

Regina Rheda's *Humanimals*:  
*Humana Festa* and the  
Postslavery Novel

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Regina Rheda's *Humana Festa* (The Human Feast, 2008) is a pioneering comedy of manners that delineates the foundations of animal abolitionism in relation to class struggle, the plight of the landless (Movimento Sem Terra), the world-system and environmental devastation.<sup>2</sup> It weaves together two parallel settings—the bible-thumping, NRA-loving milieu of the Florida hinterland, and São Paulo's neo-plantation, agro-business interior, where estates worked by slaves have been replaced by intensive cattle and pig farms operated by underpaid laborers and subsidized by U.S. conglomerates. As in Rheda's short story, "The Sanctuary" (2002), *Humana Festa* locates the question of the animal within a web of interlocking socioeconomic and post-imperial relations. With its juxtaposition of the two largest post-slavery polities in the Americas, and its climactic direct action on a São Paulo

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<sup>2</sup> See Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System I* (New York: Academic Press, 1974); *The Modern World System II* (New York: Academic Press, 1974); *The Modern World System III* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1989). See also Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1.3 (2000): 533-580.

*fazenda*, Rheda situates animal abolitionism in the context of struggles against African enslavement and globalization as well as within the long tradition of comparative analyses of U.S. and Brazilian slavery.<sup>3</sup> Her narrative of south/ north struggles to expand the parameters of personhood decenters the U.S. as the hub for the transmission of avant-garde ideals while simultaneously unhinging the notion of “animal whites,”<sup>4</sup> the pervasive allegation that animal rights is a frivolous preoccupation of single-issue U.S. and European elites who “care more about animals than people.”

*Humana Festa* centers on two vegan women, characters drawn with wit and irony without depreciating their commitment to abolishing animal exploitation. Whereas animal rights activists have appeared in contemporary literature and film, they are invariably either frivolous or intensely neurotic. Most recently, Mike White’s “The Year of the Dog” (2007) features the batty Peggy (Molly Shannon), a lonely single woman in her 40s whose only friend is her dog. On the other hand, Rheda’s novel is by no means the first in literary history to treat nonhuman animal suffering as a topic for serious moral consideration. Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Revolt of Islam” (1818)—“Never again may blood of bird or beast/ Stain with its venomous stream a human feast”—provides the title for *Humana Festa*. The post-human protagonist of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1817) connects his suffering with the plight of nonhuman animals, declaring himself vegetarian. Frankenstein’s overdetermined dehumanization—he is the Cartesian machine par excellence, the product of his human-cum-God-like creator—is a powerful statement about the plight of commodified other-than-humans

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<sup>3</sup> Whereas the pervasive analysis from the late nineteenth-century onward has been that Brazil had a relatively gentler slavery economy that led to the formation of a Racial Democracy, unlike the U.S.’s harsh slavery economy and rigid racial stratification, recent studies have deconstructed the myth of Brazilian Racial democracy and the concomitant myth of the U.S.’s singularly cruel regime. See Michael Hanchard, *Orpheus and Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond, *White Negritude* (New York: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2007); Edward Telles, *Race in Another America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> See Tim Wise, “Animal Whites: PETA and the Politics of Putting Things in Perspective.” *Counterpunch* 13-14 Aug 2005. <http://www.counterpunch.org/wise08132005.html>

whom he empathetically refuses to consume. John Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) explores human and nonhuman animal suffering in post-apartheid South Africa, while in *The Lives of Animals* (2001), Coetzee delivers an indictment of nonhuman animal exploitation through Elizabeth Costello's fictional Tanner lecture series at Princeton University. Whereas Mike White's Peggy is an endearing lunatic who loses touch with reality in her overstated identification with nonhuman animals, Costello is tormented by her attunement to realities suppressed by the vast majority. She is deranged but Coetzee suggests that her derangement is due to awareness of the moral schizophrenia of the world in which she lives, her solitary perception of the crimes of astounding magnitude taking place in slaughter houses, animal experimentation laboratories and fur farms the world over.

In Brazilian literature, Rheda's work is predated by bold indictments of animal exploitation and defiance of human/ animal dialectics. As in the work of Coetzee, these southern hemisphere critiques are contextualized within a broader spectrum of Western metaphysical structures of domination. In Machado de Assis's "Conto Alexandrino" (An Alexandrine Tale, 1883), two scientists conduct experiments on a myriad of nonhuman animal species. The motives behind their tests are frivolous, their quest for truth a sham: in one case, they vivisect hundreds of rats simply to ascertain changes in eye color at the moment the live animals' hearts are removed (is it lilac or a shade of blue?). When the scientists have run out of nonhuman animals, they turn to criminals, hundreds of whom are released from their cells to be subjected to the scientists' knives. Foucault's panopticon is brought to bear through Machado's dual sites of abjection: the prison and the experimentation laboratory. Machado shows that animalization—the withholding of humanity and, therein, protection from injury—is a process which can befall any living creature, whether on the basis of species difference (and confinement within the experimentation laboratory) or criminalization (and relegation to the prison). In Machado's "A Causa Secreta" (The Secret Cause, 1885),<sup>5</sup> another

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<sup>5</sup> This is the literal translation of Machado's "A Causa Secreta," translated into English as "The Secret Heart" by William Grossman in 1963.

scientist dissects live animals to satisfy his whimsical curiosity. This story brings home the complicity of his seemingly innocent associates; despite her distaste for his experimentation, the doctor's wife simply insists that his acts be accomplished out of sight and earshot so as to protect her fragile sensibilities. A young medical student who questions the ethical implications of the doctor's actions remains silent. To his condemnation of cruelty to nonhuman animals, Machado conjoins a gender dynamic: when the doctor's wife passes away, his sadistic enjoyment in observing her demise connects the logic of voyeuristic domination over nonhuman animals with the objectification and commodification of Maria Luísa's body.

