

# HUMANITY AND THE ANIMAL OTHER: A Derridean Analysis of *Waiting for the Barbarians*

JACOB SANDLER

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In “Humanity and the Animal Other,” Jacob Sandler explores animality as a pervasive metaphor for radical otherness in South African writer J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, his famous allegory about the durable human drive to subjugate, torture, and enslave. Sandler’s theoretically adroit and carefully argued analysis links the dehumanization that makes it possible for people to create divisions such as barbarian/civilized with animalization. As Sandler writes, in the end, “the animal is the *only* other,” and the surest way to make human beings ethically unrecognizable is to reduce them to the status of beasts.

DR. ALICE BRITTAN

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**I**n J. M. Coetzee’s metaphorical novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, readers are faced with the recurring theme of the modes by which sight, perception, and recognition function in our dealings with the “similar other,” as Derrida terms it. Faced with the similar other, as the colonial Empire of the novel is faced with the barbarians, we are faced with fear. What terrifies us most, however, is not the similar other’s otherness, but its

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similarity: the connections we share with something we do not entirely understand. As a result, the similar other exists in a sort of limbo between our self-definition and our definition of the other or, as will become apparent, of *the animal*. In managing our fear, we must manipulate the problematic limbo within which the similar other exists by eliminating the hybrid nature of the *similar other* and redefining it as simply *the similar*, or *the other*. While this process is directly enacted on the similar other, often violently, its goal pertains primarily to those who are perceived only as similar, and the way we perceive and recognize them. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, readers are faced both with examples of the recognition of humanity (similarity) and with attempts to dehumanize (remove similarity) through the process of “animalization.” Using *Waiting for the Barbarians* as a platform to explore the nature of the animal-human distinction by which Derrida suggests, “philosophers have always judged and *all* philosophers have judged,” and through an examination of the role of *the animal* as the only tangible *other*, I will show that, in redefining the similar other, there are only two options: to recognize humanity (similar) or to animalize (other).

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### THE ANIMAL AS THE OTHER

In his theoretical text, *Of Grammatology*, Derrida builds on established ideas surrounding the exclusionary principles of language. He furthers Saussure's suggestion that each word is simply an arbitrary sound attributed to a particular idea by suggesting that just as the signifiers are arbitrary except in their difference from all other signifiers, so too are the signified ideas arbitrary except in binary comparisons to the ideas they are not. Thus, the cat is the cat because it is not the dog, or the snake, or the monkey, or any other species. Yet we do not say the human is the human because it is not another species: in *Of Grammatology*, we are faced with the claim "that the term 'human' gains sense only in relation to a series of excluded terms and identities, foremost among them nature, and animality" (Callarco 104). But animality - constituting the characteristics of the animal - is problematic, for the animal is a sign whose signified idea does not exist within the physical realm; it is not the cat, the dog, or the snake, but rather a homogenization of every sentient living being on the planet *besides* humans. According to Derrida, Animal and animalities are abstractions based on the absence of perceived traits that for centuries have been attributed solely to humans: "animal is a word that men

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have given themselves the right to give” (“The Animal That Therefore I Am” 400).

The anthropocentrically rooted human-animal distinction has until recently been the focus of philosophers addressing the idea of the animal: “all philosophers agree on the definition of the limit separating man in general from animal in general” (Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am” 408). Yet animality and humanity are simply constructions operating in opposition to one another: “animal is just a word, it is an appellation that men have instituted” (392). The institution within which animals function, however, is hierarchical, where animals are thought to be separate from, subject to, and inferior to humans.

The role of the animal as subject to man is present in the earliest religious texts: in Genesis it is written that on the fifth day God created “every kind of living creature: cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts of every kind” (1:24), and on the sixth created man and woman in God’s image, and declared that they “shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on the earth” (1:26). God then summons the animals to Adam “in order to ‘subject’ them to man’s command,” and tells Adam to give each beast its

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name (Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am” 386). This subjection is still apparent today, physically manifested in our reliance on animals as a source of food and clothing, a mode of production that “can be called violence in [at least] the most morally neutral sense of the term” (394).

