readers' fantasies of their own subjectivization via the ideological effects of the "expressive hypothesis": that is, by "extrapolat[ing] a human subject circularly from the phenomenon of emotion" (Terada 11). As Rei Terada argues, whereas the logic of the Cartesian-style *cogito* posits that reason alone reflects and, therefore, confirms subjectivity (i.e. I think; therefore, I am), the "expressive hypothesis" amounts to the following logic: *I feel; therefore, I am* (11). Readers' affective

orientations (or predispositions) regarding idiot, dog, and even idiot/dog figures emerge as key to this auto-affective "humanization" training. The idiot/dog's affective potency indicates that *Of Mice and Men*'s production of ambivalent readerly feelings and meanings is both a potent site and technique for the biopolitical negotiation of subjectivity.

My conclusion will revisit the close readings I develop here in relation to Lennie's corporeal effects within the historical terrain of U.S. biopower. I close with specific examples regarding the idiot/dog's life-and-death stakes. To wit, Steinbeck's novella has been used in Texas to force capital punishment onto prisoners who are constitutionally exempt from an imposed death. The case *Moore v. Texas* in particular helps to elucidate the way Lennie has been used as the legal benchmark for the state's determination of mental disability—a definition that, as I will explain, is problematically underwritten by a *sympathetic interpretation* of Steinbeck's classic.

Abjection and Affection: Reconsidering *Of Mice and Men*

My reconsideration of *Of Mice and Men* and Lennie marks an important development in this dissertation's analysis of disability and animality. In the previous chapter, I was mainly concerned with unsettling the reification of the rational human subject in relation to the eugenics-inflected semiotics of blood blending exercised by the modernist (and notoriously difficult) novel *The Sound and the Fury*. Here, however, I add to and complicate that argument by teasing out this idiot/dog's ambivalence as a figure for love and fear.

Besides assuming the canine form of Willoughby the Dog, Lennie Small has reappeared in numerous television, film, radio, ballet, opera, and theatre adaptations, as well as in contemporary parodies, including skits on *Saturday Night Live* and *Key & Peele*. Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* also remains "one of the most commonly taught texts in secondary literacy

classrooms" in the U.S., so many American readers encounter it for the first time as youths (Borsheim-Black 125).

Given this ubiquity, it is likely already common knowledge that Lennie and his primary caregiver and companion, George Milton, are itinerant farm labourers. While the two struggle to survive in Depression-era California, their daily hardships are ameliorated by the bond of their friendship and a shared pastoral vision of self-sufficiency—a "dream of settling down in a small house on their own land where they could farm and raise chickens and rabbits, setting the conditions for and keeping all of the products" (Keely 216). Steinbeck's novella begins with a hopeful, if somewhat exasperated, George leading Lennie to a ranch in the Salinas River Valley in pursuit of enough capital to realize this dream.

It is also common knowledge that Lennie's mental disability and physical strength combine to effect dangerous—even fatal—outcomes. Killing is never really his intent. He is merely infatuated with stroking soft, furry bodies. Recognizing this potential danger, George promises that if his friend learns to follow his lead and exercise self-control, he will be rewarded with rabbits to cuddle and care for once they buy their dream farm: "'Good boy! …When we get the coupla acres I can let you tend the rabbits all right'" (Steinbeck 31).[47] The problem turns out to be that Lennie does not seem capable of the self-control asked of him. Although he proves to be a success when it comes to manual labour, which is evidently advantageous for George, when his sensual desire combines with his powerful touch even his affectionate displays prove deadly: he leaves a trail of crushed bodies in his wake, including mice (14, 15, 21, 22), a puppy (147), and ultimately, Curley's wife—his new boss's daughter-in-law (157-59). Thus, on top of George's routine suggestions that his friend is as an exemplar of unconditional love and Edenic-

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[47] Avery's *The Heckling Hare* clearly pokes fun at George's promise inasmuch as it casts a rabbit, Bugs Bunny, as Willoughby's sole object of desire.

style innocence, Lennie represents a dangerous threat—an unregulated physicality that imperils human life (Halliwell 149). This paradox comprises the central conflict of Steinbeck's narrative.

In general, *Of Mice and Men* has been critically perceived as a naturalist and sympathetic literary portrayal of the harsh social reality faced by migrant workers following the Stock Market Crash of 1929 (Halliwell 138-39). Yet it is arguably more popularly insinuated into the U.S. cultural imagination as a dramatic revamp of the subject/object dyad. As Avery's cartoon parody attests, the protagonist duo of George and Lennie are presumed to figure, respectively, a twentieth-century version of the Cartesian mind/body division (Levant 135). From this angle, Steinbeck's aesthetics are shot through with a tropology that appears to capitulate to one of the most enduring and normalizing clichés of the Western philosophical tradition: an absolute ontological division between the fully rational (and civilized) human subject and all other animality.[48]

It is crucial to recall that Lennie's vulnerable mortality hangs over *Of Mice and Men*, too. Rhetorically, this functions as a sympathy-extraction device, which produces a wellspring of readerly affection for him. After he accidentally crushes Curley's wife while she struggles to prevent him from petting her soft hair, he retreats in shock and proclaims pitifully to himself: "I done a bad thing. I done another bad thing" (Steinbeck 159). Then, he flees the scene of his crime in a confused state of panic, despair, and shame. Once George discovers her corpse, he paternalistically tries to reinstate his own Romantic ideal about his friend's perpetual innocence and vows to loyally protect Lennie:

Candy said, "He's such a nice fella. I didn' think he'd do nothing like this."

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[48] See Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, for example, for the now-classic deconstruction in Animal Studies of the Cartesian distinction of human response over animal reaction.

> George still stared at Curley's wife. "Lennie never done it in meanness," he said. "All the time he done bad things, but he never done one of 'em mean." He straightened up and looked back at Candy. "Now listen. We gotta tell the guys. They got to bring him in, I guess. They ain't no way out. Maybe they won't hurt 'im." He said sharply, "I ain't gonna let 'em hurt Lennie." (164-65)

In the end, even though Lennie's killings are marked as accidents, a distraught George decides that the most humane answer to this problem—the best form of protection he can offer—is to personally "put down" his companion. He steals a Luger pistol from their bunkhouse and surreptitiously shoots Lennie in the back of the skull. This resolution to the plot remains notorious for its heart-wrenching melancholy and pathos, as well as for its political and ethical ambivalence.

This mercy killing of Lennie is also the point when his tacit caninity suddenly comes into sharper focus. A prior execution of an old, physically impaired pet dog directly informs George's decision to euthanize his disabled friend. Earlier on, the old dog's owner, Candy, confides to George that he experiences daily shame over having let Carlson, another ranch hand, kill his beloved canine companion. He swears, "'I ought to of shot that dog myself, George. I shouldn't ought to of let no stranger shoot my dog'" (108). Candy's confession of regret, particularly the repetition of the term "ought," escalates into a moral imperative for George regarding his own dilemma about how to care for and protect Lennie. The parallel between these two mercy killings cannot be missed: both Candy's and George's companions are shot in the same spot—the back of skull—with the very same gun—Carlson's Luger. Steinbeck's critics have not failed to address the "heavy-handedness" of this idiot-dog juxtaposition, which ostensibly implies that Lennie is analogous or akin to George's beloved, misbehaving pet (Cardullo 19). Louis Owens

even hints at the entwined historical subtexts of eugenics and miscegenation this parallel evokes: "Steinbeck was clearly aware of the widespread eugenics movement. … And based on his awkward repetition of the word 'Luger,' … it would seem that he wanted his reader to associate the supposed 'mercy killings' of the novel with the rise of Fascism in Germany" ("Deadly" 331). In Owens's analysis, which provides an insightful historical contextualization for Steinbeck's larger aesthetic project with this novella, the juxtaposition of canine and idiot tropes transforms *Of Mice and Men* into a cautionary tale of ethical and political proportions: it serves as a literary warning to the U.S. on the brink of World War II and the Holocaust. Usually, however, the depiction of human mental disability as tantamount to caninity gets written off in favour of plucking out a sentimental, ahistorical theme about the everyday value of behaving humanely in relation to vulnerable and suffering others, including one's pets. This moral lesson is thought to be of elementary social value and, therefore, "suitable for children" (Halliwell 142). But I question whether *Of Mice and Men*'s "cultural and literary value…as well as [its] inclusion in [U.S. secondary] literature curricula" is merely commensurate with this mode of "humane" reading (Borsheim-Black 125).

I follow Owens's suggestion that critics need to take better stock of Steinbeck's use of idiot and dog tropes and their political and ethical implications, especially with respect to how they subtly encipher naturalizations and biologizations of ontological order. As with Faulkner's novel, it is crucial to address how idiocy and caninity encode the enmeshed histories of eugenics, breeding, and population management—a set of symbolic discourses and biopolitical practices not only particular to the pre-World War II era in which these two canonical works were published, but that continue to culminate in dire effects in the U.S. today. And yet if Lennie's tacit caninity qualifies as a stigmatizing abjection at the level of character, prefiguring the social

necessity of his death (and, admittedly, in some ways it does), this does not obviate how the very same idiot and dog tropes accruing to him sentimentally arouse *humane* feelings of sympathetic compassion and affection. In light of the ambivalence he rhetorically excites—a tension between affection and abjection—Lennie's portrayal as an idiot/dog figure emerges as an overlooked paradox in this canonical novella. He is a nodal point that evinces a disruptive aesthetic excess and, as I will elaborate, a corporeal remainder. This particular case of tropological confusion can be seized upon to impede *Of Mice and Men*'s seductive appeal to an anthropocentric hierarchy—the very order Lennie's animalization seems to secure as natural and essential, rather than historically contingent.

As I have already put forward, dog signs and bodies have proven key to enciphering mental disability as degraded biology—or, as Erving Goffman puts it, as "not quite human" (14)—along lines contiguous with the "received racist image of the black [American] as simianlike" (Gates 52). Accordingly, when George refers to Lennie as a "good boy" he unintentionally evokes an infantilizing endearment used for dogs *as well as* a racialization of African-American men under slavery as "boys." Supplementing the negative, derogatory connotations of caninity, dogs also symbolize—and, I concede, actually serve—as the affectionate "best friends" of many U.S. pet owners (and dog lovers). Nevertheless, regarding the unique status afforded to domestic dogs, Taussig recalls that the semiotic history of caninity remains deeply political because it evokes the "Western allegory…concerning the ways in which a dog and fidelity 'go together'" (213). As with my introductory analysis of *The Heckling Hare*, close readings are required here to unpack why Lennie's animalization enciphers an obedience lesson—one of lordship and bondage—that hinges on the double entendre of fidelity; this also begins to lay bare *Of Mice and Men*'s corporeal, even life-and-death, stakes.

Lennie's tacit caninity, especially with regards to his love bond with George, produces an image of a dutiful, faithful, and affectionate form of devotion and pet-like companionship. However, as Taussig's discussion of fidelity and caninity elucidates, it simultaneously encodes a violent history of U.S. nation building: Lennie emerges as "the civilized man's servant" (220). To put it bluntly, Lennie's depiction as an idiot/dog figure produces ambivalence because the positive connotations and affects aroused by his caninity overlap with this historical subtext of colonial violence and unequal relations of power in the U.S., especially in relation to his mental disability. This ambivalence brings the grave biopolitical stakes of idiot/dog tropological confusion into focus.

Biopower, as Nicole Shukin argues, does not deal in absolute ontological divisions; it "hinges" on a historically shifting division between "the human" and "the animal" (*Animal* 11). In Shukin's words, "the zoo-ontological production of species difference as a strategically ambivalent rather than absolute line" is what "allow[s] for the contradictory power to both dissolve and reinscribe borders between humans and animals" (11). More simply put, the ontological basis of species difference is never fixed, but is a shifting goalpost—one prone to political calculation. Building on Shukin's key claim that human being is not an essence, but a cultural production for determining inclusion, Colleen Glenney Boggs further pinpoints how U.S. dog tropes and canine bodies (i.e. as personified and sentimental animals) offer a material-semiotic "domain of animality whose complicated sociocultural history is deeply rooted in colonialism, slavery, and sexism" (33). While I tend to agree with Boggs's argument overall, it does not address the historical contiguity between dogs, including their roles in breeding and domestication practices, and the institutional administration and social management of mental disability in America.

Once again, while one of my primary critical aims in this dissertation is to bring Animal Studies and Disability Studies into closer discussion, I cannot ignore how unstable matters of sex/gender and race are interwoven with unstable matters of disability and species in Steinbeck's aesthetics. The coevalness of dog breeding and eugenic practices historically strengthened racist, sexist, and ableist discourses about biological inheritance and selective reproduction that flourished in the U.S. during the first half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, these contiguous histories cultivated feelings of fear and anxiety regarding bodily contamination, inferior offspring, and impure populations, which spawned and justified violent acts of legal euthanasia and institutional segregation under the guise of medical and scientific techniques.[49] The confusion of idiot and canine tropes in *Of Mice and Men* intersects with polygenetic theories and social Darwinist proscriptions against miscegenation—a term broadly connoting a mix of incompatible biological kinds (Peterson 34). According to Haraway, literal and figurative dogs are directly linked to the biopolitical emergence of human population management and its attendant regularization techniques:

> [D]ogs return us to crucial nineteenth-century economic and cultural innovations rooted in the biosocial body…. The breeding system that evolved with the data-keeping system was called scientific breeding, and in myriad ways this paper-plus-flesh system is behind the histories of eugenics and genetics, as well as other sciences (and politics) of animal and human reproduction. (*When* 53)

Historically speaking, then, idiot/dog conflations appearing in twentieth-century U.S. fiction suggest profoundly complex political, ethical, and corporeal consequences that are not yet

[49] Snyder and Mitchell chart how U.S. eugenicists pathologized disabled bodies in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century, constructing them as reproductive threats to the national population (69-99); this biologization of disability is entwined with questions of race and sex, and has an undeniable international scope, culminating in the Nazi Holocaust (100-29).

adequately recognized. There is still more to critically develop with respect to this aspect of Steinbeck's novella.

To read for idiot/dog confusion in *Of Mice and Men*—as well as locating its echoes in a cartoon like *The Heckling Hare* and, by the end of this chapter, in the legal register of *Moore v. Texas*—uncovers another submerged layer in Steinbeck's classic. It is not only that certain privileged lives and bodies are thought to matter more than others in the U.S., but that humans with mental disability and canines have both been made—that is, forced *and* produced—to bear an inordinate affective burden when it comes to shaping what counts as an unremarkable or "normal" human life. And, moreover, it suggests that they have been made to do so in figurative and literal registers at once.

Rather than suggesting that readers' vicarious sympathetic or humane feelings for Lennie are redemptive, I am proposing here that the tropological confusion opened up by Steinbeck's novella is prone to serving as a literary-cultural *dispositif* for what Michel Foucault calls the art of governmentality: "the encompassing processes linking the way that individuals conduct themselves ('ethics') with the forms of power and domination through which states regulate the conduct of national populations" (Pease "Pip" 328). As I take stock of *Of Mice and Men*'s potential to secure power, this novella—and its inclusion in the American curriculum and canon—comes into focus as epitomizing a *novel governmentality* (Pease "Pip" 328). As I explained in my Introduction to this dissertation, I build on Donald Pease's use of this term to name fiction's generic potency "to take hold of the processes of behaving, thinking and feeling immanent to [a] readers' conduct and to create structures of desire and affective protocols that introduced, secured, and valorized new forms of life" (328). As such, readerly feelings for the remarkable and marked "other" can be made commensurate with the fantasy of an

anthropocentric norm for liberal subjectivity—one that serves the U.S. state, displacing or disavowing the vulnerability and finitude shared by the dispossessed, whether they are human or nonhuman.

All Mixed Up: Reintroducing the Idiot/Dog Figure

This next section develops close readings that focus on Lennie's excessive figuration as an idiot/dog. Then, I proceed to address why he can be read to undermine *Of Mice and Men*'s alleged privileging of the normative human subject. Simply put, tropological confusion in Steinbeck's text serves as a catachrestic impairment of the novella's form: it hints at the ultimate failure of the narrative to accurately capture and re-present what it attempts to describe. As a formal disruption, tropological confusion thus inaugurates an alternative hermeneutic for Steinbeck's text that highlights a refusal of narrative order, a readerly defamiliarization, and an interpretative indeterminacy or uncertainty.

It is crucial to observe that Lennie's idiocy is never clinically diagnosed. Nevertheless, his difference from George is contrastively pronounced from the outset. George is introduced as "small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features" (Steinbeck 9). Lennie subsequently emerges from his shadow as "a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders" (9). Although both are evidently white, adult males, the order of their appearance affirms George's priority, which the narrator marks by labeling Lennie his "opposite" (9). This term establishes the figures as polar physiological exemplars. In the words of Martin Halliwell, it "fixes them" with distinct images to suggest they are psychologically supplementary: George is the "mind" that Lennie's "body" lacks (1). This reductive characterization plays out in the introductory scene: the two men are described as entering the scopic field of the narrative alongside the Salinas River, and when George comes to

an abrupt stop his “follower nearly [runs] over him”—like a lumbering pet dog (10). Labeling Lennie a “follower” undermines his agency, especially since his large body seems out of control and portends a possible threat (L. Owens “Deadly” 325). As I suggested earlier, to “follow” encodes the double entendre of fidelity: namely, to be loyal and accurate (Taussig 213).

Slowly, it is revealed that George and Lennie, drifting through the state of California in search of work, have come to Salinas River Valley and Soledad only after evading a lynch mob in the small town of Weed where Lennie did “bad things” (Steinbeck 16). Readers learn what this means later on. He stands accused of a sexual assault (75). Defending Lennie to Slim, their new “God-like” ranch foreman (72), George explains away this accusation as a misunderstanding: “[Lennie] wants to touch ever’thing he likes. Just wants to feel it. So he reaches out to feel this red dress an’ the girl lets out a squawk, and that gets Lennie *all mixed up*, and he holds on ‘cause that’s the only thing he can think to do’” (74-75; emphasis added). This accusation of sexual violence conjures the miscegenation subtext of the novella and alludes to Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*: the menace Lennie represents has less to do with this particular woman’s safety than with his reproductive potential to “pollute” the national stock with idiocy’s bad blood—that is, degenerate germplasm or genes.[50]

However, for George, Lennie is just a “poor bastard”: confused, impoverished, worthy of pity, and in need of brotherly *caritas* (19). This epithet also cultivates readerly pathos for Lennie, yet it invariably suggests more about George’s self-conception as a moral agent than it confirms his friend’s innocence or impoverishment. George’s construal of his friend as “nuts” and the charitable rationalization that he provides is, in a strict sense, another discursive frame for

[50] See Jensen-Moulton for how “California’s eugenics laws allowed for the sterilization of more than 21,000 people between 1907 and 1939 in order to prevent the passing of ‘feeble-mindedness’ from generation to generation. . . . This obsession with sterilization or even eugenic elimination . . . represented a particularly U.S. approach to dealing with disability” (130).

determining—and reining in—Lennie's identity (168). The central irony, driving home the partiality (even fictive quality) of George's own representational discourse, which is couched within the narrator's own order, is that he is no less in need of Lennie for social affection. Nonetheless, after Lennie accidentally kills Curley's wife—an act that is similarly marked and over-determined as sexualized violence—and another mob is organized to hunt him down, George appears "hopelessly" resigned to the impossibility of taming Lennie's physical strength and mental disability (163). Despite his friend's faithful attempts to obediently follow, George seems to believe he will never exercise the self-regulation or independence that is required of him.

In the novella's final scene, George sets off to euthanize his friend, discovering him back at the Salinas River clearing. Lennie immediately confesses his crime: "'I done another bad thing'" (178). However, he does not appear to understand the extreme precariousness of their situation, nor does he foresee that his own life hangs in the balance as a result. As Disability Studies scholars like Halliwell and Bérubé have both astutely suggested, Steinbeck's depiction of mental disability can be read in this instance not so much as a characterization or quality and more as a hermeneutic device couched within the fabric of Steinbeck's narrative; in other words, it can be approached as *meta-representational*. As Bérubé writes, "intellectual disability provides the structure for the narrative irony, and the narrative irony defines the novel. Lennie knows not what he does, and we know he knows not what he does" (*Secret* 14). Consequently, this changes the way readers approach the text: whereas they are implicitly distinguished by the novella as having interpretative insight and knowledge, implying hermeneutic and epistemic mastery, Lennie seems to be simply an irrational body represented within it. While I largely agree with Halliwell and Bérubé, I maintain that the meanings and affects that accrue to this figure are still

more complex.

In the final scene, George approaches his companion armed both with Carlson's Luger and Candy's confession of regret about letting a stranger kill his old dog. First, he instructs Lennie to gaze off into the distance, and then he recites their shared dream of living off "the fatta the lan'" one last time—but he augments this version with a sentimental ideal of perpetual peace: "'Ever'body gonna be nice to you. Ain't gonna be no more trouble. Nobody gonna hurt nobody or steal from 'em'" (Steinbeck 183). Then,

> George raised the gun and steadied it, and he brought the muzzle of it close to the back of Lennie's head. The hand shook violently, but his face set and his hand steadied. He pulled the trigger. The crash of the shot rolled up the hills and rolled down again. Lennie jarred, and then settled slowly forward to the sand, and he lay without quivering. (184)

This image of Lennie's serene corpse stands in stark contrast to the "violently" shaking hand that pulls the trigger, implying that suffering now belongs to George. And although Lennie's death is anticipated, this plot resolution remains distressing for its melancholic ambivalence. Clearly, George's bodily affect vis-à-vis Lennie's dead body indicates that he would prefer not to have killed his only friend. In view of this, Lennie's execution has been widely accepted as George's humanitarian "gesture of sacrifice and responsibility" prefigured as it is by the execution of Candy's pet dog, which Louis Owens describes as another "intensely lachrymose" scene ("Deadly" 321-22).

When this old dog is first introduced, he is likewise described by the narrator as an obedient follower: "The old man came slowly into the room. . . . And at his heels there walked a dragfooted sheepdog, gray of muzzle, and with pale blind old eyes" (Steinbeck 45). As with George and Lennie, this order affirms Candy's hierarchical priority. As well, it encodes the

positive affective value of fidelity embodied by the idiot/dog figure: this pet dog lovingly follows in Candy's footsteps. Later, when Carlson complains that the dog is stinking up their bunkhouse, he appeals to Candy on compassionate grounds: "'This ol' dog jus' suffers hisself all the time. If you was to take him out and shoot him right in the back of the head—' he leaned over and pointed, '—right there, why he'd never know what hit him'" (80). Candy replies that regardless of whether or not the dog would anticipate death, he cannot kill his beloved companion: "'I'm so used to him,' he said softly. 'I had him from a pup'" (81). Nevertheless, Carlson appears unmoved by Candy's appeal, arguing relentlessly that the dog is too physically impaired and old:

> "If you want me to, I'll put the old devil out of his misery right now and get it over with. Ain't nothing left for him. Can't eat, can't see, can't even walk without hurtin'."
>
> Candy said hopefully, "You ain't got no gun."
>
> "The hell I ain't. Got a Luger. It won't hurt him none at all." (84-85)

Carlson appeals to Candy by invoking the dog's sensory and physical disabilities as forms of embodied suffering that, in turn, justify euthanastic violence; in addition, he promises his Luger will kill the dog with merciful swiftness. Specifically, however, he asserts that the dog will not "quiver" (82). Though Candy resists for a time, he ultimately cedes his companion to Carlson, and the dog is immediately led away to its execution.

"Quiver"—the very term that Carlson uses to convince Candy to relinquish the dog—subtly resurfaces at the end of Steinbeck's novella in the narrator's report that Lennie's dead body "lay without quivering" (184). The narrator's repetition ballasts the idiot-dog parallel, an overarching narrative design that seems to confirm Carlson's promise: the dog and Lennie both appear to perish without prolonged suffering. Nevertheless, by positing disability as the rationale for both mercy killings, having them "put down" in an identical manner, and then marking the

parallel with a phraseological echo, the narrator stacks the deck to ensure that Lennie's tacit caninity is identifiable, yet seemingly presented to rouse readers' desires for narrative order itself. On a meta-representational level, the parallel is reader-bait because it exemplifies "that which makes a plot 'move forward,' and makes us read forward, seeking in the unfolding of the narrative a line of intention and a portent of design that hold the promise of progress toward meaning" (Brooks xiii). Although the idiot-dog analogy works in this manner at the level of plot and character, on a tropological level the idiot/dog confusion seems to be of secondary significance—something that is not entirely missed, but that does not obviously warrant readers' scrutiny. If one reads exclusively for the plot, George's possible avenues of action do appear very slim and, as a result, Lennie's death seems to be inevitable or even fateful. This is emblematized—appropriately enough—by Slim's authorization: "'You hadda, George. I swear you hadda'" (186). Slim's approval echoes the ableist sentiment of his prior approval for killing Candy's dog: "'Carl's right, Candy. That dog ain't no good to himself. I wisht somebody'd shoot me if I get old an' a cripple'" (81). By touting disability as justification for euthanasia in both cases, the narrative's idiot-dog analogy begins to bleed together.