Guimarães Rosa's "Meu Tio, o Iauaretê" (My Uncle, the Jaguar, 1961) also addresses intersecting oppressions. The narrator, a wildcat hunter who regrets murdering so many of his "kinfolk," ultimately turns into a jaguar. In addition to Rosa's send up of the human/ animal divide, the narrator's withdrawal from Portuguese in favor of an idiom incorporating Tupi-Guaraní and the onomatopoeia of the wildcat (an array of cat-like sounds) links speciesism with racism as intertwining discourses that sustain the postcolonial order. In *Vidas Secas* (Barren Lives, 1938), Graciliano Ramos recounts the plight of an impoverished family of northeastern migrants seeking refuge from the drought. Subjected to this zero limit situation, they are bombarded by the madness of a society that denies them the most basic forms of protection. Relegated to the margins, they are likewise confounded by language, by a wall of words they cannot pronounce and a painful inability to communicate with one another. Ramos connects their anguish with the predicament of their nonhuman animal companions, a parrot who "can't even talk" and a dog, Baléia; these nonhuman animals' desacralization is guaranteed precisely on the basis of purported lack of access to language and the incapacity for rational comprehension. Animalizing humans and humanizing animals, Ramos reflects on our universal susceptibility to "thingness." He enables the expression of nonhuman animal perspective and, therein, personhood; along with chapters narrated from the outlooks of Fabiano, Vitória and their two sons, one chapter is told from Baléia's point of view. The life experience—

and, ultimately, the legally and ethically sanctified killing—of this malnourished mongrel is at once a reflection on anxiety about racial mixing, the stigmatization of the rural, backland poor, and the arbitrary horror of animalization.

Published in 2008, Rheda's *Humana Festa* is distinct from these earlier texts for its engagement with the interdependent contemporary discourses of veganism and animal abolitionism. Whereas Ramos and Rosa indict the exploitation of animalized beings, their messages are contradictory. In *Vidas Secas*, Baléia's murder is the source of mourning and remorse, but the moral ramifications of slaughtering piglets and breaking wild horses are suppressed. In "My Uncle the Jaguar," wildcats are "kinfolk" but killing dogs and cows does not elicit ethical inquiry. Machado's indictment of animalization is more coherent, though he confesses a lack of personal commitment. In a *crônica* published in "A Semana" in 1893, he describes himself as "carnivorous by upbringing and vegetarian by principle" and admits that "when I attained the use of reason and organized my code of principles, I included vegetarianism; but it was too late to be executed. I was already a meat eater" (5 Mar 1893). *Humana Festa* is specifically informed by the theories of law professor and animal abolitionist, Gary Francione, whose *Animals as Persons* (2008) lays the framework for the most radical of animal rights discourses to date. Unlike Peter Singer or David Favre, Francione rejects welfarist advocacy for the elimination of "unnecessary suffering," arguing instead for the abolition of animal exploitation across the board. For Francione, the question boils down to personhood versus property. As long as animals are considered property, attempts to reduce their suffering will be inconclusive. Francione compares the millennia-long animal advocacy movement with the struggle to end African slavery; laws and regulations curtailing the infliction of violence against enslaved blacks were full of loopholes that privileged slaveholders' rights above those of the enslaved. Efforts to reduce unnecessary suffering had as their premise the belief that a certain degree of suffering was justifiable if it benefitted the owner. While Francione concurs that it would be better to beat a slave three rather than five times a week, it would also be preferable not to torture nonhuman animals prior to killing them

and for rapists not to beat their victims in addition to raping them. But just as there is no such thing as “humane rape,” there is also no such thing as “humane slaughter.” Francione insists that meaningful change cannot occur until we accept that animals are persons. Like human animals, they are sentient beings who have self-consciousness, an interest in avoiding pain and in preserving their individual lives. Whereas the space of the animal is an unsafe space—vulnerable to legally and ethically condoned injury at every step—Francione argues that, as persons, animals must be ensured the basic right of protection from institutionally condoned physical injury.

Francione’s theory of personhood relies upon a comparison with the abolition of human slavery and, as such, belongs to a body of rights discourse that situates animal exploitation in the context of atrocities committed against human animals, including Jacques Derrida’s “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)” (2000), Marjorie Spiegel’s *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery* (1996) and Charles Patterson’s *Eternal Treblinka: our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust* (2002). As Claire Jean Kim observes, this comparative tactic belongs to a long tradition within movements for social justice whereby unquestioned modes of violence are juxtaposed with others that have already been accepted on a mainstream level as abominations (“For Animals, all Humans are Nazis”). Taking this a step further, Derrida emphasizes that nonhuman animal *bios* is not only mutilated and exterminated but overproduced, such that the realities of experimentation laboratories and slaughterhouses take genocide to a previously unimaginable level:

One should neither abuse the figure of genocide nor consider it explained away. For it gets more complicated here: the annihilation of certain species is indeed in progress, but it is occurring through the organization and exploitation of an artificial, infernal, virtually interminable survival, in conditions that previous generations would have judged monstrous, outside of every supposed norm of a life proper to animals that are thus exterminated by means of their continued existence or even their

overpopulation. As if, for example, instead of throwing people into ovens or gas chambers (let's say Nazi) doctors and geneticists had decided to organize the overproduction and over-generation of Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals by means of artificial insemination, so that, being more numerous and better fed, they could be destined in always increasing numbers for the same hell, that of the imposition of genetic experimentation or extermination by gas or fire (2000, 395).

