



# Toward an Ethics of Affinity: Posthumanism and the Question of the Animal in Two SF Narratives of Catastrophe

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## ABSTRACT

This article reads two narratives of catastrophe, Octavia Butler's "Speech Sounds" (1983) and Ted Chiang's "The Great Silence" (2015), in an attempt to explore how their concern with disaster destabilizes the binary human/nonhuman. Conjuring up visions of transformation and extinction before and after catastrophe, the stories interrogate humanist accounts of subjectivity through their focus on language and consciousness, prompting us to rethink the ontological divide between the human and the animal. This interrogation is carried out not only at the level of thematics, but also at a formal level, through the techniques of defamiliarization and extrapolation as well as through the choice of narrative voice and focalization. Thus, the two stories engage with some of the key issues addressed by the discourses originating from the fields of animal studies and critical posthumanism, which are currently gaining momentum in philosophy and literary criticism in the context of the Posthuman turn. As will be contended, the stories send a powerful message about the boundary between self and other, highlighting the necessity of a shift toward a posthumanist ethics of affinity.

## Introduction

In "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), one of Walter Benjamin's best-known and most controversial essays, he argued for an understanding of history not as a "chain of events," but as "a single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (in Bates 100). Although Benjamin's apocalyptic image of the angel of history was the result of anxiety over the advance of fascism in the Germany of the 1930s, his "catastrophic" conception of history has gained renewed attention in recent years (Bates 100). Apocalyptic images of small- and large-scale catastrophes of various kinds flood the media almost daily – images of suspended dust, twisted metal and rubble after a natural disaster, of large chunks of ice breaking off ice shelves as a result of global warming, of bloodied bodies after a terrorist attack, of ghost towns after a military intervention, and more recently of hallways and waiting rooms full of stretchers with Covid-19 patients in overcrowded hospitals. Potential global catastrophic risks include threats as varied as a nuclear holocaust, global climate change and ecological devastation, an unmanageable pandemic, hostile artificial intelligence and bioterrorism, among others (see Bostrom and Cirkovic 2008). Alongside these present threats, catastrophe seems to loom large also in our envisionings of the future. Indeed, the idea of a future disaster has become a shaping force in our everyday lives and in our cultural and artistic practices.

The traumatic realization of this potential apocalyptic fate has led to the proliferation of narratives and other art forms that engage with the demise of the human. Speculative fiction (SF) has traditionally led the way, long engaging with apocalyptic scenarios of all kinds. As Roger Luckhurst explains, "SF [...] has been used as the mass commercial vehicle for apocalyptic visions" (231). With its staple tropes of world annihilation and human near-extinction, SF

explores the cultural, social, political, individual and psychological dimensions of catastrophe, engaging readers both intellectually and emotionally. In turn, “the general discourse of apocalypticism [...] [has been] tinged with SF narrative and iconography” (Luckhurst 232). However, as a mode of fiction that blends fact and fiction and that considers the past and interprets the present by imagining the future, SF’s enduring importance and subversive potential lie in the fact that it opens a unique space for interrogation. As a disruption that threatens the intelligible and the familiar, catastrophe similarly forces us to reconsider the ways in which we conceptualize the world. SF narratives of catastrophe may thus be seen as a privileged site for the critical reassessment of western ideology and values. More specifically, these narratives hold the potential to offer a way out of what Donna Haraway has called “the maze of dualisms” of western thought (“Cyborg” 181). After all, SF narratives of catastrophe not only allow readers to indulge in the fears and desires of apocalypse; in so doing, they often also grant us the opportunity to critically and emotionally engage with the implications of the loss of the basic unit of reference for the human (of humanism) and of the blurring of the limits between the categories of human/nonhuman, nature/culture, organic/machinic, body/mind, self/other, etc. What makes SF narratives of catastrophe so compelling is precisely the fact that they explore in a literal manner the anxieties and pleasures of being posthuman.

This article reads two narratives of catastrophe, Octavia Butler’s “Speech Sounds” (1983) and Ted Chiang’s “The Great Silence” (2015), in an attempt to show how their concern with disaster allows them to destabilize a number of such dualisms on which the humanist edifice stands, especially the binary human/nonhuman. Conjuring up visions of transformation and extinction before and after catastrophe, the two stories interrogate humanist accounts of subjectivity through their focus on language and consciousness, prompting us to rethink the ontological divide between the human and the animal. This interrogation, as we will see, is carried out not only in terms of thematics, but also at a formal level. Thus, the two stories engage with some of the key issues addressed by the discourses originating from the fields of critical animal studies and critical posthumanism, which are currently gaining momentum in philosophy and literary criticism in the context of the Posthuman turn. As will be contended, the stories send a powerful message about the boundary between self and other, and highlight the necessity of a shift toward a posthumanist ethics of affinity.

## Posthumanism and Critical Animal Studies

Given the indebtedness of posthumanist discourse to antihumanism – criticism of the assumptions about the human subject that are implicitly sustained by the humanist image of “Man” – and anti-anthropocentrism – criticism of species hierarchy and defense of environmental justice – it is only natural that the focus of posthumanism on the human-machine hybrid would eventually widen into a more general attention to the nonhuman. As Rosi Braidotti explains, the posthuman in the sense of antihumanism and post-anthropocentrism “displaces the dialectical scheme of opposition” between human and nonhuman and “deconstructs species supremacy, but it also inflicts a blow to any lingering notion of human nature [...] as categorically distinct from the life of animals and [other] non-humans” (65, 71). In contrast to the more negative or deconstructive critique characteristic of antihumanism, however, posthumanism puts the emphasis on embeddedness, on the positive reintegration of the human into wider networks of being. Thus, in its rethinking of what it means to be human or nonhuman, and in its exploration of the kind of relationalities that result from such reconception, posthumanism has important affinities with critical animal studies. Meanwhile, the animal, Cary Wolfe suggests, “possesses a specificity as the object of both discursive and institutional practices [...] that gives it particular power and durability in relation to other discourses of otherness” (*Rites* 6). As such, the question of the animal offers a privileged site for an exploration of the opportunities and challenges that otherness poses for the human, and it furthers the posthumanist project by unsettling and reconfiguring the enduring humanist notion of the knowing subject. At the

same time, the reconceptualization of what it means to be human that posthumanism seeks to perform holds significant promise for the long-overdue critical and ethical reassessment of human-animal relations.