But are the two mercy killings as necessary or as fated as Slim claims? Or, are they more vexed supplications to the normative order of the ranch? Arguably, Lennie and the dog are killed because their disabilities impede profitability and productivity. In this sense, as Louis Owens suggests, Steinbeck's novella is more a dramatization of "Social Darwinism" (326) than "a coldly objective rendering" that documents violence in the classic U.S. literary naturalist mode ("Deadly" 331).[51] Published on the brink of World War II, *Of Mice and Men* captures the author

[51] See Lars Ahnebrink's *The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction* for how early American naturalism's "basic philosophy . . . was deterministic and positivistic and consequently the naturalists focused their interests on the external reality. Darwin's interpretation of the

grappling with the social, political, and ethical implications of eugenics—"the profound human crisis of his times" (331). I am indebted to Owens's analysis, especially his discussion of the historical implications of Steinbeck's aesthetic project. Nevertheless, I veer from his descriptions of this text as exemplifying a kind of late naturalist focus on the ways *human* character is conditioned—and, in effect, determined—by external environmental, economic, and social forces (Owens *John Steinbeck's Re-Vision* 3). As well, I expand his focus on the historical crisis of eugenics as exclusively human. Rather, informed by recent work by Animal Studies theorists like Shukin and Haraway, I contend that Steinbeck's canine figure indicates that the biopolitical scope of this crisis is greater-than-human.

Considering how routinely Lennie is associated with dogs, it is surprising that Steinbeck's critics have not yet addressed the affective nuances of this specific form of animalization. Even as early as the introductory scene, Lennie is contrasted with George for behaving "like a terrier who doesn't want to bring a ball to its master" (Steinbeck 20); later on, Crooks explains that, without George as a caregiver, Lennie will be institutionalized and fitted with "a collar, like a dog" (126); and George routinely slanders Lennie, calling him a "son-of-a-bitch" (24). After accidentally killing the pup, Lennie mimics George and calls it a "son-of-a-bitch" (149). Ironically, in this scene, even when Lennie attempts to follow George's lead, his use of the phrase foregrounds the very caninity upon which the expletive is based. Put another way, Lennie's use of "bitch" suddenly appears too direct, too literal. The phrase nonetheless recalls the extra-literary and hierarchical discourse of species; however, since this pup's body has

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mechanism of the universe, the positivism of Comte, and Marx's socialism were adopted by the naturalistic school"—a school that included Jack London, Frank Norris, and Theodore Dreiser among others (22). In addition to Louis Owens's analysis of *Of Mice and Men*, see Donald Pizer's *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism* for a similar assessment of Steinbeck's oeuvre as epitomizing a late American naturalism that extended the philosophy of the earlier school of naturalist writers so as to pessimistically mark contemporary historical crises.

just been crushed, Lennie's attempt to use the insult, coupled with its haphazard results, comes off as both violent and pathetic. This produces a potential affective dissonance for readers.

Shortly thereafter, as a sobbing Lennie displays the dead pup to Curley's wife, she tries to console him: "'Don't you worry none. He was jus' a mutt. You can get another one easy. The whole country is fulla mutts'" (151). Her appeal abstractly invokes a human/animal binary, suggesting that no trespass has occurred because the killing of animals does not count as murder. Yet, even more specifically, this term "mutt" raises the spectral subtext of miscegenation in conjunction with dog breeding, suggesting an omnipresent threat that haunts canine pedigree and U.S. identity alike. The irony, of course, is that Lennie is associated with caninity throughout the narrative, implying that he can also be killed with impunity should he pose a threat. Therefore, this remarkable and overlooked dialogue about the "mutt" (and the subtext of dog breeding) manifests the novella's submerged script of miscegenation, which historically implies dis/ability, race, and even species mixing—albeit on more of a meta-representational level than a representational one. Meanwhile, the association of Lennie with this particular "mutt" reinscribes ableist, racist, and anthropocentric hierarchies in relation to sexual reproduction—again, ones that correspond to extra-textual meanings and values—regarding the recalcitrant deviancy of mental disability and nonhuman animality. This hierarchical order seems to justify reading the two mercy killings as permissible violence. However, it's also possible to discern in this dialogue an anxious demarcation of the human and the animal, even as Lennie is, paradoxically, denied such distinctions.

I argue that Steinbeck's tropes are trickier and more ambivalent than a character-based or plot-based reading permits. Described by Steinbeck himself as "a tricky little thing" (Steinbeck and Wallsten 132 qtd. in L. Owens "Deadly" 320), *Of Mice and Men*'s overarching comparison

between idiot and dog figures co-exists with idiot/dog tropological confusion; this can be read to enigmatically scramble or disorder the predominant narrative form of the novella, rather than to secure it. For example, after Lennie kills Curley's wife and as he attempts to bury her corpse in the barn, he suddenly appears as both human and canine at once: "He pawed up the hay until it partly covered her" (159). At this point, the narrative's overarching analogy between idiocy and caninity (and its rhetorical effects)—a comparison in which Lennie and Candy's old dog play crucial roles—escalates into a device for defamiliarization, a meta-representational metalepsis: that is, it becomes *a trope for troping itself*. By suggestively appending paws to Lennie, this figure's apparent lack of self-reflexivity is no longer dog-like *per se*; rather, it figures something ineffable or un-representable. This produces, in a word, catachresis. Before this point, the analogy between idiot and dog characters hinted at an underlying likeness and a shared fate, while maintaining distance between the terms "idiot" and "dog" and their referents. This subtly encouraged a hermeneutic practice focused on plot and characters, while diverting readers' attention from the "natural" and "transparent" effects of the narrator's representational strategies. At this point, however, the narrator's homology flaunts the narrative device *as a device, as artifice itself*. In turn, this dissolves that gap between "idiot" and "dog" into a figural form of linguistic uncertainty, highlighting a fusion between "idiot" and "dog" instead of keeping them as separate as analogues. Rhetorically speaking, once Lennie has killed a human, the narrative's formal mode of third-person objective description is effectively destabilized, and this emergent figure of threat—not only to the prerogatives of the human subject, but narrative coherence—becomes indistinguishable, undecidable. Lennie is suddenly "all mixed up" *because* idiocy is tropologically confused with caninity—or, rather, idiocy *is* caninity; in other words, they are more than metaphorical substitutes for each other (Steinbeck 75).

The tropological confusion I am developing in relation to Lennie Small is clearly aligned with Quayson's concept of "aesthetic nervousness" and, more specifically, his notion of the "short-circuiting of the hitherto dominant protocols of representation" in a literary text in relation to disabled characters (26). Whereas Quayson's guiding metaphor of the "short-circuit" can be critically applied to Steinbeck's novella to describe this scene's internal disabling "function" in the narrative—that is, Lennie functioning as a device that disrupts readers' comprehension in relation to character-based representations of disability (Bérubé *Secret* 58)—the hermeneutic model I am proposing is even more capacious. Tropological confusion is an approach that expands upon Quayson's tight focus on interpreting encounters between non-disabled and disabled characters. Instead, it pinpoints a text-based invocation, mix up, and destabilization of *manifold tropes*—not just of disability in relation to ability—which are already at play in a work's literary-aesthetic paradigm. In terms of *Of Mice and Men*, in an effort to be as specific as possible, the excessive quality of the narrator's paw homology—that is, sticking figurative dog paws to the idiot figure's body—appears as a device that kaleidoscopically amplifies and reflects the ambivalent meanings and affects accruing to the idiot/dog figure across the novella. Rhetorically, the tension and ambivalence that results exceeds the narrative's "simple" form and recalls its corporeal (and historical) remainders.

Approaching Lennie as an enigmatic figure that provokes or opens up interpretative acts, rather than one that secures order, uncovers a pivotal inscrutability within *Of Mice and Men*. Here, the narrative flaunts its own semantic limits through taxonomic confusion, signaling a crucial moment of indeterminacy—of trembling and infidelity—wherein it appears to recoil from mimetic readings and to expose its own descriptions and biologizations as artifice. The narrator's style, which initially appears to be unambiguous and direct, suddenly appears to be suffused with

chains of metaphor; this results in a potential confusion for Steinbeck's readers. Lennie as an idiot/dog functions as a synecdoche for the narrator's inability to capture and masterfully re-present an absolute ontological division between subjects and objects, as well as humans and animals. Because a degree of uncertainty surfaces at this point with respect to the identity of Lennie within the narrative order (i.e. is he human or animal?), this rouses aesthetic and rhetorical effects that at once undermine interpretative mastery and subvert the autonomy of the subject of interpretation by exposing humans and other animals as discursively and materially entwined.

In this respect, tropological confusion throws into question whether Lennie's animalization—his tacit caninity—is reducible to a sign of social stigma that effectively warrants the exclusion of mentally disabled people. I argue, on the contrary, that *Of Mice and Men*'s depiction of this literary idiot/dog figure no longer appears to simply correspond with or signify prejudicial structures of human normalcy within U.S. society that require and rely on a "natural" demotion of animality. There is something else going on beyond dehumanization and denigration on a meta-representational level. By beginning to read for these unsettling, less-reductive aesthetic effects, Lennie emerges not only as a character in Steinbeck's narrative, but a nodal point for many conflicting meanings and affects at once. As these meanings and affects converge, Lennie serves as a rhetorically useful instance of confusion—one that unsettles the strict division between the human and the animal.

In sum, the idiot/dog's ambivalence—or, in other words, the resulting positive-negative tension—evokes a textual aporia underlying the narrator's representations of presence, an aporia that fissures across the narrative; this destabilizes its mimetic form and affectively exceeds its scope. To invoke the rhetorical term I used earlier, this mix-up of idiot and canine tropes

produces a catachrestic encounter akin to what Julia Kristeva names the "abject"—an encounter with "the jettisoned object" re-emerging as a pre-symbolic, affective *thing* threatening to implode conventional structures and containers of meaning into a void (Kristeva 2). Although ambivalence can be key to biopower's functioning (Shukin *Animal* 11), this literary instance of catachresis nonetheless can be read to expose the conceit of the ontological regularization of identities and bodies in the U.S.—human and nonhuman alike. Steinbeck's aesthetics thus unlock otherwise hidden meanings: a hermeneutic of tropological confusion allows for biological identities in the narrative—ontological conceits themselves—to be deconstructed. Moreover, tropological confusion renders hermeneutical logics that would perpetuate the human-animal order and confirm subjectivity over and against the objective world inoperative: this excessive turn potentially delivers a destabilizing epistemic jolt to readers who believe humans and animals can be kept separate or sealed off in absolute domains, and yet identify themselves with the fusion that Lennie effects. On another level, it potentially precipitates a crisis of interpretation that suggests readerly incertitude is morally significant. Tropological confusion mixes up and destabilizes readers' expectations and epistemic assumptions regarding how a literary work corresponds to socio-cultural conventions and, accordingly, to collectively agreed upon meanings.

For Quayson, an excessive representation like this one turns aesthetic questions to ethical ones. In his words, "disability returns the aesthetic domain to an active ethical core that serves to disrupt the surface of representation" (19). On the one hand, I agree that *Of Mice and Men*'s tropological confusion of idiocy and caninity promulgates representational excess that destabilizes its form. However, Quayson's concept of "aesthetic nervousness" unduly limits disability figures to serve as "analogue[s] of *the sublime* in literary-aesthetic representation

(ineffability/ articulation)"—albeit an ineffability that permits hegemonic powers to assert "social hierarchization and closure within the real world" (23; emphasis added). Insofar as there is a Kantian-style "sublime" at the core of Quayson's conceptual model, the kind of extra-literary or "real world" moral questions to which literary figures of disability invariably return implies an ethical "universalism" rather than a pluralism (Berger *Disarticulate* 154). In contrast to Quayson, I am proposing that the extra-literary domain invoked by tropological confusion remains historically and ideologically contingent. Consequently, if "ethical choice is always a choice between ethics" (Harpham 28), and insofar as ethical choice is relocated "in the material practices of reading and writing, [whereby] textual analysis becomes an ethical imperative" (Pamela Caughie qtd. in Goldman 81), then each reader's efforts to *interpret* the tropological confusion of Lennie, specifically, entails a moral response/ability to wrestle with his complexity.[52] Each reading will vary. Nonetheless, idiot/dog figures foreground the extra-textual potential of literary-aesthetics through this variegated and dynamic interplay of call and response. *Of Mice and Men*—and, specifically, its idiot/dog confusion—potentially opens up lines of cross-species feeling and intimacy, even of interdependence, between human and nonhuman animals.

In my next section, I turn to previous critical readings of Steinbeck's classic. I want to clarify in advance that I neither oppose nor aim to discredit the Disability Studies scholars who claim that *Of Mice and Men* is problematic or that Lennie is a sign of social stigma. Historically, the novella has played a role in troubling social consequences—in both conceptual *and* corporeal registers. I intend to build upon these prior critical readings to emphasize that the stakes of

[52] According Harpham, morality is distinct from ethics (which primarily negotiates concepts): "Morality is the 'rigor' [sic] of ethical thought, where the rubber of a definite principle meets the road of reality" (29).

Steinbeck's idiot/dog are nothing short of life and death and, moreover, that the novella's aesthetics can be read *otherwise*.

Critical Context: Is Lennie a Bad Thing?

For Morris Dickstein, an influential critic of U.S. literature, unlike the interpretative challenges excited by *The Sound and the Fury*, Steinbeck's pathos-driven narrative comes off as a "schematic" exercise in plotting (122). Compared to Faulkner's novel, he argues, Steinbeck's tragedy is too artificial and facile: "everyone knows" that the story will culminate in the "canny" George "saving" the pitiful Lennie "by taking his life" (122). To substantiate this dismissive and negative assessment, Dickstein zeroes in on how Candy's dog is "put of out of his *misery*," claiming that it too blatantly portends "what George will have to do for Lennie" (122; emphasis added). For Dickstein, this parallel epitomizes a fundamental aesthetic "weakness": the novella's reductive design (123). Without directly engaging Dickstein, Louis Owens offers a rejoinder to this kind of dismissive simplification. Owens reminds readers that to cast Candy's dog as miserable and suffering, as Dickstein does, is over-hasty: "There is no evidence that the old dog is unhappy or suffering terribly as he lies faithfully by Candy's bed. The truth is he's simply an annoyance [to Carlson]—he stinks—and he's too old to be useful" ("Deadly" 326). Given this reminder, permit me to briefly unpack Dickstein's claim that Steinbeck is primarily concerned with a melancholic theme: "every *man* must kill the *thing* he loves, the thing he cares for most" (122-23; emphasis added).

On the one hand, the terminology and essentialist tropes Dickstein relies on to support his interpretation of Steinbeck's "schematic" tragedy are worrisome, especially the structural binary he proposes insofar as "every man" (i.e. the American subject or normate) is fated to kill "the thing" (i.e. the object) that "he cares for most" (123). On the other hand, this critical diction

assists me in prying open and problematizing the novella's purportedly thematic and anthropocentric distinction between the categorical "man," capable of killing but also of caring, and the categorical "thing," passively cared for by "man" yet requiring destruction (122). While far from ideal representatives, George and Candy ostensibly are identified with the category of "man," a normative figure that might be more productively elaborated as exemplary of "the autological subject"—not an identity or power given by nature, but the "discourses, practices, and fantasies about self-making, self-sovereignty, and the value of individual freedom associated with the Enlightenment project of contractual constitutional democracy and capitalism" (Povinelli 4). In stark contrast, the idiot and dog figures are cast down a presupposed hierarchy of both ontology and power to the comparably lesser category of non-productive, irrational "thing." When Steinbeck's idiot and dog figures are juxtaposed in this way, George's "merciful" act of violence tends to be regarded as a form of responsible *self-sacrifice*, especially since Lennie is presumed to be demoted to the pre-moral, natural domain of nonhuman animal bodies, drives, and instincts. For Dickstein, the rational half of the protagonist duo, George, faces the moral quandary of this novella alone. He can choose *individual freedom*—acting on his intertwined desires to flee the ranch, to help his dependent companion survive, and to continue to work together toward achieving their shared dream of land ownership and self-sufficiency. Alternatively, he can choose *social constraint*—submitting to the necessity of work that binds him to the social world, one that demands Lennie be killed to punish him for a crime and to maintain civil peace. Tellingly, George chooses the latter.

Along similar worrisome lines, Mark Spilka's interpretation suggests the earlier deaths of the mice, puppy, and Curley's wife are sequenced in an "ascending hierarchy of power"—a symbolic ontological hierarchy in which George's execution of Lennie also plays a key role

(171). Spilka extrapolates on their names: "His name is Lennie *Small*, by which Steinbeck means subhuman, animal, childlike, without power to judge or master social fate. His friend's name, George Milton, puts him by literary allusion near the godhead, above subhuman creatures, able to judge whether they should live or die" (171; original emphasis). In this dubious and reductive reading, Lennie does not qualify as properly human, nor does he belong to a distinct species; nevertheless, he is tolerated on the ranch for his strength and labour power. For Spilka, he is identified with the category of the sub-human. George's species identity, by contrast, appears unimpeachably, even masterfully, human—a symbolic category that evidently requires the supplement of a sub-human companion. The abjection of Lennie is thus predicated, Spilka suggests, on an indeterminate identification of his mental disability with an abstract, generically singular "animal" (171). This frames him as killable with impunity.[53]

More recently, a number of Disability Studies scholars, including Karen Keely, Sally Chivers, and Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, have condemned Steinbeck's depiction of Lennie as a demeaning and dehumanizing representation of the lived experience of human mental disability. That said, each considers the larger socio-political implications of *Of Mice and Men* in ways that are remarkably commensurate with the thematic reading developed by Dickstein and the allegorical one proposed by Spilka. In sum, they assert that Steinbeck constructs an ontological hierarchy: this posits, on the one hand, Lennie as an inherently inferior and even monstrous being, which is emphasized by and through persistent, stigmatizing juxtapositions with George, on the other hand, who emerges as his superior and rational protector.

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[53] Derrida specifically admonishes the "*bêtise*" (or idiocy) of homogenizing, and thereby occluding, the "heterogeneous multiplicity of the living" (*The Animal* 31) under the sign of "this definite article ('the Animal' and not 'animals')" (34); this disavowal of difference re-inscribes a sacrificial economy that is both conceptual and corporeal, permitting those others deemed "animal"—human and nonhuman alike—to be killed without it counting as "murder" (48).

Karen Keely articulates why Lennie represents a two-pronged threat—both physical *and* sexual—to the idealized power, order, and vitality of the white, male *cogito*: an Enlightenment-derived notion of the human subject is endangered by Lennie's body and his instinctive compulsions, which Keely likewise suggests borders on an untamable, generically singular animality (207). She continues, insofar as Lennie's body appears to be "unconstrained by reason and traditional [social] mores," he reinforces an extra-literary "cultural anxiety" vis-à-vis real mentally disabled individuals, which is historically subtended by the eugenic discourse and anxiety that was at its peak pre-World War II (207). From this angle, Steinbeck's depiction of Lennie promotes an outdated and denigrating stereotype.

According to Chivers, Lennie's representation and his euthanasia are literary insults that profoundly "disappoint" Disability Studies scholars; in turn, this explains why the so-called "dehumanization" of this character is rarely analyzed at significant length. In her reading, which neatly aligns with Dickstein's dismissive assessment, Steinbeck's plot and its "simple moral lesson leaves little room for complex analysis" (Chivers). Purportedly, this ensures there is little to be redeemed by scholars working in a critical subfield that mainly seeks to redress stigmatization (Chivers). The novella's logic is regulative in the extreme for Chivers: insofar as Lennie refuses to be normalized, he must be executed. If the text could be reduced to this conform-or-die logic, it would no doubt be problematic. As I have already conceded, Steinbeck's narrative is inarguably symptomatic of the historical context in which it was wrought—an era when mental disability was pervasively feared as degraded biology in the U.S. and, without the implementation of historically legalized restraints like institutionalization and sterilization, was supposed to lead to "crime, indiscriminate sexual activity, and careless reproduction" (Keely 207). Nonetheless, Lennie's association with Candy's dog appears to be only—and

irredeemably—negative for Chivers, and her reading does not attend to the ambivalence or uncertainty evoked by Lennie's figuration as an idiot/dog.

Stephanie Jensen-Moulton does not stray far from the other two Disability Studies interpretations I have cited above. Yet she specifies that Steinbeck's depiction of Lennie evokes a threat *because* he appears to be a monstrous form of "animalistic" alterity: "[he] perpetuates the stereotype of the intellectually disabled as animalistic or subhuman" (140). This is why he "deserves to die" (145). Like Keely and Chivers, Jensen-Moulton seems to view Steinbeck's text exclusively through the lens provided by the mercy killing parallel. By opting for a plot-based approach over a tropological one, Lennie is once again reduced to a *prima facie* case of abjection because he is associated with a dog: "[he] is cruelly executed in exactly the same manner as Candy's old dog," and therefore he comes off "as a pernicious and unpredictable member of society, no better than an unruly pit-bull" (152). Setting aside Jensen-Moulton's evident disdain for pit-bulls (a breed that is tellingly not mentioned in the novella), it is significant that she observes Lennie's dog-like unruliness is what that extends fears of biological retrogression and "caus[es] a general apprehension about intellectually disabled people [as dangerous]" to flourish within the U.S. cultural imaginary (140).

Keely and Chivers both suggestively circle around Lennie's caninity, but Jensen-Moulton pointedly discusses it is as a sign of both disobedience and degraded character. Nonetheless, these disability-focused readings do not address the affective ambivalence or complex connotations attending Lennie's animalization. Moreover, each reading rhetorically appeals to an abstract human/animal binary that positions the generic trope of animality as inherently negative. Put another way, these interpretations seem to presuppose the luminous social value of human being, while evincing a metonymic slide between the terms "animality" and "embodiment"—a

slide that is also problematically evident in a number of influential biopolitical theories. Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life" is one paradigmatic example.

For Agamben, "animality functions predominantly as a metaphor for that passive, corporeal part of 'man' that becomes subject to biopolitical calculation" (Shukin *Animal* 10). Agamben understands "bare life" as a biopolitical body that can be sovereignly killed with impunity, a *merely* "animal" biology "included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion" (Shukin *Animal* 8, 11). The plot and character-oriented readings of Keely, Chivers, and Jensen-Moulton accord neatly with Agamben's biopolitical framework: *Of Mice and Men* simply dramatizes how the animal(ized) body of a mentally disabled character is rendered exceptional, cordoned off from the human collective, and killed with impunity. As this thumbnail critical sketch attests, Lennie's corporeal and metaphysical conditions have been assumed to be "simple" enough: he is an object of biopower, and he is not representative of human being or dignity.

But Steinbeck's novella is more biopolitically complex than a reading for "bare life" permits. Manifold symbolic, biological, and historical meanings and affects can be read to converge in Lennie at once. With regards to this convergence, Halliwell proposes that Lennie epitomizes an early-twentieth century American version of the "idiot figure" (142). Halliwell's claim is situated within his larger analysis of the shifting historical semantics of human idiocy, which demonstrates that "idiot" is a term oscillating between scientific precision and conventional ambiguity; it is never reducible to a stable sign of abjection (5). The ambiguity of cultural conventions or historical tropes and the precision of clinical science are not necessarily polar extremes and, moreover, a literary-aesthetic depiction of idiocy like Steinbeck's should not be interpreted as opposed to or divorced from scientific consensus. In Halliwell's words,

> This [ambiguity] does not mean that official definitions are always challenged [by literary texts]: at times, idiocy has been simply used as a clinical category for distinguishing a profound degree of neural and motor impairment. However, in fiction in particular, where words rather than visual images produce the impression of idiocy (even though this impression can be described in visual terms), the idiot figure is often *a symbolic repository for that which defies categorization*. (4-5; emphasis added)

Here, Halliwell suggests Steinbeck's representation of mental disability is an excessive amalgamation of U.S. cultural connotations and values *as well as* medical and scientific discourses. He asserts that Lennie's idiocy refuses to conform to a fixed or uniform meaning in the narrative (146). I agree this figure does not fit a single critical interpretative strategy because his excessive connotations and values unsettle such monological enterprises (146). Consequently, Lennie cannot be reduced to a metaphor for a vacuous null point on a pedagogical scale of development, nor does he fit a Social Darwinist rhetoric of ontological degeneracy. Nor is he a Wordsworth-inspired Romantic idiot, idealized for his imaginative and affective potential to commune with nature. As Halliwell point out, Lennie's figuration combines all of these resonances, and *more*: above all else, this figure emerges as contradictory and "confusing" (12). What Halliwell's term "confusing" hints at here is that Steinbeck's portrayal of Lennie is better approached as provoking acts of interpretation. Or, put another way, Lennie is an enigma for readers to attempt to decode—and to fail in the act of trying.