Kim demonstrates that the tactic of comparing atrocities has, throughout history, elicited impassioned indignation. Most recently, PETA's campaigns, "Are Animals the New Slaves?" and "Holocaust on Your Plate," provoked outrage on behalf of blacks and Jews seeking to safeguard the uniqueness of their historical plights. Whereas the crux of their specific ire was the association with animals from whom they have struggled to differentiate themselves, resistance to this perceived dehumanization is on par with homophobic black activists' reactions to the gay and lesbian rights movements' heavy reliance upon comparisons with civil rights, or resistance to African American women's advocacy within the civil rights movement, given the assumption that black men's discrimination was of a more serious and urgent order. For Cary Wolfe, though it is understandable that "historically marginalized peoples would be skeptical about calls from academic intellectuals to surrender the humanist model of subjectivity, with all its privileges, at just the historical moment when they are poised to 'graduate' into it," the problem is that as long as speciesist/humanist common sense is unchallenged, animalization will be available as a tool for desacralizing human animals as well, whether on the basis of race, gender, socio-economic class or sexual orientation (*Animal Rites*, 2003, 7-8).

At the same time that comparisons of animal exploitation with African enslavement and the Holocaust have met with hostility, Kim cites examples of black and Jewish rights activists' denunciations of nonhuman animal exploitation: William Wilberforce co-founded The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals; the founder of the

Farm Animal Reform Movement, Alex Hershaft, was a Holocaust survivor; Nobel prize winning Yiddish author Isaac Bashevis-Singer compared the daily atrocities committed against nonhuman species to the horrors experienced by Jews during World War Two. In addition to the prominent abolitionists and black and Jewish intellectuals to whom Kim makes reference, Dick Gregory is among PETA's most outspoken advocates, Alice Walker has identified parallels between struggles against racism and speciesism,<sup>6</sup> Coretta Scott King was a committed vegan and César Chavez, like many members of the Executive Committee of the United Farm Workers, was a vegetarian, having discerned links between the exploitation of farm workers and the tortures perpetrated on nonhuman animals. Invested in Francione's theory—Rheda has translated much of his "Abolitionist Approach" website into Portuguese<sup>7</sup>—*Humana Festa* approaches the question of nonhuman animal exploitation from the premise that nonhumans are persons, not property, and should therefore not in any way be enslaved or subject to injury. With its reliance upon the discourse of personhood and its advocacy for the abolition of animal exploitation, her narrative redefines the postslavery novel, a term that has traditionally referred to narratives centering on power relations between blacks and whites since the origin of African enslavement.

The first vegan protagonist to whom Rheda introduces her reader is Megan (an anagram of vegan), a resident of Weekeeewawkeeville, Florida who is preparing her master's thesis on a comparative interpretation of Percy Bysshe Shelley and J. M. Coetzee. Megan's Brazilian boyfriend, Diogo Bezerra-Leitão, studies agronomy and environmental science and is presumed heir to the Fazenda Mato Grosso, a cattle and pig farm in the interior of São Paulo, itself destined to be transformed into a factory farm through the efforts of Holy Hill, a U.S. conglomerate. The second protagonist is Dona Orquídea, a worker

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<sup>6</sup> See Alice Walker's preface to Marjorie Spiegel's *The Dreaded Comparison* (New York: Mirror Books, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> See Francione's website, [www.abolitionistapproach.com](http://www.abolitionistapproach.com)



on the Bezerra-Leitão's farm who, without being aware of the term, "animal rights," has refused to consume or wear animal products since childhood. The tragedy for Orquídea is that her job consists in tending to farm animals and preparing their corpses for consumption, her hair covered with a rosemary-infused handkerchief to mask the smell of blood. Orquídea recalls Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), who secretly laments a mule's mistreatment and finds that her concern with the animal "ain't no everyday thought" (Zora Neale Hurston, 87). Like Janie, Orquídea is hard-pressed to define or articulate her views given that, prior to her encounter with Megan and Diogo, she has never met a vegan. As Orquídea puts it, "I was born crooked" (80). Orquídea's perception of her "crookedness," or of the world upside down, reflects the experience of attunement to animal suffering in a setting wherein common sense dictates animals' thingness. Contemplating the massive slaughter of animals on Christmas eve, Orquídea asks "that God permit her another crooked idea," and ventures that since she must annually endure the sounds of wailing animals and laughing men, her suffering is worse than that of Christ, who only had to die once (73). When she learns that the farm will soon be visited by Megan and Diogo, who also do not consume animal products, she is incredulous: "Virgin Mary...two more loonies in the world!" (90).

Megan and Orquídea meet when Diogo's mother, Dona Marcela, transfers her from her shack to the big house to serve as vegan chef. Whereas Megan is a second-generation animal liberationist—the daughter of a 1970s-style ecofeminist—Orquídea's activism is initially a private protest, consisting in setting an example by refusing to consume or wear animals. It is only with Megan's visit that she begins to conceive of her individual dissent as part of a larger politic; as it turns out, Megan and Diogo's arrival coincides with the planning stages of a direct action against the transformation of the Fazenda Mato Grosso into a factory farm. Whereas the farm laborers are already underpaid and contract life-long debts to the Bezerra-Leitãos for the use of their uniforms and tools (166), the advent of the *fazenda's* modernization portends even less tolerable working conditions. At Zé Luís's invitation, Orquídea attends strategy meetings at Norato's store, where farm workers, the representative of a

nearby landless peasant occupation, and an environmentalist leader join forces to protest Holy Hill, articulating the intersecting interests of underpaid workers, landless migrants, and environmental protection. Though they discuss biotechnology and the drugs used to fatten farm animals and to cure the illnesses caused by their intensive confinement, they are blind to the moral significance of nonhuman animal suffering and to the relevance of that suffering for their own dehumanization. As Kim notes, “Henry Ford was inspired by observing slaughterhouses to develop his assembly line production method, which was then applied to the design of Nazi death camps” (4).

