

Humanimal Relations in Contemporary U.S. Literature: Biopolitics and Terminal Illness in Mark Doty's *Dog Years*

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Abstract This essay illustrates how questions from animal and animality studies can be productively explored in relation to literary and cultural texts, with a particular focus on Mark Doty's recent bestselling memoir *Dog Years*. In this text, Doty recounts the illnesses that lead to the deaths of his human partner, Wally, and their two dogs, Arden and Beau. The question of when to "let go" in order to accept a "good death" can be related to biopolitical questions of citizenship and activism: when (or whether) one should stop fighting the kinds of problems that the text presumably wants to resist, such as homophobia, U.S. imperialist aggression in response to 9/11, and speciesist attitudes toward dogs. The implicit assumption of the text is one that resonates with other recent popular illness narratives; we should not fight death to the very end, but rather accept terminal illness as an opportunity to "live in the moment," supposedly in line with the way that dogs must live their lives. But what are the implications of constructing the inner lives of dogs in this way? And what constitutes a so-called good death, then, if we compare terminal illness with what might be called "terminal injustice?" The focus in this essay is thus on the biopolitics of how Doty's text constructs both human and nonhuman animals at the end of life.

Key words animality studies; animal studies; biopolitics; illness narratives; *Dog Years*

If animal and animality studies are typically interdisciplinary, how might literary studies offer a particularly important contribution to these burgeoning areas of study? At a basic level, the simplest answer might be to say that the way people think about animals and animality is not only reflected but also produced by literary and cultural texts. In other words, novels, memoirs, films, and so on, shape the assumptions we all have — in various historical and cultural contexts — about what it means to be

a nonhuman or human animal, and how we should therefore treat others, whether they share our species or not. It makes sense for literary scholars, then, to explore and analyze literary and cultural texts that have either been influential in relation to dominant discourses of animality or have resisted or challenged mainstream ideas that have been naturalized.

In my previous work I have argued for a distinction between animal studies and animality studies, with animal studies, on the one hand, emphasizing a political or ethical challenge to speciesist thinking, ultimately driven by a desire to improve the way various nonhuman species are treated. Animality studies, on the other hand, can be seen as work from various disciplines that emphasizes instead the history of thinking about and representing animality in relation to what might more typically be seen as cultural studies, of the human kind. Animality studies also pays close attention to how “real” animals are constructed in various ways, and draws upon other disciplines in relation to studying and understanding biological creatures, but emphasizes the implications of how animality is constructed in relation to the situated histories of human identity categories such as race, class, gender, and sexuality.¹ While animal studies has been seen at times as an umbrella term that can contain work that I would call animality studies, it seems useful to me to be able to suggest, for example, that Donna Haraway’s *Primate Visions* is more of an animality studies critique, while *When Species Meet* is more in line with what I would narrow down to call animal studies. But it’s certainly possible to do both, or to go back and forth between animal and animality studies, even within the same work. My recent book titled *The Birth of a Jungle*, to take an example that focuses more on literary texts, is more animality studies than animal studies, with particular attention to what I call the discourse of the jungle, in relation to new ways of thinking about various human identities at the turn of the twentieth century, such as African-American men, homosexuals, and working-class immigrants. But it also takes up questions that might be more aligned with animal studies, such as the nature of dogs and wolves in Jack London’s work, particularly when those nonhuman animals actually push back against constructions of animals as *only* defined by biological instincts, suggesting what we might think of as more complicated — and interesting — “inner lives” (to use a phrase that has been part of various bestselling books about nonhuman animals).

That phrase also connects Jack London, whose books have certainly had a strong influence on at least U.S. readers for over a century, to other kinds of recent bestsellers, such as Mark Doty’s *Dog Years* (2007), which is a memoir about both dogs and illness, among other things. Illness memoirs are a contemporary U.S. obsession, along with the inner lives of animals, and the links between these two kinds of texts are the focus of a new book I am currently working on. To give you

just a few examples of bestselling illness narratives, we might think about works by Lance Armstrong, David Rieff, who writes about his mother Susan Sontag, and Randy Pausch, as well as more “literary” writers such as Terry Tempest Williams, Audre Lorde, and the playwrights Tony Kushner in *Angels in America* and Margaret Edson in *W;t*.² While texts from these writers do not all have obvious connections to animality, I would argue that they actually rely upon and produce discourses of animality, particularly in relation to terminal illness. It might be survival of the fittest, as in Lance Armstrong, or “going off to die” and accepting death as “natural” in Terry Tempest Williams. But in both cases, constructions of terminal illness and a “good death” revolve around animality in relation to what is seen as “natural.” When illness itself is constructed as “unnatural” — such as in “rogue cancer cells” — we can also connect these bestselling obsessions with constructions from other frameworks, such as “rogue terrorist cells,” for example, which raises questions related to biopolitics.³

