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Aging, Abandonment and Friendship in a Cruel World: Human-Canine Bonding in Sigrid Nunez's *The Friend*

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Abstract

German-Panamanian-Chinese-American writer Sigrid Nunez's seventh book *The Friend* (2018) is a hybrid narrative, a composite of memoir, meditation, novel, fiction and metafiction, on human and non-human animal companionship. It amalgamates issues that have become trademarks of Nunez's fiction such as loss and grief with the companionship of non-human animals and humans. The book thematically blurs the boundaries between humans and non-human animals and fundamentally challenges and questions Western ways of thinking about human-animal dualistic hierarchy, according to which animals are associated with instincts rather than reason, with teh body rather than the mind, and with nature rather than culture. While the human world the novel presents is filled with vile gossip, competition, senseless brutality and bloodshed, the animals set an example of loyalty and friendship; with their superior mental and bodily capacities, animals in *The Friend* are portrayed, rather than dumb creatures, as wise kin of humans still persisting in goodness though wrongfully exiled from human privileges. Thus in her intricately knitted narrative, Nunez offers the companionship of non-human animals as the only saving grace in human life.

Keywords: Sigrid Nunez, *The Friend*, (Human) Animal Studies, Friendship with Animals, Violence

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Acımasız bir Dünyada Yaşlanmak, Terk Edilmek ve Dostluk: Sigrid Nunez'in *Dost* Romanında İnsan Köpek Bağı

Öz

Alman-Panamalı-Çinli-Amerikalı Sigrid Nunez'in yedinci kitabı olan *Dost* (2018), insan ve insan-dışı-hayvan ilişkilerine odaklanan ve içinde anı, meditasyon, roman, kurmaca ve üstkurmaca öğeleri barındıran melez bir anlatıdır. Kitap, Nunez'le özdeşleşmiş olan kayıp ve yas gibi temalarla insan-hayvan ilişkilerini birlikte harmanlar. Tematik olarak insan ve hayvan arasındaki sınırları bulanıklaştırarak hayvanı içgüdüyle, bedenle ve doğayla, insanı ise akılla ve kültürle özdeşleştiren Batı düşüncesinin insan-hayvan hiyerarşik ikiliğine radikal karşı duruş içerir. Bu düşüncenin aksine, kitapta insan dünyası her türlü kötülüğün ve şiddetin gerçekleştiği alanken hayvanların dünyası dostluk ve sadakatle doludur. Ayrıca, *Dost*'ta hayvanlar, üstün akli ve bedensel kapasiteleriyle, aptal ve duyarsız yaratıklar olarak değil, insana tanınan ayrıcalıklardan haksız biçimde yoksun bırakılmalarına karşın iyi kalmakta ısrar eden bilge aile bireyleri olarak resmedilirler. Bu durumda hayvanların dostluğu, insanı kendi dünyasının kötülüklerinden koruyabilecek tek kurtarıcı olarak ortaya çıkar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sigrid Nunez, *Dost*, (İnsan) Hayvan Çalışmaları, Hayvan Dostluğu, Şiddet

Introduction

The Friend (2018) is German-Panamanian-Chinese-American writer Sigrid Nunez's seventh novel, which brought her international acclaim along with the National Book Award. Nunez (b. 1951) was born to a German mother and a Panamanian-Chinese father and spent a working class childhood in a housing project on Staten Island along with poor families of other ethnic groups. Her father held a regular job in a hospital kitchen and worked in various Chinese restaurants on weekends. She earned her BA in English at Barnard College and MFA from Columbia University, after which she worked for *The New York Times Review of Books*. Her multicultural background enabled her to write on a wide variety of subjects from family to identity, pandemics

to the Vietnam War, and grief and loss to friendships with humans and animals. In addition to her novels, she also wrote a biography of Susan Sontag, *Sempre Susan: A Memoir of Susan Sontag*. Her most autobiographical debut novel *A Feather on the Breath of God* (1995) reflects the coming-of-age of a young girl based on Nunez's own experiences. *For Rouenna* (2001) revisits the Vietnam War, from the fresh and unusual perspective of a young nurse, as experienced by a woman. It also introduces some of the themes that will resurface in *The Friend*: suicide, loss, and friendship. In *The Last of Her Kind* (2005) Nunez explores the sixties in an unlikely friendship between two Barnard roommates from different social classes and upbringings. *Salvation City* (2010) is another coming-of-age novel of a boy orphaned by a flu epidemic and the turns his life takes after being adopted by a pastor in a small town in Indiana. Not only does Nunez touch on the issue of epidemic that has become a life-altering reality for her readers now, but also points towards the clash between secularism and religious fundamentalism, a divide that American people, along with the rest of the world, feel ever more deeply. Nunez's last novel *What Are You Going Through* (2020), in which a woman accompanies an acquaintance with terminal cancer, revisits some earlier topics she had dealt with in *For Rouenna*, *The Last of Her Kind*, and *The Friend*.