Recalling Derrida’s account of the tentative voices that speak on behalf of animal rights—“minority, weak, marginal voices, little assured of their discourse, of their right to discourse and of the enactment of their discourse within the law” (395)—Orquídea is intimidated by the all-male crowd but eventually intervenes and influences the attending organizers to include farm animals’ liberation as part of their protest (188). Later, when the labor organizers and environmentalists become fearful of the Bezerra-Leitões and their U.S. backers, Orquídea, together with Zé Luís, his pregnant hooker girlfriend, Doralice, and Pé de Anjo, the representative of the landless peasants, organize an action of their own. Pé de Anjo blows up the foundation of the concrete corrals under construction by Holy Hill while Orquídea, Zé Luís and Doralice break into the edifice where pigs are held in dark, miniscule stalls. Rheda casts the pigs’ liberation from their dank confinement into the surrounding forest as a neo-underground railroad and Dona Orquídea, the vegan *camponesa*, as postmodern slaves’ advocate. As in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, when Janie’s husband takes action on behalf of the mistreated mule and she places him within an “historic tradition of liberators,” comparing him with Washington and Lincoln (Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, 1990, 87), Rheda “creates her own mythopoesis, enlarging the meaning of an individual’s actions so that it carries political importance; actions that are usually muted within the dominant culture that decides what is appropriately political” (Adams, 87).

The group resolves to concentrate on freeing the piglets since they are lighter and easier to handle, but Orquídea, a mother and soon-to-

be grandmother, is tortured by the sight and sounds of the gestating sows. Entering the confinement edifice, she witnesses a reality that, in the age of the factory farm, is sustained and made viable through camouflage (neatly packaged, disassembled body parts) and invisibility (as Paul McCartney has observed, slaughterhouses do not have glass walls).<sup>8</sup> The images she sees and, equally importantly, the experience of subjecting herself to the watchful eyes of the confined sows, places a demand upon Orquídea, emboldening her and deepening her comprehension of the slaughterhouse politic. As Derrida observes, “The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. Thinking perhaps begins there” (397):<sup>9</sup>

...the shrieks and moans of so many pregnant Mortandelas squeezed into small prisons wounded her eardrums like a knife. She avoided looking at the interminable series of pictures of abjection and ruin behind the bars. The images dared to be noted, they slipped out of the cages and came at her, exposing to her wounds, lugubrious eyes, feet buried in shit. Dona Orquídea went three times to the growing rooms, pretending not to see the gestating sows chewing the bars of their cells in their lost war of teeth against the irons (my italics, 320-1).

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Taussig has described laboratory experimentation and slaughterhouse killings as the “public secret of carnivorous modernity” (*Defacement*, Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1999), and Hugo Reinert refers to this “secret spectacle’s choreography for the eyes of unseen experts” (“The Pertinence of Sacrifice,” *Borderlands* 6.3, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Derrida traces the potential redirection of the gaze from violated beast to human “despot” that would accompany a shift in power relations, altering the millennia-long struggle between those who violate animal life and “those who appeal to an irrefutable testimony to this pity” (397). Indeed, for those who call for pity for the violated animal, the gaze becomes the all-important measure of their interventions. Discussing the famous moment when Nietzsche embraces a badly beaten horse, he insists that the capacity to imagine and identify with the other is intimately connected to the gaze of the anguished animal, and emphasizes the philosopher’s need that the animal bear witness to his compassion [“The Animal That Therefore I Am,” *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2002): 403].

Unable to bear the stupefying knowledge induced by the sights and sounds of the gestating pigs, Orquídea disappears back into the confinement edifice. After an extended lapse, her worried son and future daughter-in-law watch a procession of pregnant pigs slowly emerge, roused from their cells and urged on by Orquídea, wielding a prodding rod. Orquídea has special difficulty with the last one: “She didn’t want to raise herself up off of the ground, her belly heavy and legs handicapped by the inertia of confinement. Confused, she startled the others with her shrieks. They ran away from the screeching in a mock race, two to one side, one to the other. Zé Luís tried to scare them in the direction of the forest. They forced their swollen legs to run a bit and then stopped” (322). Taking a large sack and attempting to stuff into it the rear part of this last remaining pig, Orquídea is bitten but dismisses her son’s protests: “I’m only leaving here with this poor thing in my lap. You shut up and help me, dammit!” (323).

