Postcolonial Philippine Nonhuman Animals in Jessica Zafra's *The Age of Umbrage* and Irene Sarmiento's *Stray Cats*

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Abstract

While postcolonial studies often foreground the human "other," they have often overlooked nonhuman animals, whose marginalization persists even within narratives that are attentive to structural inequities. Drawing on Peter Singer's critique of speciesism and John Berger's reflections on the visibility of nonhuman animals, this article investigates the representation of nonhuman animals in Jessica Zafra's *The Age of Umbrage* (2020) and Irene Sarmiento's *Stray Cats* (2023), situating both novels within the context of Philippine postcolonial literature. Both texts position nonhuman animals in highly constrained roles: either as consumable bodies embedded in human food systems or as symbolic messengers deployed to articulate human emotions and cultural anxieties. Through the figures of Guadalupe "Guada" de Leon and Elisa Paz, two young female protagonists whose lives are shaped by their relationships with nonhuman animals on and off the page, the novels draw from Philippine folklore while simultaneously reinforcing the subordination of nonhuman life. Scenes of slaughter and pet keeping reflect the routine commodification of nonhuman animals, while the incorporation of mythical creatures reveals the link between nonhuman animals and symbolic meaning. This dual positioning emphasizes how nonhuman animals in these novels are consistently framed through utilitarian or representational lenses, with little space for recognizing their subjectivity outside human-

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centered narratives. Both novels highlight the spatial marginalization of nonhuman animals through controlled environments such as zoos and urban landscapes, where they appear as spectacles rather than autonomous beings. Despite these narrative limitations, both *The Age of Umbrage* and *Stray Cats* suggest subtle sites of interspecies connection. The enduring presence of feline companions offers moments of intimacy and mutual recognition that complicate the dominant anthropocentric framing, pointing to the potential for more ethical modes of relationality. This article analyzes these tensions to contribute to emerging discussions in postcolonial ecocriticism and human-animal studies, foregrounding the complex ways nonhuman animals are rendered both visible and invisible in contemporary Philippine fiction.

Keywords: Philippine literature, Postcolonial Studies, nonhuman animals, Critical Animal Studies, Folklore.

Introduction

The presence of nonhuman animals in contemporary Philippine literature emerges within a distinctly postcolonial context. The intimate connection between Southeast Asian literature and postcolonial studies allows for politically engaged criticism—one that speaks directly to issues of social, cultural, and ecological injustice (Devadas 249). Priscelina Patajo-Legasto echoes this in the preface to the second edition of *Philippine Postcolonial Studies* (2004), in which she asserts that the field has "opened up spaces for literary and cultural texts that were marginalized in the past because of the hegemonic (i.e., western) aesthetics, criticism, and the supposed 'universal' canon of Literature" (vii). While postcolonial studies has long concerned itself with the "other," Philip Armstrong, the co-director of the New Zealand Center for Human-Animal Studies at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, argued in 2002 that this scholarship had largely overlooked nonhuman animals, perhaps out of concern that such inquiries might trivialize the suffering of human subjects under colonialism (413). To study the nonhuman means to surrender to viewing their otherness from a human lens, through a constant state of

comparison with "notions fundamental to the work of colonialism: 'the human,' 'the natural,' 'the cultural'" (Armstrong 414). Armstrong further noted that despite the field's commitment to marginality, "it has shown little interest in the fate of the nonhuman animal" (413), even though such figures persist as peripheral characters in postcolonial literature.

This article primarily engages with Peter Singer's foundational critique of speciesism and John Berger's reflections on the visibility and cultural positioning of nonhuman animals. Their works provide a crucial theoretical lens through which to examine the often-overlooked dimension of nonhuman animal representation in postcolonial studies. Specifically, Singer's ethical framework on animal liberation allows for a direct interrogation of the moral implications of how nonhuman beings are commodified and exploited within the narratives. Concurrently, Berger's insights into the changing human-animal relationship, particularly the shift from wild encounters to controlled spectacles and anthropomorphic projections, offer a robust framework for analyzing how nonhuman animals in Philippine literature are both physically and culturally marginalized. By focusing on these two scholars, and occasionally drawing on contemporary posthumanist thought, this article aims to establish a clear analytical connection between global critical animal studies and the specific nuances of Philippine literary contexts, highlighting how universal ethical concerns about human-animal relations manifest in localized narratives. Berger and Singer's foundational insights into how humans perceive and relate to nonhuman beings are particularly pertinent here, as both the novels discussed in this article centrally explore the formative experiences through which children learn to view and interact with nonhuman life.

