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The Dodo and the Bear: Stanley Elkin's Encounters with the Animal

Dodo ve Ayı: Stanley Elkin'in Hayvanla Karşılaşmaları

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Abstract

Stanley Elkin's *The Dick Gibson Show* and *Searches and Seizures* present two human encounters with the animal – the former a dodo, the latter a bear. One encounter is violent, the other sexual, but both provide an interpretation of interspecies encounters that exposes the masks humans use to ignore the violence practiced on nonhuman animals. Most interpretations of Elkin's animal encounters read the dodo or the bear as lenses through which to judge either the human protagonist or the human condition in general, but an anthrozoological reading of the texts gives weight to the experiences of the animals and finds an argument for equivalency across species.

Keywords

Stanley Elkin, animals, dodo, bear, fiction

Öz

Stanley Elkin'in *The Dick Gibson Show* ve *Searches and Seizures* metinleri insan ile hayvanın iki ayrı rastlaşmasını sunar: İlki bir dodo, ikincisi ise bir ayı. Biri şiddet içerikli, diğeri cinsel olan bu rastlaşmaların her ikisi de açık bir şekilde insanların insan olmayan hayvanlara uyguladıkları şiddeti örtbas etmek için kullandıkları maskeleri göz ardı eden türler arası karşılaşmaların bir yorumunu sunar. Her ne kadar çoğu yorum Elkin'in bu kitaplarındaki insan-hayvan rastlaşmalarını dodo ve/veya ayıyı ya insani bir kahraman ya da genel olarak insanlık hâlinin bir yorumu olarak mercek altına alsa da, bu çalışma bu metinlerin antrozoolojik bir okuması ile hayvanların deneyimlerine ağırlık vermeyi ve türler arasında eşdeğer bir okuma ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Stanley Elkin, hayvanlar, dodo, ayı, kurmaca

Stanley Elkin's career of thick description and superfluous language was able to penetrate much of the American experience and, in many ways, the human experience, in a career that spanned from the 1960s to the 1990s. Two of his better-known attempts at such penetration, both published in the early 1970s, involved encounters with animals that have been read by scholars in a variety of often contradictory ways. Those contradictions are largely because the animals in those encounters have been seen as comparative vehicles for assessing the place of the human in society. The animals are lenses, not individual beings with their own need of assessment. An anthrozoological reading of Elkin's two most prominent animal encounters remedies that absence by analyzing the nonhuman on his or her own terms and assessing the consequences for animals and animality in the stories. Those stories, a violent encounter with the dodo in Elkin's 1971 *The Dick Gibson Show* and a sexual encounter with a bear in his 1973 *Searches and Seizures*, demonstrate the author's recognition of the social constructions that undergird civilization and that humans use to mask the violence practiced on nonhuman animals. Society itself is built on animal violence, the stories argue, and serves as a veil to limit the human view of animals as equivalent beings, as fellow earthlings with their own interests and vulnerabilities. Elkin was not an animal activist, was not an author using his narrative to push animal rights, but in his depiction of human encounters with a dodo and a bear, his work demonstrated a unique understanding of the human-animal relationship years prior to Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, which popularized the concept of speciesism depicted by his novels.

The Dick Gibson Show, Stanley Elkin's third novel, is the story of an itinerant radio host and disc jockey who travels to various jobs around the country and around the world, changing names and personas along the way to fit the requirements of different available jobs. The personality sometimes known as Dick Gibson's most distant assignment came in contested Mauritius during the Pacific conflict of World War II. The sergeant's most meaningful encounter on the island involves contact with the mysterious dodo bird, assumed to be extinct since the seventeenth century.

Elkin's inspiration for *The Dick Gibson Show* came in the mid-1950s while the author was serving in the military. He was listening to a local radio broadcaster while driving in his car and reflected on the role that such personalities played on the lives of listeners. The broadcaster seemed lonely but competent, as was Elkin, and the connection between two invisible individuals seemed to have a meaningful power. There was a similar power in the unity of isolated people all communing under the authority of one disembodied voice. While Elkin's experience occurred more than a

decade prior to his work on *The Dick Gibson Show*, it remained with him in stasis until it became more fulsome in his conception for the novel.[1]

Joe Fox, Elkin's editor at Random House, attempted to cut much of the section on Mauritius from the book, arguing that the effusive prose could be trimmed and simplified. "I had to fight him tooth and nail in the better restaurants to maintain excess because I don't believe that less is more. I believe that more is more. I believe that less is less, fat fat, thin thin, and enough is enough," Elkin wrote to Fox. "You can't cut this. It's really as good as I get. It means that travel is no accident but the specific fate of a particular man, something I genuinely believe is true. Dick is encouraging himself here, too—this is the important thing—in the notion of his specialness, his view that he stands up (and out) in the landscape."[2] Elkin was able to save his prose in the Mauritius section, and much of it appeared the year before the book's publication as "The Dodo Bird" in *The Iowa Review.*[3]

Elkin's inspiration for the story of the dodo bird was a television program that described travel in Mauritius.4 Mauritius was first discovered in the fifteenth century in the Indian Ocean east of Madagascar, and the Dutch first arrived in 1598. Wybrant van Warwijck commanded the Dutch fleet, claimed the island for the Netherlands, and first reported on the existence of the dodo (Raphus cucullatus) (Hachisuka; Parish). It was a large bird of at least fifty pounds, its outsized body dwarfing its small wings, "so small and impotent, that they serve only to prove her bird," explained Thomas Herbert in 1634:

> The halfe of her head is naked seeming couered with a fine vaile, her bill is crooked downwards, in midst is the trill, from which part to the end tis a light green, mixed with pale yellow tincture; her eyes are small and like to Diamonds, round and rowling; her clothing downy feathers, her train three small plumes, short and inproportionable, her legs suiting her body, her pounces sharpe, her appetite strong and greedy.[5]

The dodo was an ugly enigma to European eyes, one that generated either sympathy or disgust.

1 David C. Doughterty, *Shouting Down the Silence: A Biography of Stanley Elkin* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 112.

2 Dougherty, *Shouting Down the Silence,* 114.

3 Dougherty, *Shouting Down the Silence*, 113.

4 David C. Doughterty, "A Conversation with Stanley Elkin." *Literary Review* 34, no. 2, (1991): 176

5 Sir Thomas Herbert, *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaille into Afrique and the Greater Asia* (London: William Stansby, 1634), 211.