The western philosophical canon has traditionally used the animal to negatively define the human by expelling the animalistic, by downplaying the features that we share with nonhuman animals and those they share with us. As Haraway explains, “[t]he Animal is forever positioned on the other side of an unbridgeable gap, a gap that reassures the Human of his excellence by the very ontological impoverishment of a lifeworld that cannot be its own end or know its own condition” (*Species* 77). That is, the animal has been used as an ontological category meant to delineate the boundaries of the human and to embody difference, otherness. It has become a sort of abstract entity that has less to do with what animals (in the plural) truly are in biological, cognitive and behavioral terms, than with what humanism has made them be. And what western thought has made of the animal undoubtedly matters: the discourse of humanism, based on a speciesist logic of domination, has contributed to building a hierarchical system that legitimizes the enslavement, torture and killing of nonhuman animals without legal liability. This is what Wolfe calls the “institution of speciesism,”<sup>1</sup> which lies behind “the ethical acceptability of the systematic ‘noncriminal putting to death’ of animals based solely on their species” (Wolfe, *Rites* 7; emphasis in the original).

The discourse and institution of speciesism are tightly linked with the humanist concept of the knowing subject, with the ontological category of subjectivity, as Haraway skillfully foregrounds when she suggests that the commandment “Thou shall not kill” should perhaps read “Thou shalt not make killable” (*Species* 80). This, she claims, would eliminate the problem of “figuring out to whom such a command applies so that ‘other’ killing can go on as usual” (*Species* 80). For her, “[k]illing sentient animals is killing someone, not something” (*Species* 80). The notion of the subject is a severely contested and yet extremely resilient one. While the philosophical work of thinkers such as Marx, Freud and the French poststructuralists has done much to challenge the centrality of “Man” and the exclusion of his traditional Others from the category of the subject (see Badmington 4–7), it stopped short of crossing the last threshold – between the human and the animal – and of shattering the last illusion: human exceptionalism. And this has far-reaching implications for nonhuman animals. As Irving Goh reminds us, the humanist foundation of subjecthood leads to the subsequent problem of “the subject assuming a prerogative to determine the world around him according to his decisions and actions, again at the cost of the perspectives of others” (312).

Both the ontological category of the subject and the binary human/animal have been made by western philosophy to almost entirely depend on the capacity for (human) language. As Jacques Derrida argues in his essay “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)” (2008), “[a]ll the philosophers [. . .] from Aristotle to Lacan, and including Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, and Levinas [. . .] say the same thing: the animal is deprived of language. Or, more precisely, of response, of a reponse [sic] that could be precisely and rigorously distinguished from a reaction” (32). As for the realm of science, although the latest research in animal cognition is beginning to challenge long-held views about the linguistic capacities of some animals,<sup>2</sup> questions of consciousness and cognition are still widely assimilated to language ability. This has contributed to maintaining the ontological and hierarchical distinction between the human and the nonhuman animal in most scientific discourse. However, the problem might simply be that we cannot access animal minds and, even if we did, human language is insufficient to represent nonhuman experience – a problem best summarized by Wittgenstein’s oft-quoted aphorism that “[i]f a lion could talk, we could not understand him” (in DeMello 4).

The (im-)possibility of cross-species understanding, and the complexity that the question of the animal adds to the already complex “problem of other minds,” was famously discussed by philosopher Thomas Nagel in his seminal article “What Is It Like to Be a Bat” (1974). In it, he argued that “the fact that an organism has conscious experience *at all* means, basically, that there is something it is like to *be* that organism” (436; emphasis in the original). He further claimed that the fact that “we cannot expect ever to accommodate in our language a detailed description of [. . .] bat phenomenology should not

lead us to dismiss as meaningless the claim that bats [...] have experiences fully comparable in richness of detail to our own” (440). For Nagel, then, it is unquestionable that it is “like something” to be an animal. This is a powerful ontological claim to make in that it opens the door to arguing that, just because we have no access to the bat’s or any other animal’s thinking, just because the bat’s is a nonhuman mind, we cannot assume that it does not have experiences at all. The question, then, as Cary Wolfe cogently puts it, is not whether the consciousness, intelligence and emotional or mental lives of nonhuman animals are comparable to ours, or an approximation to ours; we should acknowledge that animals represent different ways of being in the world which compel us to rethink what we mean by concepts such as subjectivity, consciousness or mind (*Posthumanism* 46–47).

In light of the inability or refusal of mainstream philosophical and scientific discourse to take such rethinking seriously and to address its ethical implications for human-animal relations, speculative fiction may prove a more productive medium for this kind of critical interrogation. Such is the claim made by Sherryl Vint in her study *Animal Alterity: Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal* (2010), which foregrounds the often overlooked wealth of SF’s engagements with the question of the animal. As she argues, “sf’s long history of exploring questions of alterity and particularly the boundary between human and other sentient beings – frequently explored through robot or AI characters – further positions it as uniquely suited to interrogating the human-animal boundary” (6). After all, SF, posthumanist thought and critical animal studies are all interested in foundational questions about the nature of human and nonhuman existence, they are all concerned with the construction of otherness and with what it means for subjects to be positioned as others, and all take seriously the question of what it means to communicate with the other (Vint 1). What is more, the premises and motifs of SF allow for an engagement in a literal manner with what is only theoretical or figurative in scientific or philosophical discourse. As such, SF has the potential to be a powerful ally to the projects of critical animal studies and critical posthumanism, as my analysis of “Speech Sounds” and “The Great Silence” will attempt to prove.