Doty's *Dog Years* can provide a literary example that engages with these questions, while also illustrating more generally the kinds of questions that both animal and animality studies can explore in relation to literary and cultural texts. In *Dog Years*, Doty recounts the illnesses that lead to the deaths of his human partner, Wally, and their two dogs, Arden and Beau. The question of when to “let go” in order to accept a “good death” can be related to biopolitical questions of citizenship and activism: when (or whether) one should stop fighting the kinds of problems that the text presumably wants to resist, such as homophobia, U.S. imperialist aggression in response to 9/11, and speciesist attitudes toward dogs. The implicit assumption of the text is one that resonates with other recent popular illness narratives; we should not fight death to the very end, but rather accept terminal illness as an opportunity to “live in the moment,” supposedly in line with the way that dogs must live their lives. But what are the implications of constructing the inner lives of dogs in this way? What constitutes a so-called good death, if we compare terminal illness with what might be called “terminal injustice,” in which oppression and exploitation are never ultimately defeated?

The opening chapter of Doty's memoir juxtaposes the inner lives of dogs with the external reality of September 11th. Recounting his own experience of 9/11, Doty can't help but wonder, “With the world in such a state, isn't it arrogance or blind self-absorption to write about your dogs?” (4). A few pages later he remembers a conversation with a new acquaintance who asks him what he would do in the world if “his commitments were all waived” (7). Doty's response — which is that he would “buy a place with a barn, in the country, and open a shelter for homeless retrievers” — is met with a critical reply by his friend, who wonders “why that compassion isn't offered to other people” (7). Doty, perhaps like many animal studies scholars

in the academy today, is angered by the suggestion that compassion is a “limited quality, something we can only possess so much of and which thus must be carefully conserved” (8). “Love,” he argues, “is a gateway to the world, not an escape from it” (8). But what exactly is the nature of this love for dogs that can supposedly open up our understanding of a post-9/11 world?

In Doty’s *Dog Years*, there are three implicit claims that I want to identify briefly and then raise a few questions about. The first is that dogs can supposedly offer a positive and even joyful model of “living in the moment,” mostly because they lack human language and a human form of self-awareness. Doty constructs dogs as inhabiting pre-linguistic bodies, supposedly like humans in an earlier evolutionary moment when “our bodies were not yet assumed into the world of speech” (3). Recent work in animal and animality studies — by Derrida, among many others — has refuted this kind of implicit affirmation of a Lacanian mirror stage to limit subjectivity to the human.⁴ But Doty’s romanticization of pre-linguistic experience essentializes dogs in a particular way: they must embody living in the moment.

In a list of reasons why humans are drawn to dogs, Doty argues that humans are lonelier because we are self-aware, while dogs “live in a state of connectedness ... that we have lost, if indeed we ever possessed it”; dogs are “all right here, involved in whatever it is, and therefore they are a sort of cure for our great, abiding loneliness. A temporary cure, but a real one” (42). A dog dwelling on and fearing death or even depression, then, would seem to be impossible, because of the dogness of the dog. But this kind of essentialism strikes me as problematic both for dogs themselves and for the model Doty wants to make them for human lives. How can we know whether dogs are capable of fearing death the way that humans can? For Doty it is not a question of dogs lacking a soul, but rather lacking language, though he acknowledges other forms of communication later in the text. But if language broadly conceived is no longer tenable as a dividing line between the human and the nonhuman, as animal and animality studies if not a much broader consensus contends, it seems limiting, at best, to assume that nonhuman animals can *only* “live in the present.” And there seems to be a big difference between constructing dogs as an inherent embodiment of joy and exploring their *capacity* for experiencing joy or pleasure, particularly within humanimal or inter-species interactions, as Donna Haraway has written about in *When Species Meet* (2008).⁵