The Friend is a hybrid narrative form, a composite of memoir, meditation, novel, fiction and metafiction, on human and non-human animal companionship. It amalgamates issues that have become trademarks of Nunez's fiction such as loss and grief with the companionship of non-human animals[1] and humans. The novel explores the possibility of love and redemption in a world of unimaginable yet real atrocities. In a complex and often digressive plot, Nunez tells the story of a middle-aged writing instructor's attempts at finding meaning in a world after losing her mentor/lover and long-time friend, a well-known and successful author, to his unforeseen suicide.

One of her recurring presences, animals have been interwoven in Nunez's fiction such as in *For Rouenna*, in which the narrator mentions having a cat, and in *Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury* (1998), the biography of Leonard and Virginia Woolf's adopted pet marmoset, who suffers from the consequences of war and exile as much as humans. A dog appears in Nunez's debut novel *A Feather on the Breath of God* significantly referring to the memories of the narrator's Panamanian-Chinese father who, after ten years of stay, has to leave his dog in

China when he leaves for the United States. Although the narrator considers her father more of a mystery about whom she knows very little, she knows that behind his nostalgia for China lies his profound longing for and guilt of leaving behind this dog who understands that he is abandoned, an issue that Nunez takes up in *The Friend*. The narrator is sure that his memory of the dog howling behind him never left him. When a dog appears in Nunez's fiction again in *The Friend*, he occupies the center so much so that it is this "dog-centric world" that draws animal lovers and Animal Studies scholars to the novel (Johnson 47).

Human-Animal Studies or Animal Studies is a response to the age-old speciesism that has dominated Western thinking from its Judeo-Christian roots to the present. Though the Enlightenment shattered the theocentric conception of the world, it replaced it with an anthropocentric universe where non-humans deserved little or no consideration. From the religious argument that denied possession of soul to animals, the Enlightenment shifted the focus to the exclusive possession of reason by humans, an argument that later evolved into the exclusive human ability for language. Especially Descartes and his designation of animals as automata contributed greatly to the perception of animals as unworthy of ethical consideration. There have been individuals from Western thought and religion such as St. Francis of Assisi, Henry Salt, and Jeremy Bentham, who strongly disagreed with such a view of animals, but it was with the publication of *Animal Liberation* by Peter Singer in 1975 that a much greater interest in animals as deserving of ethical consideration and legal rights began to be voiced. Thinkers and writers from a wide array of disciplines from ethology to psychology, from evolutionary biology to ethics, and from literature to linguistics have contributed to the field, illuminating the neglected intelligence, capacities and functions of animals.[2] As such, each new study has helped break down human superiority and the barriers that have separated humans from non-human animals. Animal Studies has given impetus to literature about animals. In older works literary scholars excavated and brought animals, so far beyond critical interest, to critical attention as more and more new works explicitly dealing with human and animal relationships have been published.

Animal Studies is also closely related to studies on race and gender, for many of cruel practices on non-white people and discrimination against women are made possible by animalizing them.[3] The theoreticians speaking from the intersections among these discrimina-

tory practices and discourses call attention to the fact that if it were not for the conceptualization of animals as lesser forms of life, hierarchies based on race would not be so easily convincing. While non-white races are often animalized, they are further shown to be unclean in their dealings with animals. For example, Asians are often stereotyped for eating animals considered unclean and/or inedible in the West—such as dogs, a point that Nunez subtly challenges in *A Feather* with the strong connection between her narrator's father and his dog in China.

In *The Friend*, the narrator, with the unexpected suicide of her mentor, finds herself having to take care of his dog Apollo, who becomes her companion in mourning, quest for meaning, and strength to stay alive. The friendship that she develops with this aging dog becomes the center of the narrator's life from which she explores the role of friendship and literature in a world dominated by atrocities and violence exerted by humans on all forms of life. This essay argues that in this intricately knitted narrative, which offers the companionship of non-human animals as the only saving grace in human life, Nunez successfully blurs the boundaries between humans and non-human animals and fundamentally challenges and questions Western ways of thinking about human-animal dualistic hierarchy, according to which animals are associated with instincts rather than reason, with the body rather than teh mind, and with nature rather than culture. While the human world the novel presents is filled with vile gossip, competition, senseless brutality and bloodshed, the animals set an example of loyalty and friendship; with their superior mental and bodily capacities, animals in *The Friend* are portrayed, rather than dumb creatures, as wise kin of humans still persisting in goodness though wrongfully exiled from human privileges. At the end, the reader asks, between animals and humans, who actually is the more rational being and where else any human can find true companionship if not with animals.

