

“Keeping Pets and (Not) Eating Animals in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*”

Jeremy Withers, Iowa State University ¹

Abstract: This article examines the role of animals, as well as of veganism, in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, his second novel which deals with the lingering trauma of 9/11. Although Foer took some readers by surprise with his overt interest in animal issues and dietary ethics in his follow up to *Extremely Loud* – the nonfiction work *Eating Animals* – this essay demonstrates that some of the issues regarding food and animals that will so preoccupy Foer in *Eating Animals* are already on display in his earlier fiction. Additionally, this article demonstrates the ways in which Foer is interested in *Extremely Loud* with how traumatized people use animals both to alleviate feelings of guilt and alienation, and also as chauvinistic reminders of human exceptionalism that only further contribute to their painful feelings of isolation.

For most people familiar with his work, Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Eating Animals* (2009), a nonfiction work detailing the horrors of modern factory farming, came as something of a surprise. For example, in Jay Rayner’s review of *Eating Animals* he remarks: “Prior to this book Safran Foer was best known for quirky, self-consciously experimental novels...[*Eating Animals*], however, is a different beast, a detailed piece of journalism, the product...of three years of intense research” (41). In the eight years preceding *Eating Animals*, Foer published two well-received novels. The first, *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), came out when Foer was only twenty-five years old, “discusses the Holocaust...and invites readers to analyze individual and collective trauma” (Collado-Rodriguez 56), and was highly regarded by such literary luminaries as John Updike and Salman Rushdie. Foer’s second novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005), served as his response to the atrocities of September 11th and was met with largely positive, yet also some mixed, reviews. Thus, after one of the most impressive arrivals upon the world literary stage with two highly imaginative works of fiction (works that, furthermore, appeared to possess little discernible interest in animals), Foer’s decision to turn to a journalistic exposé of our contemporary large-scale raising and killing of pigs, cows, chickens, turkeys, and fish for food constituted a seemingly eccentric arc in his writing career.

Rather than promote the notion of a deep separation between *Eating Animals* and Foer’s earlier works of fiction, this article will demonstrate that at least one of those earlier works, *Extremely Loud and*

¹ Jeremy Withers, Iowa State University, jeremywithers@gmail.com

Incredibly Close (hereafter abbreviated as *Extremely Loud*), repeatedly draws upon references to animals and to the human treatment of animals in order to explore its larger themes of grief, trauma, community, and survival. Specifically, I will show how Oskar's dietary practices and frequent allusions to various animals in his narration function in the novel as useful signposts of occasionally seized upon (but by and large missed) opportunities for Oskar to alleviate his acute pain after his father's death by realizing he shares such isolating emotions with, not only many other New Yorkers, but also nonhuman animals as well. And even though he is often deemed the most remote and emotionally deadened character in the novel due to his horrific experiences during World War II, the character of Grandfather (Thomas Schell, Sr.), it will be argued, exists as at times arguably the most responsive and emotionally engaged character in the novel: just not necessarily with regards to humans.

Furthermore, part of this article's underlying polemics is that rather than being an aberration in Foer's steadily growing oeuvre, *Eating Animals* functions as a continuation and more overt discussion of several issues concerning animals that Foer broaches in earlier fiction such as *Extremely Loud*. However, it will be shown that Foer's ideas on animals in *Eating Animals* and *Extremely Loud* are by no means in complete harmony with one another; rather, the journey between those two works has led to some interesting revisions and rethinking of animal-related issues on the part of Foer.

Extremely Loud consists, for the most part, of nine-year-old Oskar Schell's account of his eight month quest to find the lock that fits a mysterious key he discovers in his father's closet after the latter is killed in the Twin Towers on 9/11. Written on the outside of the envelope in the which the key was discovered is the word "Black," which Oskar eventually deduces must be the last name of a person who might know the answer to what lock the key fits. Thus begins Oskar's ambitious plan to meet and interrogate everyone named Black in New York City about the lock and about his father. Interwoven with Oskar's narration are chapters narrated by his paternal grandparents, both survivors of the Allied firebombing of Dresden near the end of World War II. Hence, all three narrators are traumatized characters, and are representatives of various strategies of coping and living with the pain and suffering they have been made to endure as a result of loss and of horrific acts of violence.