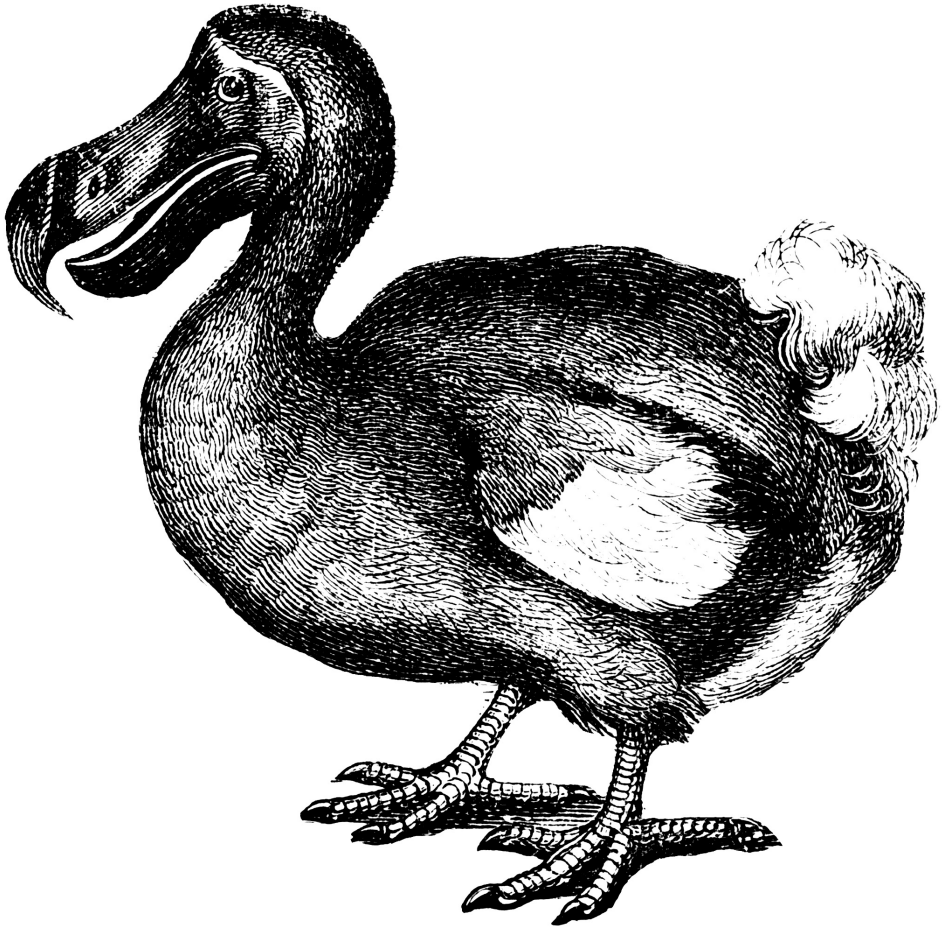

Figure 1: Louis Figuier. *Reptiles and Birds*
(London: Cassell, Petter and Galpin, 1869), 397.

It was a state that made the bird particularly vulnerable. Europeans killed the dodo for meat and sent several back home to the continent, but the largest threat became the pigs introduced to the island. Holland used Mauritius as a refueling station for the Dutch East India Company and introduced pigs as a food source for passing sailors. The pigs, however, proved disastrous to the dodo, feeding on the bird's eggs as they roamed across the island. The last human sighting of the dodo bird was in July 1681,

leaving many naturalists in the nineteenth century to assume that the animal had been a creature of the sailors' imagination, like the unicorn or the griffin.[6]

The dodo was the first known animal forced into extinction by human intervention, and its demise less than a century after its discovery became a cautionary tale about the fragility of life and the consequences of human expansion and capital growth.[7] In Elkin's hands, the dodo reappears in the twentieth century with a similar tale to tell.

The book's Mauritius section begins, told entirely by Gibson as part of a low band radio broadcast from the island, with a disquisition on his boredom on the island, and that of Lieutenant Collins, his superior officer. He describes the counterintuitive mundanity of war service, the long pauses and downtime between brief bursts of physical conflict with the enemy. There was a single museum in Port Lewis, the island's principal city, however, one that held "the world's largest collection of the skeletons and reconstructed corpora of the extinct dodo bird which, for some curious reason, once thrived on Mauritius and Réunion isles."[8]

Gibson's boredom quickly gives way, however, as a "Japanese task force" soon arrives, and "one of the Japanese civilians attached to the Jap Army was captured and interrogated. He turns out to be a scientist—an ornithologist."[9] It is that discovery that causes those in command to become suspicious: "HIC SUNT DODOS!"[10] Gibson goes on to describe the history and biology of the dodo bird, including the introduction of hogs to the island, which "fed on the dodo eggs and on the dodo young and, in one or two dodo generations the birds were extinct. Ah Malthus, geometer, you knew."[11] While in the process of his description, Gibson explains that the dodo's cheeks, reconstructed in the museum, "seem oddly weather beaten and muscular, almost human in fact and not at all unlike the toothless cheeks of old men who have worked out in the open all their lives."[12]

6 Errol Fuller, *The Dodo: Extinction in Paradise* (Piermont, NH: Bunker Hill Publishing, 2003), 5-7, 10-13; Clara Pinto-Correia, *Return of the Crazy Bird: The Sad Strange Tale of the Dodo* (New York, NY: Copernicus Books, 2003), 15-30.

7 David Quammen, *The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinction* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1996), 264.

8 Stanley Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show* (New York, NY: Random House, 1971), 29; Réunion Island, along with Rodrigues, join Mauritius in making up the Mascarene Island chain. Page references to Elkin's dodo bird text come from the "The Dodo Bird" segment published in the *Iowa Review*.

9 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 30.

10 The Latin translation is "Here are the dodos!" Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show,* 30.

11 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 31.

12 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 31.