In Jessica Zafra's *The Age of Umbrage* (2020) and Irene Sarmiento's *Stray Cats* (2023), nonhuman animals are abundant yet occupy highly constrained positions that reinforce their marginalization. The selection of these two novels is driven not only by their prominent engagement with nonhuman animals but also by their significant contemporary relevance within Philippine literature. Both novels, published recently,

offer a timely lens into current socio-cultural anxieties and realities in the Philippines. Zafra, a celebrated and influential Filipino writer known for her sharp wit and incisive social commentary, brings a unique perspective to issues of class and identity. Sarmiento's *Stray Cats*, a young adult novel, addresses pressing urban issues such as child trafficking and economic disparity, making it particularly resonant for exploring vulnerability and marginalization in the modern Philippine context. Importantly, the novels reflect the pervasive presence of stray cats in Philippine urban life, often existing as numerous strays with little inherent cultural significance beyond their utilitarian roles or perceived nuisance. Both texts limit nonhuman animals to two primary functions: either as meat, signifying their physical marginalization, or as symbolic messengers, highlighting their cultural marginalization. Their depiction as consumable bodies emphasizes their exclusion from systems of value beyond human use, while their role as messengers often reduces them to tools that serve human narratives rather than possessing agency of their own. This constrained representation not only reflects the structures of oppression that render nonhuman life expendable but also limits the ways in which these novels engage with nonhuman characters in the narratives. Through an analysis of how *The Age of Umbrage* and *Stray Cats* position nonhuman animals at the peripheries of human society and narrative focus, and in conversation with Singer's critique of speciesism and Berger's insights on animal visibility, this article investigates how these portrayals either reinforce or contest the sociocultural frameworks governing human-animal relations in the Philippine context.

From Childhood Companions to Commodities

As the protagonists of *The Age of Umbrage* and *Stray Cats* are young girls, we are introduced to their worlds from a child's perspective. In *The Age of Umbrage*, young Guadalupe "Guada" de Leon, who grows up in the servants' quarters of the wealthy Almagro family's estate in Manila, finds comfort in stray cats and tales of *manananggal*

as she navigates the realities of her social status. Guada's estranged father Hernani "Nani" de Leon's absence and her mother Asuncion "Siony" Pelayo's unfulfilled dreams of success further deepen her isolation, hence her preference for fiction over reality. This is evident early in the narrative when Guada, a self-proclaimed bookworm, is engrossed in *Creatures of Lower Philippine Mythology* by Maximo D. Ramos. Though Siony explains to Guada the concept of mythology, she is unsure about the distinction between "upper" and "lower" mythology. The book introduces Guada to a range of supernatural beings: *kapre*, dark-skinned giants perched on tree branches smoking cigars; *tiyanak*, ghostly infants crying in rice fields; *aswang*, shapeshifters that transform into monstrous dogs and prey on unsuspecting travelers; and *tikbalang*, horse-headed creatures that walk like men. However, the figure that most fascinates Guada is the *manananggal*, a vampiric creature that splits in half at night, leaving its lower torso behind while its upper half takes flight in search of pregnant women (Zafra 13-14).

This enduring belief in Philippine folklore among Filipino children is also central to *Stray Cats*, a young adult novel that follows eighth-graders Elisa Paz and Raquel Madria as they immerse themselves in a self-created magical world in which they act as *bruhas* (witches). When Raquel mysteriously disappears, Elisa, accompanied by Oscar Santos, a talking cat, embarks on a quest through the streets of Manila to find her. Their journey exposes them to the stark realities of urban life, including child trafficking and the widening divide between rich and poor—issues that manifest through mythical creatures in the novel such as the *tikbalang*, *batibat*, and *kapre*.