Halliwell thus begins the process of critically excavating the *hermeneutic logic* that I argue is submerged in the idiot/dog figure, which I carried forward in the previous section. However, I also recognize that this might be deemed controversial, especially in Disability Studies. For as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue in their now-classic *Narrative*

Prosthesis, a provocation to interpret disability, especially when it slides back and forth between literary and extra-literary registers, is a highly fraught exercise. Historically, disabled bodies have been made to bear the burden of such interpretative acts, being forced to serve "as the *hard kernel* or recalcitrant corporeal matter that cannot be deconstructed away by the textual operations of even the most canny narratives or philosophical idealisms" (49). A potential concern arises insofar as interpreting disability as a hermeneutic provocation, a meta-representational device, risks re-centring *material* forms of impairment as the prime determiner of disabled identity as opposed to the social construction or biopolitcal regulation thereof:

> The problem of the representation of disability is not the search for a more 'positive' story of disability, as it has often been formulated in disability studies, but rather *a thoroughgoing challenge to the undergirding authorization to interpret that disability invites*. There is a politics at stake in the fact that disability inaugurates an explanatory need that the unmarked body eludes by virtue of its physical anonymity. (*Narrative* 59-60)

An imagined rejoinder like this one gives me pause. Why proceed with a reconsideration of literary aesthetic projects like Steinbeck's if they come with this potential risk of making mentally disabled people bear the somatic burden of my close reading?

My reply is as follows: I realize that referring to Lennie as an enigmatic figure comes with the risk of inadvertently aligning with the historical discourses and prejudicial values that justified violence and produced "deleterious effects" for actual people living with mental disabilities (Carlson 7). Also, I do not dispute that disability has been made to serve as both a naturalizing symbol for identity *and* a physical object of biopower with a perceived demand for scrutiny. Nevertheless, while Lennie is obviously a character who inhabits a narrative, his

literary-aesthetic dimensions exceed that narrative containment. Once again, *he is not reducible to his function as a character alone*. As a literary-aesthetic nodal point, he serves as a nexus or device in which multiple, even contradictory, discourses and figures converge. The mainstream tendency in Disability Studies to date, as Bérubé puts forward, has been to focus literary analyses on the "representations of disabled characters, rather than on textual tropes, rhetorical devices, and narrative strategies for constructing (and deconstructing) disability" (*Secret* 41).[54] Lennie's complexity, however, requires that he not be reduced to a representation of disability, and then swiftly passed over.[55]

Given his excessive metaphorical and meta-representational resonances, a mimetic apprehension of a lived experience of mental disability by Steinbeck's literary words—a one-to-one transparency—will not suffice. Rather, as Halliwell suggests, Lennie is a "composite" figure (146)—and the excess he produces is integral to Steinbeck's complex literary-aesthetic effects. I applaud Halliwell's analysis for opening *Of Mice and Men* up to new directions for Disability Studies interpretations (and potentially less-programmatic readings about disabled identity), prompting critics to move beyond blaming Steinbeck for constructing a demeaning stereotype. That said, in keeping with the spirit of Halliwell's account, I also assert that to interpret Lennie *exclusively* as an "idiot" figure (even in the capacious manner that Halliwell conceives) develops a partial account. Having addressed some of the critical readings that Lennie has tended to

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[54] As I discuss in the Introduction to this dissertation, aligned with Mitchell and Snyder's "narrative prosthesis" is Quayson's claim that "aesthetic nervousness" is spurred into production by "the interaction of a disabled and nondisabled character, where a variety of tensions may be identified" (15).

[55] According to Halliwell, Steinbeck reported that Lennie "was based on 'a real person': 'He's in an insane asylum in California right now. I worked alongside him for many weeks. He didn't kill a girl. He killed a ranch foreman'" (146). Still, I maintain that learning scant biographical details about the historical person that inspired Lennie only supplements the mounting readerly confusion he evokes as a figure.

reproduce, I now turn to elaborate an alternative based on his ambivalence: although Lennie's love bond with George can be read to reinforce an ideology about his readers' own self-possessed human(e) subjectivity over and against other animal species, the critically overlooked effects of tropological confusion remain a potent counterpoint to this hegemony.

Learning to Feel Superior: Steinbeck's Invitation to Human(e) Subjectivity

In the final scene, directly before George kills his friend, Steinbeck's narrator provides readers with what appears to be unmediated access to Lennie's psyche and private experience. Given that the rest of the narrative is limited to relaying physical descriptions and recounting dialogue, this sudden glimpse into the inner recesses of Lennie reveals and reinforces both his intense loyalty to George, as well as his otherwise mute feelings of shame. Equally important, however, is how Lennie's body evokes the trope of caninity within the very same concluding scene. For example, when he comes to a stop alongside the shores of the Salinas River, returning to the same clearing where the narrative began, he immediately assumes the posture of a quadruped. He drinks from the river like a nervous dog:

> He knelt down and drank, barely touching his lips to the water. When a little bird skittered over the dry leaves behind him, his head jerked up and he strained toward the sound with eyes and ears until he saw the bird, and then he dropped his head and drank again. (173)

This posture recalls the narrator's introductory description of Lennie as "a terrier who doesn't want to bring a ball to its master" (20). If Lennie figuratively straddles the ontological division between animals and humans, his representation as dog-like—that is, an analogy—reinscribes a political, social subtext that is commensurate with the obedience lesson evoked by canine fidelity. He, however, appears to have failed to follow his "master."

The narrator then reports that Lennie is muttering to himself, worrying about George's potential punishment. Clearly distraught, his disturbed bodily affect manifests in the form of a vivid hallucination, one wherein he stands accused of his wrongdoing by his deceased Aunt Clara:

> *And then from out of Lennie's head there came a little fat old woman*. … She stood in front of Lennie and put her hands on her hips, and she frowned disapprovingly at him. And when she spoke, it was in Lennie's voice. "I tol' you an' tol' you," she said. "I tol' you, 'Min' George because he's such a nice fella and good to you.' But you don't never take no care. You do bad things."
>
> And Lennie answered her, "I tried, Aunt Clara, ma'am. I tried and tried. I couldn' help it." (174-75; emphasis added)

Although it is not clear whether this case of narrated perception, including the dialogue, is spoken aloud, Lennie evidently acknowledges his trespass with it: he scolds himself for lacking self-control, despite his best efforts to follow George. His initial hallucination, which serves as a virtual trial outside of any court of human law, is shortly succeeded by another fantastic vision of an animal accuser who is no less judgmental. A rabbit pops out of his head to predict that Lennie's beloved friend and caregiver will shortly abandon him: "*Aunt Clara was gone, from out of Lennie's head there came a gigantic rabbit*. It sat on its haunches, and it waggled its ears and crinkled its nose at him. And it spoke in Lennie's voice too. … 'He gonna leave ya all alone, ya crazy bastard.'" (177-78; emphasis added). As with Lennie's vision of Aunt Clara, it is impossible that an oversized rabbit actually springs from his head. What is crucial to note, then, is that because Steinbeck's novella is dominated by a third-person objective narrator, this sudden shift from direct discourse and mimetic description to hazy, free indirect discourse—indeed, this

shift to the inscape of Lennie's psyche—is startling for readers and produces ambiguous, surreal dissonance.[56] Even if the above passages are presented as reflections of Lennie's phenomenal experience, they still also constitute an interruption at the level of form: the narrator switches from impersonally describing events to ventriloquizing Lennie's psyche. Following the tropological confusion of idiocy and caninity, in other words, the narrative no longer proceeds in its usual "transparent" mode of description. As such, the tropological confusion of idiocy and caninity has ripple effects that alter the fabric of the narrative. Although the portrayal of Lennie's psychology appears to be unmediated, at least at first, it is crucial to note that the narrator's employment of free indirect discourse is a device for relaying, supplementing, and constructing Lennie's otherwise inaccessible feelings and mental activity for a readerly audience. Thus, the novella flaunts its own artifice in this scene to the extent that this perspectival shift highlights the differential relationship between Lennie and the narrator: that is, it shows how Lennie's most intimate thoughts—even his hallucinations—are expressed in language attributed to him and, paradoxically, to the narrator *at once*.

By cultivating pathos for Lennie in this manner, this final scene serves to increase his affective value and facilitates identification with him immediately before he is euthanized. In order to preserve the dramatic ethical and political ambivalence of the conclusion, *Of Mice and Men* presumably cannot afford to cast the idiot figure as entirely nonhuman and, thus, inaccessible; his species status must appear indeterminate. In other words, he comes into focus not simply as a figure of abjection, but *affection* as well. To be clear, I am not suggesting that by

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[56] I follow Donald Pease, who distinguishes between direct, indirect, and free indirect discourse as follows: "Direct discourse reports speech which is uttered by a speaker as the expression of his own thoughts. Indirect discourse entails a second person in the citation of the speech of a first person to a third person. But free indirect discourse takes place when a second person stages a first person's speech and thought as a third-person narration" ("Psychoanalyzing" 15).

the novella's end all readers tend to identify exclusively with Lennie as opposed to George. However, I am claiming that in spite of the threat that this figure enciphers, Steinbeck's novella cultivates pathetic identification with him. Steinbeck's tropological confusion of idiocy and caninity not only figures lack, degradation, and disgrace; it produces "loving" and compassionate feelings for others who are deemed socially vulnerable.

Alongside questions of rational mastery and anthropocentrism, *Of Mice and Men* triggers phenomenological questions about *pathos*. I employ this term because, according to Rei Terada, "'pathos' is the precise term for emotion *for another*" (23). For Terada, this vicarious feeling for others is a supplementary, "second-order" state that appears less immediate or slightly "off-present" compared to first-order emotions, which are erroneously assumed to belong to subjects themselves (13). Against the ideological effects of the "expressive hypothesis," which posits that subjects own or possess emotions that are then communicated to others, Terada argues that expressed emotions are inconstant—ebbing, flowing, coming and going, whereas pathos never completely disappears (14). Furthermore, Terada argues that "fictions inflame" this second-order state of sympathetic interpersonal feeling "not to the extent that other people's experience remind us of our own, but to the extent that our own seem like someone else's" (22); that is, they expose the auto-affective function of self-reflexivity itself as a partial and illusory experience, shot through with otherness and one's own self-difference. As Terada elaborates regarding this crucial overlap between affect and hermeneutics, the term "affect" has generally been defined as a physiological or somatic state, at least in Western philosophical discourses, whereas "emotion" is usually reserved for denoting a higher order psychological state that is reliant on self-reflexivity. However,

if one does accept that duality, then our own emotions emerge only through the *acts of*

> *interpretation and identification* by means of which we feel *for others*. … We are not ourselves without representations that mediate us, and it is through those representations that emotions get felt. Emotions are neither intentional nor expressive—not because they don't have objects, and not because we don't feel them on purpose, but because whether they are directed at objects or not, and whether we feel them on purpose or not, they take place on what must seem to be a mental stage peopled by virtual entities. (21; emphasis added)

This notion of emotion reveals the contingency of the subject of interpretation.

To link Terada's notion back to Steinbeck's novella and its effects, the affective subject invited by *Of Mice and Men* is—at the same time—a hermeneutic subject mediated by its aesthetic figures: the feelings that Steinbeck's figures arouse are often erroneously perceived to be belonging to—and as an expression of—its readers' subjectivity, rather than something contingent on the encounter between a reader and a literary text. Terada's argument can be applied to help clarify why a reader's purportedly natural and "positive" ability to feel and identify emotions *as emotions* is itself an ideological position: this "proof of the human subject" overshadows the subtle ways Lennie invites this readerly subjectivity into dialogue with the text in the first place.

By casting Lennie as akin to George's pet dog, Steinbeck's novella cultivates readerly *pathos*, and this promulgates notions that humane and loving social attachments are the proper way to learn "our humanity" (Boggs 116). Since dogs are a popular species of pet in U.S. culture and are widely perceived as such, the trope of caninity is commonly imagined to be a sign for the opposite of the human in the human/animal binary. Pet dog representations mark, and are frequently read to remark upon, the otherness of animality vis-à-vis human being—an alterity

that stands outside of human law. This (remarkable) otherness implies that the (unremarkable) human figure is masterfully sovereign, a character of subjectivity belonging to an order of disciplinary control and citizenship that demands canine obedience (Boggs 69). Insofar as canine obedience also appears to be freely and naturally given, caninity can potentially be construed to validate these meanings as ontologically grounded. Dogs, like Candy's beloved companion, can be approached as establishing a symbolic hierarchy of being and power at the same time. Meanwhile, dog figures, like those accruing to Lennie, can be read to validate the hegemony of the human subject over brute animal nature.

However, as Boggs observes, pets also affectively (re)produce inter-species intimacies and overlapping relationships based on sympathetic feeling (19). In this regard, domestic dogs function as a "middle ground" straddling the interval between the two poles of the human/animal opposition, which is responsible for determining the limits of legal order and political representation (19). Boggs articulates why "loving" human-pet dog relationships indicate that there is no absolute or essential division between "the human" and "the animal," but merely a shifting, porous border that gets re-drawn in various social, historical contexts:

> A problematic double articulation emerges of what we mean by 'animal': ('the') animal is the binary opposite of ('the') human. But animals, especially when figured as pets, also function as a middle ground between sets of binaries that oppose the subject and the object, the human and the nonhuman, the psychological and the physiological, and the real and the symbolic. In that sense, animal representations are mediators. … [They] mark the limit of the subject and reveal the mechanisms of its functioning. (19)

This provocative argument, in short, posits that the crucial ambivalence put forward by canine-oriented feeling also realizes the contingency of the human subject (and its ideological effects).

In light of Boggs's theoretical claims, *Of Mice and Men*'s tropological confusion of caninity and idiocy comes into view as a highly mutable resource for abjection, affection, or—confusingly—*both at once*. Also, this confusion indicates the complicated, frequently contradictory, meanings and affects accruing to mental disability in twentieth-century U.S. culture. Because Lennie's mental disability is repeatedly associated with and framed by dog tropes throughout the narrative he inhabits, and since caninity routinely encodes a loyal, sentimentalized, socially affectionate, or even "humanized" animality, the form his animalization takes emerges not only as a sign of social stigma, but of inclusion. As such, he is deeply paradoxical and indeterminate.

As Terada argues, in the Western philosophical tradition affects tend to be commonly associated with physiological bodies, but the superior power to experience and express personal emotion is reserved for individual human subjects (2). Boggs agrees, claiming what is at stake in reserving emotion exclusively for individual humans is nothing short of the ideological hegemony of the human subject itself: "the production of a particular notion of subjectivity marked by an individuality independent of others and clearly demarcated by the separation of reasoning from embodiment" (134). Against this notion, Boggs traces an alternative genealogy of U.S. liberal biopolitical subject formation, which charts how the nation's pedagogical models and institutions bear the influence of the British empiricist John Locke.

In sum, Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693) puts forward that individuals are not born in full possession of human subjectivity; rather, one *learns* to become human. Humanity, construed in this Lockean manner, is a status achieved by and through embodied practices of feeling *in relation to others* (Boggs 138). My literary analysis follows Boggs's argument, namely, that a Lockean education in humane attachments is pivotal to the

pedagogical production of the human(e) subject. However, it also proposes that this production is merely an affirmative ontological conceit: it "positively" supplements the more disciplinary techniques and meanings of biopower that are at the core of a biopolitical theory like Agamben's. Accordingly, the notion of a distinctively human(e) subjectivity gets reinforced through claims to sovereign reason, *as well as* affirmed through the "bonds of sympathy that underlie civic society" (Boggs 140).

As Sara Ahmed's work on the political roles played by emotions and affects attests, bonds of sympathetic "fellow-feeling" are complex and often contradictory. Such feelings are often ascertained and discussed as having positive "sticky" connotations—as the integral feeling that makes collectives cohere—especially in discourses of the family and the nation. At other times, however, such feelings are celebrated as forms of "benevolence" *for others*, as in discourses of multiculturalism or charity, which claim to extend loving and respectful feelings to maligned "out" groups (or at least beyond the limits of one's own social group) (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 125). Under Ahmed's influence, I propose that such loving feelings can be read to enter *Of Mice and Men* in a way that risks "reproduc[ing] the collective [of the U.S. nation] as ideal through *producing a particular kind of subject* whose allegiance to the ideal makes it an ideal in the first place" (123; emphasis added). It risks validating the normative subject—or, in other words, the white, male *cogito* that's enciphered in the title "man's best friend." Steinbeck's figuration of Lennie invites a *readerly subject position* that requires the tropological confusion of idiocy and caninity for two key reasons: on the one hand, this figural conflation indicates the stigmatizing abjection of Lennie's otherness and difference; on the other hand, it suggests an otherness that is worthy of an American subject's sympathetic emotion. As such, *Of Mice and Men* serves as a potent literary means of cultivating vicarious feeling.

Furthermore, this production can be approached as a "technique of perpetuation"—that outlines, affirms, and sustains an affective and hermeneutic subjectivity for its individual human(e) readers (Terada 5).

Steinbeck's fiction therefore serves to affirm that its readers are capable of humane feelings *for others* and, in addition, of recognizing the very same feelings *as* their own emotions. To illustrate this point, I return once more to Chivers's reading of the novella to review some textual proof she cites to show that Lennie is merely a figure of social stigma. Chivers reviews a scene in which Crooks—the novella's "crippled" African-American figure—teases Lennie. Presuming that Lennie does not fully understand him, Crooks explains that without George to take care of him, he would be institutionalized by the state of California:

> Crooks bored in on him. "Want me ta tell ya what'll happen? They'll take ya to the booby hatch. They'll tie ya up with a collar, like a dog."
>
> Suddenly Lennie's eyes centered and grew quiet, and mad. He stood up and walked dangerously toward Crooks. "Who hurt George?" he demanded.
>
> Crooks saw the danger as it approached him. He edged back on his bunk to get out of the way. "I was just supposin'," he said. "George ain't hurt. . . ." (126)

On one level, at least in the context of this exchange, Crooks's simile implies Lennie's precarious position before the law, suggesting he does not qualify for the full rights, freedoms, and protections guaranteed by U.S. citizenship. For his part, Crooks appears to be an authority on disenfranchisement: this is not only marked by obvious visual signs of his race and physical disability, but emblematized by one of his few "personal possessions"—"[a] mauled copy of the California civil code for 1905" (117)—a text responsible for enacting eugenic fears of miscegenation into law (Moran 31-32). Also, prior to teasing Lennie, Crooks confesses that he is

terribly lonesome: “there ain’t a colored man on this ranch an’ there’s jus’ one family in Soledad” (Steinbeck 123). As a result, he appears to be someone denied intimacy and sympathetic relationships, and he has arguably internalized his marginalization. For Chivers, this exchange between Crooks and Lennie problematically conflates “a number of [distinct] forms of marginalization” in order for Steinbeck to launch a sentimental lament about oppression in general.

On the contrary, whereas Chivers seems to take for granted that Crooks’s simile confirms Lennie’s disgrace as a similar figure of dispossession, I recall that dogs also serve as ciphers for idiocy in Steinbeck’s novella because they are signs of fidelity and obedience; this marks Lennie as a loving follower of George. Although the dog simile is suggestive that animalization justifies abuse, in this scene Lennie also appears to be a sympathetic, even likable, character because he remains unconditionally faithful to George. Indeed, it is precisely when he is framed as doglike by Crooks that he appears prepared to serve and protect the person he loves most against all possibility of threat: he experiences a defensive rage when Crooks’s suggests George might be hurt, and this overwhelms whatever has been said about him. Thus, the duo’s love bond overlaps with Lennie’s tacit caninity in this particular scene, inciting readers’ vicarious identification with him.

For Lennie, being treated as doglike is deeply ambiguous: it translates as a vicarious experience of being human, as something humans can and do sympathetically and anthropomorphically possess; at the same time, however, being dog-like is being less than human and prone to being “humanely” killed (Fudge 108).[57] Steinbeck’s mixing of idiocy and caninity cultivates conflicting feelings, which predisposes readers to experience loving sympathy

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[57] See Fudge for the prominence of euthanasia within the U.S. pet industry: “for every four healthy companion animals one is destined . . . [to be] humanely killed” (109).

and pity, not just fear, regarding actual dogs and actual people who live with a mental disability. Still, these confused emotional responses—or "gut feelings"—are too often accepted as a measure of truth, rather than being recognized as the ontological conceits they are.

In addition to Boggs's argument about how canine representation exposes the contingency of human subjectivity, Mel Chen points out that despite the widespread assumption that being treated *like* a dog is synonymous with dehumanization, such an assumption is itself a liberal fantasy that disavows historical inequality: "the statement that someone 'treated me like a dog' is one of liberal humanism's fictions"—fictive to the extent that "some dogs are treated quite well, and many humans suffer in conditions of profound indignity" (89). Moreover, "dehumanizing" fictions that depict "humans as abjected matter or less than human … cannily assert human status as a requisite condition for securing nonhuman comparators, thereby rendering the idea of 'dehumanization' paradoxical" (13-14). Inasmuch as a critical term like "dehumanization" is founded on the paradox Chen describes, this has consequences for readings of *Of Mice and Men*. First, the presupposition that "the human" connotes an ideal, luminous value in Steinbeck's novella disregards and conceals its own historical subtexts, which are rampant with unequal power relations. Second, the generic concept of "the animal" is a key mechanism for that concealment. Chen's observation helps me clarify that the specifics of Lennie's depiction are paramount in order to contest and impede the problematic aspects of terms like "animalization" and "dehumanization" themselves.

Of Mice and Men's intimate companionships (both inter- and intra-species) and its mercy killings ultimately come into focus in my analysis as sentimental scaffolding for a lesson in the compassionate treatment of human *and* nonhuman others—a humanitarian sentimentalism that is arguably also a regulatory resource for U.S. biopower. Moreover, readers' actual relations to

literal and figurative nonhuman animals are key to inculcating these bonds. Following Locke, Boggs argues, "humanity is the product of an educational process that relies on the relationship to animals to elicit and direct emotions" (141). This sympathetic education cultivates "appropriate" cross-species intimacies, especially with pets, through sentimental aesthetic depictions of human and nonhuman others, such as those encountered in Steinbeck's novella (141). This is nothing short of "humanization" training, and since that pedagogical aim implies that readers' emotional responses provide "proof" of the liberal human subject's identity, Steinbeck's classic reinforces the "*ideology of emotion*" (Terada 3). The hegemony of the human(e) subject, then, is secured when emotions are construed as performing the normalizing function of centering readers extra-textually as naturally free subjects (3). For example, if I weep while reading about Candy's dog's death and Lennie's death, this emotional response permits me to reflect that I am a properly human(e) subject who is capable of vicariously sympathizing with fictional characters. Readerly emotion thus gets interpreted as auto-affective evidence for a subject's self-possessed power to interpret and respond to the world. As Terada puts it, "the beholder—the Cartesian would-be subject—feels [emotions] when it represents itself to itself, when it reads its self-representation" (21).

However, when the emotions aroused by *Of Mice and Me*n are understood as the proof that hermeneutically fills in and connects the subjective and objective realms with meaning, the underlying logic starts to emerge as positively circular: to wit, the fully human subject is assumed to be not only rationally superior to a figure like Lennie, it is now also "naturally" equipped with the power to *feel* the truth of itself, to prove its superiority through sympathetic feeling (Terada 3,14). As both Boggs and Terada help bring into focus, it is not only idiot/dog figures that are fashioned to various effects by Steinbeck's aesthetics, but *the affective*

production of a human(e) reader. As I have elaborated, this reader's superiority rests not only on the possession of reason, but also on the "natural" proof of human(e) feeling. This pedagogical aim potentially suggests why this particular novella has remained a staple in U.S. high school curriculums: it reinforces a fantasy of biopolitical subject formation through the consensus-building ideology of emotion. Steinbeck's idiot and canine tropes are therefore crucial to an understanding of how this text inculcates readerly feeling and orients extra-literary relationships. Both figures seem to stabilize the human subject by figuring its binary opposite. What singles dogs out from other species is just how mutable a resource "man's best friend" has proven to be for validating and reinforcing the notion that to be human is to be humane. Against this naturalization, tropological confusion serves as a possible counterpoint: it exposes subjectivity not as an essence, but as one discursive trope in relation to manifold intersecting tropes—one that fundamentally "relies on *affective relationships* that cross the species line" and that "strategically get worked out by biopower" (Boggs 6).