In his accounting there is a significant effort to tie the dodo to the human, not simply in the bird's infamous susceptibility to Dutch arrival, but in its countenance and being. The dodo's vulnerability was like the vulnerability of working-class men who have suffered because of difficult labor conditions. Being measured by a Malthusian rubric placed the dodo within a decidedly human measurement. Malthus's principal thesis concerned human population growth as a result of abundance, a growth that would eventually exhaust such abundance and portend doom for the human project (Malthus 1-7). It was a counter to eighteenth-century millennial thinking that assumed unfettered human progress leading to the return of Jesus. Malthus was using human geometrical projection to counter socially constructed ideas about human supremacy. In both of Gibson's comparisons, then, he tied the fate of the dodo to the fate of the human. While such binding was intended to foreshadow the dodo story to come, viewing the metaphorical renderings through an anthrozoological lens shows a human-animal equivalency that used conceptions of the human to legitimize the value of animal life. The dodo, in this reading, was not simply valuable as an anomaly; the bird was valuable as an earthling, as a life, a conception only reinforced by the continued tale that Gibson would tell.

When Gibson and Collins realize that their garrison had been deserted, as the troops had gone to meet the Japanese at some distant point on the island, the two begin to ruminate on the dodo and travel to the local museum to again examine the specimens housed there. While in the picture gallery, they discover the captured Japanese ornithologist weeping while studying paintings of the lost species. The incredulous Americans ask him what he is doing there and prepare to retake him as a prisoner. "He looked like someone in touch with something really important suddenly forced to deal with the ordinary," Gibson observes, again reinforcing the meaning of the dying bird, over and against the constructed human concerns represented by war.[13]

The ornithologist is reluctant to leave with the men, not because he is afraid of being a prisoner of war, but because he wants to stay in that sublime space with the dodo. They eventually get him outside, however, and ask if he is the one who discovered the dodo. "No," the ornithologist replies. "I identified him".[14] Again, a statement against speciesism. "Discovering" the dodo is an interpretation filtered through the lens of human supremacy, leaving the bird without meaning or selfhood without the vision of humans to validate his existence. "Identifying" the dodo is more accurate, acknowledging the moment of human intervention without stripping the meaning of nonhuman life without our particular intrusive gaze.

Richard Ryder coined the term "speciesism" in an anti-vivisection pamphlet in 1970, and it was popularized by Peter Singer in the years that followed. Speciesism, Ryder argued, was "the widely held belief that the human species is inherently

13 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 34.

14 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 35.

superior to other species and so has rights or privileges that are denied to other sentient animals." It could certainly encompass oppression and physical cruelty, but oppression and cruelty were not necessary. Speciesism was any set of "beliefs and behaviours if they are based upon the species-difference alone, as if such a difference is, in itself, a justification" for those beliefs and behaviors.[15] Singer concurred, seeing speciesism as "a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interest of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species," and argued that it could only be properly understood in relation to other dispossessions like sexism and racism.[16]

The ornithologist's anti-speciesist statement is preparatory for a story he tells the enlisted men, dating hundreds of years prior in the thirteenth century during the reign of the fictional Emperor Shobuta. It was then that a dodo appeared in Japan. A court counselor had the bird placed in the zoo, where it resided with the hogs, a dangerous situation that would later lead to its demise. When the Emperor discovered the indignity, he was furious. Not knowing about the bird's diminutive wings, he lamented their loss. "What iniquity is this?" he asked. "To break off the wings of a bird merely to indulge the crowd's appetite for the grotesque!" Though his minions attempted to correct him, Shobuta would hear none of the arguments. He had the bird brought to his palace, where "he anointed the nub of its wings with precious balms and unguents."[17]

While making his description, the ornithologist explains that Shobuta was "an animal fancier, no hunter but a lover of beasts." The emperor decreed the construction of a place that would house two hundred types of animals, the "z" in the word zoo simply being a modification of the 2 in 200. The ornithologist tells the American soldiers that "we are not barbarians either, Lieutenant; Shikoku had a zoo long before one was ever dreamed of in Europe." The ornithologist, then, equates compassion for animals with the dignity necessary for rule and with zoos as a mark of civilization. It was an oxymoronic equation, as zoos are built for the benefit of humans rather than animals, and the divided mind of the emperor is marked in his frustration with the dodo being placed with the hogs. He was "furious" that the bird "had been put in with the animals."[18] The bird was valuable for its symbolic value, something the hogs did not possess, but symbolic value was only meaningful for humans. Thus the ornithologist presents a contradictory conception of animals, one that holds certain

15 Lauren Corman and Sarat Calling, "'Nailing Descartes to the Wall' by Propagandhi," in *Rebel Music: Resistance Through Hip Hop and Punk*, edited by Priya Parmar, Anthony J. Nocella, Scott Robertson and Martha Diaz (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2015), 36-37.

16 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 7.

17 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 36.

18 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 36.

species in esteem while judging the measure of that esteem through human interest. It is a contradiction that would continue through the remainder of the tale.

As the emperor waited for a warlord to kill him, he spent his days caring for the dodo. "I will be your wings," he told the bird, sleeping with the dodo and providing a place for him to sleep under his right shoulder. He then added, "thinking perhaps of his own circumstances, 'We all come down'" (37). His concern was no less helpful for the human, personal lens through which he viewed the bird. He sang the dodo songs and put on a brave face in front of him, despite constant worry about an impending attack. "He was disturbed by what would happen to the dodo when he was no longer there to care for it."[19] When he erroneously believed that he had avoided the attack, his first thought was a celebratory exclamation that "the bird was spared seeing this!"[20]

When the warlord finally arrived and was preparing to kill Shobuta, the dodo arrived and distracted him, causing him to laugh uncontrollably at the sight of such a ridiculous bird. He finally recovered his composure and drew his sword when "suddenly the bird appeared to drift up into the air. The wingless bird had flown! Not flown, not flying, but floated, floating—??rising—*risen*!"[21] The move scared the warlord and distracted him, giving Shobuta the opportunity to kill him. After the ordeal, he found the bird "squatting in a corner. It seemed clumsy as ever, stupid as ever. It had flown but one moment—in the instant of its dear friend's need—and now it was as it had been before."[22]

From the ornithologist's contrast of the dodo with other animals to the dodo's ability to save his friend by miraculously floating, Elkin presents a kind of bird exceptionalism, wherein human conceptions of the animal are contradictory and uneven, preferring those that deviate from an assumed norm and provide tangible benefit to humans or human concerns. That exceptionalism serves to diminish the lives of animals deemed unexceptional – such as, for instance, hogs – but also to place birds like the dodo in precarious positions precisely because of their proximity to humans. Being judged as valuable based on human need meant that that an animal loses value when that need dissipates; it also places animals like the dodo around the violence practiced by humans on one another. The dodo's exposure to assumptions of human supremacy is different than that of, say, hogs in the local zoo, but the exposure of both is real and puts them in danger.