### The Human/Nonhuman Boundary in “Speech Sounds” and “The Great Silence”

“Speech Sounds,”<sup>3</sup> written by Octavia Butler in 1983 and winner of the Hugo Award for Best Short Story, does not feature animals – at least not conventional ones. Set in a California that is recognizably our own, the story depicts a post-apocalyptic society that has been hit by a global pandemic. A mysterious virus has decimated the world’s population, leaving survivors severely intellectually impaired: most have lost their linguistic skills altogether, while the luckier ones have been deprived of their ability to understand and produce either written or oral language. The most dramatic effects of the pandemic are, on the one hand, that people have been rendered incapable of communicating – except through gestures and animal vocalizations, which often lead to misunderstandings. On the other, western urban society as we know it has collapsed. Interestingly, the loss of human language has resulted in increased aggressiveness and brutalization, and in the deprivation of the protection civilization grants the individual. In other words, the surviving humans are left in a new, literal state of nature.

The story is narrated from the perspective of Valerie Rye, a former history teacher at UCLA that can no longer read or write and whose memory “would not bring back to her much of what she had read before” (Butler 98). Having lost her husband and children to the disease that has caused the whole world to fall silent, she decides to leave her home in LA in hopes of finding some relatives that might still be alive. She boards one of the few buses that still run, but a violent fight soon breaks out. This is a common occurrence due to most survivors’ linguistic impairment, which limits their communicative repertoire to “whimpers,” “squeaks,” “grunts,” “bared teeth” and “hand games of intimidation” (89, 90). When a young man offers to take her away from the site of the fight, she decides to ride with him as he is clearly less impaired than most. The man, Obsidian, spends his time driving around the city in a now obsolete LAPD uniform, helping those in danger. As they bond, Rye directs him to drive back to her house, hoping that he will stay with her as her partner. The prospect is much better than that of

returning alone, since her neighbor – “the animal across the street” who rarely washes, urinates everywhere and has taken two women who “put up with him in exchange for his protection” (96) – is determined to have her too. However, on their way back they see a woman who is about to be attacked by another man. Both the woman and Obsidian end up being killed in the struggle, and as Rye is trying to put Obsidian’s body in the car in order to bury him, the woman’s children come out from hiding. Assuming them to be like most children, no more than “hairless chimps” (105), Rye is about to drive away from them, but she finally decides to take them home when she realizes that they, like her, can speak.

As this brief summary suggests, “Speech Sounds” depicts the linguistically impaired humans in animalized terms, resorting to conventional ideas about animal behavior and communication to suggest their inferiority. Thus, the story appears to betray a speciesist logic that sees nonhumanity as that which humanity excludes, denies, repudiates and represses: irrationality, aggression, amorality, etc. It is also worth adding that, with the loss of language, Butler’s humans become incapable of sharing their inner experience, and in this way their minds become as inaccessible as that of Nagel’s bat. What is more, given the insistence of much scientific and philosophical discourse that language is essential for thinking and, thus, for subjecthood, one must unavoidably conclude that the humans in Butler’s story are no longer so. Yet, “Speech Sounds” offers some interesting contradictions: these beings are simultaneously shown to be driven by human emotions such as “frustration, confusion, and anger” (92) – even Rye suffers a moment of murderous rage and jealousy when she finds out that Obsidian can read and write while she cannot – they are offended by the displays of superiority of the less impaired and, as the woman who is murdered at the end of the story proves, they are shown to be capable of suffering and of experiencing anguish, despite their inability to express these feelings through human language. In so doing, the story blurs the distinction between human and nonhuman, rendering the sort of images of the human-animal continuum that Haraway demands (see *Companion* 12). It further opens a space for critical discussion of the ethical question of nonhuman animals, “not as the other-than-human but as the *infrahuman*, not as the primitive and pure other [...] but as part of us, *of us*” (Wolfe, *Rites* 17; emphasis in the original).

Ted Chiang’s “The Great Silence”<sup>4</sup> similarly confronts readers with a near-extinction scenario, although in this case the story is set before the catastrophe that brings about the silence. The impending disaster is also of a different nature, since it is not humans, but animals, that seem to be (at least most immediately) at risk. The story was originally written as subtitle script to a three-channel video installation by the visual artists Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla that juxtaposed the radio telescope at the Arecibo Observatory in Puerto Rico with the endangered parrots in the surrounding Rio Abajo forests. Told from the parrots’ perspective and in their voice, the story takes the shape of a collection of interconnected philosophical musings and observations. It addresses human practices and their environmental consequences, in particular the ongoing mass extinction of species in the context of the Anthropocene.