Why Lennie Still *Matters*

Far from simple, Steinbeck's aesthetics are complex, contradictory, and indeterminate. As this chapter's analysis shows, unstable biological markers of identity accrue to Lennie Small, including—but not limited to—disability, race, age, sex, gender, and species, and these routinely overlap and converge. The framing of his mental disability as canine can be approached as merely denigrating and serving hazardous cultural scripts of miscegenation and eugenics—ones that rationalized historical cases of segregation and euthanization. At the same time, however, his dogged love bond with George can also be read to serve the extra-textual production and biopolitical regularization of a "superior" humane subjectivity that hinges on humans' feeling ability. Still, more complexly, Steinbeck's tropological confusion of idiocy and caninity offers

readers an alternative hermeneutic, one that is decidedly text-based even as it is aporetic and uncertain. A critically overlooked paradox in the novella, tropological confusion destabilizes anthropocentric notions that the human subject is ontologically discrete and self-sufficient. Also, it provides readers with an extra-textual opportunity to more modestly reconsider the corporeal contingencies underlying everyday bonds of greater-than-human intimacy. My close reading of this idiot/dog confusion in relation to Steinbeck's text, as well as vis-à-vis Disability Studies and Animal Studies, never assumes that humanness is a biological identity or essential norm, but a fantasy that must be anxiously reproduced by means of a number of intersecting tropes at once. I conclude this chapter by refusing to prioritize bodies over tropes or vice versa; instead, I resolutely confirm their constitutive inter-implication.

Additionally, I recognize that prior interpretations of *Of Mice and Men* cannot be disarticulated from the workings of U.S. biopower. Regardless of whether idiot/dog figures crop up in canonical fiction, popular cartoons, or—as I will show momentarily—Texas law, they come freighted with discursive and corporeal histories that might not be apparent or "simply available" on the surface (Ahmed "Orientations" 243). Nevertheless, such historical traces affectively position physical bodies in relation to other bodies in non-arbitrary ways. As an idiot/dog figure, for example, Lennie enciphers an ambivalence that is undergirded by the rise of the inextricable practices and values of the eugenics movement and the dog breeding industry. Alongside Faulkner's Benjy Compson, he thus exemplifies a more sweeping confusion of mental disability and caninity across U.S. culture during the early twentieth century—a confusion that is neither arbitrarily conceived nor purely discursive, but historical *and* material. As such, he does not escape embodied relationships of power.

At the outset of this chapter I suggested that Lennie's life-and-death stakes are nowhere

more glaring than in the legal context of *Moore v. Texas*. At last, I will substantiate that claim. In October 2016, Bobby James Moore, an African-American male convicted of capital murder in 1980, petitioned the U.S. high court to intervene in a prior ruling handed down by Texas's Court of Criminal Appeals (CCA). Despite ample clinical evidence, the state court rejected Moore's claim to be mentally disabled and barred him from constitutional protection under *Atkins v. Virginia*, which specifically forbids capital punishment for mentally disabled defendants as a violation of the Eighth Amendment. The CCA, however, maintained that Moore did not satisfy the state's own legal definition of mental disability—a definition it established in 2004 with *Ex parte Briseño*. More popularly known as the "Briseño factors," this was a precedential ruling that became de facto law.

On February 11, 2004, Judge Cathy Cochran provided evidentiary guidelines for the CCA so as to determine who qualifies as mentally disabled in light of the fact that the Supreme Court's ruling in Atkins left it to each state to devise a definition. *Ex parte Briseño* directly invoked—absurdly enough—*Of Mice and Men*. Accordingly, if the CCA ruled that a defendant was *less* disabled than Lennie (whose fictional disability is described, but never determined), the capital sentence would stand (Long 868). Cochran's ruling "disregarded the standardized results of an adaptive behavior assessment" of an inmate named Jose Garcia Briseño, who was seeking an exemption from the death penalty under the introduction of *Atkins* (869). That assessment, which was considered alongside Briseño's clinical IQ score, was developed over years of specialized psychological research; nevertheless, Cochran found its results "exceedingly subjective" (869). In a bizarre twist, she installed Lennie—a fictional figure—as the state-sanctioned benchmark for determining the legitimacy of a defendant's claim to constitutional protection (869). The rationale for using Steinbeck's canonical figure in this juridical context

was linked to his popularity: the judge explained that Lennie represented someone so well-loved and well-known that "[m]ost Texas citizens might agree that [he] should, by virtue of his lack of reasoning ability and adaptive skills, be exempt" from a sovereignly imposed death (869). That is, she assumed that the majority of Texans would agree with her reading of the novella. In this sense, the legal benchmark for defining mental disability in Texas was underwritten by Cochran's *sympathetic interpretation*—an interpretation that maintained that the Steinbeck's resolution is tragic because Lennie does not deserve to be killed because he is "too" disabled. Ironically, however, even if Cochran's direct invocation of the fictional Lennie in her legal ruling was a well-meaning attempt to lay claim to the juridical state's own superior human(e) subjectivity, it consequently established the grounds for enacting sovereign violence on bodies that had been historically framed as deviant and criminal. *Ex parte Briseño* constituted a hermeneutic act, and it enshrined a sympathetic approach to *Of Mice and Men* as a deciding legal factor in whether Texas pursued capital punishment of defendants (869).

The "Briseño factors" themselves were meant to be used on a case-by-case basis (869). Comprised of seven questions, they included: "Has the person formulated plans and carried them through or is his conduct impulsive?"; "Can the person hide facts or lie effectively in his own or others' interests?"; "Is his conduct in response to external stimuli rational and appropriate, regardless of whether it is socially acceptable?"; and "Does his conduct show leadership or does it show that he is led around by others?" (868).[58] Lennie is not mentioned by name in the guidelines. However, as his direct invocation in the ruling suggests, he is enciphered therein as the implied negative case.

Bérubé was the first to bring my attention to the potential dangers and even lethal effects

[58] See Long for all seven "Briseño Factors" (868).

of Steinbeck's portrayal of Lennie, referring me to the "Briseño factors" and the 2012 execution of Marvin Wilson, a mentally disabled African-American male (*Secret* 192). Three years later, on January 30, 2015, Robert Ladd, another African-American male, was also executed despite likewise meeting clinical definitions of mental disability. He was administered a lethal dose of pentobarbital in the same Huntsville County facility where Wilson was killed (Pilkington). To be clear, it would be a mistake to suggest that Steinbeck or Lennie is to blame for these deleterious material effects. Readers' interpretations are what *matter* most here. The legacy of Cochran's "Briseño factors" serves as a case in point.

Even more recently, Moore's petition to the Supreme Court highlighted why the CCA's continued use of Lennie as a legal yardstick was absurd. A popular, even beloved, fictional representation is an excessively flexible and arbitrary standard when compared to current medical diagnostic frameworks for determining mental disability (though these are also far from perfect). On March 28, 2017, the Supreme Court agreed, ruling in Moore's favour and stating that the "Briseño factors" are an "unacceptable method" for enforcing *Atkins* (Liptak). And yet, there are other factors that were arguably implicated in Moore's case too. His racial identity was not a superfluous detail either, evincing the Texas court's history of rampant racial bias in deciding how to apply *Atkins*.[59]

Though less salient, the complicated meanings accruing to Lennie's animalization were implicated in the state's pursuit of Moore's execution. I argue that *Moore v. Texas* helps to underscore Lennie's fundamental ambivalence and mutability: that is, it's *because of* idiot/dog tropological confusion, not in spite of it, that this fictional figure served as Texas's juridical exception to capital punishment for thirteen years. What remains especially troubling, at least

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[59] See Perlin for how "ethnic adjustments" are used in Texas to make some defendants "who would otherwise have been protected under Atkins . . . eligible for the death penalty" (1439).

from my vantage as a literary critic, is that feelings of loving sympathy aroused *for* Lennie are what subtended the state's legal definition for mental disability—a definition suffused with fiction, but nonetheless used to deny certain inmates their rightful protection. This history of denial suggests that the affective potency of the idiot/dog figure can be instrumentalized to secure unequal relationships of power.

As I have outlined, Disability Studies scholars have most often approached Lennie in relation to his euthanasia, claiming his animalization justifies his execution. They have also roundly condemned the resolution of Steinbeck's plot for typifying a "'cure or kill' approach to disability"—and not without good reason (Jensen-Moulton 150). Some have also tried to restore desirability to Lennie with assertions about his "human stature" (152). Though well intentioned, this re-humanizing approach risks reinscribing the cultural script that human life is ontologically superior to animal life.

Granted, at the level of Steinbeck's plot, being treated like Candy's dog is hazardous: the convergence of disability and animality seems to reduce a vulnerable human to the status of "bare life" conceptualized by Agamben—a biological existence outside of the law (2).[60] Yet insofar as this distinction suggests that being treated substantively as an animal is synonymous with being marked conceptually as inferior and killable, this risks reducing animality—and human animality in particular—to a political metaphor for the securitization of an ontological "truth" about human identity. Derrida has criticized Agamben's theory for this ahistorical (and even atemporal) reduction, arguing that the human/animal distinction "has never been secure" (*Beast* 316). In a more nuanced reading of Steinbeck's novella, however, the pet dog tropes

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[60] In Agamben's biopolitical theory, whereas *zoē* is the mark of an animalized exclusion, *bios* serves as the mark of inclusion within the collective of a rights-bearing, juridico-political humanity.

accruing to Lennie pathetically evoke his dog-like fidelity to George and rouse readerly concern for him; this domesticates *and* excuses his physical, sexual, and reproductive "threatening" aspects, preserving his moral worth and rendering his death unfortunate. He is a figure of abjection, affection, and—paradoxically—both at once.

For my part, I have tried to develop why approaching Lennie's indeterminate species status through the lens of tropological confusion makes visible a representational ambiguity that can be seized upon to confound the human-animal binary—the very division used to justify the violence and prerogatives of liberal U.S. subjectivity. On the one hand, Lennie's comparison to dogs seems insulting; on the other, to be confused with a species that connotes affection and fidelity is a far cry from the subordination and stigma entailed in being compared to, say, a chicken in a battery cage "destined to be Chicken McNuggets and Eggs McMuffin" (Haraway *When* 267).[61] As figures of "loving" fidelity, dogs are affectionately deemed unique animals, and they are largely perceived to be pets or companions—not foodstuff—in American culture. Moreover, the ambivalent and complicated meanings and affects attached to Lennie's figuration suggest that tropological confusion subtends the CCA's own ambiguous definition of mental disability: idiot/dog confusion is a stigmatizing exclusion of disability that costs Lennie his subjectivity and life, but it also fosters pathos, which absolves him from accountability within a system of human law. Tracing these overlooked dimensions reveals how Lennie more trickily serves as a potential "resource" of liberal knowledge/power orders (Shukin "Security Bonds" 181).[62]

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[61] For the material-semiotic role chickens play vis-à-vis *Homo sapiens*, refer to Haraway's *When Species Meet* (265-274).
[62] See Shukin's "Security Bonds" for an elaboration of why "it is crucial to resist the suggestion that because feeling is not the property of a subject it escapes or exceeds power; even the bonds of ontological debt that accompany affective relationships and that betray the idea of a self-

As Chen explains, such knowledge/power orders might not be ontologically stable, but they historically constitute limiting frames for fleshy bodies; moreover, they remain affectively powerful scaffolding for biopolitics in practice (12). The maintenance (and policing) of a "natural" hierarchy that posits the human subject at its apex requires the cultural re-production of status quo presuppositions regarding social agency, power, and feeling. Thus, as Chen suggests, "[i]f affect includes affectivity—how one body affects another—then affect … becomes a study of the *governmentality* of animate hierarchies, an examination of how acts seem to operate with, or against, the order of things (to appropriate Foucault's phrasing…)" (12; emphasis added). To recast Chen's reference to Foucault in terms of my literary analysis of Steinbeck, the ambivalence that Lennie cultivates as an idiot/dog fosters *an affirmative biopolitics of feeling*.

In terms of *Of Mice and Men*'s extra-literary stakes and its readerly effects, the vicarious feelings roused by Steinbeck's novella are not neutral. As *Moore v. Texas* attests, Steinbeck's aesthetics have been interpreted in ways that have conceptually coerced—and indelibly shaped—historical bodies. I end this chapter, then, by invoking the historical cases of Wilson, Ladd, and Moore not to morbidly sensationalize or conflate them, but to stress that Steinbeck's aesthetics have had indisputable effects in the terrain of U.S. biopower. In view of the life-and-death stakes of the "Briseño factors," it is practically inarguable to claim otherwise: these legal guidelines proved far too mutable in practice, permitting Texas to pursue and enact the executions of "several intellectually disabled individuals" who would otherwise be guaranteed legal protection outside of the state (Long 865). Because the vast majority of those killed were marked as racial others, this suggests—once again—that anthropocentrism is not the sole condition of possibility for stigma, bigotry, and disqualification. Indeed, to the extent that the deaths imposed under *Ex*

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constituting subject represent a value that is potentially redeemable for the work of security" (181).

parte Briseño were predominantly marked as African-American and male, this evinces the over-determined and entwined biological meanings that attend tropes of race, gender, sex, disability, as well as species. I emphasize the racialized identities of Wilson, Ladd, and Moore to draw attention to how Lennie's tropological excess—his complexity—as an idiot/dog figure can be—and has been—radically reduced and instrumentalized. Rather than uncovering complex layers of meaning in Steinbeck's text, the likes of which I have steadfastly pursued here, the CCA used this figure as a stereotype to justify the state's lethal imposition on particular citizens—on mortal bodies that had already been made to bear the burden of supporting the fantasy of an unremarkably "normal" human subject in U.S. civic and economic life (i.e. white, adult, middle class, able-bodied, rational, and male). It is difficult to imagine a more flagrant example of a work of fiction being deployed by a state power, and in such a reductive way no less, to frame some bodies as criminal and biologically inferior.

In the wake of *Moore v. Texas*, I draw tentative hope from the Supreme Court's ruling. The CCA must now revise Texas law to ensure that its determination of mental disability comports at least with current medical professional standards, not a judge's reductive interpretation of *Of Mice and Men*. Nevertheless, for thirteen years Lennie was used to kill in the name of biopolitically protecting a population. Clearly, this is an odious historical legacy. Regarding Steinbeck's classic, more specifically, I insist that it can—and *should*—be interpreted otherwise. To this end, I humbly submit that Lennie can teach us new tricks.

– Chapter 3 –
"What Is It?": James Robert Bell, Hybrid Freaks, and the Perils of Curiosity in *Blood Meridian*

> "What Is It?," a name that expressed the freak's ambiguous humanity and challenged spectators to resolve the disparity between this body and their expectations. Barnum's advertising power challenged onlookers to make the distinction . . . . Billed as "missing links," the "What Is It?" figures complemented . . . a growing interest in Darwinian distinctions. . . . For instance, Barnum introduced William Henry Johnson, a black microcephalic man, as a "What Is It?," depicting him as "a most singular animal" who was neither human nor beast, but "a mixture of both—the connecting link between humanity and brute creation." Human exhibits like these, whose freakdom was founded on ambiguity, provided audiences with a rich icon of directed meaning.
>
> – Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (*Extraordinary* 69-70)

> The judge was seated upon the closet. He was naked and he rose up smiling and gathered [the kid] in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch home behind him. . . . In the mudded dogyard behind the premises two men went down the boards towards the jakes. A third man was standing there urinating into the mud.
>
> Is someone in there? The first man said.
>
> The man who was relieving himself did not look up. I wouldn't go in there if I was you, he said
>
> Is there somebody in there?
>
> I wouldnt go in.
>
> He hitched himself up and buttoned his trousers and stepped past them and went up the walk toward the lights. The first man watched him go and then opened the door to the jakes.
>
> Good God almighty, he said.
>
> *What is it?*
>
> He didnt answer. He stepped past the other and went back up the walk. The other man stood looking after him. Then he opened the door and looked in.
>
> – Cormac McCarthy (333-34; emphasis added)

Ambiguous Identity and Hermeneutic Undecidability

This chapter advances my argument about the significance and value of the idiot/dog figure in twentieth-century U.S. fiction with a close reading of Cormac McCarthy's violent, ocular-centric, and notoriously puzzling historical novel, *Blood Meridian, Or The Evening Redness in the West* (1985). Set in the Southwest borderlands in the wake of the Treaty of

Guadalupe-Hidalgo and the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), *Blood Meridian* follows "the kid," a nameless drifter who ends up being conscripted into the commercial exploits and the spree of violence perpetrated by the historical Glanton Gang. This group of American-led mercenaries is initially contracted by the Chihuahuan governor Angel Trias to kill and scalp the Apaches who have been wreaking havoc on the war-torn Mexican state. It is not long, however, before the scalp hunters are enjoined by Captain John Joel Glanton and, increasingly, by their de facto leader, the terrifying polymath Judge Holden, to seize any human life that crosses their path and convert it into profit—or, as Glanton puts it, into "receipts" (McCarthy 167).[63] They begin to kill both indiscriminately and industriously, scalping the very Mexicans they are contracted to protect. McCarthy's detailed depiction of this mix of bloodshed and business tends to attract the most critical attention because it brings this little-known segment of U.S.-Mexican history—a chapter of "forgotten atrocities"—into view (Eaton 158).

Though no doubt meticulously researched by McCarthy, the novel's plot is largely drawn from one historical source in particular: *My Confession* by Samuel Chamberlain. This unfinished memoir, an account of the circumstances that culminate in Chamberlain's joining the scalp-hunting gang, ends abruptly with a Colorado Desert chase scene featuring the judge; this follows the decimation of Glanton and many other scalp hunters during the Yuma massacre of 1850. This abrupt conclusion also provides the basis for McCarthy's own fictional version of a desert chase—the very scene wherein Judge Holden ostensibly domesticates James Robert Bell and

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[63] As John Sepich points out, the Glanton Gang's scalp-hunting, while no doubt atrocious, essentially constituted an entrepreneurial business venture, which sought to accumulate greater amounts of capital for each member for less labour: "A group of fifty Indian hunters paid two hundred dollars a scalp would have to bring only four scalps a month into Chihuahua City in order to exceed the [U.S.] army's rate of pay, and for work not much more hazardous than the army's" (7-8).

exhibits him as an idiot/dog to the kid and the ex-priest Tobin (I cited and discussed this scene briefly in the Introduction to this dissertation). From this point onwards, *Blood Meridian* undergoes a remarkable shift: it becomes less concerned with its historical analogues in favour of pursuing an imaginative fiction of "McCarthy's dramatic design" (Sepich 5). The plot moves swiftly towards its confounding conclusion: the kid's presumably fatal, yet undisclosed, encounter with Judge Holden in the jakes at the Griffin brothel. In the end, James Robert seems to be the only one who "survives his relationship with the judge"—a survival that is arguably made possible by his position outside of language and, thus, his mindless "immunity" to the order that the judge stands for (Cant 172).

On the one hand, *Blood Meridian* clearly constitutes a critique of U.S. imperial expansion into Mexico during the mid-nineteenth century (Sinykin 363)[64], as well as of national myths of Manifest Destiny and economic "progress" (Cant 157). On the other hand, it also explores the more abstract, even metaphysical possibilities of violence as an "atavistic" condition of nature (B. Owens 4) or even a divine Gnostic order (Mundik 15). Admittedly, at least at first glance, this novel seems to have little to do with idiot or dog tropes. So, how does my concept of idiot/dog tropological confusion contribute to the critical discourse surrounding *Blood Meridian*, and vice-versa?

I argue that James Robert emerges as the abject figure against which McCarthy's readers risk biopolitically reproducing their own sense of liberal subjectivity, specifically their sense of being freely self-determined and "able" interpreters who can solve the novel's riddles, *as well as*

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[64] See Dan Sinykin's essay for how this novel troubles official histories of U.S. imperialist expansion: "Most accounts of US empire date the origin of its economic imperialism to the early twentieth century, after the wars of 1898; *Blood Meridian* suggests 1849, more than 40 years before Frederick Jackson Turner declared the closing of the frontier and the turn to Asian markets" (Sinykin 363)

the occasion for an immanent resistance to the history and ideology subtending such conceptions of subjectivity. Recall my dissertation's contention that idiot/dog tropological confusion, paradoxically, results in a figure that is both *figurative* (i.e. in Haraway's material-semiotic sense of the term) and *catachrestic* to the extent that its appearance represents an uncertain meaning or "a real gap in vocabulary" that produces metalepsis (Ricoeur 51). As with Faulkner's Benjy Compson and Steinbeck's Lennie Small before him, the tropological confusion embodied by James Robert foregrounds this significant indeterminacy, this problem of orderly categorization: he is a forced, compounded figure—one without a proper term—that resists interpretive closure. Not only does the resulting aesthetic excess suggest an underlying precarity to mimetic correspondence in McCarthy's aesthetics; at the same time, it undermines readers' hermeneutic mastery as an inherent or natural capacity belonging to a normative subject that is qualified as human. As an embodiment of ambiguous identity and, in turn, hermeneutic undecidability, James Robert constitutes a key emblem—even a synecdoche—for the ultimate inscrutability of *Blood Meridian* itself.

But even more specifically, my chapter elaborates a crucial link—a line of cultural inheritance of sorts—that draws together the hyperbolic qualities of *Blood Meridian*'s late twentieth-century literary-aesthetics and the visual rhetoric of late nineteenth-century American freak shows. Infamously, the spectacle of freak shows hinged on the exploitative, stigmatizing exhibitions of so-called human "curiosities."[65] The purposes behind such exhibits were manifold:

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[65] See Bill Brown for how the conventions underlying the display of "curiosities" grew out of nineteenth-century museal exhibitions: "The Smithsonian, once called the National Cabinet of Curiosities, was originally responsible only for exhibiting the interesting objects accumulated by government-sponsored exploring expeditions. Renamed the U.S. National Museum in 1876, it became responsible for representing natural and technological history. The transformation of American museums meant … [c]uriosities were abandoned in the effort to produce genuine object lessons" (87).

"In the turbulent era of social and material change [brought on by rapid modernization in the U.S.], the spectacle of the extraordinary body stimulated curiosity, ignited speculation, provoked titillation, furnished novelty, filled coffers, confirmed commonality, and certified national identity" (Garland-Thomson *Freakery* 4). By linking the indeterminacy of James Robert to the "What Is It?", a hybrid freak advertised by P.T. Barnum as a missing link between humanity and animality, I bring into clearer focus the ways that *Blood Meridian* self-consciously flags its own inhabitation of a history of American liberal subjectivity and entrepreneurial capitalism.[66] Not only does this history underwrite the conventions of freak show performances and advertisements[67]; at the same time, it perpetuates the ideological notion that white, male, able-bodied, human individuality comprises its ideal subject (Adams 36).[68]

Yet McCarthy transmutes James Robert and the idiot/dog tropological confusion he embodies into a dramatic acknowledgement that modern literary aesthetics cannot be abstracted or wholly detached from the more material, social, political, and economic histories that irradiate and mediate them. Far from simply glorifying or establishing complicity with the rhetoric of

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[66] See Raymond Williams's elaboration of how capitalism's emergence as a full-fledged "system" was ballasted by the liberty of the entrepreneurial subject or, in other words, the individual business owner's ability to accumulate profit without state intervention: "a particular form of centralized ownership of the means of production, carrying with it the system of wage-labour" (51).

[67] According to Rachel Adams, "Freak shows are guided by the assumption that *freak* is an essence, the basis for a comforting fiction that there is a permanent, qualitative difference between deviance and normality, projected spatially in the distance between the spectator and the body onstage. To characterize *freak* as a performance restores agency to the actors in the sideshow, who participate, albeit not always voluntarily, in a dramatic fantasy that the division between freak and normal is obvious, visible, and quantifiable" (6).