As Shobuta attacked his other enemies after his initial victory, he took the dodo with him into battle. During the violence, however, the dodo "went mad. There is no other word for it. It dashed its poor head to pieces on the shield of a just-fallen

19 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 38.

20 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 39.

21 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 39.

22 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 40.

shoulder."[23] The ornithologist attributes his madness to a bodily overcompensation, the inability to fly heightening the bird's hearing as one "who has not the sense of sight is frequently preternaturally blessed with the sense of touch or smell."[24] Or, he says, referring to the dodo, "perhaps we have all along paid too much attention to its winglessness and not enough to its voicelessness. Perhaps voicelessness is a choice—the choice of silence. Perhaps winglessness is one. Perhaps there are birds who reject the air and choose the earth. Perhaps even extinction is a choice of sorts."[25] The speculation is a version of anthropomorphism as justification for violence. If extinction is a choice, then humans are spared complicity in the act. In the same manner, if the dodo's response to combat was the result of a biological overcompensation to his own winged deformity, then the combat itself was not to blame for his madness. Such thinking creates the vulnerability of animals viewed through the lens of perceived human need.

When he saw his companion suffering through self-injury, Shobuta stopped his participation in the battle and went to him. He picked him up and carried him from the battlefield. "I shall once more be your wings," he told the bird.[26] His rival also stopped fighting to watch the display and wept as a result. While he was distracted, one of Shobuta's men snuck up behind him and killed him. "Once again the bird had saved Japan," the ornithologist explains.[27]

It is clear to Gibson and Collins that the ornithologist and his fellow Japanese are there on Mauritius to find a dodo to save Japan yet again. Assuming the Japanese know where the bird resides, they agree to drive the ornithologist across the island to find the dodo and thwart the effort of the enemy. They travel nine hours to find a clearing in the woods that looks remarkably similar to the environment reconstructed in diorama in the dodo museum. They get down on their hands and knees to crawl around in the darkness, searching for the bird. "We could have been cats and birds observing some petty detail of a neutrality mechanical as the fingers crossed time-out of children in a murderous game," Gibson explains.[28] Ultimately, the narrator finds the dodo. "I grabbed its legs and pulled it to me for a hostage."[29] He hides the bird in his shirt for hours before finally revealing that he has it. As everyone watched, Collins, Gibson's superior officer, demands that he kill the dodo

23 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 41.

24 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 41.

25 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 41.

26 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 41.

27 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 42.

28 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 44.

29 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 44.

to prevent the Japanese from taking him. The Japanese men respond by pleading with Gibson not to kill the bird.

Gibson grabs a knife thrown to him by Collins and slits the dodo's throat. As the Japanese forces weep, Gibson walks toward them. "'It's only a bird,' I said. 'Don't you see? It's just a bird'."[30]

"*Then the bird was in the air!* They fell away from me. Collins was shrieking. They *all* were. The bird was in the air and the soldiers screamed."[31] As the dodo falls back into Gibson's arms, everyone stares in awe. Collins is crying. Gibson places the miraculous dead bird back in his nest before an American brigade rushes into the clearing, shooting and killing all of the Japanese soldiers and civilians there. It all seems so meaningless to Gibson. "But it was all meant to be meaningless. But that's very hard. You know? Meaning is everywhere, Mauritius as well."[32] Meaning, as Collins interprets it, is tied directly to life; the intentional meaninglessness he sees around him is a reference to the senseless killing of the dodo, but also the senseless human killing of war itself. As his story concludes, however, Gibson makes a final admission that, he assumes, gives the lie an inherent meaning. "I tossed the bird," he says. "I flung him up myself. With my wrists. Everything with my wrists. Like someone at the free-throw line taking a foul shot."[33]

In death, the dodo was nothing more than an animal. He was only a bird. Gone was the dodo exceptionalism. Even if there could be special status attributed to the living dodo, dead animals were simply dead animals when viewed through a human lens. Elkin here returns to the precarity of the life of animals in relation to human concerns. All of those not included in the categories of "human" or "dodo" were already condemned to zoos, slaughter, or wanton disinterest. The exceptionalism placed in rare species, however, was its own form of condemnation, their special status in human thought marking them as strategic entities to be discarded as necessary for temporary human concerns. Death, however, was not temporary, and the narrative demonstrates that the real lives of animals were in constant danger from human caprice, whether they were members of a species considered "just an animal" or singled out for exceptional concern.

Such hierarchical chains usually redounded negatively toward nonhuman animals in what Gwendolyn Blue and Melanie Rock call trans-biopolitics, "the classification and evaluation of life as it unfolds in complex, technologically-mediated networks with global reach."[34] In late twentieth-century Sweden, for example, as Galina

30 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 46.

31 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 46.

32 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 47.

33 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 47.

34 Gwendolyn Blue and Melanie Rock, "Trans-Biopolitics: Complexity in Interspecies Relations," *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness, and Medicine* 15, no. 4 (2011): 362.