The story opens with a reference to human beings’ “desire to make a connection” (231), which has led to the building of Arecibo to look for extraterrestrial intelligence. But as the homodiegetic narrator laments, “I and my fellow parrots are right here. Why aren’t they interested in listening to our voices? We’re a nonhuman species capable of communicating with them. Aren’t we exactly what humans are looking for?” (231). The parrot goes on to discuss the Fermi Paradox, also known as the “Great Silence” – the contradiction between the high probability that intelligent life has arisen somewhere else in the universe and the fact that no evidence of such existence has been found – which the parrot links with the imminent silencing of the rainforests. The next section concentrates on Alex, a famous African gray parrot that was the subject of a thirty-year experiment by ethologist Irene Pepperberg. This is, our parrot informs us, the animal to have come “closest to being taken seriously as a communication partner by humans” (232). The parrot-narrator then muses on the similarities between parrots and humans, both being vocal learners and capable of speaking and both having myths, rituals and traditions. The last section blames human indifference rather than maliciousness for



the current situation in which many rainforest species find themselves, and issues a powerful call to action: “You be good. I love you” (236). According to Chiang’s parrot-narrator, these are the same last words Alex said to Pepperberg the day before his death.

Besides the obvious environmental concerns of Chiang’s story, it is readily apparent that “The Great Silence” also ingeniously and very self-consciously touches on a number of key philosophical questions and scientific debates regarding nonhuman animals. The most evident one is that of animal cognition. As our parrot ponders in annoyance when discussing Alex’s scientifically proved ability to understand the concepts of color and shape, “if humans are looking for a connection with a nonhuman intelligence, what more can they ask for than that?” (232). The problem, the parrot thinks, is clearly our belief in human exceptionalism, since “humans like to think they are unique” (232), despite the fact that parrots and humans “share a special relationship with sound. We don’t simply cry out. We pronounce. We enunciate” (233). Indeed, although real-life parrots’ cognitive and linguistic abilities cannot compare to those of Chiang’s narrator – which actually seem superior even to those of many human beings – the story takes issue with the possibility of interspecies communication and with the so-called “problem of other minds.” As the parrot-narrator observes, “[it]’s hard to make sense of behavior that’s so different from your own. But parrots are more similar to humans than any extraterrestrial species will be” (234). In making such observations, Chiang’s parrot, like Butler’s animalized infrahumans, draws attention to the human-animal continuum and opens a critical space for discussion of the implications of our humanist heritage.

As we have seen, the two stories are inhabited by creatures at the threshold between the human and the nonhuman, thus challenging the ontological divide between humanity and animality. On the one hand, “The Great Silence” draws attention to the fact that the animal as a category, as a “catch-all concept” (Derrida, “Animal” 34), obscures differences among animal species and is a denigration of their complexity. This is in line with Derrida’s abhorrence of the definite article – “‘the Animal’ and not ‘animals’” (“Animal” 34) – which establishes a rigid boundary between the human and “*all the living things* that man does not recognize as his fellows, his neighbors, or his brothers” (“Animal” 34; emphasis in the original). After all, humans have much more in common with some mammals and birds – such as for instance chimpanzees, with whom we not only share 99% of our DNA but are also now reported to have entered the Stone Age; pigs, whose organs are soon to be used for xenotransplantation; crows, who are capable of tactical deception or altruism and also happen to hold funerals; cats, who express curiosity about their environment and dread boredom; and indeed parrots, who are also vocal learners – than these creatures have with other beings categorized as “animal,” such as for instance a lizard or an ant (Derrida, “Animal” 34; see also Wolfe, *Rites* 40 and De Mello 6). This is not meant to suggest that some animal species approximate the human enough so as to be allowed to “cross over” to the other side of the binary, but rather that the ontological distinction itself does not hold. Chiang’s story self-consciously foregrounds the fact that the notion of species itself is an artificial creation, a conceptual imposition meant to articulate a hierarchical taxonomy of sentient life. The concept of species supports and justifies a system of exploitation, violence and abuse – speciesism – which ascribes inferiority to those that are excluded from the category of the human through a perceived sense of their deficiency in a relatively arbitrary set of aspects such as language, tool use, knowledge of death, etc. – what Haraway calls “the Big Gap popular at the moment” (*Species* 79). “The Great Silence” self-consciously brings to the fore the fact that the differences between beings have to do with degree, not with kind.

“Speech Sounds” also undermines the myth of human exceptionalism, though in this case it is done by entering into a debate about human nature. The impaired humans lack many of the attributes traditionally ascribed to the human by the discourse of humanism, such as rationality, agency, autonomy or self-consciousness. They behave in an irrational way, often acting against their best interest – as happens, for instance, at the beginning of the story, when a fight breaks out between two men inside the bus, causing the driver to stop the bus and leaving them all stranded. They also seem to lack agency, as they are controlled by their instincts: aggression, fight or flight response, reproductive drive, etc. Because of that, as we have seen, they are represented in animalized terms in the story.

However, it is undeniable that human beings are no strangers to these “flaws.” This also brings to mind the so-called “argument for marginal cases,” a philosophical argument within animal rights theory which is often deployed in order to attack speciesism. In the words of philosopher Paola Cavalieri,

there exist within our species individuals who, on account of structural problems due to genetic or developmental anomalies, or of contingent problems due to diseases or accidents, will never acquire, or have forever lost, the characteristics—autonomy, rationality, self-consciousness, and the like—that we consider as typically human. (In Wolfe, *Posthumanism* 58)

Thus, as Wolfe argues, even if those characteristics were not found in any animal species – which science tells us they are – they would still not be possessed by *all* human beings (*Posthumanism* 58). Similarly, the problem for Haraway is not “human beings’ denying something other critters [. . .] but rather the death-defying arrogance of ascribing such wondrous positivities to the human” (*Species* 79; see also Wolfe, *Posthumanism* 43). As the parrot-narrator in “The Great Silence” ironically reminds us, “humans create such beautiful myths; what imaginations they have. Perhaps that’s why their aspirations are so immense” (235–6).