The persistence of these supernatural figures in contemporary narratives aligns with Ramos' observations in *The Creatures of Philippine Lower Mythology* (1971) that lower mythology remains deeply embedded in Philippine culture. Ramos notes that such beliefs enrich children's art, play, and imagination, informing their worldview (4).

In both novels, the young protagonists and their feline companions navigate communities where nonhuman animals are met with varying degrees of disdain, disgust, and indifference. This treatment of nonhuman beings reflects a shift in industrialized societies, where they, as well as children, have been increasingly reduced to commodities. In post-industrial societies, however, nonhuman animals are treated as raw material, processed for food much like manufactured goods (Berger 11). Despite their commodification, nonhuman beings remain central to the cultural imagination of childhood. Historically, representations of nonhuman animals in children's lives were limited, but by the nineteenth century, they became a staple of middle-class childhood, and in the twentieth century, with the rise of large-scale commercial entertainment such as Disney, they extended to children across all social classes (Berger 20). This pervasive presence of commodified nonhuman animal imagery, often spearheaded by global corporations like Disney, also holds significant sway in countries like the Philippines, where Disney products and media are widely consumed (Afinidad-Bernardo; ABS-CBN News; Globe Telecom, Inc.). Similarly, the child protagonists of *The Age of Umbrage* and *Stray Cats* are immersed in the presence of both real and mythical nonhuman animals who shape their understanding of the world around them.

Similar to Philippine epics where heroes act as leaders and participate in adventures and quests, Guada and Elisa are the heroines of their own narratives, and their nonhuman animal companions "help them succeed in their undertakings" (Eugenio xxi). In *Stray Cats*, Elisa's constant companion is Oscar Santos. Elisa's background as part of "an upper-middle class household" (Sarmiento 1) means the only places she is allowed to venture into alone are her subdivision's park and *sari-sari* store. Her search for Raquel, however, brings her and Oscar Santos to Quiapo Church "to visit the arbularyo who raised Oscar Santos after Raquel had rescued him" (Sarmiento 28), Luneta Park to look for the Lady of the Hippopotamus, Olongapo City to speak with Raquel's father, the Manila Police Station to report Raquel's disappearance, and Reposo Cemetery to look for clues. Guada's journey may seem much more mundane in *The Age of Umbrage* as readers follow her

through the typical spaces of lower- and middle-class childhood: her family home, her mother's workplace, public and private school, and public and private transportation. At the beginning of the novel, she has yet to be born; by the end, she is fifteen years old. Every hardship she experiences, from a failed exorcism as an infant to bullying as a teen, is faced with a feline or fiction by her side. When Nani fails to pick her up from nursery school, Guada divides a sandwich and egg into three portions to give to three stray cats as she waits, much to the dismay of her classmate Elsie and Siony (Zafra 12). The night Nani leaves Siony and Guada, Guada dreams of playing with a calico cat before she is taken away by a *manananggal* (Zafra 22). Throughout her time at the Almagro home, she treasures the hours she is able to play "with the family of stray cats who lived in the garden" (Zafra 40). After her mother's death, Guada follows a cat, leading her to a bus she decides to get on alone (Zafra 125). These narratives position Elisa and Guada within a living tradition where nonhuman animals function as vital companions whose presence shapes how the protagonists navigate their worlds and make sense of their experiences.

Beyond serving as companions, the nonhuman creatures in *The Age of Umbrage* and *Stray Cats* function as symbols, offering the young protagonists glimpses into deeper social realities. This parallels the ways in which children are introduced to nonhuman animals through controlled spaces such as zoos, where visits are often more sentimental than educational. Unlike fairs or sporting events, zoos allow adults to not only show children the real-life versions of their beloved nonhuman animal reproductions, but also to reconnect with their own childhood perceptions of nonhuman animals (Berger 21). In *Stray Cats*, Elisa's relationship with the talking cat Oscar Santos grants her access to an alternative perspective on the world. This is most evident when she meets the Quiapo *arbularyo* (folk healer) who agrees to speak with Elisa once he understands she is associated with Oscar Santos. The *arbularyo* provides Elisa with two vials of liquid she is instructed to throw at attackers; he tells her, "[t]here are people out there who want to do you harm" (Sarmiento 34). Though Elisa and Oscar Santos initially doubt the supposedly supernatural contents of these vials, they are eventually saved by the

arbularyo's potions, setting Edgar Rintala on fire as he admits to being behind Raquel's disappearance as part of a child trafficking operation (Sarmiento 175). Elisa's link to Oscar Santos and belief in folklore afford her safety otherwise unavailable to her alone. Similarly, in *The Age of Umbrage*, Guada's fascination with felines and the occult allows her to understand the basics of "othering." As she waits for her father at her nursery school, she discusses the status of stray cats with her classmate Elsie:

> "My mom says cats are dirty," said Elsie, who cowered behind the bench lest the beasts claw her eyes out.
>
> "No, they're not," said Guada. "Look, they're cleaning their paws." She crouched down and stroked the calico cat, who rubbed its cheeks against her hand. Maybe she could take the cat home in her knapsack and keep it in her room where her parents wouldn't see it. She could put it in her sock drawer and bring it leftovers.
>
> "Sister Margaret says cats are evil," Elsie went on, with the irritating assurance of one who would never formulate her own opinion in her life.
>
> "She did not."
>
> "Yes, she did. Cats are the pets of the devil. They live with witches and eat babies."
>
> Sister Margaret was the religion teacher. Her method of inculcating religion in four-year-olds was to pronounce things evil. (Zafra 12)

Guada responds to Elsie by calling herself a witch who might "get on a flying broom and eat babies"; their conversation ends with Guada threatening to fly to Elsie's house and eat her (Zafra 13).

Through their encounters with nonhuman animals, both Guada and Elisa come to perceive systems of threat and belonging that remain invisible to others. These figures prompt the protagonists to see beyond their immediate realities, yet remain constrained by how others interpret or instrumentalize them. In the worlds woven by Zafra and Sarmiento, nonhuman animals are positioned through two dominant roles: as meat and as messenger. This dual function illustrates their precarious position—caught between

objectification and symbolic meaning—within the social structures that shape both narratives.

Meat: Physical Marginalization of Nonhuman Animals

Nonhuman animals in *Stray Cats* (2023) and *The Age of Umbrage* (2020) exist primarily as raw materials for human consumption, reinforcing their status as disposable commodities rather than sentient beings. While nonhuman beings once played a central role in human imagination, these novels depict a world where they have mainly been reduced to their usefulness as food or labor, their agency erased by the economic structures that dictate their existence. The presence of nonhuman animals in these texts primarly reflects slaughter and commodification, where their value is determined solely by their function in human economies. In this way, *Stray Cats* and *The Age of Umbrage* reveal the mechanisms through which animals are both omnipresent and invisible.

The physical marginalization of nonhuman animals is especially evident in both novels when they are embedded into the setting as food. In *Stray Cats*, Elisa eats a "tamarind-based soup" (sinigang) while simultaneously feeding the cat, Oscar Santos, "small pieces of fish in between bites" (Sarmiento 41). This moment, in which a nonhuman animal receives scraps from a meal that itself contains nonhuman animal flesh, highlights the pervasiveness of meat consumption and reveals a more unsettling implication: the casual entanglement of care and violence. That Oscar, a cherished companion, is nourished through the death of another animal demonstrates a normalized disassociation in everyday life, where affection toward some nonhuman animals coexists with the consumption of others. In *The Age of Umbrage*, where Siony is a cook, references to food underscore the routine animal consumption: "cured meats" (Zafra 4), "slabs of pork" (18), eggs spilling yolks that "ran down the table legs" (20), and traditional dishes such as "pinangat—pork cooked in coconut milk and chillis, then wrapped in gabi leaves" (31). Even the novel's references to dietary restrictions, such as religion-based rules

regarding the consumption of "creatures with eyes" (46), reinforce how nonhuman animals are framed not by their sentience but by their edibility.