Lindquist explains debates about wolf-hunting created a Sophie's choice between urban and rural Swedes, the former wanting to protect a meaningful symbol of the nation, the latter worried about the effects of such predators on the reindeer population.[35] Similar debates in England pitted human groups against one another over the issue of fox hunting. Garry Marvin argues that the historical context of the activity is necessary for understanding the debates. Humans began by seeing foxes as competitors for killing livestock, but fox hunting's evolution into an upper-class country sport and the sloughing off of the feigned necessity of the act by many, particularly in urban spaces, pushed back against the hunt.[36]

Such thinking also spread across boundaries of place, as it did in Elkin's Mauritius and Japan. The contested interpretation related to pigs was certainly not a Mauritius phenomenon, or an American or Japanese phenomenon. In their study of the relationships between pigs and humans in Papua New Guinea and the way such relationships played on gender roles among different groups in different environmental settings, for example, Peter Dwyer and Monica Mennegal demonstrate varying levels of care for living pigs, all of which are selective and all in aid of ultimate killing. Among the Kubo people in Papua New Guinea, pigs are taken from their mothers at two weeks old and put in the hands of a human caregiver, who treats them as a functional pet for roughly eighteen months. The Keraki people, meanwhile, keep pigs in feeding cages where they grow too fat to stand before being killed. Still, among the Keraki there is a substantial outpouring of would-be concern for the pig before his execution.[37] With the Kubo, the response is more subdued. The caregiver for each pig – a gendered experience, as women are the caregivers and pig domestication is associated almost exclusively with the female domestic domain – attends the killing of the pig, largely because the bond she forms with the pig makes her presence required to get the victim to the killing ground. The caregiver is demonstrably upset, but without public protest or lament. Such results lead Dwyer and Minnegal to conclude, "The less attachment of pigs to people the greater the likelihood that people will proclaim their attachment to pigs through public displays of emotion"[38]

35 Galina Lindquist, "The Wolf, the Saami and the Urban Shaman," in *Natural Enemies: People-Wildlife Conflicts in Anthropological Perspective*, edited by John Knight (London: Routledge, 2001), 170-173.

36 Garry Marvin, "The Problem of Foxes: Legitimate and Illegitimate Killing in the English Countryside," in *Natural Enemies: People-Wildlife Conflicts in Anthropological Perspective*, edited by John Knight (London: Routledge, 2001), 189-195.

37 Roy A. Rappaport, *Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2000), 1-7, 30-35.

38 For more on the Papua New Guinea example, see Peter D. Dwyer and Monica Minnegal, "Person, Place or Pig: Animal Attachments and Human Transactions in New Guinea," in *Animals in Person: Cultural Perspectives on Human-Animal Intimacy*, edited by John Knight (London: Routledge, 2005), 52; Paula G. Rubel and Abraham Rosman, *Your*

The case of Papua New Guinea is relevant to that of Elkin's Mauritius in several ways. First, it is clear that all of those on the island care deeply about the dodo. They demonstrate that concern not through overt laments like the women of the Keraki but instead through a belief in the bird's power, through its iconography in the local museum. Like both the Keraki, the Kubo, and others in New Guinea, they also demonstrated a contested interpretation in which the lament that developed, in whatever particular form, was never in aid of keeping the animal alive. It was not any form of equalitarian concern. This should come as no surprise from a group guided largely by the assumptions of war, itself, like the ceremonies of New Guinea, predicated on violence and socially constructed meaning. Finally, as the feelings of distress among the women of Papua New Guinea ring hollow when they make no effort to save the lives of the nonhumans they claim to love, equally hollow are the laments of those like Collins, who cries at the killing he prompted only because he assumed a kind of supernatural power in the dodo. It is, in that sense, a Keraki lament.

Of course, the veneration model leading to precarity for the dodo can work in reverse, as well, and useful counterexamples exist from the ornithological world itself. Keven de Ornellas has described a reverse coding during the Renaissance in reference to cormorants, a bird castigated as a representative of gluttony, greed, avarice, and covetousness. In a variety of sixteenth and seventeenth century texts, authors used the commonly understood traits of the bird to represent such characteristics in people. "Men who are like cormorants experience not only their own insatiate lust for material excess but also the desire to deprive other men of their possessions," explains Ornellas. "The cormorant becomes a symbol for cruel exploiters of the poor."[39] A commensurate veneration of pelicans by the same culture led to negative references to pelicans in the bible being replaced in the 1611 King James Version with cormorants. And the semiotic demonization of the cormorant and its use to demonize other humans had real consequences for the bird. The cormorant population diminished substantially through the nineteenth century and remains low throughout Britain in the twenty-first. One species of cormorant, which made a home near the Bering Strait, was hunted to extinction, and the possibility exists for those in Britain. The use of nonhuman animals as signifiers of negative human traits has real and universally negative consequences for the nonhuman animals themselves.[40] When both venerations, in the case of the dodo, and castigation, in the case of the cormorant, lead to extermination, then it is reasonable to conclude that it is simply the otherness of the species that places them in positions of precarity. Human

Own Pigs You May Not Eat: A Comparative Study of New Guinea Societies (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1978).

39 Kevin de Ornellas, ""Fowle Fowles"? The Sacred Pelican and the Profane Cormorant in Early Modern Culture," in *A Cultural History of Animals in the Renaissance*, edited by Bruce Boehrer (London: Routledge, 2007), 39.

40 De Ornellas, ""Fowle Fowles"?," 50-52.

opinions about the variable value of such species matter less in determining their fates. Whether speciesism comes in the form of laudatory conceptions or denigrating assumptions, speciesism ultimately leads to death, and sometimes to extermination. It is an eliminationist bigotry.

Adding to such complicated human relationships with nonhuman species, the categories various animals find themselves occupying do not remain static. Beginning in the 1700s, a century following the publication of the King James Bible, for example, the English presentation of dodos began to resemble the country's presentation of cormorants. The dodo in British ornithological literature was "universally depicted as a monster, a lumbering, clumsy, gluttonous animal whose survival was unquestionably doomed by its ungainly morphology".[41] It was an example, explains Charles Hoge, of "an act of culture redefining its victim after destroying it." Both ornithologists and the culture to which their conclusions redounded "helped to redefine a victim of its invasive practices as a fundamentally doomed creature."[42] Such redefinitions served as the excuse-making of perpetrators.

Raymond Olderman describes Dick Gibson's version of those redefinitions as the "routinization of the mythic."[43] Gibson, Olderman argues, "learns the key lessons of the Dodo—that extinction can be a choice, that voicelessness can be extinction, and that technique is survival."[44] Olderman is unconcerned with the animals themselves, instead reading in the text that "like Dodoes, we would choose extinction unless we use our voice to gain control of all the empire." Dick, he explains, "has learned to justify the pursuit of power" through the episode with the dodo. "He has learned how to maintain the illusion of his own sacred mission."[45] Such was undoubtedly the lesson Gibson took from the events, but missing from this framing is the dodo, the foundational character in the text. In the critical community, as in the seventeenth century and in the pages of Elkin's novel, eliminationism holds sway.