[68] As Adams explains, insofar as Barnum's "What Is It?" figures emerge after the popularization of Darwinian evolutionary theory, they are clearly suffused not only with denigrating racist stereotypes, but biological markers for identity that align the anomalous body with an atavistic animality: "publicity materials for the What Is It? describe the creature as a fusion of African and orangutan: Is it a lower order of MAN? Or is it a higher order of MONKEY? None can tell! Perhaps it is a combination of both" (36-37).

nineteenth-century freak shows and the inequalities of power upon which they hinge, then, McCarthy's acknowledgement opens up from within, as it were, a critical gap between the novel itself and the competing—yet twinned—hermeneutic lures of Judge Holden and the narrator. Here, readerly confusion is not so much a failure or weakness; rather, it is the basis for an immanent resistance to, and critique of, the intensely visual orders proffered by the judge and the narrator. In so doing, McCarthy offers critical purchase on the perils of abstracting meaning from the violent history and material effects he depicts, which arguably extend to and underwrite the U.S. imperial capitalist culture of the 1980s in which his novel was first published and read.[69]

By singling out the ambiguity of McCarthy's idiot/dog figure as characteristic of these "What Is It?" or missing link figures, I add greater specificity to Iain Bernhoft's recent claim that Judge Holden practices an "operational aesthetic"— a spectacular brand of freak show irony perfected by Barnum that "stages deception as performance and illusion as spectacle" to invite a suspicious viewership (29). On top of that, I claim that *Blood Meridian*'s narrator equally appropriates this freak show irony, and—I emphasize this next point—its *affective potency to provoke readerly desire, doubt, and curiosity*. With James Robert, McCarthy explicitly dramatizes an aesthetic debt to the mesmerizing conventions of U.S. freak show industry and entrepreneurs, like Barnum, who profited from the hoaxes they perpetuated. Meanwhile, at a meta-narrative level, the novel also cannily repackages the historical violence perpetrated by the Glanton Gang as Barnumesque spectacle in order to throw the intense visuality of that violence into relief, rather than merely reproducing it.

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[69] See Sinykin's claim that *Blood Meridian* represents the scalp-hunter's violence as a "violence collapsed into, and threatening the novel's contemporary historical moment. The 1970s and early 1980s witnessed a crisis of capitalism . . . . *Blood Meridian* emerges from this crisis to prophesy the unraveling of capitalism's order and the return of violence" (363-64).

Many critics have observed that *Blood Meridian* is dominated by appeals to sight. Jay Ellis, for example, argues that an "eye of nature unassuaged by anthropocentrism" activates its thematic concern with "the limits of human epistemology" (2). For Thomas Pughe, the "writing is almost totally visual" (374), a claim that neatly encapsulates how visuality operates on diegetic and stylistic levels at once. Yet inasmuch as the narrator's field of vision serves as *Blood Meridian*'s grid of intelligibility, the novel's meta-narrative injunctions to readers to "see"—and it is worth recalling that the first sentence of this novel implores readers to "See the child" (McCarthy 3)—arguably evokes the visual rhetoric, optical illusions, and spiel of a sideshow barker (i.e. "Step right up and *see* the freak, folks!"). I consider the linked hermeneutic and biopolitical ramifications of this potential cultural inheritance in terms of this form of readerly interpellation.

Before proceeding to my close reading, permit me to reiterate that this chapter will be peeling back two distinct biopolitical layers: one focuses on the pairing of Judge Holden and James Robert, and the other focuses on the narrator's style. First and foremost, I discuss the implications of the judge's disciplinary display of the idiot/dog figure as a "What Is It?" freak along lines similar to those glimpsed in Barnum's exhibition of "Jo-Jo the Dog-Faced Boy"—that is, as a species hybrid or "wild man [who] was said to come from a lost species on the developmental chain between human and beast" (Adams 167). The judge's treatment of the idiot/dog makes the more disciplinary techniques and productions of U.S. biopower visible. When I approach James Robert, however, I do not analyze him through the lens of the sovereign biopolitics articulated by Agamben, a theory that hinges on the violent abjection of some bodies that are deemed killable with impunity as bare life. Rather, I claim that this novel's acknowledgement of its debt to the freak show implicates readers themselves in the biopolitical

production and normalization of liberal individual subjectivity along the lines elaborated by Michel Foucault's divergent understanding of biopolitics.[70] As such, I proceed to unpack the readerly subject that is aroused by and implicated in the consumption of the narrator's Barnumesque, freak show aesthetic. In effect, I adopt the historical figure of Barnum as a lens for reading—and resisting—the invitations made by both the judge and the narrator. Whereas James Robert's representation as an idiot/dog no doubt plays a role at the level of narrative action, I ultimately shift to a meta-narrative discussion of how and why the narrator's style—"the sumptuous language in which [the novel's historical violence] is depicted" (Cant 160)—likewise invites curious onlookers, inciting their desires to both see and learn about historical "curiosities." Though there are no published Disability Studies or Animal Studies critiques of *Blood Meridian* to date, I continue to draw inspiration from these critical subfields as I address the complex hermeneutic and biopolitical stakes of McCarthy's idiot/dog figure. To this end, my analysis is guided by the question "what is it?" as an overlapping problem—the very question that underpins the marginalization of James Robert *and* the interpretive difficulty of McCarthy's novel.

[70] Foucault's notion of biopolitics diverges from Agamben's focus on the relation between biopower and sovereignty. Foucault argues sovereignty is "not the right to put people to death or to grant them life. Nor is it the right to allow people to live or to leave them to die. It is the right to take life or to let live" (*Society* 240-41). Yet, Foucault also argues, sovereign power gives way in the eighteenth century to an emerging biopolitical regime characterized by its regulatory aim to "administer, optimize, and multiply" the vitality and health of a population; accordingly, the disciplinary technologies of sovereignty, which targeted individual bodies, were subsumed in this massifying movement of the governmental "power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death" (*History* 137-38). Biopolitics, Foucault argues, is constituted and enacted by state and non-state institutions and agencies, and "the development of capitalism" is a biopolitical subset that hinged on the individuation of the subject vis-à-vis the population: "The adjustment of the accumulation of men to that of capital, the joining of the growth of human groups to the expansion of productive forces and the differential allocation of profit, were made possible in part by the exercise of bio-power in its many forms and modes of applications" (141).

Two Missing Links

Rather than beginning with the opening scenes of *Blood Meridian*, I pick up where my epigraphs left off. In this section, I probe two seemingly unrelated episodes close to the end of the novel's main narrative (i.e. bracketing off the notoriously enigmatic epilogue in which some figures follow another, seeking bones). Before discussing the narrator's refusal to visually disclose the horrible violence that the judge presumably enacts upon the kid, despite a propensity to make readers witness violence in great detail elsewhere, I first revisit Judge Holden's relationship with James Robert. Much like the kid, James Robert ultimately disappears without a trace from the novel. Before completely disappearing from the diegetic frame of the narrative, however, this mentally and physically disabled human ends up being "enfreaked" by Judge Holden (Hevey 435).

This scene of enfreakment directly follows the Yuma Massacre, which culminates in a graphic image that McCarthy draws from historical records: Glanton's body is set ablaze with his own dog tied to him (Sepich 32). What does this image of Glanton and his dog have to do with James Robert's subsequent reconfiguration as an idiot/dog? It arguably brings two key subtexts into view: one regarding the sovereign American, hyper-masculine human subject, and another concerning the compliance of their canine companions. Insofar as Glanton's dog ends up being tethered to his burning corpse, the dog's body is transmuted from a fetishized sign of the scalp hunter's ability to dominate nature into a symbol for hubris as it, too, is engulfed in flames. From this angle, the historical details surrounding Glanton's demise can be seized upon as an ironic foil to the fantasy of liberal, hyper-masculine individualism to which the Glanton Gang subscribes.

Consider, for example, how when Glanton first adopts this dog, a fellow scalp hunter expresses doubt about whether he will "man that son of a bitch" (McCarthy 149). Glanton replies, "I can man anything that eats" (149). Their shared use of "man" as both a verb *and* a trope for domestication problematically maps a discourse of gender onto notions of autonomous agency and anthropocentric superiority, conflating canine animality and human femininity with natural inferiority. Evidently, this posits the scalp hunters' masculine performance as their supreme value. Glanton's reply also carries overtones of sexual desire, suggesting he yearns to master and physically claim—or "man"—the dog's body in order to perform and re-affirm his sovereignty and self-aggrandizement. The dog's body is a desirable, feminized fetish—a biological sign— inasmuch as Glanton employs it to consolidate his position of power within the gang as something pre-ordained by nature. Importantly, then, this image of Glanton and his dog being set ablaze troubles the scalp hunters' assumption that it is the manifest destiny of the American male to freely achieve his independent dominion in the world. It also ironizes notions about a dog's natural compliance—or, perhaps, even willingness—to be "remade" into an obedient animal "servant" that stabilizes a hierarchical order of male subjectivity (McHugh 25). As discussed in previous chapters, it is this very relationship of lordship and bondage that subtends the dog's colloquial designation as "man's best friend" (195).

Picking up on this subtext, Wallis R. Sanborn III argues that Glanton befriends and treats his dog better than any of the human scalp hunters (112), and he also suggests that their demise closes out "the apex" of *Blood Meridian*'s "canine hierarchy": "no human and animal pairing in the text could be more deterministic than these two—unless of course, the judge had a dog, but he does not" (113). Yet Sanborn overlooks how Glanton and his dog's "bucolic" friendship (113) is counterpoised with the scene of their violent deaths; this denaturalizes and destabilizes the

over-determined encoding of these figures as the ideal man-dog duo. Moreover, as the idiot/dog figure to which I now turn suggests, Judge Holden does attempt to domesticate the character commonly referred to as the idiot, James Robert, to serve as his dog-like companion; this, in turn, firmly situates the idiot/dog figure as central to *Blood Meridian*'s immanent critique of U.S. liberal individualism (and one-up*man*ship).

Once Judge Holden reconfigures James Robert as an idiot/dog, he employs him to track the kid and the ex-priest Tobin—to sniff out human prey—in the Colorado Desert: "The idiot squatted on all fours and leaned into the lead. . . It swung its head and sniffed at the air, as if it were being used for tracking. . . . The imbecile lunged in its collar and croaked, its forearms dangling at its chest" (298). As I have noted, Denis Donoghue highlights this desert scene as "[o]ne of the most memorable" in the entire novel (410). After scampering down an esker, the kid and the ex-priest, who are without food or water, injured, and losing ground to their trackers, seek refuge amidst the bones of some dead mules and lock their eyes on the ridge above. Then,

> [Judge Holden] appeared upon the rise and paused momentarily before starting down, he and his drooling manciple. The ground before him was drifted and rolling and although it could be fairly reconnoitred from the rise the judge did not scan the country nor did he seem to miss the fugitives from his purview. He descended the ridge and started across the flats, *the idiot before him on a leather lead*. He carried the two rifles that had belonged to Brown and he wore a pair of canteens crossed upon his chest and he carried a powderhorn and flask and his portmanteau and a canvas rucksack that must have belonged to Brown also. More strangely he carried a parasol made from rotted scraps of hide stretched over a framework of rib bones bound with strips of tug. The handle had been the foreleg of some creature and the judge approaching was clothed in little more

> than confetti so rent was his costume to accommodate his figure. *Bearing before him that morbid umbrella with the idiot in its rawhide collar pulling at the lead he seemed some degenerate entrepreneur fleeing from a medicine show and the outrage of citizens who'd sacked it* (297-98; emphasis added).

What makes this particular image so horrifically entrancing? The tableau of the judge and his idiot/dog companion is by no means illegible; rather, it is legible on many refracting levels at the same time. It is excessive, and it appears all the more so because James Robert, who is rendered hyper-visible next to the judge, disappears almost immediately afterwards.

Here, the readerly experience is focalized through the sightlines of the kid and the ex-priest: as the two characters gaze up at the judge and the idiot, readers do too. This constitutes an ethical appeal, implying a shared worldview. Also, it rouses not only a vicarious or pathetic identification with the observers; it marks a spatial separation from the observed, thereby marking an inside/outside opposition.[71] Additionally, there is the vivid visuality of the narrator's style: the descriptive language could mystify some readers, diverting attention away from the naturalizing effects of the narrative's mimetic form. The style produces "reality effects."[72] On top of that, the narrator's references to each of the trackers in the generic singular—and with the

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[71] This observation is indebted to Garland-Thomson's "Seeing the Disabled" and, in particular, her claim that "[p]hotography operates in a visual mode in which perception takes place across distance" (339). As Garland-Thomson elaborates, when people with disabilities are photographed, this distance risks being interpreted as a spatial metaphor—a degrading one—that posits them exclusively as an observable (but untouchable) other within a compulsory able-bodied social-symbolic order (339).

[72] According to Roland Barthes, literature—even, paradoxically, the most "realistic"—always "unfolds in an unrealistic manner" because its discourse cannot achieve denotative referentiality; instead, it is limited to signs (16). This limit is epitomized as follows: "any 'seeing' would be inexhaustible by discourse; there would always be some corner, some detail, some nuance of location or colour to add" (14). So, on the one hand, Barthes equates the (impossible) experience of unlimited vision with "reality"; on the other hand, "analogical" details—that is, descriptions that document the "having-been-there of things" (15)—function as indirect, metonymic access points in the text to a concept or "categor*y* of the 'real'" (16).

definite article no less—implies taxonomic identification; that is, it seems to name something proper to them (i.e. *the* idiot and *the* judge). Although part of this image's impact stems from details like the judge's morbid umbrella, their clothing (or, rather, lack thereof), the harsh desert setting, and their postures, it rhetorically hinges on its mode of representation. In other words, McCarthy's narrator invites readers to accept this scene as ocular "proof" that James Robert embodies caninity. In effect, the narrative accedes to an almost cinematic-level of verisimilitude, appearing "naturally" transparent (i.e. not constructed), while marking the judge and the idiot/dog as worthy of shock and awe.

Given James Robert's exhibition as a human/animal hybrid by the judge, it is crucial to note that hybrid human/animal freaks were historically advertised and more popularly insinuated into the cultural consciousness of nineteenth-century America as biological throwbacks or "curiosities" like the "What Is It?', "wild men," or "missing links"; these monikers "linked the spectacle of ferocious wildness to racial and national difference" (Adams 165). Even when these freaks were white Americans by birth (as James Robert appears to be), the freak show promoters would use costumes and choreograph performances to visually fabricate their exotic, "unassimilable" bodies; in turn, by performing a double function of education and entertainment, the remarkable curiosities exhibited surreptitiously perpetuated normative ideologies that assured white American audiences of their own unremarkable ordinariness and social inclusion (Garland-Thomson *Extraordinary* 66). "What Is It?" freaks were specifically exhibited as "inarticulate and undomesticated" figures of biological retrogression (Adams 167). To the extent that James Robert is ensnared and made to appear as an uncivilized, biologically determined figure by the judge, that is, as one who naturally inhabits the threshold between the supposedly stable ontological categories of the human and the animal, he conjures images of humankind's

imagined "animal" past. The biological and reproductive threat he figures has also ostensibly been mastered by the judge to the extent that he is contained by collar and leash—for the time being.

But why are the judge and his idiot/dog companion hunting the kid and the ex-priest in the desert?[73] Given that this episode is set in a harsh and arid landscape, one scattered with skeletal reminders of death, and coupled with the fact that it follows the Yuma massacre, a spectre of survival cannibalism looms on the horizon. This subtext is borne out inasmuch as, historically, sideshow advertisements also touted that "wild men" had "voracious and indiscriminate appetites" and gladly ate raw flesh (Adams 167). At the same time, readers might infer another possibility: could it be that Judge Holden wants to punish his two former gang members for refusing to sell him the kid's pistol at the well in the previous scene and, by extension, for abstaining from the commercial economy he tries to establish (McCarthy 285)? The precise nature of the adversarial relationship between the two parties is never clear.

While I will return to examine the readerly implications of idiot/dog confusion later on, it is nonetheless crucial to recognize now that the judge's makeshift freak show in the Colorado Desert is intended for the eyes of other characters: the ex-priest and the kid. In other words, this instance of tropological confusion of idiocy and caninity occurs at the level of *narrative action*. This figure's exhibition as an exotic curiosity suggests that the judge has a two-fold rhetorical purpose for the idiot/dog: firstly, to track his human prey; secondly, to attract the curious attention of the kid and ex-priest in order to mesmerize them and manipulate or control their sense perception. Evidently, this is man-hunting pursued along aesthetic *and* psychological lines.

[73] See Sanborn for how McCarthy uses caninity to conjure images of the hunt (100).

The kid only manages to survive these trials in the desert because he proves to be, not unlike James Robert, less susceptible to the judge's "show."

The narrator's description of Judge Holden as a "degenerate entrepreneur fleeing from a medicine show" explicitly positions him in the nineteenth-century tradition of U.S. entrepreneurial showmen, like Barnum, whose hyperbolic illusions and confidence games roused audiences' curiosity, incredulity, and—when their deceptions were exposed—potential rage (McCarthy 298). This description of the judge evokes the "operational aesthetic" attributed to Barnum (Harris 57). Moreover, as my first epigraph suggests, Barnum himself employed "What Is It?" figures to great effect and commercial profit: his exhibition capitalized on "a growing interest in Darwinian distinctions" by adorning freaks in monkey suits, but sometimes canine paraphernalia as in the case of "Jo-Jo the Dog-Faced Boy," and then claiming to exhibit an ontological hybrid of human and animal (Garland-Thomson *Extraordinary* 69). In McCarthy's novel, the "leather lead" (297), the "rawhide collar" (298), and the "rag of fur with the blackened blood side out" (282) that adorns James Robert's head combine to similar effect. But even more significantly when considered vis-à-vis the context of the freak show, the showman's question "What Is It?" encodes a direct appeal to audiences, challenging them "to resolve the disparity" and to expose the exhibit as an illusion by determining the freak's proper species affiliation (Garland-Thomson *Extraordinary* 69). In this sense, the hybrid freaks are bait for spectators, luring them into a dynamic of interaction rather than a state of passive gawking. Like Barnum, Judge Holden rhetorically constructs and strategically deploys his hybrid to challenge, upset, and bait the kid and the ex-priest. He does so to sustain their curiosity and, in effect, keep them hypnotized by his spectacular display of James Robert as *grotesque*—that is, as the polar

opposite of law and formal order.[74] Insofar as Judge Holden is a figure of law, his performance of sovereign power requires this audience.

Whereas the judge's construction of a grotesque idiot/dog figure is a means of structuring the discomforting reception of extraordinary bodies deemed abject and, in so doing, an effort to off-set a biopolitical human or social norm, the narrator also attracts readerly curiosity and provokes an approach that is at once suspicious and fascinated. To put it another way, the narrative is also an "it" whose significance can be questioned and mulled over, while resisting any definitive resolution or interpretation. When considered alongside the fact that the narrator denies any sense of closure in the narrative, the hermeneutic invitation I am describing spurs critics into action, challenging them to impress a pattern upon it that resolves its elusive meanings. However, if the freak show's double inscription in McCarthy's novel (i.e. at the levels of form and content) unleashes a two-pronged readerly invitation to solve the question of the freak's "ontology" and the question of the text's meaning, then it is important to recall that, at least originally, its spectacular form served freak show promoters as a kind of bait.[75]

At this point, I wind back to discuss my second epigraph. The very last moment when readers "see" the kid echoes the judge's Barnumesque enfreakment of James Robert inasmuch as they are linked by the question, "What is it?" (McCarthy 334). This question suggests that the narrator's performance is harmonized with that of the judge, drawing equally on the historical

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[74] See Kathryn Hume's juxtaposition of law and order with the grotesque, which is defined as "something perceived as chaotic by the orderly side" (85).

[75] As Robin Blyn puts it, "Crucial to the success of the freak show was its capacity to produce the provocative equipoise of uncertainties that would inspire its customers to purchase another ticket or recommend the exhibition to their friends. …[T]he freak show sought to sustain curiosity, to forestall intellectual mastery, to render uncertain the demarcation between the true and the false, the real and the fake. If the freak show was a venue that piloted the commodification of the human body for the culture industry, it was also a place wherein the objectified human body perpetually threatened … to recede from the proprietary grasp of its consumer" (xxiv).

freak show's advertising conventions and visual rhetoric. In the end, the narrator's refusal to disclose what Judge Holden has done to the kid cannot be missed by readers, leaving the ambiguous "it" to their imaginations. In this case, readers are merely privy to a description of the naked judge as he "gathered [the kid] in his arms against his immense and terrible flesh and shot the wooden barlatch [of the jakes] home behind him" (333). Later on, when the door of the jakes is flung open, the unsuspecting (and unnamed) man who peers in clearly appears horrified by the vision awaiting him. A nearby companion pointedly asks: "What is it?" (334). The first man does not answer and retreats in horror. In this final scene, the ostensibly all-seeing, omniscient narrator pulls back—and, then, the kid disappears from the diegetic frame. Instead of detailing what occurs to the character that focalizes the majority of the narrative action, the narrator offers only a proxy's mute response and, as such, denies readerly access to this climactic encounter between the kid and the judge. This suspends readers' desire for narrative closure and, moreover, denies them the visual exhibition of bodily deformation and violence it hints at. Rather than providing readers with a satisfying resolution, the narrator inscribes a dramatically emphasized absence—an unanswered question and a provocation.

While theories abound about what actually happens to the kid, "[t]he closest one comes to a critical consensus is that he is probably sodomized, possibly cannibalized, and almost certainly killed" by the judge (Dorson 119). Still, it is worth recalling that "almost certainly" is by no means an epistemic equivalent for certainty. It is also worth noting that when Judge Holden gathers the kid against his body, he embodies a curious admixture of care and violence; this cradling posture hints at a biopolitical doubleness, a supplementarity that is not reducible to the death-driven and disciplinary regime of sovereign power Agamben describes. Despite the possibility of reading for the biopolitical layers at stake in this novel, McCarthy's narrative

resolutely and bathetically remains a puzzle. By having the kid and James Robert disappear from the diegetic frame in a parallel manner, and then marking both figures as missing links in the narrative order, the narrator self-reflexively encourages reading it through the lens of Barnum's rhetoric and entrepreneurial spirit. "What is it?", then, is not only an invitation for readers to interpret a narrative event that's deeply inscrutable; it also functions as an exhortation to *re-read* the ambiguous spectacle of the novel again in the vainglorious hope of making better sense of it.[76]

Of course, the visual consumption of freak shows and literary forms of consumption practiced in reading and interpreting literary texts differ in many respects. Nevertheless, I see them as converging and overlapping under the sign of what Mark Seltzer calls an "aesthetics of consumption": that is, neither practice transcends their material conditions nor are reducible to them, and both tend to generate a desire or "appetite for representations—the gratification of the hungry eye"—that is commonly identified with subjectivity and self-possession (Seltzer 139). Given the ocular-centric quality of McCarthy's novel, the sheer visual surfaces of the narrator's descriptions promulgate an analogy between the act of reading the curiosities that comprise McCarthy's historical fiction and the act of viewing a freak show.

I have briefly sketched the rhetorical agency of Judge Holden and the narrator in tandem here in order to grasp how *Blood Meridian* dramatically *stages* the artifice of its own aesthetic discourse. Its style fetishizes and depends on the affective potency attending visual protocols and techniques of representation: instead of offering captivating plot twists or insights into character,

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[76] I agree with Kurt Cavender that *Blood Meridian* has no stable, fixed meaning or identity that can be resolved; instead, it triggers "an endless interpretive restlessness that invites the reader to always begin again" (695). In this sense, interpreters cannot help but fail to master the text. So, the mysterious "epilogue doubles as a prologue, and the new reading will owe its existence to the sparks kindled by the previous reading" (694).