Companion Animals: Haven in A Cruel World

The narrator's personal loss, suffering, and trauma are juxtaposed with those in a world where such experiences have become daily realities. The novel opens with the trauma that some Cambodian women refugees experience: for no apparent biological reason they suddenly go blind. The narrator notes that "[b]efore fleeing their homeland,

they had witnessed the atrocities for which the Khmer Rouge, which had been in power from 1975 to 1979, was well known" (Nunez 1).[4] The human world the narrator describes is often filled with unspeakably horrid forms of violence so much so that victims refuse to see, hear or speak more of it. Scattered throughout the book are many other examples of violence from recent human history fictionally documented in the film *Lilya 4-Ever* and by studies on and interviews with survivors of human trafficking. The Cambodian women who "had seen family members murdered in front of them … suffered from blurred or partial vision, their eyes troubled by shadows and pains" (1). The narrator comments, "the women's minds, forced to take in so much horror and unable to take more, had managed to turn out the lights" (2). She is also invited by a friend of hers to offer a writing workshop for survivors of human trafficking, and as preparation her friend asks her to watch *Lilya 4-Ever*, a movie based on a true story about a sixteen-year-old girl in the Soviet Union abandoned initially by her mother and abused and forced into prostitution by everyone she cares for and loves. Finally, a young Swedish boy with whom she falls in love promises her happiness, only to become the last and final blow in her life. In Sweden where she goes with the hopes of reuniting with her boyfriend, she is met by a man who sells her into prostitution. None of the clients "allows either her obvious youth or the obvious fact that she is acting against her will to interfere with his lust," the narrator comments; "[o]n the contrary, everyone behaves as if sex slavery is what Lilya has been put on this earth for" (65). As the narrator witnesses from the accounts of real victims of human trafficking in her writing workshop, the actual experiences of women surpass the rendition of Lilya's story on the screen. As one of the Moldovan prostitutes who were shown the film says after the movie: fictionalized violence is often "*[n]ot brutal enough*" (66; emphasis original). Many of these survivors cannot even be called women because they are mostly teenagers such as "[the] fourteen-year-old … rescued … from a house where she'd been kept chained to a cot in the basement" (63). Like the Cambodian women who shut their eyes to the world so full of violence, "this girl is unable to speak," for no biological reason. Such psychosomatic symptoms may include "mutism, blindness, paralysis" (64).

The most startling aspect of such redundant and surplus brutality is the part the civilized Western world plays in it. "For people who have themselves been victims of inequality and exploitation," the

narrator's friend comments, "there might be some understanding for the way they mistreat one another. There might even be forgiveness. … But the depraved behavior of all those privileged members of the prosperous Nordic welfare state—this is rather harder to accept" (67). Eventually, the film director cannot offer any other consolation than his belief that "God took care of Lilya," holding no human responsible for taking care of the "Lilyas of the world" and leaving those who cannot share such belief without any consolation (66-67).

Human cruelty is most widely practiced on animals; in fact it is the Ur cruelty that probably opened the possibilities of other forms of brutality on more vulnerable humans. The scope of the novel limits cruelty to animals with pets, which demonstrates most strikingly the kind and extent of pain humans are capable of inflicting on their companion species. Among others, she mentions a cat abandoned because of her owner's allergic reaction and moved from one place to another until "it was no longer the same creature. It was a mess—a mess no one was willing to live with and so the original owner had to put it down" (45).

The excessive violence and downright malice of the human world is juxtaposed with the stories of animal friendship, undercutting Western beliefs designating nature as a place red in tooth and claw and human civilization as a safe and peaceful haven. The references to the world of dogs demonstrate a world of devotion and love. Hachiko, Fido, and the Greyfriars Bobby are such examples. The first waiting for his dead master every day at the train station for nearly ten years, and the second and the third waiting for theirs, respectively, at the bus-stop and at his grave, for fourteen years. These animal stories clearly show that animals possess the traits often thought to characterize humans. The narrator quotes earlier in her narrative the result of some scientific research: "The only animal that commits suicide is also the only animal that weeps" (15). Reminiscent of Bentham's famous answer to Descartes' designation of animals as automata with no souls: *"*The question is not, Can they reason?, nor Can they talk? but, *Can they suffer?* Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being?*"* (emphasis added), the narrator reminds her reader, maybe they do not weep or commit suicide like humans, "But they can and do fall to pieces. They can and do have their hearts broken. They can and do lose their minds" (45).

In the novel, Apollo provides entry into the world of animals. The narrator had stopped having animals, but Apollo comes to her care as her mentor's wish when she is still grappling with his shocking suicide. He was living the most tranquil time of his life domestically and medically. Also, he recently had a new jump-start in his writing career after a painful period of writer's block. Thus, his suicide becomes a mystery the narrator tries desperately to comprehend throughout the narrative. The mentor adds to the mystery by leaving no explanation, note, or letter, behind. Thus she hopelessly tries to bring together signs scattered through a long time, words smuggled into more engaging issues. Once for example, he said, "*I think I'd prefer a novella of a life*," to which his listeners responded as a mere joke (6; emphasis original). She also remembers that suicide had been one of his frequently visited topics: for example, he referred to Ted Bundy's work in a suicide prevention call center. She also realizes the incidence of suicides or suicidal tendencies among artists and especially writers: Woolf, Flaubert, O'Connor, Hemingway …