As a jumping off point for an analysis of Foer's interest in animals in *Extremely Loud*, we should remind ourselves that one of the more interesting details that we learn about Oskar in the novel is that he is a vegan, that is, a person who refrains from using or consuming any and all animal products (such as eggs, dairy products, honey, and so forth). So integral is veganism to Oskar's self-identity that on the business cards he periodically hands out to people we find (among the many other identity markers specified on the card) "VEGAN" listed there (99, italics and caps in original). The novel implies early on that Oskar's veganism precedes his father's death, for we are told in one flashback scene that Oskar and his entire family "ordered General Tso's Gluten for dinner" (8) one evening.¹ Thus, his veganism is in no way a reaction to the violence of his father's death. But what is interesting about Oskar's veganism is how surface-deep it can seem and how it functions at times as an alienating device. Put simply, Oskar can seem downright self-righteous about his dietary ethics. For example, when he goes to visit Ada Black, the elderly millionaire who owns two Picasso paintings, she is initially quite patient with Oskar's unexpected visit, for she invites him in and tells him he "could have a seat on the couch if [he] wanted to." But rather than show gratitude for this display of patience and hospitality, and use it as a moment to build a rapport with this person who he believes could have vital information about his father, Oskar instead "told her [he] didn't believe in leather, so [he] stood" (149). As Erica Fudge has pointed out: "At the meal table we thus declare who we are on a daily basis, and we make plain also some of the structures of power in which we live" (149). Fudge is speaking here of how meat-eaters declare human supremacy and power over animals, but her comments about the relationship between power and food

are relevant to vegans as well. For just as a vegan like Oskar might do in his dietary practices at the dinner table, in his comments to Ida Black about her leather sofa he is making plain to her his perceived sense of ethical power and ethical superiority over the likes of her. As will be argued below, Oskar does not strike me as embodying the motto (borrowed from Carol J. Adams) "I am a vegan because I am an animal" (122), that is, not because he embraces deep interconnections between human and animal identity; rather, all evidence in the novel points to Oskar embracing his veganism as a way to solidify his *distance* from animals and humans.

Of course the irony surrounding Oskar's judgmental comment to Ada Black here is that careful readers know he is far from perfectly devout in his veganism. One of the "few exceptions to veganism" that Oskar allows himself is dehydrated ice cream, a treat originally designed for astronauts to eat in outer space and one that Oskar's grandmother occasionally picks up for him at the Hayden Planetarium. Oskar's lapses in strict veganism appear permissible from Foer's perspective because they help the relationship between him and his grandmother to flourish, as well as opening up opportunities for Grandmother to demonstrate her profound love for her only grandson by giving him such difficult-to-acquire gifts. These moments of rapport-building through food quite clearly connect *Extremely Loud* with Foer's subsequent work, *Eating Animals*.

In the first and last chapters of *Eating Animals*, Foer mediates at length on the relationships between food, narrative, and community. Early on in the book he writes: "If my wife and I raise our son as a vegetarian, he will not eat his great-grandmother's singular dish [of chicken with carrots], will never receive that unique and most direct expression of her love...Her primal story, our family's primal story, will have to change" (15). Foer returns to this theme of food's social dimensions in the book's concluding chapter when he observes: "We eat as sons and daughters, as families, as communities, as generations, as nations, and increasingly as a globe" (261). By the end of *Eating Animals*, Foer concludes that rupturing tradition and demolishing stories is, lamentably, what is called for when those traditions and stories are deeply intertwined with cuisines and dishes that rely on acts of violence and cruelty, such as those involved in factory-farmed animals (of which, *Eating Animals* points out, nearly all commercially available meat consists). However, in *Extremely Loud*, Foer appears more conflicted about the relationships between food and community, and suggests with Oskar's off-putting devotion to this vegan principles that at times it may be necessary to ease up on ethical dietary restrictions in order to establish or to preserve meaningful bonds with other people.

Another (likely) lapse in Oskar's veganism occurs when he is out on one of his many rambles with his frequent companion, the 103-year old Mr. Black. After their fruitless quest to find another Black in a decrepit part of the Bronx, they stop and buy "some tamales that a woman was selling by the subway from a huge pot in a grocery cart." As they are eating – and clearly enjoying – their tamales, Oskar asks Mr. Black "These are vegan, right?" (196), a query to which he gets no discernible response. Rather than evidence of a growing moral laxity, Foer, I believe, intends a moment like this with Mr. Black to be evidence of Oskar opening himself up to community-building with some of the other lonely and wounded denizens of New York City. Unlike his disdainful refusal to sit on the leather couch at Ada Black's apartment, Oskar does not allow his veganism to interfere with the moment of tamale-sharing with Mr. Black, and consequently to not interfere with the deep bond being forged between himself and his helpful and equally lonely companion.