The direct action at the Fazenda Mato Grosso redefines abolition as an intra-species struggle, gendered by its emphasis on Dona Orquídea’s liberation of the gestating sows and, therein, its indictment of the meat industry’s commodification and exploitation of motherhood. In the single vivid description of animal exploitation in Kim’s analysis of the animal rights’ movement’s use of slavery and Holocaust analogies, she also lingers on the conditions of gestating sows on industrialized farms, a gesture that dignifies not only the pregnancy and motherhood of nonhuman animals but redeems the suffering of an exceptionally stigmatized species as a subject for moral consideration:

Pigs are sociable, playful and affectionate creatures thought to be at least as intelligent as dogs. A sow, a female pig used for breeding, lives her adult life in an intensive confinement facility. Impregnated through artificial insemination, she spends her four-month pregnancy in what is known as a ‘gestation crate.’ This is a metal cage roughly two feet wide (sometimes as narrow as 19 or 20 inches wide). The sow, weighing 400 pounds or so, is immobilized in this space, which is scarcely larger than her body. She cannot move from side to side, turn around,

groom, scratch herself, forage, root, socialize, or nest. She cannot lie down comfortably. The bare concrete floor cripples her legs and feet, and her skin festers with sores. She exhibits depressive and neurotic behaviors such as biting and licking the bars, head waving, and chewing on air. When she is ready to give birth, she is moved to a farrowing crate that is similarly restrictive but exposes her teats to the suckling piglets. Experiencing her first taste of freedom from the gestation crate, she resists entering the farrowing crate and must be beaten before she submits. After giving birth, she is re-impregnated and returned to the gestation crate. This goes on for several years until her productivity declines and she is sent to slaughter (16).

As Kim observes, “Meat-eating as a practice is indissolubly tied to the cult of masculinity in Western societies” (3). In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol Adams assesses interlocking oppressions of female and animal bodies, describing a symbolic economy that “transcends the *edible* bodies of animals and the *sexualized* bodies of women within an overarching ‘logic of domination’ - all compressed in what Derrida’s recent work calls *carnophallogocentrism*” (Wolfe, 8). In *Nature Ethics* (2008), Marti Kheel traces other-than-animal exploitation to a male cultural bias and politic of domination, advocating an ecofeminist philosophy centered on an ethics of caring for individual beings and larger, non-individuated life forms. As in the narrative of the direct action at the Fazenda Mato Grosso, the U.S. sections of *Humana Festa* also explore connections between sexism and speciesism through Megan’s relationship to Diogo, a neophyte vegan and, even more pointedly, through the ambivalent relationship of Megan’s mother, Sybil, with her live-in partner, Bob Beefeater, who slips bits of animal carcasses and secretions into her food. Whereas ecofeminists have devoted important critical attention to the interlocking oppressions of nonhuman animals and women, and though both Megan and Sybil are cast as educating their unenlightened men, Rheda pokes fun at their stridency and disloyalty, in Megan’s case, and their hypocrisy and sexual

opportunism, in Sybil's. Megan leaves Diogo for her ex-boyfriend, River, at the first sign of wavering in his commitment to defying his family. In addition to her tacit complicity with Beefeater's lacing her food, and the exhibitionistic undertones of her participation in nude, all-female protests against fur farming, Sybil is a case study in hippie bad mothering, attracted to Megan's boyfriends and oblivious to Megan's emotional needs and professional and intellectual pursuits (she can recall neither the locale of her job nor the subject of her Master's thesis). When Sybil finally rejects the incorrigible Bob, she does so with the implicit suggestion of a liaison with Megan's ex-boyfriend and a reunion with her own lesbian former lover.

There is, nonetheless, a true ecofeminist in Dona Orquídea, a character whose defense of exploited nonhuman animals cannot be traced to any trend but only to her innate empathy and sense of justice. Orquídea and Zé Luís are particularly close to Mortandela, a piglet they raise "like a puppy" and with whom Zé Luís cuddles in bed until he reaches an age when social conventions demand that he disavow his affection for her, giving her a kick in the leg—and leaving her limping for days—to prove it. Rheda connects the rupture of Zé Luís's infantile identification with nonhuman animals—the coming-of-age acceptance of the carnivorous law of culture—with the repression of boys' feminine attributes in the name of their maturation as masculine, meat-eating subjects. At the same time, the description of raising Mortandela "like a puppy" is in dialogue with studies that have found pigs to be of equal intelligence to dogs and, indeed, reflects Francione's theory of the schizophrenia that enables people to treat certain species of nonhuman animals as cherished pets and others as objects that may justifiably be tortured. As indicated, Rheda's attention to pigs not only indicts the exploitation and commodification of nonhuman animal motherhood but elevates a particularly maligned species to the realm of moral consideration. Whereas she incorporates the points of view of a number of nonhuman animal species, constituting them as persons—at one point, Wanderlust the jaguar wonders if approaching humans bring "things to satisfy hunger and thirst" or "things to injure and humiliate" (282)—pigs receive special consideration. Rheda describes their

experience of waiting in terror as men appear to shove them into bags and lead them to slaughter, and lingers in detail on the nest Mortandela and her group, newly freed, create for themselves in the woods. Unlike the abject conditions in which they live mired in shit and mud within the pigpen, their nest is clean and orderly; the food they consume is not “slop” but an assortment of fresh roots, and, like all animals, they defecate at a distance from their encampment.

Like Orquídea’s direct action, Rheda’s discourse—her transformation of pigs from abject property to persons worthy of moral consideration—is also a form of activism, though neither the author’s words nor Orquídea’s intervention will bring an instantaneous end to animal exploitation. Rheda emphasizes animal liberationists’ small victories in an ongoing, colossal struggle. Once the proprietors regain control of the farm, the pigs are all recaptured save for Mortandela and her group, who remain in their encampment in the woods, itself reminiscent of a *quilombo* (maroon community), a site of resistance that, despite its exceptional status, suggests the potential for dismantling the established order. Acquiescing to his son’s wish, Bezerra-Leitão allows two horses, Unicórnio and Trotamundos, to roam free on the *fazenda* (312), another small triumph. In keeping with this determined optimism in the face of fearsome obstacles, when Orquídea convinces Vanessa, the Bezerra-Leitão’s bulimic, former beauty queen niece, to neuter Mortandela, Vanessa demands in exchange that her eight babies be sent to the concrete holding edifice. Orquídea is bereft at the thought of Mortandela and her piglets’ weeping during the separation, but “consoled herself with her victories and even nourished herself with them” (255).