For the narrator Apollo is from the start a chance to reconnect with him and to make some sense of her mentor-friend's suicide. She ruminates when she first brings Apollo to her apartment: "Having your dog is like having a part of you here" (39). Like the relationship between the narrator and her mentor, between Apollo and the narrator a multifaceted relationship begins, one that transforms both. It starts out as a forced and stressful one, for the narrator's contract does not allow dogs, let alone a huge harlequin Dane, in her too-tiny apartment. She brings him home not knowing what will happen with the building management because other alternatives are either not possible like kennels, or not thinkable like euthanasia—which most people refer to euphemistically, as "put to sleep." In time, Apollo not only becomes a catalyst for the narrator to evaluate her relationship with her lost friend, authorship, teaching, and aging, but also a mystery for its own sake to be solved, just like the mystery behind the suicide of her friend. In a way, Apollo's mystery replaces the mystery behind the suicide of her mentor. As she tries to unravel Apollo's history and emotions, she hopes to unravel major mysteries of her mentor's and her own life. She closely observes his behavior in order to find some evidence to explain his past during and before her mentor.

In their unusual relationship, the binaries separating humans and animals gradually dissipate as the two become mentally and bodily con-

nected. Western thought has traditionally deprived animals of traits of language, thinking and even sentience. From the biblical Genesis story on, only human beings, often exclusively the male gender, are believed to be made in the image of God and in possession of redeemable souls, rendering the rest of creation hierarchically lower than humans.[5] The same narrative gives the privilege of naming animals to Adam, an act that Nunez also refers to as the first sign of domination.[6] This understanding is cemented by Western philosophy, especially by Descartes according to whom animals are simply machines with no reasoning capacity,[7] not even capacity for feeling pain. Fed both by decrees of monotheistic religions and Western philosophy's dualistic mindset, Western science has found little ethical obstacle in the way of experimenting on animals and, more recently, taking full advantage of them in factory farms. Such a separation between humans and animals has given way to a culture that has continually uprooted and enslaved animals, turning them into spectacles for human entertainment in zoos and circuses.

The narrator's relationship with Apollo challenges patterns of Western dualistic thinking by destabilizing the human/mind and animal/body binaries. Not surprisingly, initially she occupies the reason and mind part of these binaries. Not only is she a human but also one that engages in highly intellectual endeavor of writing. Yet with Apollo she discovers that she can communicate with her body. Succumbing herself to his intimate embrace and paying close attention to him, she seeks a gateway into Apollo's emotions, initially remaining behind a screen of mist. The narrator notes, "Mostly he ignores me. He might as well live here alone" (39). As opposed to Wife Three's promises, he crawls on the narrator's bed and becomes her bedfellow. Waking up one night, she "can make out his big bright eyes and juicy black plum of a nose. I lie still, on my back, in the pungent fog of his breath. ... Every few seconds a drop from his tongue splashes my face. Finally he places one of his massive paws, the size of a man's fist, in the center of my chest and lets it rest there: a heavy weight" (42). The two bodies share senses of touch, smell, body warmth and a large number of microorganisms. From that night on, this nightly ritual is repeated between the two with Apollo snuggling, nudging, and sniffing the narrator as she remains motionless for his exploration: "[F]or a few minutes I become an object of intense fascination" (42).

This equalizing bodily sharing is what Haraway calls "lateral communications" between "kin and kind," taking place in the "oth-

er worlding" that she defiantly calls "natureculture" (*When Species Meet*, 10, 20). She maintains that humans and animals are products of the same history of natural events and disasters, climate changes, human and animal mass migratory movements, colonialism, scientific developments and enhancements. They share not only history but also a huge portion of their biology, with only a tiny portion of DNA separating humans from their closest non-human kin. As the epidemics and pandemics in history demonstrate, with non-human animals, humans also share a considerable amount of microorganisms in their daily contact, which is in fact comparable to sexually transmitted and shared microorganisms between two lovers. Both are in fact forms of intimacy. According to Haraway this "embodied communication" between the narrator and Apollo

> is more like a dance than a word: the flow of entangled, meaningful bodies in time—whether jerky and nervous or flaming and flowing, whether both partners move in harmony or are painfully out of synch or something else altogether—is communication about relationship, the relationship itself, and the means of reshaping relationship and so its enacters. ("Encounters," 111)

Haraway explains that the word species comes from the Latin *specere*, which has "tones of 'to look' and 'to behold'" ("Encounters" 100). Since, "[i]n logic, species refers to a mental impression or idea," she suggests, "*thinking and seeing* are clones," concluding that "[s]pecies is about the dance linking kin and kind" (100; emphasis added). The word *respecere,* (respect) derives from the same root. Thus, she announces:

> To hold in regard, to respond, to look back reciprocally, to notice, to pay attention, to have courteous regard for, to esteem: all of that is tied to polite greeting, to constituting the *polis:* where and when species meet. To knot companion and species together in encounter, in regard and respect, is to enter the world of becoming with, where, who, and what are, are precisely what are at stake. … Species interdependence is the name of the worlding game on Earth, and that game must be one of response and respect. That is the play of companion species learning to pay attention. (102)