The stories further undermine the human/animal divide through their emphasis on our shared vulnerability, which is brought to the fore by the stories’ apocalyptic scenarios of extinction. “Speech Sounds” presents the reader with the demise of the human, not just in a figurative sense, as we have seen, but also in a literal one, as survivors are rendered powerless to stop the spread of the illness and their annihilation as a species: “The illness was stroke-swift in the way it cut people down and strokelike in some of its effects” (96). As a result of it, the world’s population has been dramatically decimated, and human survival is at risk. In “The Great Silence,” it is an animal species that is, at least most immediately, under threat of extinction. For all the parrot-narrator’s capacity to understand, describe and rationalize the situation his species finds itself in, these beings are equally powerless to prevent their imminent mass extinction. As he informs us toward the end of the story, “[m]y species probably won’t be here for much longer; it’s likely that we’ll die before our time and join the Great Silence” (236). The underlying threat is that of environmental degradation, whose effects, as the scientific community insists, will prove equally fatal for the human species unless we change current practices. This emphasis on our common vulnerability evokes Derrida’s concern with the finitude that we share with nonhuman animals. Deeply affected by the question Jeremy Bentham asks concerning animals – “Can they suffer?,” whose response leaves for Derrida no room for doubt – Derrida claims that, in it, the word “*can* [pouvoir]” is “disturbed by a certain *passivity*. It bears witness, manifesting already, as question, the response that testifies to a sufferance, a passion, a not-being-able” (“Animal” 27; emphasis in the original). Unlike questions regarding animals’ capacity for reasoning or for language, as he argues, “[b]eing able to suffer is no longer a power; it is a possibility without power, a possibility of the impossible. Mortality resides there, as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life [. . .]” (“Animal” 28).

As the limits between the human and the animal become blurred, other boundaries built around the relations with nonhumanity start to collapse, such as the culture/nature dichotomy. In “The Great Silence,” the parrot-narrator reminds us that myths, rituals and traditions meant to make sense of one’s environment are not the exclusive province of human societies: “We Puerto Rican parrots have our own myths. [. . .] Alas, our myths are being lost as my species dies out [. . .]. So the extinction of my species doesn’t just mean the loss of a group of birds. It’s also the disappearance of our language, our rituals, our traditions” (235). Again, Chiang’s story self-consciously evokes the findings of recent research on animal, especially primate, societies – famously translated into cultural theory by Donna Haraway – bridging the traditional divide that lies at the foundation of anthropology and humanism. The story reminds us, as Haraway also does, that there is a “connection across the discredited breach of nature and culture” (“Haraway” 152). In contrast, the human society in “Speech Sounds” is shown to have collapsed as a result of the spread of the illness, depriving the surviving impaired humans of the protection that culture, as an evolutionary development, grants. As such, survivors must fend for



themselves in a newly recovered state of nature, among “blocks of burned, abandoned buildings, empty lots, and wrecked or stripped cars” (97), in a society whose only use for books – the quintessential product of culture – is symbolically enough as fuel. Thus, the parrots and the impaired humans would qualify as representations of what Haraway calls “naturecultures” (*Companion* 12), and as what Braidotti has termed “nature-cultural compounds” (73). In short, instead of finding clear ontological divisions, the stories compel us to confront the complex entanglements that exist between the categories of the human and the nonhuman.

### Subjectivity, Consciousness and Language in “Speech Sounds” and “The Great Silence”

In their threat to the integrity of the humanist edifice, “Speech Sounds” and “The Great Silence” also pose a challenge to traditional philosophical accounts of subjectivity. As *Derrida* explains in his interview “Eating Well” (1991),

[...] the discourse on the subject, even if it locates difference, inadequation, the dehiscence within auto-affection, etc., continues to link subjectivity with man. Even if it acknowledges that the ‘animal’ is capable of auto-affection (etc.), this discourse nevertheless does not grant it subjectivity—and this concept thus remains marked by all the presuppositions that I have just recalled. (105)

Posthuman conditions, mobilized in an enhanced manner by the conventions of speculative fiction, create a space for the consideration of new subjectivities. In his exploration of posthuman subjectivity, *Stefan Herbrechter* usefully draws on Louis Althusser’s theory on the constitution of the subject through “hailing.” As he explains, for Althusser, “the subject is fundamentally an addressing device, a pronoun shifter that allows to connect between a ‘you’ and a ‘me/I/we,’ and switch between these [...]. A subject is therefore first and foremost a position or positioning” (331–32). For Herbrechter, alternative scenes of interpellation are not only imaginable, but occur on a daily basis: “humans can of course be interpellated by a whole variety of social actors: machines, animals, things and so on” to which we respond, and these “can also be addressed by humans” (333). Then, “provided they can somehow embody these positions all can also be attributed with subjectivity” (333).

The impaired humans of “Speech Sounds” engage in alternative forms of interpellation in which human language is not involved. These animalized infrahumans interpellate one another and are capable of response, not only through body gestures and animal vocalizations, but also interestingly through the use of name tokens: “[...] he slipped a gold chain over his head and handed it to her. The pendant attached to it was a smooth, glassy, black rock. Obsidian. [...] She handed him her own name symbol – a pin in the shape of a large golden straw of wheat” (97). These allow them to retain a sense of identity, to position one another as subjects and to embody the subject positions that they would seem to be deprived of with the loss of language. As *Herbrechter* argues, “far from an end to subjectivity, posthuman(ist) conditions rather imply a proliferation of subjectivity, ideology and address or forms and instances of interpellation” (333). In “The Great Silence,” the parrot narrator asks for the kind of interpellation on the part of humanity that would grant his species a position as selves. In other words, s/he begs to be “hailed into” subjecthood: “[i]n 1974, astronomers used Arecibo to broadcast a message into outer space intended to demonstrate human intelligence. That was humanity’s contact call. In the wild, parrots address each other by name. One bird imitates another’s contact call to get the other bird’s attention” (233). After all, addressing means acknowledging the capacity to respond, the response-ability, of the addressed subject, as *Derrida* reminds us (“Animal” 13, 33).