On the surface, Oskar's connection to animals appears to run deep. At several points in the novel, he employs animal metaphors to express what he is feeling. For example, one metaphor that he favors

using is that of a beaver building its dam in order to express Oskar's own relentless need to invent things. Oskar says of this peculiar obsession of his:

It was worse at night. I started inventing things, and then I couldn't stop, like beavers, which I know about. People think they cut down trees so they can build dams, but in reality it's because their teeth never stop growing, and if they didn't constantly file them down by cutting through all those trees, their teeth would start to grow into own faces, which would kill them. That's how my brain was. (36)

Oskar proceeds to use the beaver metaphor for his compulsive inventing one other time in the novel, as well as employing analogies to salmon and sharks elsewhere in the novel, following up each instance of his metaphorical reference to an animal with the tagline "which I know about."² That repetitive "which I know about" signals Oskar's proud mastery of encyclopedic knowledge about animals, but registers a less-than-substantial understanding of animal subjectivity, sentience, emotions, and so forth. To use the distinctions described by the animal theorist Boria Sax, Oskar is primarily interested in animals "as a tradition," that is, his interest lies almost wholly in the narratives, folk beliefs, and legends associated with animals, and hardly at all (if at all) in their "biology" (i.e. in the animal as a flesh-and-blood, materially existing entity).³ In short, Oskar's adoption of veganism as a lifestyle choice does not, by and large, appear to arise out of any deep, overwhelming concern for animals or animal welfare. Instead, it seems to be the product of Oskar's need to feel exceptional, and to separate himself from those around him and from other children his own age. Two scenes from the novel will serve to demonstrate that what motivates Oskar's veganism is more of a peripheral and overly cerebral interest in animals, and nothing resembling a deep emotional connection to, or deep concern for, them.

First, there is the example of Oskar's pet cat, Buckminster. Periodically throughout the novel, Oskar appears quite enamored of this pet, as when Oskar tells us "I petted Buckminster to show him I loved him," or even when Oskar composes a top ten list of the people he loves and proceeds to rank Buckminster at number four.⁴ Yet, as Versluys has noted: "There are episodes in the book in which Oskar comes across as desensitized and emotionally numb to the point of autism" (107). One such "emotionally numb" moment involves the time when Oskar takes Buckminster to school for some kind of show-and-tell day, for on that day Oskar "brought Buckminster to school...and dropped him from the roof to show how cats reach terminal velocity by making themselves into little parachutes" (190). One would think that with all of the footage of 9/11 jumpers Oskar has viewed on the Internet – and with his theorizing that his own father might have been one of those jumpers – Oskar would have developed an empathy for what the harrowing experience of falling from great heights might feel like. Instead, he appears unable or unwilling to consider the mental experience of his (allegedly) beloved cat here during this exhibition for the class, leading Versluys to conclude that Oskar "seems to have no notion of cruelty and no sense of sympathy" (107).

As a second example of Oskar's overly cerebral interest in animals, we have the discussion of elephants with Abby Black, a discussion engendered by a close-up picture of an elephant's eye (that appears to be weeping a lone tear) hanging on Abby's refrigerator. Oskar calls attention to the picture first, ostensibly as an occasion to display to her his bookish knowledge of elephants. He begins lecturing Abby on subsonic communication between elephants, and about an ongoing experiment conducted by a scientist in the Congo on elephant memory that relies upon the playing of calls by deceased elephants to living members of their herd. However, rather than being impressed by Oskar's preternatural-for-his-age display of scientific knowledge about elephants, Abby only yearns to know what the elephants' emotional reactions were to hearing the calls of deceased herd members. "I wonder what they were

feeling,” Abby muses, “When they heard the calls of their dead, was it with love that they approached the jeep? Or fear? Or anger?” (96).