*Humana Festa* articulates links between the predicaments of farm hands, landless peasants and nonhuman animals while exploring resistance to interspecies comparisons as well as the limitations of cross-class alliances. Despite their mutual dedication to ending nonhuman animal exploitation, Megan and Orquídea never merge forces. When Megan requests to accompany Orquídea on a typical day in the *camponesa*’s life, to photograph her and observe her weeding in the corn field, Rheda makes a sly observation about the bourgeois college student’s

class insensitivity. Orquídea is exasperated by this invasive, ethnographic gesture. When she spots Megan saving worms upturned by their weeding, she thinks of recruiting her for the direct action, but remembers that Megan ultimately belongs to the “same lair as Vanessa and Bezerra-Leitão” (230). Likewise, whereas early in the novel, Vanessa is a frequent visitor to Dona Orquídea and Zé Luís’s shack, where she gorges herself on their humble offerings, purges in their ramshackle bathroom, and exhibits a filial devotion to Dona Orquídea, with maturation she confirms allegiance to her class, demanding that Orquídea henceforth address her as “Dona Vanessa” (223).

In keeping with Vanessa’s patronizing rapport with her auntie-cum-servant, Rheda’s portrait of Diogo’s parents is a biting reflection of the provincial, postslavery, *paulista* interior - a region typified by enormous, agro-industrial mansions where barefooted black people labor as in the days of old, and home to ski resorts, Nestlé Brasil’s headquarters and the idiosyncratic Americanópolis, a city settled by post-civil war U.S. slaveholders where, to this day, residents fly confederate flags and names such as Fanny Sue, Billy Bob, and J.P. are common. Rheda’s neo-plantation mistress, Dona Marcela, is particularly hilarious. Reflecting on the presence of her changed son and his “strange, pale girlfriend” (185), she finds her world turned upside down. With its meatless repast—to honor Diogo and Megan, the household officially adopts a vegan diet, though individual family members secretly place orders from local fast food chains at night—and the couple’s empathetic identification with the domestic servants, Diogo’s birthday dinner is transformed from a “nobleman’s banquet into a chaotic party of John-Nobodies” (183). Feeling out of place in her own home, Dona Marcela retreats to her bedroom to confirm the order of things:

Dona Marcela looked at herself in the mirror. She saw a fat and exhausted matron, with an impeccable neck-wrap of mink and extravagant rabbit ears. Wearing animal ears makes people look ridiculous. Whereas wearing animal skins doesn’t, she thought. Animal skins on peoples’ bodies make them chic. There is a right place for everything, chairs close to the table,



pigs in the cooking pot, minks on chic clothing, poor people in rich peoples' kitchens (183-4).

Despite Dona Marcela's efforts to restore order and further her pretensions of nobility, by the novel's end the Bezerra-Leitãos have irreparably lost their footing. Having dreamed her whole life of appearing in the society pages of the provincial newspaper, "O Correio Perobinha-Campense," when Dona Marcela's photo is finally highlighted following the direct action, it is on the first page and with headlines reminiscent of the crime section (326). Whereas Bezerra-Leitão is on the point of a meat-induced heart attack at the time of the uprising, like his wife, he is above all preoccupied with maintaining appearances in the face of the politicized "peon masses" (169). The Bezerra-Leitãos ultimately succumb to a variety of ailments. In addition to his leg, disabled some years ago by a meal of bad meat, Bezerra-Leitão's cigar smoking causes a suspicious splotch on his lung. The description of the couple's maladies provides an ironic commentary on the macabre business of cattle and pig farming. Diagnosed with diabetes and high cholesterol, and forced to alter her diet, her husband laments that, without her "guava jelly and cheese roly-poly," Dona Marcela is like a "mother cow separated from her offspring" (342). The defeated proprietress observes that the now deserted Fazenda Mato Grosso's headquarters are "a true cemetery" (342), and that with their newly prescribed regimens, their standard of living is subhuman: "This is not a life fit for people. I don't know what the advantage is of living like an animal" (342). Disillusioned with their son's animal liberationism—and following his announced intention to transform the Fazenda Mato Grosso into a combination vegan agroforest and cow and pig sanctuary—they name as heir Vanessa who, "in spite of being a woman," knows plants' Latin names, understands how to deal with both animals and workers and how to distinguish pets from animals for profit (344).

Whereas the Brazilian sections of *Humana Festa* concentrate on animal agriculture's links to postslavery relations between human animals—the descendents of slaveholders, on the one hand, and Brazil's dispossessed labor force, on the other—the U.S. sections emphasize the

politics of hunting and, in particular, the schizophrenia of Megan's animal-loving, disease-curing, hunting enthusiast M.D. At the outset of *Humana Festa*, Megan is diagnosed with skin cancer; as with the Bezerra-Leitão's bodily ailments, which forge a parallel with commodified farm animals' bodies, Rheda connects Megan's condition with the stuffed trophy birds and mammals on display in Dr. Stanley's waiting room. Florida's most renown skin cancer specialist is "a man who combats cancer to make his daily bread and kills wild animals to relax" (132). Repeatedly spotting a crow circling overhead in his comings and goings to and from the office, Dr. Stanley is initially awe-struck by what he considers a mystical coincidence. He wishes to capture the crow to construct a spacious cage in order to shelter him and protect him from an uncertain future (135). Within minutes, this fantasy is replaced by another one, to shoot him in mid-air without disfiguring him. Dr. Stanley imagines how impressive the stuffed crow would look at the entrance to his waiting room, where "the new age receptionist would be able to invoke his spirit in a prayer for all the animals martyred during mystical encounters with human beings" (138). Said receptionist is a mouthpiece for some of *Humana Festa's* most comically inane doublespeak about human/animal relations. Confronted by Megan about the ethics of hunting, she responds, "The animal cornered by the hunter knows it needs to die. He may give the impression that he wants to resist, to avoid pain, to flee, to live. But its none of that" (298) and insists, "The animal who is hunted is accomplishing the function of connecting the human being with the creative power of nature, in which some die so that others may live. You understand? This connection is a sacred experience because it connects the human with the animal, nature with the creator" (299).