When the narrator actually *sees* Apollo, she simultaneously begins to *think* about him. Reciprocated by Apollo, these acts connect them into a "world of becoming." She becomes attentive to the smallest

details about him. She notices the transformation that he goes through with her while she herself is transformed in their relationship. For example, she believes Apollo *was* in fact trained to stay off the bed in his former homes, but he became *the* Apollo she has, sharing her bed, her mourning, and her grief. In this relationship they are connected with a strong bond as two living bodies that mourn the death of their mutual friend. As such, they can communicate without recourse to words. The narrator often says that she does not want to speak to anyone about her friend, about what they shared and what they talked about, about what he meant to her. These are beyond the power of words for her, a sentiment she seems to share with an animal that lacks—or, has no need for—words. Just as he becomes a different dog with her, she, as a writer who has mastery over words, experiences a transformation realizing the shortcomings of words when two bodies are profoundly bonded. For each body, the other is what remains from their mutual friend that they will never touch, smell, or embrace. There are certainly no words to express this feeling but the shared world of the senses.

In the past, her mentor had also, albeit shortly, opened a phase of corporeal becoming with the narrator through sexual intimacy. One day he announces that "we should fuck. … Because … we should *find that out about each other*" (21; emphasis original). To him bodily knowledge is a requirement to complete the circle of intellectually shared knowledge between the two. She remembers that in the mentor's life, mental and bodily experiences always completed rather than excluding each other. Sexuality and flânerie are always inseparable parts of his writing. He often declares to his friends "*If I can't walk, I can't write*" (3; emphasis original). Likewise, sexual life that, in his case, verges on "womanizing" is part of his writing. "The intensity of your romantic life was not merely helpful but essential to your work, you said," remembers the narrator about her friend. "You … never wrote better than during those periods when you were having lots of good sex, you said. With you, the beginning of an affair often coincided with a spell of productivity" (30). The mentor's approach to corporeal knowledge as an aspect of discovery about another embodied being places it alongside and equal to theoretical and scientific knowledge. His persistence on his bodily activities as his motivation for his writing subverts the dynamics of the Western tradition that regards mental and cerebral activities higher than, and independent from those of the body. This tradition has long depended on binaries between culture and

nature, the soul or the spirit and the body, man and woman, and human and nonhuman animal. From this perspective, activities pertaining to culture fall into the domain of the human, namely man, who has a claim to possession of reason and soul as opposed to spiritless animals and their domain, nature. The body is the animal side of the humans, from whose servitude they should try to liberate themselves. It is what prevents humans from rising to the heights of culture, reason, and the spirit, in other words, the heights of God. Nunez, however, depicts a character who, not only is enmeshed equally in cultural production or creativity and bodily pleasures—or even sins—but also *needs* his bodily satisfactions to feed his creative, intellectual, and godlike side.

The distinction between Apollo and the mentor—and body and mind—further disappears when Apollo proves to be an avid listener of literature. Reading aloud one night what she has written to herself, the narrator finds that Apollo wakes up from his sleep and approaches her desk. When she finishes, poking her with his nose barking very quietly, he communicates that "[h]e wants me to keep reading" (131-132). She then picks up *Letters to a Young Poet* by "Rilke, who loved dogs and looked hard at them and shared a boundless communion with them" (137). The next day Apollo himself chooses his book for her to read to him. The narrator thinks someone, perhaps her mentor, might have read to Apollo. Although Wife Three declares not having seen him reading to Apollo at least when she was present, the possibility that it might have actually happened brings the three companions together. Finally turning the tables on human/non-human animal hierarchy, she attributes to Apollo not only mental capacity but also even scientifically supported superior senses that humans lack. "[M]aybe Apollo is a canine genius who has figured out about me and books," she ponders. It is possible, she thinks, with his "phenomenal nose," he can smell not only cancer and mental states of humans—as studies have shown—but also "predict a looming fit of the blues?" (139). Compared to Apollo, all human knowledge and understanding pale: "we humans don't know how the half of how dogs' brains work," she admits. Her final declaration challenges the treatment of animals as objects of scientific study and topples over Western hierarchies of knowledge, which place humans as the knower and animals as the known: "They may well, in their mute, unfathomable way, know us better than we know them" (139).

Apollo and the mentor merge further because they are both abandoned and left behind. He first met Apollo as he was "Standing

on an overhang, silhouetted against the sky. … A harlequin Great Dane. … [P]urebred though it was, it might have been *abandoned*" (25; emphasis added). Why would anyone abandon a dog so beautiful, well-trained and well-behaved? This is the mystery Apollo will never reveal. He looked clean and well-fed, but without a collar and a tag. The vet tells the narrator that the likelihood of his running away from his former home is very weak, and the lack of anyone reporting him missing further weakens this theory. Maybe he was stolen, but according to the vet, there are more disturbing and hard-to-face possibilities "happen[ing] more often than you might think, said the vet" (50): Loss of jobs, inability to afford vet bills and pet supplies may be reasons as well as simply finding life easier after a dog is stolen. Also if the original owner dies, it is very likely for a dog like Apollo to be thrown out by those who have inherited him. In fact these stories are not at all unfamiliar, for she knows that dogs and cats are the first victims of economic collapse and loss of jobs, of changes of place, deaths of human companions, or changes of mind. She remembers that her sister and her husband bought a house in the country, the former owners of which had "an ancient mutt. *A part of the family* since he was a pup, they introduced him. When my sister and her husband went to move in, they were met by the dog, left behind, alone in the empty house" (50; emphases added).