Oskar, on the other hand, betrays complete indifference to Abby’s questions and imaginative engagement with animal minds, and even subsequently appears offended by Abby’s suggestions that elephants do indeed cry and bury their dead. This notion of whether or not animals are capable of shedding emotional tears has been usefully explored by Mason and McCarthy in their book *When Elephants Weep*. Of particular relevance to our discussion of Oskar’s resistance to Abby’s suggestion that elephants do indeed weep is when Mason and McCarthy write: “perhaps part of the respect accorded to tears comes from the possibility that they are ours alone. It has been suggested that almost every human bodily secretion is considered disgusting...with one exception: tears. This is the one body product that may be uniquely human and hence not remind us of what we have in common with animals” (105). Oskar, put simply, may be feeling overly protective of the boundary that supposedly divides human emotional tears from an animal’s mere physical tears, as his crankiness here appears to be caused by feeling threatened by Abby’s suggestion that animals mourn in a way akin to humans (and, therefore, akin to the mourning he does for his father). Again, Oskar’s interest in animals – demonstrated here by showing off to Abby Black his command of esoteric knowledge about elephants – reveals itself to be motivated by the need to preserve and display his own exceptionalness. We also see how far Oskar is at this early stage in his quest from being capable of employing his grief as a tool for forming imaginative and emotional bonds with other mourners and sufferers – especially with nonhuman ones.

What Foer’s novel does is show that in the course of Oskar’s learning to become aware of other people’s grief, and to realize that he is part of a large community of traumatized people, there exist several opportunities during his odyssey for him to realize that grief and pain in fact cut across the species line. As is the case with Utilitarian philosophers like Jeremy Bentham and Peter Singer, Foer suggests in the novel that pain of many kinds – whether it be of the human or nonhuman kind – resembles one another and counts the same.⁵ But even though Oskar makes great strides in the course of his eight month quest to open himself up to and acknowledge the pain and suffering of others, and to not perceive his own loss as so extravagantly exceptional (like he does earlier in the novel), he displays no signs of having learned that animal pain may be commensurate with his own post-9/11 pain and suffering.⁶

All of which is not to say that Oskar fails to exhibit any discernible evidence of any kind in the novel of maturation or growth with regards to his attitude to animals, only that he never appears to awaken to an understanding that animal pain and human pain might be similar and ethically equal. One slightly ambiguous incident from the novel does, in fact, hint at the possibility of some development on Oskar’s part with regards to animal issues. After Oskar’s discussion with Abby Black about elephants in her apartment, the novel shares with us a letter that Oskar receives from the assistant to Dr. Kaley, the latter being a scientist who “is currently in the Congo on a research expedition” (197) and who Oskar contacted in the hopes of assisting her with her work on elephants. Presumably, this is the same scientist conducting the experiments with recorded elephant calls about which Oskar told Abby Black earlier in the novel. The novel contains several such letters that Oskar receives in response to epistolary contact he initiated with such diverse people as Ringo Starr and Stephen Hawking.

The significance of this letter by Dr. Kaley’s assistant lies in the fact that it could be evidence of, after having met Abby Black and witnessing her intense interest in elephant grief, Oskar himself now craves a more nuanced understanding of and a deeper connection to animals that can come only from studying and interacting with them in their native habitats like Dr. Kaley does. However, as is the case with all of

the response letters Oskar receives and which are included in the novel, none of them contain dates, so we have no idea whether or not Oskar contacted Dr. Kaley about becoming her assistant before or after his discussion about elephants with Abby Black. Yet, Foer may be implying that Oskar did in fact seek out a chance to do ethological field work with animals after being inspired by Abby's intense interest in elephant subjectivity. And if so, such an act would signal a noticeable shift in Oskar away from his previous absorption in animal matters of a purely aloof, metaphorical, and discursive kind.

In contrast to Oskar, Thomas Schell, Sr. (Oskar's grandfather) has learned to transform his personal grief into an increased empathy for fellow sufferers around him, including those of nonhumans. One of the things we learn early on about Grandfather from Oskar's unnamed Grandmother is that his apartment "was like a zoo" with "animals everywhere" (82), such as cats, dogs, birds, fish, snakes, lizards, insects, and mice. Part of the reason for this compulsion to surround himself with many animals might be a need for companionship, but we also get a clear suggestion that Thomas is concerned about animal happiness and animal suffering. For example, at one point Grandmother asks Oskar: "Did I ever tell you about how Grandpa would stop and pet every animal he saw, even if he was in a rush?" (71). Additionally, in one of Thomas' own sections of narration, we are told about a visit he made to the Central Park Zoo with a certain Mr. Richter. But rather than visiting the zoo in order to just be a passive visual consumer of the animals or in order to buttress some sense of human superiority,⁷ Thomas instead (he tells us) "went weighted down with food for the animals, [for] only someone who'd never been an animal would put up a sign saying not to feed them" (28). As Randy Malamud reminds us, oftentimes "feeding [zoo animals] represents spectators' attempt to bridge an otherwise absolute division between people and animals" (235). Malamud emphasizes the above point through an excerpt from the famous children's author A. A. Milne:

If you try to talk to the bison he never quite understands;

You can't shake hands with a mingo – he doesn't like shaking hands,

And lions and roaring tigers hate saying, "How do you do?" –

But I give buns to the elephant when I go down to the Zoo. (Qtd. in Malamud 235-236)

Once at the zoo, Thomas' primary concern lies with alleviating by means of food the animals' hunger (or possibly their boredom due to under-stimulation), and, as in the Milne passage above, with establishing some kind of connection to the animals imprisoned behind the bars or across a moat.⁸

Of course, the incident that must in large part be responsible for Thomas' heightened sense of empathy for animals is his harrowing experience with living through the firebombing of Dresden during World War II. This controversial military action carried out by the Allies near the end of the war brought unspeakable death and suffering not only upon the human inhabitants of Dresden, but also (as Thomas sees firsthand) upon the animal ones as well. During one horrific and fateful night in Dresden during a firebombing raid, Thomas encounters humans "crackling like embers" and "melted into thick pools of liquid" (211) from the fires and intense heat of the firebombing. But he also has undergoes a traumatic experiencing of mass animal death, for during his frantic search throughout the burning city for his beloved Anna (who only that very day told Thomas she was pregnant with their child), he sees "a horse on fire gallop[ing] past" and hears "birds with their wings on fire" (211). But then, most horribly, he finds himself in the middle of the Dresden Zoo during the air raid. An injured zookeeper tells Thomas he must

begin killing the “carnivores” (presumably, so they won’t escape and injure or kill any people), but instead Thomas “kill[ed] everything, everything had to be killed” (213).

Lest the scene of the zoo being bombed – and Thomas’ order by the zookeeper to kill the carnivores – sound too fanciful, we should keep in mind that during World War II both the London and Berlin zoos were bombed. And as Juliet Gardiner informs us, the director of the London Zoo, Julian Huxley, did indeed instruct “the head keeper...to shoot any dangerous animal that might escape during a raid” (172). Randy Malamud, in a section of his book on zoos devoted to how often zoos and warfare converge in catastrophic ways, describes how, not only World War II, but conflicts like the French Revolution and the Bosnian war of the 1990s brought untold suffering to captive zoo animals.⁹

One of the things that appears to surprise Thomas is his own willingness to perform the injured zookeeper’s command to “Shoot everything” (213), for at one point, while in the process of killing an elephant, Thomas tells us that “I...wondered, as I squeezed the trigger, Is it necessary to kill this animal?” (213). But kill it he does, and despite this moment of self-doubt about the moral integrity of his actions, he proceeds to slaughter a breathtaking diversity of animals, including apes, lions, camels, giraffes, zebras, and sea lions. In this moment of being thoroughly victimized and rendered completely powerless by the falling bombs, Thomas has apparently seized with zeal this opportunity to regain a sense of control over his environment. And the animals pay the harrowing price. As Malamud argues: “war engenders a milieu of rampant, unchecked sadism. As human society deteriorates, some people apparently believe zoo animals should not comfortably survive what afflicts our own species; misery loves company” (201). Catalysts such as these – a sudden burst of sadism and a need to recover a lost vestige of control – are what apparently drive Thomas along in his orgy of killing at the Dresden zoo.

What is equally surprising about Thomas’ shockingly violent and unexpected behavior here in the zoo is also how he permits himself to become thoroughly distracted from his quest to locate his beloved Anna during the attack. Instead of finding her and possibly saving her and their unborn child’s lives, Thomas becomes curiously absorbed in this spectacular display of power and control that the circumstances of war have made available to him. His concern and affection for animals later in life, then, for petting and feeding and housing them, resounds with a note of atonement towards animals for the violence unleashed against them on that terrible day in Dresden. The diversity of animals Thomas kills in the zoo finds its parallel in the diversity of animals he cares for later in life and watches over in his apartment, suggesting that what he once took away – a dizzying variety of animal life – he is now trying to protect. At one point during the zoo massacre, Thomas claims that after shooting an ape “in its eyes I was sure I saw some form of understanding, but I didn’t see forgiveness” (213). Seeking forgiveness, it appears, is what sponsors Thomas’ stewardship of animals later on in his life.