McCarthy's novel prioritizes visual exhibition by parceling out images of violence in an unrelenting succession. In the words of one early reviewer, its episodic narrative "comes at the reader like a slap in the face, an affront that asks us to endure a vision of the Old West full of charred skulls, blood-soaked scalps, a tree hung with the bodies of dead infants" (James 3). Many critics—including John Sepich, Barcley Owens, Hanna Boguta-Marchel, Iain Bernhoft, and Steven Frye—agree that its aesthetic form should be understood in relation to this panapoly of grotesque images. In the words of Boguta-Marchel,

> Scenes of violence in *Blood Meridian* are saturated with graphic, minutely detailed depictions of gross human bodies. Of their distortion and dismemberment, their wounds, scars, and irregularities. . . . These freakish, distorted bodies are . . . both fascinating and fearful, spectacular and hideous. (47)

In addition to depictions of bodies framed as anomalous and in various states of suffering and/or physical "disorder", McCarthy's novel regularly invokes figures of medicine shows, carnivals, circuses, sideshows, fools, clowns, and even a dancing bear.[77] The critical consensus is that such figures attest to the novel's investment in the visceral effects of the grotesque and the folkloric tropes of the carnivalesque. Furthermore, as Steven Frye argues, its investment in visuality also bears the influential mark of the cinematic gaze of revisionist Westerns like Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and Ralph Nelson's *Soldier Blue* (1970), films that explore "the mythically rendered violence of the American hero in the [historical and ideological] context of the Vietnam War" and the rise of progressive U.S. political movements (111). While the influence of these specific films and the cinematic medium on the novel's intense visuality is a

[77] McCarthy appears to confuse the traditional and institutional significance of the carnival's rituals with the circus, which primarily aims to entertain (Sepich 153). See Sepich's concordance on the novel's carnival and circus references (152-54).

compelling angle, what cries out for further study is how *Blood Meridian* unsettles conventional presuppositions about aesthetic production and appreciation—especially the positive, so-called "high" values of "harmony, integrity, and beauty" (Siebers 3)—by confusing tropes of mental disability and caninity as freakish. Rather than joining the chorus who argue for the more general significance of the carnivalesque, I proceed to trace how McCarthy makes explicit both a thematic and formal continuity between his novel and the freak show.

The Idiot/Dog: A Troublesome Inheritance

When he is harnessed and exhibited by the judge, James Robert emerges as the figurative and catachrestic embodiment of idiocy and caninity at once. However, as Bernhoft astutely observes, "Judge Holden exerts a tremendous pull on the interpretative energies of *Blood Meridian*'s readers. Enigmatic in speech and spectacular in appearance, he overwhelms with apparent significance" (Bernhoft 27). He tends to usurp and dominate critical readings of the novel. In my effort to stave off the judge's mesmerizing effects, I follow Bernhoft's suggestion that Holden's exhibition should be approached as that of a "confidence man, *Blood Meridian* his masquerade" (27). In this light, his Barnumesque display of James Robert is a disingenuous rhetorical exhibition. That said, it is crucial to observe that the narrator also treats James Robert as a figure in whom anxious biological demarcations of humanity and animality can be read—even as he represents, paradoxically, ontological indeterminacy. So, readers should be equally wary regarding the narrator's own mesmerizing effects.

To develop this novel's subtext of biological retrogression (or, in other words, degeneracy), I suggest that James Robert inherits a literary aesthetic that can also be traced back to the eugenics-inflected depictions of Benjy Compson and Lennie Small. As with Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, McCarthy's novel contributes to the

widespread tropological confusion of idiocy and caninity in twentieth-century America by (re)producing a human/canine composite. Yet, unlike Faulkner or Steinbeck, McCarthy does not attempt to access this figure's psyche or interiority: readers are only ever permitted to "see" the idiot/dog and, as a result, are barred from vicariously or sympathetically inhabiting his perspective. Simply put, James Robert remains utterly inaccessible.

Insofar as the narrator of *Blood Meridian* privileges a portrait of James Robert's body—and, more specifically, his hyper-visible enfreakment—over insight into his character, this troubles the potential for readerly identification and, moreover, renders the medical conditions that he evokes even more ambiguous; the novel does not offer a diagnosis of his mental or physical disabilities. Instead, the narrator and the other characters refer to him variously as "idiot," "imbecile," or "fool."[78] This uncertainty marks James Robert as all the more excessive, whereas figures like Judge Holden, the ex-priest Tobin, or the kid are consistently referred to in a strict allegorical mode. This complicates readerly comprehension, at least in accordance with mimetic and/or medical-diagnostic schemas, and causes confusion because no distinction is made, for example, between the eugenics nomenclature of "idiot" or "imbecile" [79]or the more festive, religious connotations of "fool" —or, even more pertinent to my analysis, the popular freak show history implied by "Wild Man" (233). These oscillations not only upset a stable referential identity for James Robert and underscore his excess; the very same labels are also deployed as insults to discredit other characters, emphasizing an overlap between medical-

[78] See James Robert described as an idiot (McCarthy 233, 239, 242, 244, 246), an imbecile (233, 238, 252, 257, 284), and a fool (259, 260, 282).
[79] Recall that according to Goddard's theory and influence on eugenics diagnostic scales, "imbecility" was a case of arrested development deemed normal for a child of seven or eight years of age, while "idiocy" designated an earlier developmental plateau at two years of age and, thus, denoted "the most enfeebled" (Snyder and Mitchell 81).

scientific and cultural discourses.[80] Glanton and his scalp hunters clearly consider James Robert an aberration of the human species, which is epitomized by the invectives they use to abuse his dignity, including "thing" (233, 238), "ape" (238), and "son of a bitch" (238). But the narrator regularly disparages these characters in analogous ways.[81] From this angle, *Blood Meridian*'s treatment of James Robert does not greatly distinguish him from the degraded status of other characters and their actions; arguably, it suggests that he mirrors them in the larger social framework of the narrator's flattening, misanthropic worldview.

To begin to approach *Blood Meridian* as a text that self-reflexively operates within a point of view—or visual grid—that is historically rooted in the exhibition of freak show "curiosities" is not as tangential as it might first appear. Although James Robert is not introduced as a fully-fledged idiot/dog figure, the narrator gradually sets up his exhibition as one. In fact, he is specifically introduced to the Glanton Gang as a freak in Tucson. As Glanton and Holden try to assemble more recruits, they approach "[a] rude tent thrown up out of an old tarp. A sign that said: See The Wild Man Two Bits" (233). While it is crucial to observe that James Robert is cast as a freak show exhibit, he is even more specifically cast as a "wild man"—a synonym for the "What Is It?". In this scene, the barker's "sign"—the sideshow's promotional material—announces James Robert's enfreakment as a form of untamable nature, and the sign enjoins viewers to "see" his body as ferocious and exotic (and always for the price of two bits). The convention of envisioning James Robert as an anomalous object is signaled by the sign, directing an audience to pay to "see" him as fascinating or wondrous, pathetic, and potentially transgressive—an amalgam of three rhetorical modes that, arguably, are historically cultivated

[80] For example, James Robert is labeled a fool, but the ex-priest Tobin uses this term to insult the kid (162, 290, 291), and Judge Holden uses it to insult Glanton (307).

[81] The narrator repeatedly uses "ape" to describe the scalp hunters—and, moreover, humankind generally (4, 65, 74, 90, 148, 153, 200).

ways of viewing disabled humans (Garland-Thomson “Seeing” 342-43). This suggests that the paying customers’ *experience of viewing and interpreting* the visual text of the freak’s body becomes a commodity fetish itself. However, Glanton and Judge Holden promptly demystify the illusion perpetuated by the sign. Barging into the tent, they reveal that the “wild man” is not as wondrous or exotic as advertised. Instead, he appears neglected and materially dispossessed to the point of his “naked” biology:

> They passed behind a wagonsheet where within a crude cage of paloverde poles crouched a naked imbecile. The floor of the cage was littered with filth and trodden food and flies clambered about everywhere. The idiot was small and misshapen and his face was smeared with feces and he sat peering at them silently chewing a turd.
>
> The owner came from the rear shaking his head at them. Aint nobody allowed in here. We aint open.
>
> Glanton looked about the wretched enclosure. The tent smelled of oil and smoke and excrement. The judge squatted to study the imbecile. (233)

This first encounter with James Robert imprints him in a way that is typically reserved for thinking about neglected animals, potentially arousing charitable feelings of sympathy: he’s encaged, devouring his feces, and cast as the property of an “owner” (233).

James Robert’s introduction also cannily promulgates an aesthetic link between the “wild man” freak and the kid. The sign that exhorts Judge Holden and Glanton to “See the Wild Man” (McCarthy 233) mirrors the narrator’s first sentence, a meta-narrative injunction to visualize the kid: “See the child” (3). My point is not merely that readers are introduced to James Robert and the kid as analogues here; rather, on the basis of this analogy, this particular scene stages a mini-drama that compares how the narrator’s descriptive style is also dominated by rhetorical appeals

to vision. Once again, the narrator likewise draws on the visual rhetoric cultivated by mid-century U.S. sideshows. Furthermore, by demonstrating how the neglected, disabled body of James Robert (i.e. the referent) does not match the promise of exotic freakdom espoused by the advertisement (i.e. the sign), McCarthy's dramatic acknowledgement also evokes—and even puns on—the Saussurean notion of the fundamental arbitrariness of signs themselves. Although some critics maintain that *Blood Meridian* "describes rather than narrates its events" in a way that suggests its narrator is somehow permitted to bypass the craft and artifice of "representation" altogether, my reading of this scene's rhetorical implications challenges such a claim (Phillips 443-44). Instead, it recovers how the narrator's style disguises the degree to which it is diegetic (i.e. telling) and how it masquerades as mimetic transparency (i.e. showing).

The second time that Glanton and Holden engage the freak's owner, it is revealed that James Robert is not only exhibited for the amusement of gawking spectators and for profit; he is also exploited by his neglectful brother, Cloyce Bell:

> Where'd you get that thing at?
>
> He was left to me. Mama died. There was nobody to take him to raise. They shipped him to me. Joplin Missouri. Just put him in a box and shipped him. Took five weeks. Didnt bother him a bit. I opened up the box and there he set [sic]. … Big as life. Never hurt him a bit. I had a hair suit made but he ate it.
>
> Aint everbody in this town seen the *son of a bitch?*
>
> Yes. Yes they have. I need to get to California. I may charge four bits out there. (238; emphasis added)

During this interview, Glanton's use of the idiomatic phrase "son of a bitch" is doubtlessly intended to abuse James Robert's dignity, but it also questions his inclusion in the human species

by linking him to canines, suggesting he is the offspring of a female dog. From this point, instead of the simian signifiers that historically racialized many "wild men" freaks, canine signifiers and bodies begin to increasingly accrue to the body of James Robert.

Unlike Glanton, whose primary response to James Robert seems to be a mix of disgust and fear, the judge appears excited to discover that the so-called "owner" of the freak is also his brother (McCarthy 238). When prodded, Cloyce confirms that James Robert is a case of arrested development:

> Has he always been like that? said the judge.
>
> Yessir. He was born that way. (239)

Without hesitation, the judge begins to aggressively perform phrenology on Cloyce: "The judge had his entire head in his grip like an immense and dangerous faith healer . . . he narrowed an eye at the man and studied him and then reached and gripped him again, holding him by the forehead while he prodded along the back of his skull with the ball of his thumb" (238-39). Apparently, the judge's phrenological study is motivated by a desire to dispel the mythic illusions perpetrated by Cloyce's freak show. For, as the judge claims shortly thereafter, "the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way" (245). In other words, this study is evidently prompted by the judge's desire to assert his individual agency in the world. In this case, the judge's masterful sovereignty can be achieved by delivering an explanation for James Robert's condition. While the judge routinely demonstrates to other character that he is well versed in the sciences of his day, the irony remains for contemporary readers that he uses phrenology.[82]

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[82] See Christopher Douglas's suggestion that despite this irony, Judge Holden's use of phrenology merely confirms that he "is a scientist of his time, which includes getting some things wrong" (90).

Before the Glanton Gang departs Tucson, the narrator evokes an image match for James Robert's "misshapened" body (233) in a litter of so-called "dogfreaks" (223): "A merchant of that town brought forth a litter of dogs one of whom had six legs and another two and a third with four eyes in its head" (239). Clearly distressed by the mutations, Glanton "warned the man away and threatened to shoot them" (239). While this juxtaposition introduces a tenuous association between idiot and canine figures, the narrator proceeds to rigorously draw readerly attention to James Robert's idiot/dog hybridity. As the Glanton Gang rides westward toward California, images of Glanton's dog are frequently juxtaposed with James Robert to underscore their connection:

> The cart with the idiot in his cage trundled along at the rear and now Glanton's dog fell back to trot alongside, perhaps out of some custodial instinct such as children will evoke in animals. But Glanton called the dog to him and when it did not come he dropped back along the little column and leaned down and quirted it viciously with his hobble rope and drove it out before him. (246)

Once again, Glanton responds with disgust to James Robert, which stands in stark contrast to the keen interest of Judge Holden. Caninity continues to accrue to James Robert via a series of associations with Glanton's dog:

> The keeper led the imbecile down from its cage and tethered it by the fire with a braided horsehair rope that it could not chew through and it stood leaning in its collar with its hands outheld as if it yearned for the flames. Glanton's dog rose and sat watching it and the idiot swayed and drooled with its dull eyes falsely brightened by the fire. (252)

This tethering and drooling accentuate James Robert's animalistic alterity in relation to the other scalp hunters. Moreover, by emphasizing the physical proximity between dog and idiot figures,

the narrator's juxtapositions risk culminating in identificatory equivalence between dog and idiocy for readers (i.e. at a meta-narrative level).

When the scalp hunters first arrive at the ferry crossing in Yuma with "the idiot in his cage[,]" Sarah Borginnis, a historical laundress, leads a group of women in protest; this comprises a rare female and humanizing presence in the diegetic space of the novel (256). In this scene, the narrator corroborates historical accounts by describing Borginnis as "a huge woman" (256).[83] She towers over and admonishes Cloyce for the mistreatment suffered by his brother:

> What's your name anyways? she said.
>
> Cloyce Bell mam.
>
> What's his.
>
> His name's James Robert but there dont anybody call him it.
>
> If your mother was to see him what do you reckon she'd say.
>
> I dont know. She's dead.
>
> Aint you ashamed?
>
> No mam.
>
> Dont you sass me.
>
> I'm not trying to. You wan him just take him. I'll give him to you. (256).

By declaiming that James Robert has been mistreated, Borginnis emerges as figure for sympathetic values: "Shoo. Imagine having this child penned up like a wild animal" (258). She proceeds to burn James Robert's cage to protest the indignities he suffers at the hands of the Glanton Gang. Then, she bathes him in the Colorado River, an act with blatant maternal and baptismal overtones. Afterwards, James Robert is outfitted and pampered: "His thin neck turned

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[83] See Sepich for how the historical Sarah Borginnis "stood six feet tall" (51).

warily in the collar of his outsized shirt. They'd greased his hair and combed it flat upon his skull so that it looked painted on. They brought him sweets and he sat drooling and watched the fire, greatly to their admiration" (258). Borginnis strives to re-humanize a previously animalized figure; in other words, she tries to restore James Robert to a fully "human" identity. However, it is crucial to recognize that this restoration effort fails.

What follows is a key intermezzo in the narrative, albeit a brief one, wherein the idiot/dog figure eludes fixed or categorical definitions of identity organized along the axis of the human and animal binary. After Borginnis kisses and tucks him in for the night, James Robert sheds the "coarse woven wool suit" and "naked once again" he is described "shambling past the fires" and into the night of his own accord (258). While the narrator has already established a portrait of James Robert's tacit caninity, the use of "shambling" recalls Faulkner's depiction of Benjy and, thus, reinscribes the gait of this idiot/dog figure as biologically determined: "Ben shambled along beside Dilsey … like a big foolish dog" (Faulkner 177). Further recalling Benjy's olfactory dependence and dog-like noises (178), James Robert "tested the air" and "whimpers" as he makes his way to the shoreline (McCarthy 258). Hesitating briefly, he enters the water: "Before the river reached much past his waist he'd lost his footing and sunk from sight" (258). Witnessing James Robert's plunge, Judge Holden "stepped into the river and seized up the drowning idiot, snatching it aloft by the heels like a great midwife and slapping it on the back to let the water out. A birth scene or a baptism or some ritual not yet inaugurated into any canon" (259). By saving James Robert and letting him live, the judge's own baptism trumps the re-humanization effort of Borginnis, and this serves to effectively link the two figures in the symbolic order of the novel: James Robert is no longer the dispossessed human that Borginnis sought to redeem; he is Judge Holden's adopted companion, who is simultaneously cared-for and

abjected. This second baptism marks the moment that Holden assumes his mastery over James Robert; however, this is a complex biopolitical mastery constituted by both the power of care and sovereign violence at once: "He twisted the water from its hair and he gathered the naked and sobbing fool into his arms and carried it up into the camp and restored it among its fellows" (259). Also, it is critical to recognize that the narrator casts the judge as restoring James Robert "among its fellows." In other words, this re-introduction into the community of the Glanton Gang collapses the presupposed distinction between the animalized "idiot" and the scalp hunters by drawing a literal line of comparison between this figure of biological degeneracy and the rest of the gang. The resemblance invoked by the narrator here subverts any valorization of human nature, but also potentially ironizes the hierarchy of power within the gang itself.

Hermeneutic Humbug

To date, James Robert's adoption as dog-like by Judge Holden has been critically pursued in highly problematic terms. Adam Parkes provides a sense of the extreme effect purveyed by this pairing when he refers to James Robert as a "demented sidekick" (113). Even worse, Jay Ellis declares that it represents the "domestication" of a "man . . . [who has] barely crawled across some evolutionary meridian between animals and humans" (185) and, he adds, the judge merely urges "James Robert . . . back over the border of his animality. The judge's odd domestication of *a man more animal than human* provides another bizarre image of civilized life. . . . This man on a leather leash is a *pet*—what else? Glanton has his dog, and now the judge has his man at heel" (185; emphasis added).

During the nineteenth century, according to Harriet Ritvo, many naturalists promulgated the anthropocentric notion that canine subservience "was an index of the advance of civilization" (Ritvo 20). In other words, the degree of eagerness ostensibly exhibited by dogs to accept their

servitude was thought to correlate to the degree of masterful superiority enjoyed by particular humans (20). However, it is worth briefly reconsidering here how this "natural" obedience of dog to human—a relationship of lordship and bondage—is troubled by the complex and hotly debated history of human-dog domestication itself. Recent studies of the fossil and genomic records indicate a history at odds with the myth of canine obedience that Ritvo describes. Drawing on the work of evolutionary biologist Robert Wayne, Stephen Budiansky argues that while the original "proto-dogs" were genetically similar to wolves, they were behaviourally unique to the extent that they "*chose* to hang around humans, and in so doing to isolate themselves from their wild counterparts" (22-24; emphasis added). Moreover, in light of the archaeological and genetic evidence (and in line with Budiansky), Donna Haraway proposes that it is a mistake to understand domestication as a simple, once-and-for-all conquest narrative that pits the figure of the human civilizer over the figure of wild nature. Instead, the evidence suggests a more variegated, ongoing history of "co-evolution" or mutualism between humans and dogs, whereby both species exercise power and agency (*Companion* 30-31).

Yet the violent labeling of James Robert on the part of McCarthy's critics implies that he is most often ascertained as a figure without agency or power, one whose animalized abjection affirms Judge Holden as an avatar of sovereign subjectivity. Such a reading of the judge aligns with Robert L. Jarrett's influential claim that he is the embodiment of the Enlightenment brought to its horrific, logical conclusion (78): "a representation of the unrestricted will to power of the transcendental Reason" (79). Along slightly different lines, Russell M. Hillier suggests that this pairing captures the judge's "desire that the company [of scalp hunters] be tethered to his suzerain law" (25) and suggests that Holden forcefully "assume[s] ownership of the idiot and keep[s] him leashed in a state of abjection" (34). In these different interpretations of *Blood*

Meridian, James Robert is conceived as abject—and, in turn, abjection is assumed to be synonymous with animalization. Thus, a critical bias emerges: he is too often reduced to a metaphor for the negative repercussions of a biologically determined order—a reduction that fits the judge's rhetorical purpose of ascending to the top of the hierarchy of power.

However, I ask: can this pairing serve to *ironize* the logic of biological determinism that tethers James Robert to an animalized depravity or barbaric state of nature and posits Judge Holden at the opposite extreme of human dominion and civilization? Here, I wind back to the mirage-like tableau I invoked earlier of the judge leashing James Robert and using him to track the kid and the ex-priest. Against the curious appeal of Judge Holden's rhetorical performance, I assert that approaching this image through the lens of idiot/dog tropological confusion helps to highlight its artifice and deflate the judge's claims to sovereign agency.

Clearly, James Robert's exhibition hinges on Judge Holden's deployment of costume and props to render him canine: the "leather lead" and "rawhide collar" are used to make him appear hyper-visible, and they are meant to signal the judge's masterful control over him (McCarthy 297-98). Yet the leash and collar can also be considered as representational devices that serve to dramatically supplement and naturalize the physical and ideological violence Holden enacts. Put another way, they enfreak James Robert as a deviant figure of dog-like atavism and evolutionary regression: on the one hand, since they cry out for interpretation, they assist the judge in exerting his magnetic pull; on the other hand, they stress the artificiality and excess of such a display. Or, to put it bluntly, James Robert would *not* appear as visibly, freakishly animal(ized) without them.

Complexly, then, instead of perpetrating the illusion that the freakish body represents an absolute alterity that delimits normative human subjects through a process of dis-identification, casting James Robert as human/animal hybrid ironically highlights and reveals the illusion of

that construction. More simply put, it's humbug. "Born in the era of humbug and confidence men," Rachel Adams writes, "freak shows promised to shock and amaze, but also *encouraged their audiences to question what they saw, to remain vigilant about the possibility of deception*" (13; emphasis added). In other words, the "freak show" of idiot/dog tropological confusion hermeneutically invites an audience to make it mean something, but to guard against potential manipulations. Given this hermeneutic function, questions of agency remain central to the rhetorical effects of this scene. Like the conventions of popular freak shows, this tableau "shifts the interpretive focus from [its] content to [its] reception" (Adams 163). Though disability scholars like Adams suggest that there is a liberating potential inherent to this dynamic, Terrence Whelan's study of Barnum's aesthetic practice suggests that the self-reflexivity built into the consumption of freak shows not only exploits those bodies deemed freakish, but converts an audience's interpretive practice and experience itself into the commodity fetish (xvi). In other words, exhibitions much like this one serve to arouse an audience's desire, inducing them to pay for the experience of puzzling over or dispelling the techniques and rhetoric undergirding the freaks' heavily aestheticized bodies.

Granted, the leash and collar still jointly signify the judge's disciplinary tools of abuse and control. However, he is also clearly determined to use them to discursively link the animalization of mental disability—James Robert's reconfiguration into the human/dog hybrid—to ostensibly more benign meanings and values, namely, ones associated with the mundane activity of bourgeois pet ownership. In this light, the judge purports to be merely walking his pet dog in the Colorado Desert. However, at the same time, his employment of a disabled human to do the work of a hunting dog appears unusually cruel and surreal; this is amplified by the fact that their prey is human. While the tableau might proffer a companionship of sorts between judge

and idiot, it's a far cry from an ideal of love and mutual respect. As Donna Haraway recalls, "[i]n the flesh and in the sign, dogs are commodities, and commodities of a type central to the history of capitalism" (*When* 52).[84] In this light, it's crucial to remember that while caninity might conjure pet-like fidelity and love, it also conjures meanings and values associated with labour and property, including human property (i.e. the historical use of dogs in tracking slaves). On that note, considering that the kid shoots the judge's horses, it is no coincidence that the judge pontificates at length, albeit in arcane terms, about the "property rights in beasts mansuete"—namely, laws pertaining to the ownership of tamed animals—in another attempt to mesmerize and lure his prey from their hiding place (McCarthy 293). Thereafter, he transforms James Robert into the very "beast mansuete" upon which he was expounding. The judge's decision to stage idiot/dog tropological confusion can be read, then, not only as an effort to establish James Robert's exclusion from a legal order of rights and privileges by rendering him animal, and thereby asserting an anthropocentric and normative hierarchy as natural; on top of that, when the idiot is adopted as the judge's dog, he is adopted as a form of property and, as such, he's made to perform rhetorical labour as an object of curiosity in a supplemental sideshow—a kind of freak show attraction—to the judge's main act.

By taking inventory of the discursive mechanisms that are aesthetically deployed to justify and make sense of the material violence in this scene (e.g. the sovereign human and enslaved animal distinction), the narrator highlights the excessive, over-determined, and even deceptive aspects of the judge's spectacle. According to Bernhoft, the judge's deceptions are always doubly calibrated: epistemically and economically (32). I add that his effort to exhibit

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[84] For all its idealism about the inherent value of interspecies encounters, Haraway's key concept of "companion species" rightly acknowledges that dogs perform material and discursive labour, "produc[ing] surplus value by giving more than they get in a market-driven economic system" (*When* 55).

James Robert as an idiot/dog hybrid remains not only something to be read (and consumed) by the kid and the ex-priest; it reflects and recalls, on this meta-narrative level, that the ontological status of the novel's characters must be read (and then visually imagined) by us—readers of *Blood Meridian*—and, moreover, that the act of interpretation risks becoming fetishized in the process.