Philosophers writing about the human-animal distinction have similarly subjected the animal through its very mode of definition, as a sexless, all-encompassing entity defined by the absence of human characteristics. This view fails to recognize the vast diversity among individual species: it “attempts to create homogeneities where only radical heterogeneity can be found” (Calarco 5). Many arguments for the human-animal distinction are based on single traits “thought to be uniquely human such as ‘the hand,’ spirit, nudity, and awareness of death, while other traits such as language, reason, responsibility, and technology are discussed critically only in passing” (105). As Derrida addresses in his essay “And Say the Animal Responded?” the animal and animality are not signs of physicality; rather, both terms function as a description of consciousness or, as Lacan suggests, the absence of an unconsciousness (Derrida, “And Say the Animal

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Responded” 123). The animal, by this homogenizing definition, is no more than a signifier of the *other*.

While fiction, fantasy, aliens, and our obsession with the impending zombie apocalypse might suggest otherwise, when we speak of a tangible other, as a signifier of that which is other than human, there is only the animal – the animal that, until recently, philosophers have cited as a designation for “every living thing that is held not to be man” (Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am” 400). While a significant portion of Derrida’s work rightly attempts to deconstruct well-established theories regarding the human-animal distinction, it is these homogenizing and subjecting definitions of the animal that lead us to animalize the similar other.

## FEAR AND REDEFINING THE SIMILAR OTHER

In an essay on forgiveness, Jacques Derrida claims that the “absolute hatred” and “radical evil” necessary to commit the unforgivable – the only act “which would make the question of forgiveness emerge” – can only be aimed toward “the ‘face’ of the Other, the similar other, the closest neighbour” (Derrida, “On Forgiveness” 49). In this context, the similar other is already associated with the unforgivable, yet by what means? Why is such hatred felt

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toward the similar other, and what is the function of the unforgiveable act?

Before the similar other becomes a source of hatred, it is a source of fear. The other, the animal, can, on increasingly rare occasions, instill fear in us. For example, the experience of running into a mother bear and her cubs while on a hike may be frightening; simultaneous to our fear, however, is the understanding that what we are viewing is the other: consciousness devoid of desire, without reason, acting purely in response to its surroundings and physical needs. Even in fear we abject the absolute other, yet we cannot in the same way understand the similar other. The similar other, in the context of colonization and cultural collision, presents itself in the *Homo sapien* form and, in interaction with others of its kind, demonstrates characteristics of human consciousness. And yet it is simultaneously not entirely understood. Whether the otherness is physical – such as a difference in race, stature, clothing, body art, and jewelry – or cultural – such as a difference in language, social etiquette, religious practice, and custom – it is the failure to understand another human that is terrifying. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, we see this fear manifest itself in the Empire's initial investigations of the barbarians, which are

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carried out “along the frontier in a co-ordinated fashion” (Coetzee 25). The absence of any evidence that the barbarians are in fact planning an assault on the Empire, besides vague and unsubstantiated claims that the “barbarian tribes of the north and west might be uniting” (9), in conjunction with the apparent need to use torture to obtain desired information (the magistrate’s questions of the tortured boy suggest doubt about the legitimacy of the answers obtained), suggests the possibility that the Empire’s efforts are in response to fear of the similar other rather than to an actual threat (10).

When facing the similar other, as the Empire metaphorically faces the barbarians, we are faced with a paradigm: what is most frightening about the similar other is its position in between our understanding of the other and ourselves. It (or they) exists in a perpetual state of difference, a limbo between the binary oppositions by which humans identify themselves. In facing the similar other and, in effect, facing one’s fear, it becomes apparent that, in order to lessen and manipulate one’s fear, it is necessary to decentre the similar other from its status in limbo: in order to understand the similar other, we must conform it to our existing binary understanding of either the *other* or the *same*.