The second implicit claim of *Dog Years* that I want to discuss is related to the first. If dogs embody a joyful kind of living in the present, without the ability to think about death, then humans confronted with death should apparently *choose* to live like dogs, at least at the end of life. This kind of linkage can be seen in the various implications of “dog years” in the title of the memoir; the narrative recounts the many

years Doty spends with his dogs Arden and Beau until their deaths, but the title can also be linked with the briefer descriptions of the final years of his partner Wally, who dies of AIDS. As in Paul Monette's essays, "the concept of 'dog years' [has been used] to describe the situation of persons with AIDS, where every single year must count for many" (264), as Marjorie Garber notes in *Dog Love* (1996). Doty's memoir suggests a model, then, of living each moment fully, rather than dwelling on death, in the face of not only Wally's death, but also the destruction wrought upon New York City on September 11th. The common thread seems to be some form of "acceptance" and a refusal to dwell on the eventual deaths that we all must meet. There also seems to be a logic that sees both terrorism and illness as an opportunity to "re-prioritize" one's life. There are far more problematic versions of this logic in illness narratives out there now that tell us, for example, that cancer can essentially be the best thing that could ever happen to you, such as Kris Carr's film *Crazy Sexy Cancer* (2007). In *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (2009), Barbara Ehrenreich criticizes this kind of thinking, pointing out how it puts the responsibility of one's own bodily response to cancer squarely on one's own mental attitude. If you die, then, apparently you weren't thinking positively enough. As Ehrenreich notes, "cheerfulness is required, dissent a kind of treason" (31).

In *Dog Years*, Doty's partner Wally "accepts" his reality of AIDS. While he isn't necessarily cheerful all the time, the text valorizes the way that Wally's attitude seems to become more like that of his dogs (who are constantly on his bed) as he approaches his death. While Doty rejects the facile logic of "positive thinking," he seems to affirm the idea that the best form of "persistence" in the face of suffering is to withdraw from the world, to live in the present with — and even as — a dog. There are several reasons why I think this logic is problematic. A certain level of privilege is necessary, for example, to withdraw from jobs and responsibilities in order to retreat to vacation cabins, as Doty and Wally do several times in the text. In addition, the kind of "re-prioritization" that this discourse often polices implies that a life spent fighting — in one's job, in one's activism, in one's community — only takes away from what is supposedly truly important: living in the moment with loved ones. Without denying the value of that, it is possible, I believe, to begin to see how "acceptance" of an illness can be linked with "acceptance" of seemingly intractable social problems. If you are privileged enough to withdraw from the messy world of politics because you don't face direct persecution, let's say, then it's okay to focus on yourself at the end of life. Perhaps that is the rightful reward for a Boomer bourgeois progressive activist, or so the logic seems to suggest. But this logic also benefits a state wanting to police its citizens more effectively, if there is less resistance and more acceptance in the face of injustice, particularly if responsibility for either happiness or death is assigned to the

individual, rather than the state.

The third and final implicit claim of *Dog Years* that I want to discuss focuses on choices each individual seems to have about how to die: a good death is supposedly one that is free from invasive interventions, in which the individual does not ultimately die fighting. Accepting illness — like a dog — leads to accepting death — like a dog. In *Dog Years*, the death of Doty's partner Wally is linked in this way first with the death of their dog Beau, from kidney disease and a brain tumor. Both Wally and Beau try various drugs over the course of their illnesses, but both end up eventually slipping away with the “good spirit” that Doty finds so heartening and appropriate. But Beau, supposedly, cannot understand death (in a Heideggerian kind of formulation of animals as “poor in world” and unable to anticipate death “as such”).⁶ Near the end, Doty tells us that “he suddenly lifts his head up and back, looking right at me, his eyes widening, with a look not afraid but wondering, startled. A look that would be read, were it a text in a language we knew, as *What's happening to me?*” (147, orig. emphasis). Both Beau and Wally are ultimately “painlessly swept away” (148), but Wally differs from Beau in his awareness and subsequent acceptance of death. In the case of Wally, whose illness and death are recounted in much greater detail in Doty's memoir *Heaven's Coast* (1996), acceptance of death also leads to a refusal to live one's final days in a hospital, where his life could be “wrenched out of our hands, into this institutional world where he'd be at their mercy, subject to invasion, unprotectable” (HC 87).