Blood Meridian links this idiot/dog figure to the hermeneutic function and use-value of interpellation—to acts of hailing and, by extension, producing a particular readership. This interpellation is two-fold: at the level of the narrative, the judge's employment of James Robert aims to draw in and fascinate the kid and the ex-priest; meanwhile, at the meta-narrative level, the narrator's framing of this scene also aims to draw in and fascinate readers. Since discursive figures and formal mechanisms must be legible and, in turn, read (or consumed) by an audience to fulfill their function, this further attests to the judge's and the narrator's vested interests in similarly attracting a curious audience—one that will "buy into" each of their particular discourses—through their investment in the affective potency of excessive aesthetic spectacle.[85] Yet by acknowledging that the judge and the narrator are harmonized in this way, McCarthy's novel itself arguably carves out some critical distance from their entrepreneurial showmanship. Despite its relegation to the margins of the critical literature, the idiot/dog figure is pivotal to McCarthy's novel and, thus, serves as a fitting entry point for elaborating how *Blood Meridian* repackages historical, imperial violence as spectacle—and, in so doing, highlights the visuality of violence so as to resist simply reproducing it.

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[85] My use of "spectacle" here recalls Guy Debord's Marxist notion that, in capitalist societies, image consumption is "both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production": more specifically, the consumption of "news or propaganda, advertisement or the actual consumption of entertainment" (Debord 13). For Debord, this constitutes the primary economic and social formation through which identities and relationships are produced.

Curious Looking: An Aesthetic Provocation to Interpret

McCarthy's novel is not reducible to a revisionist study that chronicles the heinous and disavowed history of U.S. imperialism. Indeed, it also aggressively confronts readers with a potent aesthetic, a mesmerizing fusion of "lyricism and ugliness" that some declare "hard to get through" (James 3). Edwin T. Arnold's review suggests, "this is as alienating a book as one is likely to encounter" (104). But, he adds, "for the determined reader it will offer its own rewards" (104). To the extent that this alienating novel comes with an inviting promise of remunerating determined readers (or unflinching critics) who persevere in the face of its bloodshed and hermeneutic challenges to wrest meaning from its pages, it is also crucial to acknowledge that it comes with readerly pleasures too. At first, perhaps, positive or attractive feelings of enjoyment might seem at odds with the grotesque "welter of gore" (104). Yet, as Steven Shavrio attests, "A strong compulsion draws us through this text, something beyond fascination or horror" (146). What makes the readerly experience so challenging, uncomfortable, yet appealing all at once?

A tense ambivalence resides at the core of *Blood Meridian*'s aesthetic and, by extension, its affective potency. On the one hand, there is *what* the novel depicts. In this sense, it represents the biopolitical violence and historical subjugations that accompanied U.S. imperial expansion into Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century, which are figured by the scalp hunters' indiscriminate conversion of human biology into commercial profit and the judge's claims to world dominance: "Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent" (McCarthy 198). It is now a critical commonplace that Judge Holden's primary purpose is to be perceived by others as a powerfully sovereign agent—or, in his own words, "suzerain of the earth" (198)—and, moreover, that this serves as an interpretive key for the narrative action. Although the judge doubtlessly means what he says about "set[ting] himself the task of singling out the thread of

order from the tapestry" (199), his showmanship and illusions, including his display of James Robert as an idiot/dog, remain forms of exotic mystification. To be fascinated with these conspicuous performances is to obscure both the judge's monomaniacal quest to rule and—even worse—his historical reality: "If Glanton represents the imperial aggression of American expansion . . . then the judge is the rhetoric, spectacle, discourse, and entertainment in which that aggression is couched and through which it is perpetuated" (Bernhoft 34). Nonetheless, because readers are forced to visualize the bloody spectacle of *Blood Meridian* without conventional novelistic lures, such as insight into character (Cooper 53) or a traditional plot development (Phillips 443), the likes of which tend to bestow hermeneutic significance on events, the judge's surreal performances and philosophical propositions induce a curious appeal, a visceral puzzle begging for decipherment.[86]

On the other hand, there is *how* the novel depicts—that is, the narrator's ocular-centric style. Dana Phillips's influential reading, which has been endorsed and developed by eco-critics like Georg Guillemin, puts forward that the narrator serves as an aesthetic resistance potential against the exotic allure of the judge's assertion that violence is an a priori order or natural ontology that privileges the human. Phillips warns that it is a mistake to equate Holden's flashy, anthropocentric speeches, especially the assertion that war is "the ultimate trade" and humanity is "its ultimate practitioner" (McCarthy 248), with *Blood Meridian*'s own ideological position.

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[86] *Blood Meridian* unsettles plot-based models of interpretation and character-based models of sympathetic identification, both of which attended the literary-aesthetic ascendency of the novel as a genre during the nineteenth century. See Audrey Jaffe's *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* for an account of how the novel's rise was historically linked to visual and visceral displays that invited sympathetic engagements between reader-subjects and texts. For Jaffe, the novel's lengthy form allowed for alluring invitations to readerly feeling, which served to surreptitiously reify a normative middle-class subject whose pleasure in observing literary objects of sympathy "displac[ed] attention from the destructive consequences of industrialization and the rise to power of the middle class" (21).

He writes, "Holden is not a ventriloquist's dummy perched on the novelist's knee, and we should not strain our eyes to see whether McCarthy's lips move when the judge speaks" (442).

Both Phillips and Guillemin argue that the narrator provides readers with a larger, more "omniscient" vantage of natural history that, hermeneutically, takes precedence over the judge's performance (Phillips 443). This supposedly omniscient point of view helps readers to eke out more stable ground for a "post-humanist" critique that, at least as Phillips and Guillemin elaborate it, fits with critiques offered by Animal Studies scholars' deconstructions of the human/nonhuman binary (Guillemin 81).[87] Specifically, Phillips and Guillemin maintain this activates a readerly "viewership" that can demystify the judge, seeing through to an "*equality of being* between human and nonhuman" (Phillips 444; emphasis added). Such a perspective is captured in the narrator's famous description of the desert:

> In the neuter austerity of that terrain all phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (McCarthy 247)

Phillips and Guillemin adopt this "optical democracy" as *Blood Meridian*'s programmatic creed, and they proceed to use it heuristically to resist the judge's claim to autonomous human(ist) sovereignty: the narrator simply displays "nature in its sheer materiality" and, in so doing, urges

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[87] See Cary Wolfe, for instance, on how the human/animal binary is a rhetorical construction, not an essence: "the distinction 'human/animal'—as the history of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism well shows—is a discursive resource, not a zoo-logical designation" (*Before* 10).

readers to envision a kind of ontological levelling—one in which human figures are subsumed within the larger scale and framework of natural history (Guillemin 81). For Phillips, "[it] is precisely its lack of human implication that some find *Blood Meridian*'s most disturbing feature. In the raw orchestration of the book's events, the world of nature and the world of men are parts of the same world, and both are equally violent and indifferent to each other" (447). From this angle, the narrator cultivates an awe-inspiring cosmic vision of ontological re-enchantment, which posits all entities in the natural world as equal *and* ecologically interconnected.

Although the readings of Phillips and Guillemin are helpful for glossing the competition that develops between Judge Holden and the narrator, the hermeneutic promise both critics attribute to "optical democracy" seems to be over-prized as the narrator's perspectival advantage. After all, this narrator is not merely some value-neutral "transparent eyeball" capable of bypassing the messiness of representation altogether; in other words, showing (mimesis) does not simply trump telling (diegesis) (447). On the contrary, the supposed visual transparency and equality attending the narrator's descriptive mode is made possible only by representational protocols—by its own rhetorically alluring construction and stylization of reality effects.

The narrator also self-reflexively flags or underscores the aesthetic production of their performance at key points throughout. Not only is the narrator's style mesmerizingly visual, it shifts routinely from a "photorealistic" mode (Cant 163) to prose that is ornately detailed, abstruse, and "romantic"—at times even poetic (Sepich 111). These rapid stylistic oscillations can occur quite suddenly, even within the same passage. For example, consider the following depiction of the Glanton Gang:

> At dusk they halted and built a fire and roasted the deer. The night was much enclosed around them and there were no stars. . . . They ate and moved on, leaving the fire on the

> ground behind them, and as they rode up into the mountains this fire seemed to become altered of its location, now here, now there, drawing away, or shifting unaccountably along the flank of their movement. Like some ignis fatuus belated upon the road which all could see and of which none spoke. For this will to deceive that is in things luminous may manifest itself likewise in retrospect and so by sleight of some fixed part of a journey already accomplished may also post men to fraudulent destinies. (McCarthy 120)

Here, the narrator's tendency toward stylistic and philosophical embellishments is captured in the shift from a mode of flat description to abstract, "lyrical prose [that] creates a sense of the poetic that goes beyond realism" (Cant 163). In this passage, more specifically, the narrator also brandishes the artifice or sleight of hand of their own heavily stylized aesthetic by directly invoking the "ignis fatuus"—a trope or figure for epistemic deception.

Paradoxically, then, the narrator's representational schema at once appears to achieve a level of verisimilitude or "intimate contact" with the historical events depicted; at other times, the narrator rhetorically highlights the impossibility of transcending the artifice or craft upon which all mimetic acts depend (Shaviro 153). These acknowledgements of inadequacy inscribe defamiliarizing effects that produce readerly estrangement. By cultivating states of confusion, the narrator can thus be read as inducing a detachment from the material violence at the level of the narrative, while permitting readers to derive pleasure from formal techniques. Simply put, they arguably showcase aesthetic techniques, valuing them for their own sake.

By foregrounding figures of visuality *and* illusion, however, the narrator serves to complicate notions that "image" and "language" constitute discrete categories or transparent mediums. By presenting paratactic images that, literally, must be read, it suggests excessive, labyrinthine entanglements of metaphor: "The whole question of whether verbal images are

properly called images gives us what Wittgenstein would call a 'mental cramp,'" W.J.T. Mitchell argues, "because the very distinction it assumes between literal and figurative expressions is, in literary discourse, entangled with the notion we want to explain, the verbal image" (*Iconology* 21). They are, in a word, confused. These excessive effects are rhetorically signalled in a variety of other ways in addition to the "ignis fattus" passage. Most clearly, as I discussed earlier, the narrator underscores the aesthetic production of omniscience as a mimetic illusion by refusing to provide narrative closure. In a conspicuous manner, they withhold a visual depiction of the novel's final exhibit: namely, the ultimate encounter in the jakes between the kid and Judge Holden. When James Robert himself vanishes from the diegetic frame, the narrator marks this provocative absence by having the kid try in vain to locate him:

> He saw a face slobbering in an upper window and climbed the stairwell and rapped at the door. A woman in a silk kimono opened the door and looked out at him. Behind her in the room a candle burned at a table and in the pale light at the window a halfwit sat in a pen with a cat. It turned to look at him, not the judge's fool but just some other fool. (McCarthy 311-12)

Lastly, readers encounter a figure for potential deception in the subtitle's reference to dusk—that is, *the Evening Redness in the West*—which invokes a time when visual clarity is diminished and epistemic certainty jeopardized.[88]

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[88] There is a French idiomatic expression which captures the possibility of illusion that attends the onset of evening is *entre chien et loup*. Though this phrase is used to refer to a mundane, daily event, it translates as "when a dog cannot be distinguished from a wolf." See also Sinykin, who addresses the issues of temporality signaled by this subtitle: "In an earlier draft of this passage, McCarthy notes, '(meridian = evening / as in title)' ('Early'). The note highlights what is strange: McCarthy uses a metaphor from the natural world—the movement of a day— but denaturalizes it by excising the afternoon, by making noon become immediately night. The fusion of *Blood Meridian* and *The Evening Redness in the West* … marks temporal collapse at multiple levels: of the quotidian distance between noon and evening; of the chronological

As I have attempted to elaborate, *Blood Meridian* is effectively split between two rhetorical performances that rely on self-reflexive irony: namely, the judge's enigmatic mystifications, which he uses to obscure both his quest for sovereignty and heinous acts of violence, and the narrator's intensely visual descriptions and "sumptuous language" (Cant 160), which combine to cultivate—albeit only to unsettle—readerly notions about its omniscient vantage and masterful techniques. Despite the obvious differences in terms of their roles, the judge's narrative actions and the narrator's meta-narrative invitations to readers are harmonized insofar as they both arguably draw on the freak show and harness its ironic aesthetic to induce an audience's "curious looking" (Adams 67).

Both the judge and the narrator construct aesthetic displays to stimulate a sense of wonder and horror, to pique interests via a mixture of pedagogical and sensational appeals; this establishes, in turn, an audience's unremarkable normality vis-à-vis the hyper-visible curiosity on display, and also caters to desires for inclusion in the unremarkable status quo. Yet they also cannily introduce the possibility that their performances are merely theatrical. By highlighting "formal workings while downplaying specific content," they divert their audience's attention away from motive or action and onto techniques of representation themselves (Bernhoft 28). Instead of producing credulity, their conspicuous displays ignite suspicion and, consequently, excite readers' desires to exert their own interpretive authority. As Garland-Thomson elaborates, such an aim fits with the freak show's epistemological effects:

> After 1840, freak shows may have been one of the last sites where the ordinary citizen could exercise the authority to interpret the natural world, a right bestowed by the

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distance between the mid-nineteenth century and the years of the novel's genealogy and publication, 1975–1985; and of the distance between mid-nineteenth-century US scalp hunting in the southwest borderlands and the contemporary imperial capitalism this practice worked to institute" (362-63).

> Reformation that was being incrementally revoked by the class division of labor—what Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English have called 'the rise of experts.' . . . In fact, the consolidation of medical authority occurred during the freak show era [—that is, 1840-1940.] (*Extraordinary* 70)

Both the narrator and the judge aim to similarly attract their audiences' curiosity by self-reflexively showcasing their own mimetic limits, cultivating representational confusion, and positing an opportunity for interpreters to exercise their intentional will.

The Perils of Curiosity

I began this chapter by asking what idiot/dog tropological confusion has to do with *Blood Meridian*. My close reading has detailed the ways James Robert serves this novel's symbolic order as a hyper-visible, yet critically overlooked, idiot/dog figure. As I have shown, he is routinely portrayed as a grotesque "What Is It?" freak—more specifically, a Darwinian missing link figure—embodying the threshold between the fully human and fully animal. As such, his body appears acutely vulnerable to being instrumentalized and capitalized on by other characters over the course of the narrative: first, he is introduced as a neglected, animalized "wild man" in Cloyce Bell's two-bit sideshow for profit; then, he is forcibly adopted and exhibited as dog-like by the enterprising Judge Holden to serve as a threatening sign of both biological retrogression and tracking human prey. When considered exclusively at the level of narrative action, this case of idiot/dog tropological confusion almost begs to be read—or, indeed, even criticized—as epitomizing the abuse, dispossession, and abjection of a mentally and physically disabled human character. Indeed, this is the sympathetic perspective espoused in the novel by the character of Sarah Borginnis.

To conclude, however, I redirect my analysis away from James Robert as a spectacular

idiot/dog figure of ontological indeterminacy to stress the tropological confusion he embodies, and its hermeneutic effects and biopolitical implications. To this end, I reconsider McCarthy's symbolic order in relation to how it potentially implicates *readers*—that is, how it might make them feel. I acknowledge that there is no uniform subject position or category of "the reader"; in other words, the potentially vast diversity of felt receptions to this novel are no doubt conditioned by a reader's own inhabitation of various social identities (e.g. race, gender, sex, class, religion, age, dis/ability). With all of these variables at play, I grant there is no measure that accurately accounts for readerly feeling. Nonetheless, as critics like Steven Shaviro suggest, McCarthy's novel is notorious, at least in part, because it induces states of confusion and affective ambivalence: "Reading *Blood Meridian* produces a vertiginous, nauseous exhilaration" (146). At first, these positive feelings of enjoyment—and even morbid curiosity—seem at odds with McCarthy's gruesome, historical narrative. Shaviro's reflection about his own unsettling feelings of euphoria and sickly revulsion suggest that readers cannot help but enjoy *and* revolt against this novel at once. His critical note about the experience of reading *Blood Meridian* highlights the ambivalence at the heart of its aesthetics and, by extension, its affective potency.

As with my last chapter on *Of Mice and Men*, then, I claim that *Blood Meridian*'s affective potency also comes with the risk of supporting readers' fantasies of their own subjective integrity and stability, specifically, by "extrapolat[ing] a human subject circularly from the phenomenon of emotion" (Terada 11). In this light, McCarthy's novel risks playing a productive biopolitical role in liberal knowledge-discourse formations to the extent that it hermeneutically cultivates a readerly sense (i.e. an affective state) that can too-hastily be identified with a normative category of subjectivity—one presumed to be both ontologically stable and capable of autonomously, even heroically, determining this novel's meaning. Setting

the groundwork for this claim, my previous section illustrated how *Blood Meridian*'s style transmutes the visual rhetoric of the freak show into literary form. Here, McCarthy offers readers a grotesque aesthetic of indeterminacy, the likes of which the novel ironically and self-reflexively acknowledges as a freak show inheritance. The most potent example of this acknowledgement is the narrator's refusal to divulge or make visible the final encounter between the kid and the judge; this is marked by the enigmatic question "What is it?" (McCarthy 334). This unresolved question begs to be answered, serving as a device for directed meaning. As I have shown, not only does this question, and the hermeneutic uncertainty it introduces, nod to the cultural history of Barnumesque advertisements for freakish human "curiosities" and other sideshow illusions, thereby emphasizing aesthetic form over content, it echoes the judge's hyperbolic construction and exhibition of James Robert as a biologically-determined missing link figure. Also, the kid's disappearance from the diegetic frame subtly recalls how James Robert's fate remains unresolvable and uncertain. Both disappearances carve out a site for ambiguous fissures and excess—indeed, for readerly confusion itself—within the narrative order.

To the extent that Judge Holden and the narrator emerge as competing—yet harmonized—practitioners of Barnumesque spectacle, the aesthetic conventions they adapt from the freak show come to light as hermeneutic lures or invitations for readers. Both the judge and the narrator promote a hermeneutics of suspicion. Once conceived as meta-narrative appeals, their aesthetic constructions, which are simultaneously dazzling and discomforting, comprise a dissonance that compels readers to approach the narrative action with piqued curiosity. By provoking readers to puzzle over dropped narrative threads and contradictory propositions, they both surreptitiously foster *readerly desire* for more information as well as closure. Moreover, by compelling this curiosity, Judge Holden and the narrator provide readers with the affective sense

that they are autonomous selves who can resolve the aesthetic indeterminacy they construct from a safe distance of non-complicity and/or isolation.

Why do I characterize this fantasy about the readerly subject's stable identity as biopolitical, not just hermeneutic? In short, because it contributes to the regularization and reification of "the normate" as an essential being and, by extension, an index of valuable life (Garland-Thomson 8). Here, I draw on the Foucaultian understanding that biopolitics not only regulates and categorizes individuals' bodies and the discursive construction thereof, but also "becomes the domain for the formation" of—and identification with—subjectivity itself (Boggs 173). By connecting McCarthy's aesthetic debt to the interpellations of the freak show—and, more specifically, the very fetishization of the *experience* of viewing freaks—to readers' and critics' own experience of reading *Blood Meridian*, I proceed to link the consumption of the literary freak show to the larger nexus of biopolitical subject formation that serves a hegemonic fantasy that the liberal subject is autonomous, capable, and self-asserting. Yet, as I ultimately argue, tropological confusion immanently confounds a model of liberal subjectivity that is implicated in the "show" of freakishness.

To date, McCarthy's critics have by and large tended to approach Judge Holden with suspicion, thereby capitulating to the magnetic pull of his rhetorical performance and, in particular, his claim to be a "suzerain" or "overlord"—one who "rules [even] where there are other rulers" by forcing all beings to "stand naked before him" (McCarthy 198-99). Though there are surprisingly few biopolitical analyses of the novel, James Dorson proposes to demystify the judge by reading him vis-à-vis the work of Agamben. He argues that the judge's violence epitomizes the implication of state rule (i.e. figured by the judge as law man) within the logic of exception (i.e. figured by the judge as outlaw). The judge, Dorson claims, is a paradoxical figure

of legal order in his sovereign capacity to operate above the law (i.e. a state of exception) and, in turn, to decide on the ontological status and value of the living beings that he forces to serve him (111). He does not address the pairing of Judge Holden with James Robert. I concede that using Agamben's disciplinary biopolitics as a lens helps to suggest why the judge harbours James Robert as a servile companion: to wit, the idiot/dog remains hyperbolically prone to the judge, but he cannot be killed because the judge's rhetorical exhibition of his "pet" freak, namely, as an animalized, biopolitical body, constitutes the very essence of his power. I do not deny that James Robert's exhibition as a hybrid freak subordinates him as "the civilized man's servant" (Taussig 220); however, I do stress that the judge's "mystifying posture" and his aura of super-human—or even super-abled—individuality *depends* on the naturalizing effects of this figure (Bernhoft 35). Such a reading underscores how the judge's self-mystification hinges on rhetoric and spectacle and, by extension, an audience's consumption of it.

For my part, I reiterate that readers are interpellated and, in effect, prompted to regard the judge with suspicious fascination throughout the novel. The enfreakment of James Robert constitutes one glaring example of this readerly interpellation. Other examples include the ex-priest Tobin urging the kid to "[s]tudy the judge" (McCarthy 122), as well as the kid asking: "What's he the judge of?" (135). Given these lures, it is crucial to observe that a demystification like Dorson's critique is a mode of interpretation that the novel dangles; that is, readers are tempted—even manipulated—to believe that Judge Holden's sovereign power is the key to the novel's significance. Insofar as both the judge and narrator traffic in spectacles of consumption, the cultivation of a hermeneutic of suspicion or critical demystification is precisely the goal and guarantee of their success. As Mark Seltzer argues,

> P.T. Barnum, for example, recognized early on that his success depended less on the credulity of his public than on its suspicion. That is, the cultivated egregiousness of his promotional schemes explicitly incited his paying public to 'see through" the mechanisms of deception and illusion, to see through the humbug. This is the democracy of disillusionment in a republic where each citizen-consumer can and will pay to see through the cover of rationality to the cleverness of its mechanisms of illusion: in such a democracy everyone will pay to see that the Emperor has no clothes. The mechanisms of such a disillusionment machine easily slip through the demystification model of ideology critique. (214)

Accordingly, I argue that demystifying *Blood Meridian*'s meaning as synonymous with a dramatization of disciplinary biopolitics risks overlooking meta-narrative mechanisms of power that operate contiguously to the juridico-political characters of the sovereign judge and his idiot/dog. Critical engagements that succumb to the temptation to heroically "make sense" of the novel are therefore subtly implicated in a biopolitical production of their own: specifically, such interpretive practices potentially excite readers' sense of their own autonomy, agency, and subjectivity as natural and free, rather than constructed, shifting, or endemic to systems of power. Put another way, if this novel stages disciplinary biopower-in-action on a narrative level, the narrator's aesthetic interpellation of readers functions as a more productive mechanism of biopower that, in the Foucaultian sense, reproduces the hegemony of the liberal subject and "elicits consent to the dominant economic and political ideologies of a particular historical order" (McRuer 192). Even when well-meaning critics like James Dorson and John Cant argue that McCarthy's novel critiques the U.S. juridical-political order and the "exceptionalist mythology" of the American imperial state (Cant 175), their own critical practices ironically

replicate a model of biopolitical subjectivity that is based in individual practical sovereignty. In other words, by exercising one's interpretative ability, one freely enacts one's own liberal subjectivity. *Blood Meridian* offers this reminder: interpretive practices are not innocent, but are bound up in the larger biopolitical production of subjectivity.

Against critical habits that reproduce a model of liberal subjectivity in the form of interpretative ability, I submit that the tropological confusion figured by James Robert needn't be resolved, even by reading this idiot/dog as a figure of bare life that guarantees the judge's sovereignty. Rather, this confusion can be seized as opening up a space for resisting the exercise of hermeneutic agency in a manner that distinguishes or distances the liberal human subject, as a reader/spectator, from the freakish and historical "curiosities" populating the novel's pages or, by extension, relegating disabled humans and entire animal species to a subordinate position. With the tropological confusion embodied by James Robert, McCarthy's readers are confronted with metalepsis: a figure standing for figuration itself, which multiplies kaleidoscopically and indeterminately. Is he human? Is he canine? Is he both? *Blood Meridian* thus emphasizes how narrative always exceeds what its language or mode of discourse can capture, thereby deferring mimetic readings, masterful interpretations, and self-possession. In effect, this tropological confusion dramatizes how McCarthy's novel exceeds its own aesthetic containers. Accordingly, James Robert does not simply reflect prejudicial structures of human normalcy within U.S. society that require and rely on a "natural" demotion of animality and idiocy; more than denigration is at risk of occurring on a meta-narrative level. However, unless he is seized upon as the novel's generative case of indeterminacy that disrupts the extension of liberal subjectivity, James Robert remains at risk of serving as the occasion around which readers reproduce their own liberal subjectivity as autonomous and abled interpreters. If he is conceived as a nodal point

where meanings and affects converge into a muddle, this idiot/dog figure constitutes another rhetorically useful instance of confusion—one that unsettles ableist imperatives in the hermeneutic act itself and the strict division between the human and the animal.