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While it is increasingly apparent that the similar other is almost always in actuality the similar, because of fear we tend to respond to it by manifesting our fear as hatred and attempting to define the similar other as the other, the animal. What defining the similar other as the other does, in effect, is make fear, or more specifically, the source of fear, subject, just as the animal is subject. Since the most immediate and visible similarities shared with the similar other are those that are physical, and since physicality by its own nature is extremely difficult to change, the mode by which the similar other is decentred and redefined as the other is psychological, enacted through the process of dehumanization. What is interesting, however, is the way dehumanization always functions through processes of animalization.

### ANIMALIZATION AS THE MEANS OF DEHUMANIZATION

Dehumanization is not a term of creation; it is a term of removal, the stripping away of humanity. In this way, representative only of loss, it does not in and of itself specify an end result. Dehumanization is enacted physically and psychologically on the similar other, but the intention behind it does not pertain directly to the similar other; instead, it is tied to the way the similar other is perceived

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and recognized by everyone else. Dehumanization functions, in the eyes of everyone looking at the similar other, to remove shared humanity: it is a matter of non-recognition rather than of reality. While dehumanization on its own suggests only loss of humanity, its purpose, as a tool for manipulating recognition, requires that it lead to a recognizable end result. Based on our understanding of the animal as an abstraction for every living thing outside of human consciousness, is animalization then not the only possibility?

The animal is the other that dehumanization must inevitably lead to; this claim is not only based on the understanding that the animal is the *only* other, but also on the fact that the animal functions perfectly within the larger aims of dehumanization. The animal is already subject to the human, but perhaps more profoundly, the animal is, in many ways, already outside of our ethical sphere: we often do not think twice about killing an animal and we do not mourn its loss. When it comes to animals, we have organized “on a global scale the forgetting or misunderstanding of violence that some would compare to the worst cases of genocide” (Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am” 394). Furthermore, Derrida suggests that the term bestiality, representative of acts of savage and

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depraved cruelty, cannot be used when speaking of the animal, for the sign itself is rooted in a comparison to the animal: “one cannot speak - moreover it has never been done - of the *bêtise* or bestiality of an animal. It would be an anthropomorphic projection of something that remains reserved to man” (409). Animalization, then, is not separate from dehumanization, but is rather the process by which dehumanization takes place.

### ANIMALIZATION IN *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS*

With the background theory now established, we can begin a closer analysis of the function of animalization within J. M. Coetzee’s novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*. From early in the novel, we see the comparison of particular groups to animals. After the aboriginal fishing people are initially captured, the magistrate - who later in the novel becomes the one character that we might say transcends animalization in search of its alternative - describes “watching them eat as though they are strange animals” (Coetzee 19). The magistrate’s very description of the fishing people, “living in fear of everyone, skulking in the reeds,” is already evocative of animality, suggesting that the frontier colonists already perceive the aboriginals as animalistic, as the other (19). With this perception

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established, it does not surprise the reader when the magistrate follows up his observations with the declaration, “Let them stay in the yard. It will be inconvenient for us, but there is nowhere else” (19). With the perception of the fisher folks’ animality already emphasized through turns of phrase such as “animal shamelessness,” we are quick to understand the way they are treated. Already living in the yard, it is not long before “the kitchen staff refuse them utensils and begin to toss them their food from the doorway as if they were indeed animals” (21). Soon after, when Colonel Joll returns from his investigation, he leads his prisoners “roped together neck to neck,” tied in this way as much for public display as for restraint (22). It is here, and in reading the suggestions of torture that ensue, that we begin to see the violence of animal subjection manifest itself on people through animalization; it is here too that we begin to understand the necessity of animalization in enacting the unforgiveable, the crime against humanity. Animalization is a means of propaganda: Colonel Joll, as a representative of the Empire, is manipulating the public’s perception of the barbarians, leading them as one might lead horses, as a precursory justification for the treatment they will later be subjected to. This initial scene, however, is only a taste of the way

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animalization leads to justified mistreatment and subjugation.