The fate of the dodo, of course, is not the only result of eliminationist bigotry in human thinking, nor is it the only fate that nonhuman animals face. Two years after publishing *The Dick Gibson Show*, Elkin debuted a collection of novellas titled *Searches and Seizures*, including, among others, "The Making of Ashenden," a comic takedown of the idle rich and its flighty protagonist Brewster Ashenden. The most infamous part of the novella takes place in a forest clearing much like that of the

41 Charles Hoge, "The Dodo in the Long Eighteenth Century: An Exploration of the Gray Ghost Outside of the English Sentimental Eye," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 83, no. 3 (2014): 687.

42 Hoge, "The Dodo in the Long Eighteenth Century," 701-702.

43 Raymond M. Olderman, "The Six Crises of Dick Gibson," *The Iowa Review* 7, no. 1 (1976): 129.

44 Olderman, "The Six Crises of Dick Gibson," 134.

45 Olderman, "The Six Crises of Dick Gibson," 134-135.

Mauritius dodo and its ultimate demise. Ashenden goes walking on the sprawling grounds of a mansion late at night, where he meets a Kamchatka brown bear (*Ursus arctos beringianus*).

Figure 2: Kamchatka brown bear. Wikimedia commons. Public domain.

The young female frightens the protagonist before he discovers that she is in heat. Almost immediately Elkin frames the encounter similarly to that of the dodo. "He believed that the bear was emblematic, or even that he was, but that the two of them there in that clearing...somehow made for symbolism, or at least for meaning. As the bear came closer, however, he was disabused of even this thin hope."[46] Elkin confronts again the power of animal-as-symbol, the quasi-deification of the dodo or the vaunted hypermasculinity of the bear encounter and finds in both an ungrounded meaning-making. Humans create myths about interactions with animals, at least in some measure, to submerge the reality that human interactions with nonhumans almost always redound negatively to the nonhumans, as in the case of the dodo. Those interactions become totemic in their representation.

Totems, as Claude Levi-Strauss has explained, "are codes suitable for conveying messages which can be transposed into other codes, and for expressing messages

46 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 174-175.

received by means of different codes in terms of their own system".[47] The mythology generated by such totems, he argues "has no obvious practical function".[48] It does not reference a different reality. It is referencing an unreality, a world that does not exist and is desirable because of that nonexistence. "The only thing that these totemic systems have in common is the general tendency to characterise the segments into which society is divided by an association between each segment and some natural species or some portion of nature."[49] Totemic myth is "both a language for analogically representing and reconstituting another reality—an hierarchical system of human differentiation—and a means by which that reality can be validated".[50] The bear, then, or the dodo, become representations of a separate reality more desirable because they mask the actual treatment and dismissal of animals in human society.

When facing an actual, non-totemic bear—or perhaps, a totem made of flesh, a bear who had climbed down from the pole of myth and into the life of Brewster Ashenden—the protagonist of Elkin's story panics and runs, before realizing that outrunning the bear would be impossible. After attempts at negotiation and another attempt to flee, the bear fells him, then "reached down from behind Ashenden's back and tore away his fly, including the underwear."[51] Ashenden covers himself with his hands, and the bear replies in the international phonetic alphabet, "əə͡ŋ".[52] Elkin's narrative, in the protagonist's feeling of nakedness in front of the bear and in the bear's use of a "language," works to put the two on the same plane before any further interaction. It neither humanizes the bear nor diminishes Ashenden; humanization as a linguistic stand-in for superiority, in fact, is a bigotry such tropes seek to correct. The bear's use of a language and Ashenden's modesty mark the two as earthlings, equals, far from the trappings of the protagonist's mansion or the bear's cave. They are two people encountering each other in a clearing.

There is a resonance in the encounter like that of Jacques Derrida's famous nude encounter with his cat. The cat stares at Derrida, providing an emperor-has-no-clothes moment that leaves the author, seen by the cat, feeling vulnerable, if not judged, by his companion animal. Elkin's narrative presents a similar sense of "the impropriety that comes of finding oneself naked, one's sex exposed, stark naked before a cat that

47 Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 75-76.

48 Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (Manhattan, NY: Harper and Row, 1975), 10.

49 Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1952), 122.

50 John Borneman, "Race, Ethnicity, Species, Breed: Totemism and Horse-Breed Classification in America," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30, no. 1 (1988): 48.

51 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 177.

52 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 177.

looks at you without moving, just to see," as Derrida explains. It was a feeling of "impropriety," standing "in front of the insistent gaze of the animal, a benevolent or pitiless gaze, surprised or cognizant. The gaze of a seer, visionary, or extra-lucid blind person. It is as if I were ashamed, therefore, naked in front of this cat, but also ashamed for being ashamed."[53] So, too, is Ashenden with the additional element of danger that the bear poses. But along with that danger, there is a simple encounter between people, each with opinions, motives, and desires.

Especially desires. Ashenden "saw its sex billowing the heavy curtain of hair that hung above its groin."[54] He interprets the bear as making a "gesture, oddly whorish and insistent. It was as if it beckoned Ashenden across a barrier not of animal and man but of language—Chinese, say, and Rumanian."[55] He understands the bear. He is, in interpreting her gestures, "like a student of language who for the first time finds himself hearing in real and ordinary life a unique textbook usage. O God, he thought, I understand Bear!"[56] Flush with that understanding, he attempts to explain. "I'm a man and you're a bear," to says to her, "and it was precisely as he had addressed those wives of his hosts and fellow guests who had made overtures to him, exactly as he might put off all those girls whose station in life, inferior to his own, made them ineligible." At the same time, however, there was "also an acknowledgement that he was flattered, and even, to soften his rejection, a touch of gallant regret."[57] The encounter is, in word and deed, a meeting between two individuals, rather than one between human and animal. And while Ashenden clearly sees himself the superior—he the embodiment of Jay Gatsby, the bear not quite reaching the level of Daisy Buchanan, but instead one of Gatsby's eligible party guests—he is viewing the bear through the lens of encounter rather than the lens of species.