Although not a moment of human-like verbal communication, the locking of eyes between Thomas and the ape mentioned above is nonetheless affirmed by Thomas as a moment of communication, thus (possibly) initiating the lifelong belief by people (oft-referenced in the novel) that Thomas can “talk to animals,” a curious talent that is never fully explained in the text.¹⁰ Furthermore, this moment of intuiting an animal’s state of mind by Thomas foreshadows the keen interest in issues of nonverbal communication and understanding between humans and animals in Foer’s *Eating Animals*, such as when Foer wonders about the degree of terror pigs experience when approaching the slaughter room, or when he imaginatively enters the mental state of his sleeping dog George.¹¹ In both texts, Foer suggests that an unbridgeable chasm between humans and animals does not exist, and that humans do indeed possess a reliable ability to intuit or imagine an animal’s mental state from the latter’s body language,

sounds, or facial expressions, and that such ability erodes the distance between human and animal minds.

The novel's attribution to Thomas of a capability to "speak to animals" has, as far as I can tell, been completely uncommented upon in the scholarship of *Extremely Loud*. When analyzing the character of Thomas, many critics find him to be someone who has unfortunately retreated completely into himself, has taken almost no palpable steps to "work through" his trauma, and (therefore) stands in these critics' eyes as arguably the most hopelessly wounded character in the novel. For example, Uytterschout and Versluys write: "In a very literal sense, Thomas Schell is unable to share his traumatic experiences with others because he suffers from aphasia – the loss of speech...His inability or refusal to speak testifies to an unwillingness to cope with his traumatic past" (222).¹²

But critics such as Uytterschout and Versluys mistakenly think that, for Foer, the only meaningful communication is direct verbal language, and that Foer judges all other nonverbal forms of communication in the novel as feeble attempts on the part of traumatized people to talk about the ordeals they lived through and about their lingering emotional pain. Philippe Cooke promotes this negative reading of nonverbal forms of communication in the novel when he writes: "the three main characters [Oskar, Grandfather, and Grandmother]...are muted with respect to the traumatic events that have fractured their lives. They seek other forms of communication, but mostly to no avail" (247). However, in opposition to Uytterschout, Versluys, and Cooke, I find Foer fascinated with the myriad ways people communicate and express their suffering to others, ways as diverse as Oskar's crafting of a bracelet for his mother that employs Mores code to Mr. Black's daily driving of a nail into his bed frame to show his love for his dead wife to Thomas's "talking to animals."

Foer, that is, revels in the profusion of modes of communication that punctuate people's lives. However much Thomas' aphasia inhibits his ability to reestablish meaningful and direct communication with other humans in the novel, Foer's novel certainly suggests that Thomas has opened himself up to a communication of a different order, albeit still a meaningful one, as a result of his traumatic experience in Dresden. Thomas' stewardship of a small menagerie in his apartment serves as a much less superficial engagement with animal forms of life than Oskar's aloof and bookish engagement with them, or even Grandmother's distant involvement with animals through her keen interest in learning animal-centered English idioms such as "the bee's knees, the cat's pajamas, horse of a different color, [and] dog-tired" (108).

One might be tempted to interpret Thomas' large-scale pet-keeping in negative terms, that is, as a form of mastery over creatures more weak and vulnerable than himself. This is an unflattering view of pet-keeping typically associated with the writing on pets by Yi-Fu Tuan. Take, for example, the following description by Tuan of the domestication of animals for pet-keeping purposes: "Domestication means domination: the two words have the same root sense of mastery over another being – of bringing it into one's house or domain" (99).¹³ However, Foer's novel fails to suggest that a compulsion to dominate is what motivates Thomas' pet-keeping.

Rather, as Thomas' sneaking of food into the zoo in order to feed the animals suggests, it is concern for animal welfare that sponsors Thomas' interest in animals. For as James Serpell claims (*contra* Fuan) "it is...inaccurate to argue that the thrill of dominating others is necessarily the most important thing that humans, rich or poor, derive from pet ownership" (52). Instead, Thomas' decision to fill his living-space with a diversity of animals appears to embody Serpell's description of pet as (to borrow a word from one of Serpell's chapter titles) "panacea."

Since the late 18th century, as Serpell summarizes it, pets have been employed for therapeutic purposes for a number of psychological maladies and conditions. And as the history of such therapeutic use for animals demonstrates, “the individuals who seem to benefit most [from pet therapy] are those who, for whatever reason, feel alienated or rejected. Relationships with pets appear to be able to break down barriers of despair and disillusionment” (97).¹⁴ Even though Thomas’ loss of speech certainly serves as a symptom that his trauma has left deep psychological scars that are not fully healed, Foer’s description of Thomas’ pet-keeping carries no overtones of violence and domination, and instead appears to be an indication that Thomas has turned to other species for consolation and companionship, and that – rather than completely withdrawing inwardly – these animals served as a tenuous link for Thomas to the world around him.