Even more importantly, the parrot in Chiang’s story, like *Derrida*’s cat, interpellates *us*, making an ethical demand on us with his/her last words: “You be good. I love you” (236). To talk about subjectivity is to consider who counts as subject of ethical address, a condition that has traditionally been granted through a logic of exclusion – on the basis of gender, race or class difference – and which continues to be refused to nonhumans. For *Levinas*, whose ethics of alterity has gained great importance within the recent ethical turn in philosophy and literature, our ethical duty to the Other comes from the face; we are held hostage by the ethical demand that the face of the Other places on us,

a duty that is prior to recognition or understanding and arises out of the Other's need (96, 178). Yet, as Wolfe informs us, for Emmanuel Levinas "the animal has no face" (*Rites* 11). Given the unaccountability, extremity and asymmetry of the ethical relationship that Levinasian ethics implies, the parrot-narrator in "The Great Silence" is right to show his/her indignation at the fact that humans "can look [them] in the eye" (235), but choose not to; that is, at the exclusion of the nonhuman animal from the position of the subject of ethical address. Indeed, in Chiang's story, the parrots are symbolically given a "face" through language,<sup>5</sup> forcing readers to acknowledge our duty to respond to the ethical demand that arises from the need of the Other. In "Speech Sounds," the animalized infrahumans do have a face, despite having lost their ability to issue an ethical call through human language. It is precisely the sense of ethical duty and infinite responsibility toward the face of the Other that compels Obsidian to help the woman that is being threatened by a man at the end of the story, and that forces Rye to take the woman's newly-orphaned children with her. In other words, despite their animalization as a result of their aphasia, the infrahumans in Butler's story retain the power to place an ethical demand.

This is an important claim to make: although the impaired humans in Butler's story are, like Nagel's bat and like other nonhuman animals, unable to share their inner experience through human language, we can perceive that there is a connection between their experience and their behavior. This leaves no room for doubt as regards their having a consciousness, a mind, which in no way relies on either their ability to express their experiences through language or our capacity to interpret them in human terms. In "The Great Silence," the animal protagonist and narrator is also clearly endowed with inner experience, with a capacity to experience feelings, sensations and emotions, such as pain and resignation. One cannot help but think here of the "Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness" (2012), a groundbreaking declaration written by Philip Low and signed by an international group of prominent neuroscientists gathered at The University of Cambridge "to reassess the neurobiological substrates of conscious experience and related behaviors in human and non-human animals." In it, they declare the following:

The absence of a neocortex does not appear to preclude an organism from experiencing affective states. Convergent evidence indicates that non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviors. Consequently, the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Nonhuman animals, including all mammals and birds, and many other creatures, including octopuses, also possess these neurological substrates.

As the signatories acknowledge, research has been "naturally hampered by the inability of non-human animals, and often humans, to clearly and readily communicate about their internal states," which supports a key claim put forward by the two stories: that language should not be considered a necessary condition for inner experience to exist. What is more, the stories challenge us to rethink what the notions of "mind" and "consciousness" mean by addressing the reliance of these concepts on language. In so doing, they reject an understanding of consciousness as an "all-or-nothing-property that sunders the universe into vastly different categories" reliant on linguistic capacity (Wolfe, *Rites* 88).

Language and its connection with consciousness are undoubtedly key concerns in both stories, as their titles already indicate. In "Speech Sounds," language is shown to be not only what restrains or keeps the "animality" of the human at bay, but also a condition for the expression of selfhood that is inaccessible to the more impaired, animalized infrahumans. As we have seen, the story is told by a heterodiegetic, omniscient narrator. Though we have full access to the mind of the main protagonist and internal focalizer, we only hear her voice in the story's closing sentences: "'I'm Valerie Rye,' she said, savoring the words. 'It's all right for you to talk to me'" (108). For Rye, speaking the words "I" and "me" is a pleasurable act that symbolically allows her to embody the position of the subject and to invite interpellation. This, however, is not within reach of the more severely impaired infrahumans, which justifies within the framework of the story both their animalization and Rye's superiority and

privileged position as the single center of consciousness. The parrots in “The Great Silence” experience a similar pleasure “that comes with shaping sounds with your mouth” (234). As the parrot-narrator explains, “[w]hen we speak, we use the breath in our lungs to give our thoughts a physical form. The sounds we make are simultaneously our intentions and our life force. I speak, therefore I am” (234). Leaving aside for a moment the fact that this parrot not only can speak a human language but also appears to have some knowledge about Cartesian philosophy, it is very significant to notice that the use of the first-person-singular pronoun firmly links the represented speech or thought to a (nonhuman) consciousness that is doing the thinking and the speaking, to a (nonhuman) subjectivity that is addressing a call.