He rehearses with the bear the common human uses for Kamchatka bears, from entertainment in circuses to totemic representations on "the walls of playrooms and nurseries and in the anterooms of pediatricians' offices. So, there must be something domestic in you to begin with, and it is to that which I now appeal, madam."[58] He acknowledges difference, while still maintaining a basic equivalency in the male-female relationship. As the two embrace, "See how strong I am, how easily I support this beast," he told himself. "But then I am a beast too, he thought. There's wolf in me now, and that gives me strength. What this means, he thought, is that my life has been too crammed with civilization." He has been "too proud of my humanism, and

53 Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2, (2002): 372.

54 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 178.

55 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 178.

56 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 178.

57 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 178.

58 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 179.

all along not paid enough attention to the base. This is a good lesson for me. I'm very privileged" (179-180). The human and animal are merging, both physically and ontologically. Ashenden acknowledges the role that cultural constructions play in conditioning his assumptions and behavior. Attraction and need are universal, though they are often hidden by civilizing notions of propriety, all of them invented by humans to demonstrate superiority over unincluded species. In the clearing with the bear, Ashenden witnesses the stripping away of the privilege associated with supremacy.

Privilege, of course, has long been a dominant narrative in race and gender studies. Propagated most publicly by Peggy McIntosh, white privilege, as she described it, was "a pattern of assumptions which were passed on to me as a white person. There was one main piece of cultural turf; it was my own turf, and I was among those who could control the turf," she argued. "My skin color was an asset for any move I was educated to want to make. I could think of myself as belonging in major ways, and of making social systems work for me. I could freely disparage, fear, neglect, or be oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms. Being of the main culture, I could also criticize it fairly freely."[59] Those without such racial or gendered assumptions found themselves at a decided societal disadvantage, had more impediments to controlling the turf. The main culture was also decidedly human, and the contours of privilege used to critique the effects of race and gender bigotries applied to species difference, as well. Ashenden operated in a human society that blinded him—and everyone else—to consanguinity with other residents of the planet. In becoming wolf, he acknowledged that the union of human and nonhuman was not simply the project of lifting animals to a human level, but was instead a meeting of two groups without the binds of countervailing prejudice. Becoming wolf was itself a renunciation of in-group privilege that came with membership in dominant cultural categories. If Ashenden was wolf, so too was the bear. They were wolves together in the clearing, speciesist privilege eliminated, if briefly, in the moonlight.

When Ashenden stumbles, "the bear whipped its paw behind Ashenden's back to keep him from falling, and it was like being dipped, supported in a dance, the she-bear leading and Brewster balanced against the huge beamy strength of her paw."[60] In an encounter between equals, between two wolves, with privilege stripped away in the wake of civilization, the bear could take the lead, could be the guiding force in that encounter. It is also the bear who takes the initiative and "plunged Brewster's hand into her wet nest" to begin the sexual act. The bear continues to lead, posing for Ashenden, "a performance coy and proud," before taking more definitive action, as she "plucked his cock out of his torn trousers."[61] And Ashenden responds in kind.

59 Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Multiculturalism 1992* (1992): 34.

60 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 180.

61 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 181.

When initially unable to produce an erection, he begins talking to the bear "with a sort of sexual guile he hadn't known he possessed, phrases from love, the compromising sales talk of romantic stall. He had been maidenized, a game, scared bride at the bedside."[62] The brief gender reversal demonstrated the domino effect of privileged conditions created by equalitarian encounters between those otherwise considered unequal. Ashenden "remembered, suddenly, *saw*,

> all the animals he had ever petted, all the furry underbellies, writhing, inviting his nails, all the babies whose rubbery behinds he'd squeezed, the little girls he'd drawn toward him and held between his knees to comfort or tell a secret to, their hair tickling his face, all small boys whose heads he'd rubbed and cheeks pinched between his fingers. We are all sodomites, he thought. There is disparity at the source of love. We are all sodomites, all pederasts, all dikes and queens and mother fuckers.[63]

Elkin here plays with other taboo sexual mores, but there is in the provocation of the statement a claim of equality among all beings. His critique of privilege and socially constructed bigotries has moved to more settled constructions of adult and child. The narrative about the "disparity at the source of love," however, is a defense, directed in its self-justifying platitudes toward sexual actions between species. "Yes, and there's wolf in me too now," Ashenden repeated. "God, how I honor a difference and crave the unusual, life like a link of mixed boxcars."[64]

With Ashenden's erection finally in place, the two have sex, both climaxing together at its conclusion, both groaning in the international phonetic alphabet. "uəo͡oŭ(r) reng͡ hwhu ä ä ch ouhw ouhw nnng," the bear groaned. Then Ashenden: ""uəo͡oŭ(r) reng͡ hwhu ä ä c͡hch *ouhw* ouhw *nnng*͡!"[65] There was in the similarity of their speech less an act of Ashenden becoming animal and more a melding of human and nonhuman, a shared language prompted by the most basic biological function. After seeing blood on his penis, Ashenden shakes his head. "I haven't just screwed a bear," he thinks. "I've fucked a virgin!"[66] He then realizes that his penis had a cut that was bleeding. "Maybe *I* was the virgin. Maybe *I* was."[67]

Ashenden's meeting with the bear is fundamentally different than Gibson's with the dodo, but in both encounters, Elkin counters the totemic mythology used to prop up certain nonhumans over and against others. As with the dodo, gone is the bear's exceptionalism and uniqueness as the human walks back to the mansion that represents civilization. As Gibson demonstrates the dodo's precarity and non-mythical status by admitting that he had tossed the dead bird to simulate flight after death,

62 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 184.

63 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 184-185.

64 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 185.

65 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 186.

66 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 187.

67 Elkin, *The Dick Gibson Show*, 188.

Ashenden moves the bear from the totem pole and into the real world of physical contact. Real life encounters in both instances erode the human-generated mythology about other creatures. At such a biological level, the Kamchatka bear is neither circus entertainment nor feared predator. She is a young woman with sexual desires, and Ashenden is an older man responding to a similar pull. As with the dodo, the speciesism that presents the bear as a trained trickster for human entertainment is itself a form of condemnation, humans using the species to demonstrate their mastery over an animal more powerful than them. It is fear of the totemized, mythical bear that gives such revelry its power to entertain. But sex, as with death in the case of the dodo, reveals the lie in such presentations. The human and the animal are the same, compatible, yet two different forms of earthling coexisting on a floating round ball in the sky. The human caprice that fells the dodo and makes a monster of the Kamchatka bear blinds human vision of the fellow beings that surround them, preventing through cultural constructs the vision of the animal as an equal being rather than an inferior.