Later in the novel, when the magistrate returns from his expedition to the barbarians only to find the town under military control enforced by the “Third Bureau of the Civil Guard,” he is charged with “treasonously consorting with the enemy,” and imprisoned (Coetzee 84). In solitary confinement, the magistrate begins to compare himself to an animal, guzzling his “food like a dog” and claiming “a bestial life is turning [him] into a beast” (87). While he later claims that the role of the prison guard is “attending to the animal needs of another man,” this initial statement seems to suggest that although animalization is primarily for the purpose of everyone else’s recognition, it directly influences the behaviour and, perhaps to a lesser extent, the self-perception of the animalized (97).

It is during the magistrate’s time in prison that we, as readers, are faced with the most horrific example of animalization. The army has been off, supposedly at war with the barbarians, and returns with a series of prisoners, naked as animals, restrained by “a simple loop of wire [running] through the flesh of each man’s hands and through holes pierced in his cheeks” (Coetzee 113). As the magistrate remembers once being told by a soldier, this

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wire loop, like the horse's bit or the dog's choke collar, "makes them meek as lambs" (113). The loops through the prisoners' mouths are connected to a pole and to one another in the midst of a mob of people that soldiers hold back in order to create an "arena clear for the exemplary spectacle" (114). As the prisoners are first beaten publicly by soldiers and then by members of the public, readers are faced with the end result of a chain of events leading to what could be called an unforgiveable crime.

The barbarians are animalized, stripped naked, inhumanely bound together, and then brought into the town and for everyone to see, tied to a post as a dog might be. This display, in conjunction with previous displays of animalization and the inevitable influence of spoken and written propaganda that likely permeated the town during the magistrate's time in prison (and that accompanies every similar historical use of animalization, such as the depiction of Jews as rats by the Nazis), leads to a public recognition of the barbarians as the other. Yet we do not hate animals in the same way that hate is directed at the barbarians, and the mass killing of animals is not done out of hatred – so why, in animalizing the similar other, is there such detestation?

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In part, hatred of the animalized similar other is case specific. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, as in the case of the Holocaust, the larger goal of animalization in “the campaign against the barbarians” is to completely annihilate them (Coetzee 83). However, the primary goal of animalization, as discussed earlier, is to subjugate a source of fear in order to gain control over it. There are many historical examples of the use of animalization in order to subjugate the similar other for a purpose other than annihilation, such as slavery, or apartheid. Yet no matter the specific purpose, animalization allows for unquestioned mistreatment, violence, and execution.

The use of animalization is paradoxical, as it is in all cases where it is applied on a mass scale. Because the very concept of war is a human one, the Empire never truly abandons its recognition of the barbarians as people, since it wages war against them. Yet, simultaneously, the Empire attempts to animalize the barbarians in the eyes of its citizens through mass propaganda in order to publicly justify genocide. As the scene of public torture ensues and the crowd not only watches but actively participates, it becomes apparent that the animalization of the barbarian has been effective. No one objects to beating the barbarians, or to the cruel nature of their restraints. No one

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describes it as inhumane or unforgiveable. Even the magistrate says nothing until Colonel Joll displays a hammer and makes as if to use it on one of the prisoners, and when he does speak he says, “You would not use a hammer on a beast, not on a beast!” (Coetzee 117). It is not until Colonel Joll prepares to publicly commit an act exceeding even that which we would inflict on an animal that the magistrate speaks up. In his outburst, the magistrate declares: “We are the great miracle of creation! Look at these men! *Men!*” confirming that the barbarians have ceased to be perceived as such (117). Immediately after, as the magistrate is beaten into unconsciousness, his final thought is that “we crush insects beneath our feet, miracles of creation too, beetles, worms, cockroaches, ants, in their various ways” (118). As everything goes black, the magistrate’s thoughts once again turn to a direct comparison of man to animal.