Who but humans would leave "a part of the family" behind? Especially in the face of the tales of devotion from dogs like Hachiko, Fido and the Greyfriars Bobby, such tales sound all the more cruel. If these dogs' world is what humans have left behind in their progress towards civilization, then it was already paradise that they left. Obviously the price for possession of reason and (self-) consciousness has been too high for human beings: They have lost their friends and family and earned an unfathomable form of cruelty and a senseless violence.

As an aging man, the mentor finds himself abandoned and pushed to the periphery of life. His relationships with women were not the same because his body was changing into an older man's less desirable body. After he turns fifty, with the weight that he had gained temporarily, in a hotel mirror, he sees "[n]othing *too* hideous for middle-aged man" but certainly, "not a body to turn any woman on." He feels as if "A power has been taken away, it can never be given back again … a kind of castration" (31). His last conquest was of a nineteen and a half year-old woman, but he realizes with dismay it is not his

body that she desired but "narcissism, the thrill of bringing an older man in a position of authority to his knees" (29). Caught in what he calls "slow-mo castration" of aging, unable to perform as he used to, and seeing that his body is not desirable by young women any more, he loses his major stimulus for writing, the other defining characteristic that makes him what and who he is. Nunez depicts that in the fast changing culture, which invests almost everything in youth and beauty, every aging person feels abandoned. This is tragically true for the mentor, from whom aging was reclaiming all the advantages with which youth had bountifully endowed him: beauty, energy, virility, and power to influence. For "[a] man who once could have had any woman he wanted. Who had groupies hanging on his every word and believing he could win the Nobel Prize," aging is so much harder (120). The narrator remembers that her mentor had greatly admired J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, a book with similar themes of change and abandonment, a book "that you read with your skin" (32). Like David Lurie, the protagonist of *Disgrace*, who was sure to have any woman return his attentions, after fifty, the mentor becomes an undesired part of the sexual relationships that he had so cherished. The two are further correlated because both feel redundant and useless like abandoned dogs.

For a man like the mentor, who is exiled from one of the most significant parts of his being, the remaining place to look for satisfaction and meaning is teaching. However, as a teacher, especially as a teacher of writing, recently, he finds himself becoming totally useless. Before his suicide, he had been complaining to his friends about the radical decline in the intellectual capacities of students, in the prestige of the writer, the carelessness of the world of publishing, and the death of books and literature. Under the circumstances "the biggest mystery of all was why everyone and their grandmother was turning to authorship as just the ticket to glory" (115). The narrator's own students also demonstrate the same lack of appreciation for what is called great works of literature that Apollo surprisingly preferred to listen to. Her students complained about having to read other people's work rather than have others read their writing and to read out-of-print books that obviously failed instead of those by "more successful writers" (142). They judge literature by its success in the market and by how much they can identify with it. Their standards include such criteria as wanting "someone to die" in a book. They expect from a book like Anne Frank's diary to make them laugh and have a satisfying ending. In short, they treat

books as if they are produced for easy consumption. "People talking about a book as if it were just another thing, like a dish, or a product like an electronic device or a pair of shoes, to be rated for consumer satisfaction—that was just the goddamn trouble, you said. Even those aspiring writers your students seemed never to judge a book on *how well it fulfilled the author's intentions* but solely on whether it was the kind of book that *they liked*" (118; emphases added). The mentor, however, had been told "Never assume your reader isn't as intelligent as you are." He wrote for such a reader, an "intellectually curious" person with "the habit of reading who loved books as much as you did. Who loved fiction" (116). Yet, with new technology and the internet any self-appointed critic can voice his/her opinions directly to living writers. Misreadings and misunderstandings, praises or condemnations for wrong reasons and downright banality seem to have a louder voice than the voice of truly attentive readers. This is the dilemma of the writer with an old-fashioned training like the friend: Instead of being happy that his/her books are read among the millions that are published, he "honestly would just as soon a reader like that ignore your book and go read something else" (117). Surrounded by such "ubiquity of careless reading," writers become demoralized and come to the conclusion that large readership is assigned only to bad literature.

His students' and reading public's lack of interest in fact reflects the diminishing value of literature. For the narrator as well as the mentor, fiction also has lost its once-grand function of affecting people and societies in a "meaningful" way. Once books like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were thought to be responsible for great changes in history and social fabric. In the contemporary literary scene, however, no reader would even imagine assigning such a place to any book "no matter how brilliantly written or full of ideas" (115). Ironically, that one's effort and self-torture of months, years and sometimes decades will not cause even a ripple in the world is demoralizing especially for the young authors with the highest capacity. The narrator's classmate who started with a lot of promise gave up writing because she came to the conclusion that her book would not be missed among the overwhelming number of novels published. While literature has lost its transformative power over readers, its only value is measurable by its effect on the economy. Once the calling of the divinely inspired, writing now has merely an economic value.