One might argue, however, that the stories’ approach to consciousness, language and the nonhuman betrays an anthropocentric perspective on the part of the writers. In the case of “The Great Silence,” the parrot-narrator’s linguistic abilities are far superior to those of even the most intelligent of real-life parrots – an African Gray parrot named N’Kisi. N’Kisi is thought to be the only nonhuman animal capable of conjugating verbs and talking about past, present and future experiences. He can also express concern for others, pretend, lie and joke, and is even being taught to spell by his trainer, researcher Aimee Morgana (DeMello 6). Yet, N’Kisi’s abilities, like those of the countless talking birds that one can encounter on YouTube – one of them can even sing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow,” which is nothing if not ironic – cannot compare to those of our parrot. Our parrot’s skills also surpass those of Alex, who is explicitly mentioned in the story as being particularly famous for his cognitive abilities – “[f]amous among humans, that is” (232), the narrator wryly clarifies. Not only that: the parrot in Chiang’s story is also capable of philosophizing and has a knowledge of key scientific and spiritual notions such as the Fermi Paradox, the Big Bang, Pythagorean mysticism, Pentecostalism or Hindu mythology. Simply put, our parrot, like countless other animal narrators in literature, is being anthropomorphized; that is, endowed with human characteristics, emotions and intentions. This renders him/her superior to other nonhuman animals through their being closer to the category of the human. As for “Speech Sounds,” the representation of aphasic humans as animalized infrahumans and their articulation as cognitively and also morally inferior to the less severely impaired beings like Rye, seem to reveal an equally anthropocentric bias in the story. Chiang’s and Butler’s texts are not alone in doing so; Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus have argued that “the insistence on projecting human(ist) values and assumptions as essentially unchanged within posthumanist scenarios is one of the most intriguing instincts” in much speculative fiction (105).

Interestingly, though, the two stories deploy a number of formal features that work to undermine their seeming anthropocentrism. “The Great Silence” is told by a nonhuman narrator, which as Lars Bernaerts and his coauthors explain, does “prompt readers to project human experience onto creatures and objects that are not conventionally expected to have that kind of mental perspective” (69). This, however, also forces readers to recognize the inherent otherness of nonhuman narrators, which may lead us to question our own “assumptions and expectations about human life and consciousness” (Bernaerts et al. 69). Nonhuman narrators foreground strategies of distancing and identification, of defamiliarization and empathy. This is what Bernaerts et al. call a “double dialectic” that inspires readers to acknowledge similarity and otherness, “to recognize the ratness of the rat, the monkeyness of the monkey and the humanness of the rat and the monkey as well as the ratness and the monkeyness of humans” (74) – or, in our case, the humanness of the parrot and the parrotness of the human. Consequently, the anthropocentric paradigm may be destabilized (Bernaerts et al. 69). Regarding “Speech Sounds,” readers are forced to come to terms with an (infra)human mind, Rye’s, which has lost the ability to comprehend or produce written language. This is a defamiliarizing experience in itself for the reader, but it also crucially draws attention to the often unnoticed mediating power of a heterodiegetic omniscient narrator. After all, this kind of narration creates the illusion that we are penetrating more deeply into the mental life of a character than could ever be possible with a real person, which is also rather estranging. Indeed, Marco Caracciolo ascribes a similar dialectic of defamiliarization and empathy to internally focalized stories that expose readers to nonhuman minds. As we know, internal focalization facilitates empathy by creating an impression of closeness

that results from allowing us to imaginatively access the minds of characters. This is particularly significant in light of the fact that, as Caracciolo explains, “some texts invite readers to empathize with minds radically different from ours, providing them with a disconcerting experience that challenges their core assumptions [...] and conventions” (p. 42–43).

Caracciolo makes another important point: “human” narrators and focalizers are equally fictional constructions (30). Since we conceive of fictional characters as minded beings, fictional minds – human and otherwise – are “the result of stylistic and narrative techniques that invite readers to attribute experiences and mental processes to nonexistent beings” (30), and this, Caracciolo reminds us, enhances our sense of closeness to them (33). This kind of empathic connection is based on an imaginative act, regardless of whether the minds with which we are empathizing are human or nonhuman; that is, narrative empathy necessarily involves a subconscious exercise of the imagination. Indeed, the two stories are thought experiments – though admittedly with different degrees of self-consciousness – built on extrapolation in the case of Butler’s story, and on ironic excess in the case of Chiang’s. The presentation of nonhuman minds in the stories, aided by the use of narrative techniques which create the fantasy of access to the mental life of what are undoubtedly minded beings, exploits the readers’ experience with real minds and our capacity for empathy in order to defamiliarize our expectations and assumptions about nonhuman consciousness and subjectivity. These techniques allow to reconjugate the relationship between language, species, consciousness and the question of the subject, which is done not only at a thematic level, as we have seen, but also at a formal one. In so doing, “Speech Sounds” and “The Great Silence” generate the kind of estrangement and radical repositioning that, according to Braidotti, a post-anthropocentric shift away from the hierarchical relations of humanism requires (88).

### Finding the Other Within the Self: Toward a Posthuman Ethics

As this essay has shown, Butler’s “Speech Sounds” and Ted Chiang’s “The Great Silence” dramatize the fact that neither all humans are the “human” of humanism, nor all animals are the nonhumans that much mainstream philosophical and scientific discourse would have them be. By doing so, the two stories render transparent the constructedness of our current parameters of human and animal nature. Looked at from the perspectives of animal studies and critical posthumanism, and in light of the analysis carried out in this essay, it may be argued that at the core of “Speech Sounds” and “The Great Silence” lies a forceful challenge to the boundary between self and other.

In his seminal essay “Of Being Singular Plural” ([1996] 2000), Jean-Luc Nancy puts forward the claim that being is always being with, that “that which exists, whatever this might be, coexists because it exists” (29). This condition of “*being singular plural*” means, for Nancy, that “the essence of Being is only as coessence” (30; emphasis in the original). What this means is that “Being [...] [is] determined in its Being as being with-one-another. This is the singular plural in such a way that the singularity of each is indissociable from its being-with-many [...]” (32). Nancy’s notion of “co-ontology” (Nancy 42) can be usefully deployed to address the coessence of self and other across the human/nonhuman boundary. As the two stories make clear, we must accept our animality, the finitude and vulnerability that we share with other (nonhuman) animals. The stories encourage us to acknowledge that the nonhuman resides at the very core of the human itself, that “we’ are always radically other, already in- or ahuman in our very being” (Wolfe, *Posthumanism* 89). We must, in short, embrace our posthuman condition and recognize nonhuman beings as subjects in their own right.