## BEYOND ANIMALIZATION, REFLECTIONS OF HUMANITY

As Derrida suggests in his essay “On Forgiveness,” “The crime against humanity is a crime against what is most sacred in the living, and thus already against the divine in man” (31). Yet, in a way, the crime against humanity is an abstraction, just as humanity itself and the

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animal are abstractions. The crime against humanity is a paradox, for in its enactment it is not seen as being directed against humanity, but instead as a justifiable action against the other. I say the other, and not the similar other, because it is only through intentional blindness that we are able to ignore similarities, and it is only in the failure to recognize shared humanity that such crimes can be committed. This perception of the other is why the concept of the animal is so dangerous: it is in actuality a signifier only of the absence of humanity. As Matthew Calarco underscores in his text, *Zoographies*, the study of the animal is inherently and simultaneously the study of the human. While he, Cary Wolfe (author of *Zoontologies*), and the theorists and philosophers that they draw from attempt to navigate and deconstruct the complexities of the human-animal distinction in their analysis of the animal, so too must we reexamine the way we define humanity.

In a 2008 TED Talk entitled “On Humanity,” Nigerian poet and author Chris Abani introduces his talk by discussing the South African theory of Ubuntu. Ubuntu, which appears in South Africa’s post-apartheid interim constitution, is the idea that “the only way for me to be human is for you to reflect my humanity back at me” (Abani). In effect, humanity is reciprocal: the self is only

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understood as human when perceived by others as human. In other words, humanity is something that needs to be recognized in order to exist. It is not enough to claim that because a person is not an animal he or she must be human; we must go further and instead say that because I do not see or treat a person as an animal, but rather choose to see him or her as a human, he or she is human. If there is anything I hope to have accomplished up until this point, it is to have imparted an understanding of this: the way people are treated has nothing to do with their physicality or their psychology; the only thing that affects the way people are treated is how they are recognized by other people.

While my discussion of *Waiting for the Barbarians* has, until this point, been quite grim, let us now attempt to read it (or parts of it at least), in a more positive light by highlighting examples of Ubuntu present in this novel. The magistrate, who throughout the novel is in constant disagreement with the aims of the Empire as well as its inhumane practice of torture, is not completely innocent of animalistic misrecognition: we have already noted his animalistic comparisons and descriptions. However, the majority of the middle section of the novel is devoted to the magistrate's relationship with the barbarian woman who

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was brutally tortured and blinded in front of her father. The magistrate spends the majority of this section attempting to navigate his understanding of the barbarian girl - how he recognizes her. His initial treatment of her, washing her and oiling her each night, referring to her as “brimming with young animal health,” distinctly places her in a subjected role (Coetzee 59). However, even after leaving her with the barbarians, which he describes as parting “from that other one,” his decision to return her to her people (however poorly thought out, since the barbarians he left her with are not likely the same ones with whom she arrived) suggests a recognition of her as something more like an equal (82). Just as the change in his recurring dream - each time revealing something more familiar - metaphorically represents a changing recognition, so too does this recognition become apparent in his actions. His persistent self-questioning and his many attempts to understand others, in conjunction with his recognition of the barbarians’ humanity when everyone else fails, suggest an understanding of the theory of Ubuntu. Even after his own torture and imprisonment, when the magistrate is released, he smoothly reintegrates into a community that scorned and ignored him while he was imprisoned. In a strange twist, as the barbarians outlast

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and, in this way, defeat the Empire's army - just as the magistrate predicted they would - the magistrate effortlessly regains his previous position. He organizes labour and works alongside those who witnessed and partook in his persecution in order to prepare the frontier town for the winter. And, in observing his actions, we as readers begin to understand the need to see humanity not in opposition to animality, but in reflection and enactment of itself.

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