Upon her return to Weekeewawkeeville from São Paulo, and concomitant with the direct action at the Fazenda Mato Grosso, Megan, together with her ex-boyfriend, River, and the newly cuckolded Diogo, initiate a demonstration of their own at Dr. Stanley's office on the day of an important meeting of the local hunting association. To sabotage the event, at which Florida's governor is the featured guest and where discussions will center on efforts to revoke anti-hunting laws, Megan

first derails Dr. Stanley's receptionist, leaving faux stuffed crows at the banquet table where various species of hunted animals have been arranged on plates for the attendees. Wielding a microphone, and under the gaze of TV news camerapeople, River confronts the governor, who becomes agitated by the prospect of negative publicity. Chaos erupts when Deputy Harry Badcock opens fire on the threesome as they speed away and gleefully observe that the TV news audience will inevitably identify with hunted animals once they experience Badcock's rifle pointing at the camera (305). Whereas the direct action at the Fazenda Mato Grosso results in the freedom of two horses and half a dozen pigs, the U.S. demonstration is aired as part of a coordinated action in several U.S. cities, garnering public support for the anti-hunting movement.

On the one hand, *Humana Festa* seems to suggest that there is greater potential for efficient political mobilization around animal liberation in the U.S., where the movement is more organized and alliances with like-minded individuals are more readily forged. On the other, the U.S. abolitionists are flawed by self-satisfaction. There is a tired, overwrought quality to Megan's veganism that is the legacy of her trendy, 70s-style ecofeminist mother, a hypocritical woman whose commitments to animal abolition are compromised by her tacit acquiescence to Beefeater's inclusion of animal products in his recipes and by her use of activism as a strategy for getting laid. Megan's arrogant anthropological gesture vis-à-vis Dona Orquídea bespeaks privilege and a failure to conceive of animal liberationism within a broader, multi-issue framework. River's smugness speaks for itself; with his impeccably packed lunch of raw food concoctions, he is a study in politically correct upbringing, with family members employed by "The Nation," Amnesty International, Doctors Without Borders and an environmental organization (243). In spite of his flawless CV, "the perfect little one" (o perfeitoinho) is flawed by lust for Megan's mother and fantasies of Megan and Sybil having sex (251); selfish, spoiled, and sexually dishonest, he is an ideal match for his girlfriend's mother. While Rheda by no means condemns them, the U.S. activists' staleness belies a culture of complacency and the deficits of a movement for social justice steeped

in exceptionalism. Though Orquídea is energized by the mirroring presence of the U.S. guests, her abolitionism is distinct in that it is connected to a wide array of struggles – for socioeconomic equality, land redistribution, environmental protectionism and defiance of U.S. economic interests. The demonstration at Dr. Stanley’s clinic receives positive media coverage, but the Brazilian action—with its sabotage of the U.S.-financed intensive confinement edifice, the albeit brief liberation of the *fazenda*’s nonhuman animals, and the endurance of Mortandela’s quilombo-style encampment—at once resonates with strategies of a previous generation of abolitionists and with contemporary, front-line, local resistance to globalization in sites from Chiapas and La Paz to Tokyo and Qatar.

As suggested, the juxtaposition of Brazilian and U.S. animal abolitionism recalls a long tradition of reflections on America’s two principal post-slavery economies. Michael Hanchard’s early work on Brazilian and U.S. race relations situates Brazil as lagging behind because it did not have a civil rights movement like that of the U.S. In *Orpheus and Power* (1994), Hanchard suggests that civil rights should be exported to Brazil, where the myth of Racial Democracy has shrouded racial discrimination. The problem with Hanchard’s early analysis is that he mistakes Racial Democracy as a veil rather than as the foundational ideology of Brazilian racism.<sup>10</sup> Despite Rheda’s narrative of the ultimately more sophisticated and contextualized Brazilian action, the Florida demonstration’s effective disruption of the hunting club’s meeting, and the group’s efficient media dissemination of its opposition, might appear to corroborate a pervasive idea that rights discourse is most advanced in the U.S. and Western Europe. In addition to the suggestion of a less evolved, less promising animal rights movement in Brazil, Megan’s border-crossing is reminiscent of a familiar genre in literature, film and, indeed,

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<sup>10</sup> In “On The Cunning of Imperialist Reason,” Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant cite Hanchard’s *Orpheus and Power* as an example of how U.S. culture is most efficiently imposed when produced and utilized by “dominated minorities” who “would appear to be above suspicion of promoting the hegemonic interests of a country against which they wield the weapons of social criticism,” *Estudos Afro-Asiáticos* 24 (2002): 15-35.