All this has important ethical implications. After all, the self/other and human/nonhuman boundaries – buttressed, as we have seen, by traditional figurations of subjectivity, consciousness and language – have been widely understood by the western philosophical and legal canons to draw the limits of ethics. The point is not, however, to simply broaden the sphere of ethical consideration, as humanism has been doing with certain marginalized collectives: this kind of compensatory extension of values and rights – open to those who approximate enough this fantastic construction that is “the

human” – continues to rely on traditional patterns of exclusion and oppression and constitutes an act of assimilation, of incorporation, while the values of humanism and anthropocentrism themselves are left unchallenged (see Wolfe, *Posthumanism* 99; Braidotti 96).

In contrast to the narrow, rigid and normative configurations that humanism involves, Butler’s and Chiang’s stories inspire a posthumanist ethics based on ties of affinity, respect and transversality among life forms, be they human or nonhuman. Haraway, one of the pioneers in providing a model of posthuman ethics that stresses the importance of reconsidering the relations between humans, nonhuman animals and techno-others, claims that “to be one is always to become with many” (*Species* 4), and “all the actors become who they are *in the dance of relating*” (*Species* 25; emphasis in the original). For Braidotti, the key notion is transversality, as it “actualizes an ethics based on the primacy of the relation, of interdependence, which values non-human or a-personal Life” (95). Her posthuman ethics resists assimilation and incorporation through what she calls “the principle of not-One” (100): the acknowledgment of the ties that bind us to other beings “in a vital web of complex interrelations” while “break[ing] up the fantasy of unity, totality and one-ness [and] the master narratives of [...] irreparable separation” (100). Wolfe similarly grounds posthuman ethics on affinity – and not identity – between humans and nonhumans, on the fact that “our shared embodiment, mortality, and finitude make us [...] ‘fellow creatures’ in ways that subsume the more traditional markers of ethical consideration [...] that have traditionally created an ethical divide between *Homo sapiens* and everything (or everyone) else” (*Posthumanism* 62; emphasis in the original). Wolfe’s project points toward an ethics based on “a compassion that is rooted in our vulnerability and passivity” (*Posthumanism* 41; emphasis in the original). Compassion here, one can argue, must be understood in its original etymological sense of “enduring, undergoing, experiencing with another” – *cum* “together”+ *pati* ‘to suffer’<sup>6</sup> – as it requires coming to terms with our own nonhumanity, finding the trace of the nonhuman Other always already within the self.

“Speech Sounds” and “The Great Silence” present us with posthumanist scenarios that remind us of the new place in the universe that the human occupies – a universe in which the human/nonhuman and self/other boundaries no longer hold. In it, the fantasy figure that we have long called “the human” (of humanism) has been unmasked as an ideological construct. Instead, this universe is revealed to be inhabited by a myriad of subjects who are not human but are subjects nonetheless. This posthuman predicament, Braidotti reminds us, “enforces the necessity to think again and to think harder about the status of the human [and the nonhuman], the importance of recasting subjectivity accordingly, and the need to invent forms of ethical relations, norms and values worthy of the complexity of our times” (186). In Butler’s and Chiang’s stories, this kind of thinking is facilitated by their engagement with the human and the nonhuman through the discourse of catastrophe and the conventions of speculative fiction. In the texts, the representation of the animal and the infrahuman prompt a reconsideration of the human and of consciousness, undermining the humanist schema of the subject and its reliance on language. In that sense, the stories perform a key cultural and political function: that of contributing to social and cognitive shifts and heightened awareness of the extreme importance and urgency of mobilizing a posthuman ethics, which will eventually trigger change. The ethical stakes of promoting such an ideological shift are high indeed, in light of the abuse, oppression and exploitation to which those traditionally placed at the other side of the human/nonhuman boundary are daily subjected. All representation is political, and current imaginations of future disaster hold the potential to have an impact on the present. My hope is that the “catastrophic imagination” of stories like Butler’s “Speech Sounds” and Ted Chiang’s “The Great Silence” may help shape and motivate a more ethical conduct toward the nonhuman animal in the very near future.

## Notes

1. An institution because “[...] it suggests (like its models racism, sexism, and so on) not only a logical or linguistic structure that marginalizes and objectifies the other solely based on species, but also a whole network of material practices that reproduce that logic [...] and rely on it for legitimation” (Wolfe, *Rites* 101).



2. New research into animal communication has shown that qualities long thought to be exclusive of human languages – multimedia potential, cultural transmission, arbitrariness, creativity and displacement (the ability to talk about objects or events that are remote in time and space) – also characterize the communication systems of some animals (DeMello 6).
3. The story was first published in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* in 1983, and later included in Butler's collection *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (2005). References to the text will be to this version.
4. The text was first published in *E-Flux Journal* (2014) and selected for inclusion in the anthologies *Best American Science Fiction* (2016) and *Best American Short Stories* (2016). It was later included as a short story in Chiang's collection *Exhalation* (2019). References to the story will be to this version.
5. This practice is as old as literature itself: for hundreds of years, animals have been given a human voice in myths, folktales and children's stories all over the world. More recently, however, a growing number of narratives have emerged in which animals – often a horse or a dog – tell their own story. Animal autobiographies, like John Hawkes's *Sweet William: A Memoir of Old Horse* (1993) and Charles Siebert's *Angus: A Novel* (2000) succeed in positioning the nonhuman animal as subject of ethical address while attempting to resist anthropomorphism, an issue that will be taken up presently.
6. [www.etymonline.com/word/compassion](http://www.etymonline.com/word/compassion).

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