The literature of this new age has lost its magic, its luster, its mystery and creative touch. The Nobel winner Svetlana Alexievich, for example, believes that the writers should withdraw to let ordinary people speak, those who experience horrific things in life. "Her goal as a writer, she says, is to give these people words. … We need *documentary* fiction, stories cut from ordinary, individual life. No invention. No authorial point of view" (190-91; emphasis original). To such a perspective on literature, which denies any role to imagination, the narrator says, "I myself am inclined to agree with people like Doris Lessing, who thought imagination does the better job of getting at the truth" (193). The new world of writing has become a totally alien place for old timers like the narrator and her mentor. "In our graphomaniac age," a world pervaded by technology and visibility, everybody with enough self-confidence can write and self-publish, "just like everyone poops. The rise of self-publishing was a catastrophe, you said. It was the death of literature. Which meant the death of culture" (60-61). In the traditional understanding, writing was so difficult that an author was not only lonely but also constantly frustrated and humiliated because as Philip Roth put it, "*You fail two-thirds of the time*. … Garrison Keillor was right, you said: When everyone's a writer, no one is. … *To write and have something published is less and less something special. Why not me, too? everyone asks*" (60-61; emphases original). The narrator mentions, for example, "A 'rent-burdened' woman worrying how she's going to survive in New York City decides to try writing a novel ('and that's going well')" in America at a time when "Thirty-two million adult Americans can't read. The potential audience for poetry has shrunk by two-thirds since 1992" (111). With the help of technology and social media platforms, all it takes is courage to self-expose to write a novel. People treat writing mistakenly as a search for "self-expression, community, connection," which, the friend satirically thinks, "would more likely be found elsewhere. Collective singing and dancing. Quilting bees" (60).

As the mentor predicted, the death of literature is in fact the death of culture. Likewise, the narrator sees the problem of the banalization of literature as a cultural phenomenon, a result of self-righteousness, intolerance towards weaknesses and flaws, "in a writer's character … not blatant racism or misogyny. I'm talking about any tiny sign of insensitivity or bias, any proof of psychological trouble, neurosis, narcissism, obsessiveness, bad habits— any eccentricity" (193). This

is a culture of "the persecuting spirit" Hawthorne warned his readers of, a culture that wallows in a frenzy of purification, a puritanical trait of the moral majority that is always ready to condemn and punish. This is the world of writing and teaching that the mentor wanted to leave because he was "so at odds with the culture and its themes of the moment" (194).

Unable to attract women and unable to find intellectually satisfying human companionship, the mentor puts an end to his life. Facing the same demoralizing banality and brutality every day, the narrator likewise feels the weakening of her bonds with life. Apollo becomes the bond that reconnects her to life. Nunez's novel points towards the companionship of animals as the place of friendship and true home for humans. As such the novel subverts the culture/nature binary and hierarchy, for the cultural world that the novel unfolds has none of the glamor and beauty of the masterpieces that have made humanity proud, but rather an atmosphere of self-righteousness and hubris. From this world, animal companionship is in fact where many great figures of both literature and philosophy found themselves. The depth and strength of the relationship between the mentor and Apollo is not known; however, many references to dogs and other animals in writers' lives in *The Friend* testify to the fact that animals provided writers the warmth and safety of friendship they probably failed to find among fellow humans. Among others, J. R. Ackerley and his dog Queenie are given the biggest coverage in *The Friend*. Ackerley, "a middle-aged bachelor with a formidable history of promiscuity who'd given up hope of ever finding a partner," memorialized her as Tulip in his book, *My Dog Tulip* (71). The narrator describes the relationship as "intimate," and rightfully so because she also notes, in the book one finds "[m]ore than you want to know about what goes in or comes out of a dog's vagina, bladder, and anus. … Ackerley himself admitted that he sometimes touched a sympathetic hand to the burning vulva the frustrated dog kept thrusting at him" (78). The relationship is complex and involves beating and striking because he cannot bring himself to get her spayed while she is tormented by her sexual frustration. Despite the downside that Tulip suffers, the narrator says, "to me, it seemed that Ackerley had experienced to the fullest, the kind of mutual unconditional love that everyone craves but most people never know" (80).

Conclusion

Nunez gives Rilke a large portion of her novel as a writer fully dedicated to writing and as a man with great sensibilities to animals. Fictionalizing his experience of "seeing a dying dog give its mistress a look full of reproach," he lets his narrator speak: "*He was convinced I could have prevented it. It was now clear that he had always overrated me. And there was no time left to explain it to him. He continued to gaze at me, surprised and solitary, until it was over*" (92-93; emphasis original). Maybe dogs think of their human companions as God, but the next reference from Rilke provides the possibility that it is animals, not necessarily humans, that are touched by the divine. "[He] once found in the imploring look of an ugly heavily pregnant stray that he encountered outside a café in Spain *everything that probes beyond the solitary soul and goes God knows where—into the future or into that which passeth understanding*. He fed her the lump of sugar from his coffee, which he later wrote, was like reading mass together" (137; emphasis original). Rilke's sentiments place animals way above the sphere of ordinary life of mortals into that of gods.