the news media, wherein North Americans venture south (or east) and report back on the horrific violence to which they have been exposed. Like Steven Soderbergh's "Traffic" (2000), where sepia tones mark the transition south of the U.S./Mexico border, there is an aura of barbarism in the Brazilian segments of the text, despite the noble endeavors of Orquídea and her cohort. São Paulo's interior seems more deeply hierarchical and oppressive than that of Florida. Brazil's class system is indeed infamously polarized, with a miniscule elite and a vast subaltern populace. Violence is on the surface, particularly in urban spaces marked by the close proximity of lush high rises and slums. This violence, with its underlying socioeconomic inequities, is visible to the bourgeoisie and elite—and, indeed, to visiting North American college students—in a way unimaginable in the U.S., where zones of illegality—the south centrals, outer boroughs, and tenderloins—are relegated to the distant margins.<sup>11</sup> The tranquility of the civil, sovereign spheres of U.S. society is, of course, dependent not only upon the unsafe, desecralized U.S. zones of illegality but also upon the violent, destitute non-world. By turn, whereas the U.S. is hardly free of challenges to animal abolitionism, the fact that there is a movement capable of organizing efficient actions such as that at Dr. Stanley's hunting club suggests a more sanitized, less dangerous milieu, a privilege Rheda succinctly associates both with south of the border violence and with the absence of consciousness among U.S. animal rights activists about the world-system.

Earl Fitz has called Rheda a quintessentially inter-American novelist.<sup>12</sup> As in her previous work, *Humana Festa* is marked by culture clashes and the observations of local peculiarities of which only a multi-cultural, accomplished border crosser would be capable. While the epicenter for the dissemination of rights discourse may initially appear to be the U.S., Dona Orquídea's broad-based ethical sensibility, and

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<sup>11</sup> See Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Mapping Territories of Legality: An Exploratory Cartography of an Emerging Female Global Subject," *Critical Beings: Law, Nation, and the Global Subject* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 203-222.

<sup>12</sup> Fitz made this statement in an unpublished email correspondence with Regina Rheda on May 10, 2009.

the influence she ultimately wields over her contemporaries, suggests that a more radical conceptualization of personhood and sovereignty could take hold in the neo-imperial margins. As indicated, Gary Francione has analyzed the moral schizophrenia of Western, Judeo-Christian common sense that acknowledges nonhuman animals as sentient creatures while simultaneously justifying their subjection to an array of unspeakable forms of violence. Critics ranging from Anil Singh to Tariq Ali, Edward Said and Arundhati Roy address the schizophrenic perception of the U.S. as a model for democracy and civil rights to be disseminated globally via military and economic coercion. There is in fact a decentering trend in nations such as Brazil and Argentina where, after decades of military dictatorship, the question of rights has been taken up more inclusively than in the U.S. and Western Europe, where common sense dictates that all the important liberties for previously discriminated groups—women, people of color, homosexuals—have been won or are on their way to being fully realized. With this complacency, animal rights is viewed by most as a laughable premise; as at the inception of women’s rights, black rights and gay and lesbian rights movements, it is dismissed as a sentimental, asinine, bleeding-heart preoccupation.

Brazil has abolished the use of vivisection in all but two veterinary schools, boasts thoroughly no-kill animal shelters in Bahia and other cities, hosts an array of Animal Abolitionism NGOs and has proposed a Ministry of Animal Welfare. Debates about animal rights frequently elicit respectable media attention rather than being cast as the stuff of sentimentalists or terrorists and relegated to newspapers’ fluff or crime sections. In addition to the world’s first novel centered on veganism, Brazil is home to an unprecedented lawsuit in favor of animal abolitionism. In 2002, Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) law professor Herón Santana employed the plea of Habeus Corpus to win freedom for Suíça, a chimpanzee imprisoned in the Salvador da Bahia zoo. The case attracted national media coverage and stimulated dialogue about animal rights in living rooms, public schools and universities across the country. Santana’s *Instituto Abololiconismo Animal* is affiliated with an UFBA specialization in Animal Law and has hosted a multitude of

abolitionist activities, including the First International Congress on Bioethics and Animal Rights in 2008. Despite its ambiguous platform—one that espouses abolitionism while receiving patronage from and promoting the work of welfarists, David Favre and Peter Singer—the Institute has a broad-sighted interpretation of animal rights as part of a larger fabric of movements for social justice. Yet again upsetting the association of animal rights with white privilege, most of the organizers and affiliates of the IAA are self-identified Afro-descendents and have made explicit connections between animal rights and the struggle against racism. Bahia is frequently heralded as the capital of the African Diaspora,<sup>13</sup> and is a particularly loaded site for the activities of the IAA given its historical tradition of slave rebellion, most notably the Muslim-organized Malê Revolt of 1835, the largest urban slave uprising in the history of the Americas.<sup>14</sup> As Cary Wolfe notes, “we—whoever ‘we’ are—are in a profound sense constituted as human subjects within and atop a nonhuman otherness that postmodern theory has worked hard to release from the bad-faith repressions and disavowals of humanism” (193). Together with Rheda’s novel, these signs of an expansive conceptualization of personhood suggest an emergent, more radically conceived animal liberation movement than in the world-system core.

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<sup>13</sup> With its population of Afro-descendents outnumbering those of the largest cities in Africa, Bahia is famous for its Afrocentric tourism, and the multitudes of visitors from throughout the diaspora who flock to Pelourinho, a neighborhood whose center was originally a slave auction block but is now home to a raucous flurry of commercial activity centered on the promotion and marketing of African cultural production.

<sup>14</sup> The Malê Revolt is noteworthy for its cross-class mobilization of enslaved and freed peoples. Though the rebels were ultimately massacred by the police, the Malê Revolt provided inspiration for enslaved people throughout the Americas. See João José Reis, *Slave Rebellion in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

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