It is even strongly suggested in the novel that this vast assortment of animals is barely – if at all – confined in cages, for at one point Thomas writes “[e]very morning before breakfast...[Grandmother] and I go to the guest room, the animals follow us” (130). And elsewhere, Grandmother informs us that after Thomas has abandoned her, “[t]he animals must have understood [her loneliness?], because they surrounded me and pressed into me” (176). The references here to animals could be to the normally cage-free ones like cats and dogs, but the imagery strongly suggest a larger and more varied herd moving at will throughout the apartment. To borrow a phrase Julie Ann Smith uses in her essay on living with house rabbits, Thomas and Grandmother’s apartment appears to have become a “post-humanist household,” that is, one in which humans exist as co-tenants of the space with their animal companions, and one in which people engage in “practices focused on controlling humans rather than [animals], because humans [are] the ones having to radically alter their behavior” (Smith 185).¹⁵

When Grandmother releases all of Thomas’ pets after he deserts her, her actions do not carry the overtones of merciful liberation like we may initially think. Rather, the release of Thomas’ pets appears to be more about vindictiveness for her, for we are told that in addition to “open[ing] the birdcages” and “releas[ing] the insects onto the street,” Grandmother also “poured the fish down the drain” (185). Just like Thomas abandons her, Grandmother abandons Thomas’ pets. She forsakes his practice of caring for this small menagerie of animals as an apparent act of retribution against him, thereby performing a gender reversal of the typical situation documented by Carol J. Adams whereby a male will often harm or kill the pet(s) of a woman in order to avenge himself for some perceived offense on her part or in order to exercise a form of control over her.¹⁶ Grandmother’s act of releasing these domesticated animals to fend for themselves after their lives as pets is surely sending many of them to a certain death.

In sum, unlike what many other scholars have assumed to be the case, Thomas is not necessarily the most traumatized and wounded character in the novel – at least not all the way through the novel. It is, obviously, a problematic moment when he walks out on not only his pregnant wife but also (especially given my above analysis) on his pets. His community-building with animals, and his stewardship of them, are unfortunately projects that lose out to his compulsion to not be around when a woman becomes pregnant with another child of his, a child that could potentially be lost just as his and Anna’s was back in Dresden. But critics who believe that Thomas is *hopelessly* wounded and *completely* withdrawn into himself appear to ignore his pets altogether, perhaps because they perceive them in a way that associates pet-keeping as an inferior substitute for much more “meaningful” human companionship.

Furthermore, this article has argued that Oskar’s references to animals and to his eating practices are useful signposts (also previously ignored by critics) for observing what, if any, maturation and healing Oskar undergoes in the course of the novel. Although in his more recent book, *Eating Animals*, Foer will be much more clear-cut in his promotion of veganism and other ethical practices related to animals, in

Extremely Loud we find him exploring, in a much more conflicted way, the tensions that arise between, on the one hand, a commitment to animal rights or animal welfare issues and, on the other hand, a commitment to forging and maintaining close relationships with other people. In other words, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* serves as something of a testing ground for some of Foer's ideas regarding animals that will come into sharper focus in his more extended mediations on such ideas in *Eating Animals*. But as this article has demonstrated, there are both continuities and divergences that exist between these two works by Foer. It will be interesting indeed to see what role – if any – animals will play in Foer's future works of fiction.¹⁷