Apollo, who is named after a Greek god, is the center of Nunez's novel. He becomes the narrator's new mentor, lover, and friend. With Apollo, she sees the merging of her dead mentor and her new companion as he brings her old friend to her. Together they mourn the death of her mentor and discover a communion of two bodies and souls. With Apollo she reaches down in herself to the memories of innocence in which state "[a]nimals live and die," a state that "we humans pass through and leave behind, unable to return" (92). Yet she believes "we must all retain, throughout our whole lives, a powerful memory of those early moments of life, a time when we were *as much animal as human*" (92; emphasis added). These memories are there, she believes, "if we could just cry out loud." If a person could reach down to those memories, they could see that "the intensity of the pity you feel for an animal has to do with how it evokes pity for yourself." (91-92). Then no one would confuse admiration and envy; no one would consume as food the animals whose powers they admire in order to obtain those powers. Remember the Chinese and their dog-eating habits. Then anyone could see that when one suffers—like the Cambodian women, like Lilya, like animals—from the brutality of other humans, the whole world suffers. Having lost this sense of interconnectedness has led to an unbearably brutal world where empathy is lost. Reflecting on the shared history

of humans and animals, she visits scenes of humans' mistreatments and animals' unconditional loyalty and love. What she lets the reader see is the great divide that separates humans and animals; yet it is not the divide created by humans and putting them in a hierarchically higher position. Rather, it is the divide between a world of love and trust versus a world devoid of those. Once one knows how to look at animals and enjoy their friendship, as the narrator does, animals show the falsity of the constructed human privileges. In the face of animals, all human "hubristic fantasy" falls apart. Not only does Apollo help the narrator overcome obstacles and teach her the value of unwavering loyalty, with his huge body he breaks down prejudices and borders that separate humans from animals. With Apollo, she observes a fact that she has long known, that the arguments of human superiority and prerogative become revealed to be stories that we tell ourselves: Possessing a redeemable soul, having reason, ability to speak a language. Apollo's ways of knowing and feeling surpass any ordinary human's; he expresses himself as long as he has a sympathetic soul to understand his language. From the world of writing and culture, where she, like her mentor before, feels irrelevant, Nunez's narrator enters into the "magicked" world of Apollo with whom she allows her to lose herself in the mystery of his being. Towards the end of the novel, referring to Rilke's famous definition of love as "*two solitudes that protect and border and greet each other*" she asks, "What are we, Apollo and I, if not two solitudes that protect and border and greet each other?" (146). How can anyone call what they have anything other than love?

Notes

[1] "Animals" and "non-human animals" are used interchangeably throughout this article.

[2] One of the most engaging documents on animal intelligence is Sue Savage Rumbough's *Kanzi: The Ape at the Brink of the Human Mind* (New Jersey, John Wiley and Sons, 2004). For the roots of human ethical behavior, see, Alisdair MacIntyre's *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago, Open Court Publishing House, 1999). Likewise Marc Bekoff's *Wild Justice* (Chicago and London, U of Chicago P, 2009) demonstrates the prevalence of ethics in the animal world.

[3] Two outstanding works that trace the ties between racism and cruelty to animals are Marjorie Spiegel's *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery* (Philadelphia, New Society Publishers, 1988), and *Eternal Treblinka* by Charles Patterson (New York, Lantern Books, 2002).

Carol J. Adams brilliantly analyzes the connection between women and animals through parallels between pornography and meat consumption in her *Sexual Politics of Meat* (New York, Continuum, 1990) and *Pornography of Meat* (New York, Continuum, 2003). Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan's *Animals and Women*: *Feminist Theoretical Explorations* (Durham, Duke UP, 1995) and *Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics* (New York, Columbia UP, 2007) explore the women-animal connection along the lines of care tradition. Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto* (Chicago, U of Indiana P, 2003) and *When Species Meet* (Minnesota, U of Minnesota P, 2008) underline the complex biological, historical and social interconnectedness between animals and women.

[4] Subsequent parenthetical references to this work will include only page numbers.

[5] For one of the best readings of the Genesis story and Western philosophy's treatment of animals see, Jacques Derrida, "The Animal that Therefore I Am" *(Critical Inquiry* 28.2 [2002]: 369-418.)

[6] Nunez turns this meaning of naming as domination on its head by providing a name for only one of her characters, Apollo, and leaving the rest without names.

[7] Descartes made this infamous announcement as a response to the ethical dilemma caused by the practice of vivisection.

The argument on animals' lack of reasoning finally gave way to their lack of language after what has come to be known as the linguistic turn, which has been challenged by philosophers of counter-linguistic turn, who argue that language, far from being a privilege, is a prison that humans have confined themselves in. For a comprehensive analysis of animals and philosophers, see Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals*, (New York, Columbia UP, 2012).

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