In sum, the excess that James Robert embodies as an idiot/dog is not reducible to passivity, feebleness, incapacity, or degradation. Likewise, the pairing of judge and idiot/dog does more than dramatize the overly symmetrical coupling of the figures of the sovereign and bare life.[89] Employing Agamben's understanding of biopower as a hermeneutic lens risks occluding the subtle ways that James Robert's enfreakment mediates the biopolitical construction of McCarthy's readers as liberal subjects who fetishize the experience of decoding symbols as an auto-affective sign of their own individual autonomy and agency (Boggs 126). As Boggs suggests, rather than a sovereign biopolitics focused exclusively on the abjection and exclusion of certain bodies, this novel's mystifying conceits are better viewed as "generat[ing] representational fissures through which recognition and critique of biopolitical subjectivity become possible" (157; emphasis added); it is these discursive fissures that tropological confusion of idiocy and caninity flaunts as catachresis.

My discussion of McCarthy's aesthetic debt to the freak show helps me to single out and untangle another complex thread within my dissertation's conceptual topoi: tropological

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[89] Contra Foucault, Agamben argues there has never been a civil society that isn't founded on biopolitical violence and the exclusion of some bodies rendered passive and killable as bare life. More specifically, bare life exists suspended on the threshold between the political order of rights/privileges and mere biological existence, between *bios* and *zoē*. As such, it is neither bios nor zoē, but an ontologically indeterminate and exceptional third term—a *tertium quid*—that separates the fully human from the fully animal. For Agamben, bare life is not animal or human, nor is it essentially pre-given; it's a figurative or "virtual" conceit—"a 'missing link'"—that aims to rhetorically secure or naturalize the human/animal division, while it effectively remains "empty" (37-38). The exercise of sovereignty resorts to a state of exception (or lawlessness) in its production of this figure, and the disciplinary function of the logic of exception (i.e. the anthropological machine) divides human subjectivity and its agency from the animal's objective physicality and supposed passivity.

confusion's continuity with the symbolic economies and rhetoric of freak show advertising and exhibition. I maintain that the critical potential of idiot/dog figures must be conceived as always immanent to, not separate or isolated from, orders of liberal biopower; in other words, it is not a utopian space. Yet rather than encouraging an ideology critique or demystification that purposively offers a reading of McCarthy's novel from a safe distance and confirms the identity (and autonomous will) of the interpreter-subject, this idiot/dog evinces disruptive aesthetic excess and provokes a readerly confusion that unsettles interpretive mastery. I argue tropological confusion serves as a "crip" (or counter-hegemonic) opportunity—a generative *failure* of sorts—that can be seized upon to help readers resist Judge Holden's and the narrator's separate invitations to a hermeneutics of suspicion and, in so doing, to dissent against the larger cultural imperative to "freely" exert one's self as an interpreter-subject. Conversely, by resisting the lures to definitively answer the "What is it?" question that threads throughout the narrative and ostensibly demands ontological clarity, *Blood Meridian*'s readers can pursue confusion—hermeneutic and epistemic—as a resistance potential. Of course, this begs yet another question. If a reader does not self-identify as a liberal subject, then *what is it?* My answer: I don't know.

In/determinate Conclusion: Toward a Critical Practice of Confusion

It might seem odd to end the previous chapter, my dissertation's last analysis of the idiot/dog figure, with what appears to be a concession: namely, that I don't know if there is a viable alternative to the production of the liberal reader—or, by extension, the neoliberal reader in more contemporary times—under American biopolitics. Ultimately, however, my study of idiot/dog figures in twentieth-century U.S. fiction impinges upon the question of readers' and critics' "abilities" or powers to understand the texts before them. For some, the phrase "I don't know" might appear to undermine a scholar's credibility; for some others, this might seem like mere rhetoric that masks "quietist" inaction (North 59).[90] On the contrary, far from trying to excuse critics from assuming a position of hermeneutic authority or responsible action, this parting expression of uncertainty is a politically, ethically charged recognition of the limits that circumscribe this particular project and, more generally, the affective conditions underlying deconstructive practices. With regards to the latter, as Avital Ronell suggests, it is important to avow that feelings of confusion often trigger inquiry:

> the disruption of knowing cannot be understood in terms of absence, default, deficiency, as if something could be filled, completed, or known by being brought out of its state of absence into unconcealedness. Rather, the rush of interference that produces gaps and unsettles cognition must be seen as a force that weighs in performatively and must be read. (101)

From this angle, "I don't know" is not a concession of a flaw or weakness. It reflects an acknowledgement that much more reading, learning, and labour is required of scholars in the

[90] See Joseph North's argument that literary critics must reject the legacy and influence of poststructuralist theory on the grounds that it is only a rhetorical pretense to leftist progressive politics and, as such, is not sufficiently active in its "resistance to [the] economic, political, and cultural systems" it purports to critique (x).

fields of Disability Studies and Animal Studies beyond the final pages of *Of Dogs and Idiots*, and I will sketch two potential directions for developing this work in a moment. My chapters' analyses are first steps, and I embrace an ethos of epistemological modesty in this conclusion in the spirit of moving forward. At the same time, "I don't know" is a position that permits scholars to affectively engage in a sense of exhausted self-suspension—a partial reprieve from the demands of exercising, experiencing, and reproducing their own readerly subjectivities—albeit without relinquishing the first-person pronoun or its implied notion of the self. After all, to critique the biopolitical production of the readerly subject while experiencing one's subjectivity from within that very frame is nothing less than a double bind.

Like Donna Haraway, I remain skeptical of anthropocentric and essentialist subject-object segregations of the social and natural world, yet hopeful about the possibility for new subjectivities based on relationships, hybrids, and encounters. Famously, Haraway proposes "companion species" as a promising alternative to the (neo)liberal subject—an alternative model grounded in mutually responsive, mutually constitutive relations, not stark distinctions or oppositions. Haraway's model can be summed up with these "mantras": "The partners do not precede the relating; all that is, is the fruit of becoming with" (*When* 17). That said, I am a little more tentative to speculate about what an alternative model of U.S. subjectivity would look like when it comes to the ostensibly solitary or private activity of reading fiction and the sense of sovereign self-possession this activity tends to effect. I do not mean to suggest that the biopolitical production of readers is entirely programmatic. No doubt one's social identity—understood here as a complicated amalgam, including but not limited to race, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, religion, ability, and species—conditions both the hermeneutic and affective receptions of a text. Nevertheless, to the extent that the category of the liberal American

subject has traditionally been reserved exclusively for human individuals who are presumed to be capable of freely exercising feats of epistemological strength and ethical response, the American readerly subject is likewise presumed to be capable of exercising their interpretative abilities to master texts. Meanwhile, the affective experience of reading reinforces a reader's felt sense of being an inherently responsible, capable, sympathetic, or even potentially human(e) self.

Alongside its work of drawing attention to overlooked or peripheral idiot/dog figures in key works of twentieth-century U.S. fiction, *Of Dogs and Idiots* pursues a biopolitical critique of the ontological production, identifiability, and governability of U.S. readerly subjects as (neo)liberal individuals. This critique is not congruent with an evacuation of the self to the point of absurd relativism or loss of agency. By the same token, I am not advocating for the reduction of subjectivity to pure cultural or social discourse (or, conversely, pure biological determinism). Instead, I draw on Haraway's influential concept of "natureculture", which contests the tidy separation of nature (or biology) from culture (or discourse) and refuses to move "beyond" poststructuralist-informed critiques of the subject only to replace it with another "troubled category" (*When* 17). I stick with this historical concept and insist on developing a critical practice of confusion that is equally invested in deconstruction and construction, oscillating between indetermination and determination, as well as the centrality of both material and symbolic relations that (re)produce categories of subjectivity in biopolitical times—the very conditions under which lives are framed as livable, or not.

This dissertation attempts to show how a "subjective" activity like reading a novel is never totally private, never free or immune from incursions of state power. On the contrary, each chapter demonstrated that reading fiction constitutes another potent means for harmonizing and naturalizing experiences, thoughts, desires, and feelings with the normative U.S. social and

symbolic order—a national order that hinges on recognitions and denials of human subjectivity, as well as on the very *production* of subjectivity in which fiction is implicated. Of course, one's experience of reading might seem to be original and self-determined and, therefore, an expression of the natural freedom purportedly enjoyed by human beings. However, this experience of self-possession cannot be so simply cordoned off from the ways reading fiction engages and encourages identification with—and, indeed, occludes internalizations of—the "governing rules and norms" of the national order (Pease "Pip" 328). In this respect, I agree with Donald Pease and Colleen Glenney Boggs that American biopolitics is made possible not only through what Foucault famously theorized as a tautological reproduction of normative ontological notions about the human body vis-à-vis the population as a species, and vice versa. It is also inextricably intertwined with discursive constructions of liberal subjectivity, as well as its concomitant and "deliberate exclusion of the nonhuman" (Boggs 11)—and, I add, the exclusion of those who are deemed liminal (i.e. not fully human or nonhuman). In this regard, biopolitics is reconceived throughout my project as contingent on representations of species and disability, that is, on biological tropes. Accordingly, U.S. literary and cultural critics need to continue to rethink the tropes and totalizing discourses, as well as the historical, material, and affective conditions, which allow for subjectivity to be delineated and governed "as such" in the first place.

More specifically, as my title suggests, *Of Dogs and Idiots* approaches figures of idiocy and caninity—and their conflation—in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985) from this biopolitical angle. With each chapter, I found that the idiot/dog's "real world" implications were irreducible to whether biological distinctions of ability or species status were "properly" or

mimetically represented in works of fiction. Also, I unpacked the complex ways idiocy and caninity contribute to what Ellen Samuels calls “fantasies of identification”—namely, desires to claim subjectivity as natural by disavowing the significant excesses that cannot be contained by scientific verification or medical models (2-3). Samuels is correct to point to categories of race, gender, and ability as key biological markers for naturalizing identity; however, I add the category of species to this list. Species is key, I argue, because the exercise of biopower remains contingent on targeting individual humans as organic bodies—what Foucault refers to as the reduction of “modern man [to] an animal” (*The History* 143)—in order to materially and discursively reproduce species norms as an effective means for managing populations. The deleterious history of U.S. eugenics at the turn of the twentieth century—and, more specifically, the scientific labeling of some humans as idiots and the framing of their bodies as pathologically degenerate and threatening to the point of nonhuman animality—epitomizes this kind of governmental regulation over human life. That said, “human” norms of the mind and body are imbued with meaning only to the extent that nonhuman species are likewise reproduced and regulated in discursive and material registers at once. The explosion of dog breeding in the U.S. at the same historical moment as eugenics, and the subsequent idealization of canine pedigree and purity with breed-specific studbooks, clubs, and registries, provides a view of this supplementary, nonhuman biopolitical narrative. Previously, scholars such as Martin Halliwell and Avital Ronell have elaborated how the trope of idiocy’s annexation to “the lexicon of medical and psychiatric histories” was accompanied by an aesthetic “fascination” (Ronell 167). Meanwhile, scholars such as Alice Kuzniar and Harriet Ritvo have elaborated how the trope of caninity’s annexation to a lexicon of pedigree and breeding histories was similarly accompanied by a surge in moralistic and “heartwarming” representations of dogs, especially in turn-of-the-

century literature (Ritvo 86-87). *Of Dogs and Idiots*, however, is the first study to focus on how and with what effects these tropes and histories intersect in the idiot/dog figure.

Having outlined the idiot/dog's material effects in my chapters on *The Sound and the Fury*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Blood Meridian*, I conclude this project by reiterating that this figure is much more complex and indeterminate than it initially appears. Besides potentially representing a case of abjection, a stigmatizing hybrid of human mental disability and canine animality, this figure emerges as an underestimated, recurring, and defamiliariazing convention in and of itself in twentieth-century U.S. literature and culture: an instance of excess I call tropological confusion.

In literary studies, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Blood Meridian* are institutionally disseminated throughout U.S. secondary and post-secondary schools, and they are routinely held up as exemplars, respectively, of American high modernism, late naturalism, and late modernism. My dissertation intervenes in such tidy periodizations of U.S. literary-critical history by suggesting that while there are indisputable differences between these texts that remain worthy of study, their shared deployment of a "marginal" idiot/dog figure reveals unexpected affinities and continuities. The allegedly modernist texts—Faulkner's high modernism and McCarthy's late modernism—share Steinbeck's "naturalist" fascination with the ways human subjectivity is determined by environmental *and* biological forces. Meanwhile, Steinbeck's allegedly objective, naturalist descriptions appear equally prone to formal disruptions, the likes of which are traditionally associated with modernist literature. Then, of course, there are the glaring continuities: namely, the idiot/dog figure's aesthetic construction at the level of narrative content, as well as the various ways it serves as an affective and hermeneutic invitation to readers at the level of form. Reading for the biopolitical dimensions of

the idiot/dog figure compels a reconsideration of the usual—or, put another way, the "normal"—divisions that have structured approaches to U.S. literary history.

Once the idiot/dogs of Faulkner, Steinbeck, and McCarthy are seized upon as double-edged figures, they do not appear merely as cases of abjection; they come into view as more than denigrating analogies. As in/determinate tropes for an animalized humanity and a humanized animality, each enciphers formal excess—a case of catachresis—that highlights participatory, ethically charged components within these fictions. The idiot/dogs I study here bring to light this meta-narrative relationship—affective and hermeneutic—generated between reader and text; they demand that readers decide how best to decode and respond to their excess. To the extent that they demand readerly choice and response, yet simultaneously wreak havoc on taxonomical distinctions and order, they also paradoxically register a dispossession of the ability of "the human" reader to rise above incertitude.[91] In turn, this confusion suggests that biopolitical interpretations of these works should be submitted as provisional and on a case-by-case basis, without reliance on the dominant narratives of literary-critical paradigms.

Ultimately, I offer tropological confusion as a counterhegemonic opportunity—one that readers can seize upon to challenge both the reproduction of ontological hierarchies and the reconsolidation of American subjectivity as a primary value. In biopolitical times, as Mel Chen puts it, it is crucial to ask: "what are the creditable bodies of import, those bodies whose lives or

[91] This dispossession recalls Jacques Derrida's pivotal deconstruction in *The Animal that Therefore I Am* of the human "ability" or "power" for self-reflection and self-possession. For Derrida, the notion that human subjectivity has essential characteristics or faculties that can be known is founded on, and confounded by, interpersonal *feelings*—indeed, other-oriented feelings—of shame and vulnerability that stem from "inability." In turn, this "inability" is twofold: the felt conditions of shared mortal limits—that is, a "finitude that we share with animals"—and a discursive, communicative impasse that also cannot be transcended. He elaborates this in/determination as a key aporia, calling it "nonpower at the heart of power" (27-28).

deaths are even in the field of discussion?" (6). Yet, as Haraway reminds us, the "body" is never just another word for a biological organism, but a hybridized product of natural and cultural relationships—or, in her words, it is an embodiment of natureculture—since "[o]rganisms are made; they are constructs of a world-changing kind. The constructions of an organisms' boundaries . . . are the job of discourses" ("The Biopolitics" 279). I do not prioritize bodies over tropes, or vice versa. I resolutely confirm their constitutive inter-implication. With the work of Chen and Haraway in mind, I have traced here the pressures that the figures of human mental disability and canine animality, and their in/determinate confusion, exert upon the naturalization of an ontological hierarchy that places a homogeneous, fully human subject at its apex.

I grant that individual works of twentieth-century U.S. fiction can never stand in for a century's worth of culture. Nonetheless, these fictions suggest there is something distinctively contextual—something verging on the idiomatic—about the idiot/dog figure that emerges in the U.S. during the twentieth century. When first conceiving of this project, I set out to show how each text deploys the idiot/dog hybrid to invoke the co-emergent histories, cultural scripts, and material practices of eugenics and dog breeding. As the project developed, I learned to resist the easy temptation to contend that *The Sound and the Fury*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Blood Meridian* were simply cultural reflections of ontological hierarchies and social inequalities premised on the categorical distinctions between ability and disability or humanity and animality. Previous critics have sufficiently outlined how the idiot/dog figure can be read as a sign of biological degeneration or social inferiority: Faulkner's depiction of Benjy Compson as a figure of mindless animality is discussed by Maria Trachan-Tataryn and Jacqui Griffiths; Steinbeck's depiction of Lennie Small as a human/animal hybrid is addressed by Morris Dickstein, Karen Keely, and Mark Spilka, and condemned by Sally Chivers and Stephanie Jensen-Moulton; and

McCarthy's representation of James Robert Bell, though only fleetingly discussed, is assumed to represent a barbaric state of nature by Adam Parkes and Jay Ellis. Yet nowhere are the life-and-death stakes of responding to the idiot/dog figure more harrowing than in Judge Cochran's sympathetic interpretation of *Of Mice and Men*, which became the legal benchmark for determining whether an inmate could be granted constitutional exemption from the death penalty in Texas (see Chapter Two). What makes the tropological confusion embodied by the idiot/dog figure biopolitically relevant, then, is not only that it can be read or condemned as denigrating. A study like this one is of particular concern for theories of American biopolitics because the ambivalence of the idiot/dog—its liminal position as animalized human and humanized animal—proves key to the production of a reader's own subjectivity. To put it more pointedly, it is crucial to the consolidation of a social fantasy of liberal subjectivity as human(e). That said, I have also tried to demonstrate that this figure is key to that fantasy's very undoing. In other words, the subject is both occasioned *and* disrupted by these reader-figure encounters.

Of Dogs and Idiots is not a complete account of the idiot/dog figure in twentieth-century U.S. fiction, and it is nowhere near an exhaustive study of tropological confusion when this concept is more capaciously defined beyond idiot and dog tropes in American culture. One potential direction for expanding the work I have begun here would be to address how distinctions of class, not only biological tropes, affect the idiot/dog figure's role in founding and confounding fantasies of (neo)liberal subjectivity. Though published in the twenty-first century (and, thus, emerging within the economic and political context of neoliberalism), George Saunders's "Puppy" (2013) thematically charts parallax views regarding the issue of how to properly love others—an exploration made possible in this short story by the tropological confusion of human mental disability and dogs. Saunders's narrative hinges on the divergent

perspectives of two mothers—Marie is affluent and Callie is poor—in relation to the ambivalence of the particular idiot/dog in this short story. Whereas Marie regards this figure as a sign of neglect and abjection, Callie approaches it as "perfect" (36). This divergence is repeatedly situated in terms of their class positions.

Given the scope of my project, at least in its current iteration, there was not room to closely attend to the biopolitics of sex and gender. I pinned my three core analyses on canonical works authored by American men and, in so doing, arguably focused on a biased construction of subjectivity as both male and masculine. Thus, another promising direction would be to examine how idiot/dog tropological confusion becomes even more complex when mixed up with tropes of gender, sex, and sexual desire in a novel like Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1937). Close readings of Barnes's novel would augment my project because it casts queer identity as exceeding—and yet, paradoxically, contained within—the traditional binaries, conventions, and ontological orders the novel targets. *Nightwood* is notorious for its ambiguous conclusion, ending with the collapse of Robin Vote, its protagonist, as if seized by a fit of unthinking mania or, to put it more clinically, a case of *non compos mentis*: Robin wordlessly drops down on all fours in the middle of a decaying chapel and cavorts with—indeed, behaves like—the pet dog of Nora Flood, an ex-lover (Barnes 179-80). Given that earlier on in the narrative Robin gives birth to Guido, who is diagnosed as "[m]entally deficient" (114), does this final scene suggest that she, too, ultimately embodies the threat of idiocy?[92] Given what I have taken away from this project, I would not pursue such a reading that pessimistically confirms that this queer character's tropological confusion constitutes abjection or degeneration in the face of compulsory heterosexuality, ability, and species identities (i.e. restrictive biological and social ideals). Instead, I would

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[92] See Priyank Deshmukh's recent argument that Robin Vote should be approached as an idiot figure.

consider how this character's configuration vis-à-vis tropes of idiocy, caninity, and queerness epitomizes her double bind as a transgressive force caught up in a biopolitical frame. These examples are just two promising directions in which the work I've begun here might be extended.

The idiot/dog figures in *The Sound and the Fury*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Blood Meridian* have helped me to bridge the critical subfields of Animal Studies and Disability Studies. Yet *Of Dogs and Idiots* also diverges from the critical mainstream of Disability Studies in important ways. Disability Studies in the U.S. continues to bear the influential mark of Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell's claim that disability constitutes "the master trope of human disqualification in modernity . . . that jettison[s] certain people from inclusion in the continuum of acceptable human variation" (*Cultural* 127-28). I avoid positing disability alone as "the master trope" of disqualification atop a hierarchy of other disqualifying tropes in the twentieth century, and propose instead that the social and ideological disavowal of mental disability has historically proceeded by and through its inextricable relation to animal figures, in general, and with canine tropes, more specifically. As each of my chapters zeroed in on this mixing of idiocy and caninity, they did so less as a convenient means of diagnosing a problem and more as means of (re)imagining a literary antidote to the anthropocentric and ableist values extended by socio-political critiques of "dehumanization," the preponderance of which serves as the framework for much social justice criticism today. For as Cary Wolfe writes,

> as long as this humanist and speciesist *structure* of subjectivization remains intact [that is, the ontologization of a gap dividing humans from all other animals], and as long as it is institutionally taken for granted that it is all right to systematically exploit and kill animals simply because of their species, then the humanist discourse of species will

> always be available for use by some humans against other humans as well, to countenance violence against the social other of whatever species. (*Animal* 8)

In view of Wolfe's prominent Animal Studies' position, I must also clarify that I have not attempted to transcend the symbolic and material violence that attends the dialectical logic of humanization/dehumanization here by merely reasserting the animality of all human characters as a greater, more absolute truth. Nor have I suggested that the term "dehumanization" needs to be permanently retired because it rhetorically encodes a harmful anthropocentric universal.

Why would I choose *not* to pursue these options? As Christopher Peterson convincingly puts it, "To privilege the animal and marginalize the human is to reverse rather than displace the human/animal opposition" (9). In other words, when the value of these terms is merely switched, the dialectical logic itself remains operative. No matter how strong my utopian desires might be to break with the humanist insistence that animality translates as a pejorative, and no matter how desperately I continue to dream of making a post-ableist world a reality, I recognize that transcending the discursive and material histories in which I am embedded is impossible. For as Disability Studies scholar Tanya Titchkosky so rightly observes, "However we articulate and work on oppression, the words and deeds generated by such work are inhabited by the terms and conditions of the same world from which they spring and which we wish to change. Our words are part of, made from, and flow back into the same world we want to make different" (6). Though I have tried to reimagine the words and methods for critiquing ableism and speciesism, there can be no definitive alternative or end to the use of "dehumanization" as shorthand for diagnosing problems that require critical social justice work. By the same token, there can be no decisive "afterwards" following the dialectical binarization of "the human" and "the animal." The learning and labour required must be conceived as ongoing, yet part of a historical lineage.

My dissertation has pursued a critical practice of confusion as a form of immanent critique. By addressing the ways that the reproduction of animality, disability, and subjectivity are contingent on literary-cultural conventions and representations, not grounded in natural order or immutable ontological universals, it offers a corrective to progressive narratives within Disability Studies and Animal Studies that purport to offer ways to overcome biopolitical histories and violence. Instead, I recognize that the in/determinacy of the idiot/dog figure in twentieth-century U.S. fiction is key to the production of (neo)liberal subjectivity under biopolitics. Yet, at the same time, it presents us with a counterhegemonic opportunity to learn to read otherwise and, in so doing, to risk being remade ourselves as both readerly *and* human subjects. More broadly, tropological confusion is an opportunity to reconsider other tropes that are assumed to be merely degrading; it is a chance to reshape the very boundaries of "the human" with an enriched sense of diversity rather than deficiency.

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