Endnotes

-
- ¹ Gluten – a type of protein found in most grains, cereals, and breads – is a common meat substitute used in vegan and vegetarian diets.
 - ² The second beaver metaphor occurs on page 193, the shark metaphor on page 87, and the salmon metaphor on page 106.
 - ³ For Boria Sax's discussion of animal "biology" versus "tradition," see his *The Mythical Zoo: An Encyclopedia of Animals in World Myth, Legend, and Literature* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2001).
 - ⁴ Foer, *Extremely Loud*, 68, 73.
 - ⁵ For discussions of the equality of human and animal pain by these two philosophers, see Chapter XVII of Jeremy Bentham's *Principles of Morals and Legislation* and Peter Singer's watershed book of the animal rights movement, *Animal Liberation*.
 - ⁶ Oskar does, however, make obvious improvements in his ability to empathize with other people's suffering by the end of the novel, as demonstrated by how he finally, near the novel's close, appears to approve of his widowed mother's dating of the similarly widowed Ron, a relationship that Oskar has shown nothing but contempt for hitherto then in the novel.
 - ⁷ For discussions of the role of human spectatorship at zoos, and of the perception of human chauvinism lurking at the core of zoos, see the following studies: John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" in *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980); Bob Mullen and Garry Marvin, *Zoo Culture* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989); Malamud, esp. 225-267; Nigel Rothfels, *Savages and Beasts: The Birth of the Modern Zoo* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002); Eric Baratay and Elisabeth Hardouin-Fugier, *Zoo: A History of Zoological Gardens in the West* (London: Reaktion, 2002).
 - ⁸ Malamud actually looks upon the practice of establishing a connection with zoo animals via feeding them in a more negative light than I do here. For example, at one point he proceeds to quote Yi-Fu Tuan on the allegedly heinous power dynamics behind feeding animals. Tuan, Malamud reminds us, wrote that the pleasure behind feeding large zoo animals is "all the greater if the animal is first made to beg and if it is large enough to crush us in another setting structured in our favor" (qtd. in Malamud 236). However, I do not perceive Foer sharing negative views like Tuan's of the practice of feeding animals at the zoo.
 - ⁹ For Malamud's discussion of zoos and warfare, see pages 199-217.
 - ¹⁰ The attribution of the ability to talk to animals to Thomas occurs on pages 105, 234, and 256.
 - ¹¹ See pages 41 (sleeping dog) and 160 (pigs approaching slaughter) in *Eating Animals*.
 - ¹² Versluys comes to similar conclusions in his *Out of the Blue* on pages 87-96.
 - ¹³ For an excellent overview of the cultural practice of pet-keeping, and of the alleged positives and negatives of it, see Erica Fudge, *Pets* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008).
 - ¹⁴ For an interesting – and pioneering – literary exploration of the therapeutic value of pets, see Virginia Woolf's *Flush: A Biography*, a novel about the often sickly Elizabeth Barrett Browning and her pet cocker spaniel, Flush.

- ¹⁵ In this fascinating article, Smith describes how and why she redesigned her home's interior space so that it will be more accommodating one for her foster house rabbits, thereby decentering the space from its traditional focus on human wants and needs.
- ¹⁶ See Carol J. Adams, "Woman-Battering and Harm to Animals," in *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations*, eds. Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), 55-84.
- ¹⁷ I specify fiction here because Foer has already gone on record in an interview as saying that after *Eating Animals* he doesn't plan on ever writing nonfiction – whether about animal issues or otherwise – again. Interview with Jonathan Safran Foer, *Vegetarian Times* 36:6 (May/June 2010), 84.

Works Cited

- Adams, Carol J. "An Animal Manifesto: Gender, Identity, and Vegan-Feminism in the Twenty-First Century." *Parallax* 12:1 (2006): 120-128.
- Collado-Rodriguez, Francisco. "Ethics in the Second Degree: Trauma and Dual Narratives in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 32:1 (2008): 54-68.
- Cooke, Phillip. "Philomela Revisited: Traumatic Iconicity in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*." *Studies in American Fiction* 35:2 (2007): 241-253.
- Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Eating Animals*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009.
- . *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- Fudge, Erica. "Why it's Easy Being a Vegetarian." *Textual Practice* 24:1 (2010): 149-166.
- Gardiner, Juliet. *The Animals' War: Animals in Wartime from the First World War to the Present Day*. Foreword by Jilly Cooper. London: Portrait, in association with the Imperial War Museum, 2006.
- Malamud, Randy. *Reading Zoos: Representations of Animals and Captivity*. New York: New York UP, 1998.
- Mason, Jeffrey Moussaieff and Susan McCarthy. *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals*. New York: Delta, 1995.
- Rayner, Jay. "Review of *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer." *The Observer* 28 February 2010: 41.
- Serpell, James. *In the Company of Animals: A Study of Human-Animal Relationships*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Smith, Julie Ann. "Beyond Dominance and Affection: Living with Rabbits in Post-Humanist Households." *Society & Animals* 11:2 (2003): 181-197.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Dominance and Affection: The Making of Pets*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1984.
- Uytterschout, Sien and Kristiaan Versluys, "Melancholy and Mourning in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*." *Orbis Litterarum* 63:3 (2008): 216-236.
- Versluys, Kristiaan. *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel*. New York: Columbia UP, 2009.