I want to underline the phrase “subject to invasion” in order to raise some questions about the discourse of a “good death” here and in other contemporary illness narratives. For progressives like Doty who might be opposed to the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the wake of 9/11, and who might generally be inclined to label themselves pacifists, it might seem like one must be in favor of “peace” rather than “invasion” when it comes to the institution of the hospital in relation to an individual at the end of life. According to this logic, the antithesis of a “good death” would be one in which the individual dies fighting to the bitter end, summoning all the toxic weapons a hospital can provide, invaded by both treatments and the illness itself. David Rieff's memoir, *Swimming in a Sea of Death* (2008), is perhaps the best example of an illness narrative that condemns this kind of approach, illustrated in the death of his mother, Susan Sontag. Her lack of “acceptance” is certainly the opposite of Doty's Wally. Sontag herself criticizes military analogies in *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989), but her willingness to try what Doty might think of as “invasive” treatments at the end of her own life, as recounted by Rieff, links her with the current champion of that approach, Lance Armstrong, as recounted in *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life* (2000).

Aggressive treatments and clinical trials are not necessarily a better way to approach death for everyone, and an endless war on illness — analogous to an endless war on terrorism — means big bucks for Big Pharma. While it is impossible to simply reject all metaphors for illness, as Sontag argued we should, we might want to at least reject those metaphors that seem problematic politically, such as the war on cancer. But Sontag's model of *not* accepting her illness, rather than being condemned implicitly for its link with waging war, can instead be seen as a productive form of *resistance*: homologous with a political model that refuses to “withdraw” from the struggles of the world, even at the end of life. For Sontag, Edward Said's desire to keep writing up until the very end of his life could be seen as a model of this kind of resistance, as recounted by her son, David Rieff (94-95).

At the end of *Dog Years*, Doty decides to euthanize their dog Arden after interpreting a look. In the end, “what was entirely plain to me in his face that morning was that he was through, that he'd welcome an exit” (212). Doty constructs the act of euthanasia as a solemn form of stewardship that he would want for himself as well: “This is unmitigatedly awful and not so at all; I remind myself this is exactly what I'd want, for someone to love me enough not to allow me to live in pain when I don't want to ...” (213). With the help of lethal injections, Arden is soon “gone, like a whisper, the easiest breath” (213), and Doty pronounces it “*A good end ... a fine end, the best we could do*” (214). But what about the politics of this kind of death if the logic were extended to putting people “out of their misery” if they are suffering because of U.S. military and economic imperialism around the world?

How is it possible, finally, to tell the difference between a look that means “I don't want to live” from “I don't want to be in pain,” or, “I am afraid of death,” or even, “I want to live,” or, “please don't kill me?”⁷ Literary and cultural texts can explore these questions imaginatively, even if Doty's construction of dogs and the lessons he seems to draw from animality in relation to human illness and death seem problematic. But I must also question the assumption that we can “read” dogs so confidently and propose universal lessons from them. Certainly living with a dog — or anyone else, for that matter — can build confidence in one's ability to read an Other. And there is no reason why advocacy for dogs must be an escape from the world. But I would argue that we need an understanding of “companion species” that neither essentializes nor universalizes in a world that is inevitably messy, complicated, and politically dangerous. Literary texts can both reinforce and resist these kinds of messages in ways that warrant further consideration in animal studies, animality studies, and beyond.

Notes

1. For more on this distinction, see my “From Animal to Animality Studies.”
2. Lance Armstrong, with Sally Jenkins, *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life* (New York: Berkley Books, 2001); David Rieff, *Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son's Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008); Randy Pausch, with Jeffrey Zaslow, *The Last Lecture* (New York: Hyperion, 2008); Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992); Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1997); Tony Kushner *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009); Margaret Edson, *W;t* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1999).
3. For more on these questions related to the history of cancer, see my “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” For more on biopolitics in relation to animality, see Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law*, which engages the work of Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito, Niklas Luhmann, and Jacques Derrida, among others.
4. See Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. See also, for example, Marianne DeKoven and Michael Lundblad, eds., *Species Matters*.
5. See, for example, Haraway’s chapter titled “Training in the Contact Zone: Power, Play, and Invention in the Sport of Agility,” in *When Species Meet*, 205-46.
6. For a discussion of Heidegger in this regard, in a volume that also includes a very brief excerpt from Heidegger, see Matthew Calarco, “Heidegger’s Zoontology.”
7. For more on lives made “killable,” building upon the work of Derrida, see Wolfe, *Before the Law*.

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