Francine Hardaway reads "The Making of Ashenden" as the story of a man who "couples with the bear to prove his worth."[68] For Thomas LeClair, the story's protagonist, in having sex with the bear, "fails the test of purity as no other hero, Lancelot included, ever has."[69] Robert Coover describes Elkin's description of the coupling as "unparalleled in world literature"; it was, "though no doubt it went largely unrecognized as such on the night, a true religious experience, as it was for the transformed Ashenden, who, falling in love, prepared to leave Jane and civilization behind for wilder places."[70] The interpretations are necessarily at odds with one another: a proving of Ashenden's worth and a decided self-failing; a failed test of purity and a religious experience. The disjointed nature of such interpretations, however, share one significant element. All of them interpret the bear as a device, a lens through which to see Ashenden rather than an independent entity with her own needs, her own purity test in the narrative.

Three years after the publication of *Searches and Seizures*, Marian Engel published her 1976 novel *The Bear*, the story of a Toronto librarian who escapes the big city for a rural life in northeastern Ontario. There she develops a sexual relationship with a bear, one that unlike Ashenden's, runs through more than one isolated experience. Eventually the bear claws her back and hurts her, the relationship ending as she returns to her former life. Engel, too, plays with many of the tropes that Elkin engages, but her narrative moves in a variety of different directions: Female sexuality

68 Francine O. Hardaway, "The Power of the Guest: Stanley Elkin's Fiction," *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 32, no. 4 (1978): 244.

69 Thomas LeClair, "The Obsessional Fiction of Stanley Elkin," *Contemporary Literature* 16, no. 2 (1975): 160-161.

70 Robert Coover, "Reflections and Reminders," *New England Review* 27, no. 4 (2006): 61.

and the dangers that men pose in response to it permeate a story published in the throes of second wave feminism and the women's liberation movement.[71] Still, Engel does negotiate the tangled relationship between human and nonhuman. The bear's "nose was more pointed than she expected–years of corruption by teddy bears, she supposed."[72] Engel's protagonist, too, has found her assumptions corrupted by the constructed totems of human civilization, blinding her to the lived reality of other species.

Elkin's story did not have the gendered political influence of Engel's tale, but it raised similar issues of thorny entanglement. Elkin wrote "The Making of Ashenden" after a heart attack and a bout of writer's block. A friend had told him a story of a bear in estrus who almost mauled her human keeper. "It occurred to me as I was listening to this story," Elkin remembered. "My God, what I'm being told is not in itself a story, but *if* the man had to fuck the bear in order to save his life, *that* would be a story".[73] It was a story, one that became both popular and controversial, as did the story of Marian Engel. His depiction of the dodo, however, was not controversial, and the public response to both narratives demonstrates the presence of the human-nonhuman disconnect and the constructions that supported it. In "The Making of Ashenden," the bear and the human commit a voluntary sex act provoked by the bear's biologically generated passion. In *The Dick Gibson Show*, the human slices the throat of the dodo in response to a mythology artificially generated about the bird. In any foundational interpretation of equality among earthlings, the killing of the dodo should have been more likely to cause controversy. But it didn't. The dodo was a curiosity; the bear was a scandal.

But bears and dodos are independent entities, their value disconnected from human interpretations. Elkin's negotiation of that value is shaped by his not being a proponent of animal rights. Throughout both narratives, for example, the dodo and the bear are referred to by the pronoun "it," which those acknowledging the personhood of animals would not. Both *The Dick Gibson Show* and *Searches and Seizures* appeared at the time of a reawakening of animal rights efforts. The Oxford Group of animal activists, including Richard Ryder, who coined the term speciesism, and Peter Singer, who two years after the publication of *Searches and Seizures* would publish his seminal *Animal Liberation*, provided a new momentum for a movement that had largely lay dormant through much of the twentieth century.[74] There is no evidence that Elkin was influenced by the movement, but it would provide a context for those

71 For more on Engel's work and broader discussions of beastiality in literature, see Grewe-Volpp; Aguila-Way; Barrett; Meoni; Gault.

72 Marian Engel, *The Bear* (New York, NY: Athenaeum, 1976), 24.

73 Dougherty, *Shouting Down the Silence*, 122.

74 Robert Garner and Yewande Okuleye, *The Oxford Group and the Emergence of Animal Rights: An Intellectual History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

reading his tales of the dodo and the bear and gives direction to an interpretation that includes the personhood of the animals in its analysis.

In his novella "The Bailbondsman," which precedes "The Making of Ashenden" in *Searches and Seizures*, Elkin describes "the progress of the liver fluke through a cow's intestine to a human being."[75] (27). The cow excretes the fluke, who waits in the grass until it grows, ready to be consumed by sheep. It then takes up residence in the sheep's liver until again excreted, ready "to sting the heels of the barefoot kid on one of those fucking calendars of ours. Nature's nasty marathon, its stations of the cross and inside job," Elkin explains, finding this time totemic mythology in the barefoot child. Again, nature's reality comes into conflict with social construction and exposes the myth as a lie along the way. "And the same with people. What the liver fluke can do man can do. The fix is in, takes two to tango, all crime's a cooperation."[76]

What the liver fluke can do man can do. Or the bear. Or the dodo. Elkin's encounter with the animal demonstrates a groping toward equivalency that pierces the false reverence humans use to mask many of the more violent actions they practice on nonhuman animals and upon which much of civilization is based. That civilization is then tautologically used to justify such violence. Elkin's depiction of the dodo and the bear, however, holds such tautologies up to the light, finding through one violent encounter and another sexual encounter the equalitarian bond between earth's creatures, stripped of the constructions that often veil them. Elkin was not making a case for animal rights, but in his depictions created a literature that provided new perspectives on the emerging movement for them developing in the 1970s.

75 Stanley Elkin, *Searches and Seizures* (New York, NY: Random House, 1973), 27.

76 Elkin, *Searches and Seizures*, 28.

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Kamchatka brown bear. Wikimedia commons. Public domain.