Beyond references to prepared meals, *The Age of Umbrage* also makes the process of nonhuman animal slaughter visible, briefly disrupting their erasure as living beings. At a wet market, a man is described "unloading a wire cage of live chickens from a rusty van" before grabbing "a chicken, and in a single movement twist[ing] its neck" (Zafra 19). Guada, observing another scene, is "fascinated, as a man in a bloody apron slit fish corpses and pulled out their reeking guts. The floor was wet with blood and melted ice" (Zafra 19). The visceral imagery here momentarily restores visibility to the violence behind meat production, though it remains an accepted and normalized aspect of the setting. This mirrors a broader industrial logic in which nonhuman animal suffering is only considered insofar as it does not interfere with production costs, reinforcing a system in which ethical concerns are secondary to economic efficiency (Singer 219).

Similarly, *Stray Cats* emphasizes how nonhuman animals are stripped of their individuality and reduced to their utility. While some nonhuman creatures in the novel, like Oscar Santos, are imbued with mystical qualities, strays are often reduced to objects of cruelty or function, as reflected in the urban legend that siopao contains cat meat—a myth rooted in historical anxieties over food safety, economic competition, and ethnic discrimination (De Leon). Nardo's offhand joke to his daughter that the siopao they are eating in a Chinese restaurant is "certified cat-free" (Sarmiento 17) may seem like an innocuous remark, but it draws attention to the perception of stray cats as disposable and interchangeable with food. The rumor that cats are secretly used in meat production trivializes their suffering, turning them into objects of disgust rather than beings deserving of ethical consideration. This devaluation extends beyond urban legends to the functional use of nonhuman animals, as seen when Elisa's Nanay suggests leaving a cat at a bakery to "help kill all their rats" (Sarmiento 40). The assumption that nonhuman beings will inevitably be consumed or exploited prevents them from being seen as subjects in their own right, limiting their presence in the narrative to their economic function (Singer 219).

By depicting these moments without sentimentality, both novels illustrate how the reduction of nonhuman animals to meat is not just a physical process but an ideological one that structures human-animal relationships in ways that prevent ethical reflection. In *Stray Cats*, the transformation of nonhuman animals into consumable goods is implied through the instrumentalization of stray cats, while in *The Age of Umbrage*, it is made explicit through scenes of slaughter. The novels expose how nonhuman creatures have been removed from cultural consciousness even as they remain central to human economies, ultimately asking their readers to confront a world where nonhuman animals exist only in their absence, where they are most visible when they are already gone.

However, while most nonhuman animals disappear into systems of consumption in the novels, one category remains deeply embedded in human characters' lives: pets. Unlike their commodified counterparts, pets occupy a unique space in modern societies, where their visibility has only increased. Rather than vanishing, household pets have multiplied, particularly in urban environments where they are no longer valued for their traditional roles—guard dogs, hunting dogs, or mouse-killing cats—but instead for their ability to provide emotional companionship (Berger 12). This shift reflects a reconfiguration of human-animal relationships, one in which domesticated nonhuman animals serve as objects of projection rather than independent beings. At the same time, this sentimental attachment to pets exists alongside widespread nonhuman animal exploitation, creating a moral inconsistency in which some nonhuman animals are loved and protected while others are systematically used for food, clothing, or experimentation (Singer 19). This contradiction is what posthumanist scholars Nicklas Lindgren and Johan Öhman refer to as a crucial area of inquiry. They suggest that a "studying up perspective" allows for a critical examination of these inconsistencies, focusing on "why some animals are worth saving and addressed as the ultimate cost of climate change and human exploitation (polar bears and the poaching of elephants and tigers), while others end up on our plates or our sofas" (Lindgren and Öhman 1210). This is evident in the novels, where pets exist within human narratives as reflections of human needs, mirroring their

human companions' emotions and serving as symbols of personal connection. In *Stray Cats*, the protagonist's father, Nardo, explicitly likens cats to people, telling Elisa,

> I thought you should have a cat because cats are like people. Anyway, cats are very intelligent. They are probably the only animals who can use human beings to their own benefit. They don't have the same obligation that dogs have about returning our affection. Cats are disloyal and think only of themselves. Sure, they have cute furry faces and large eyes, but they also have fangs and claws for hunting. Cats are passersby who have no masters. They are manipulative and amoral. In a way, you should be thankful you didn't get too attached to Oscar Santos. (Sarmiento 19)

His reasoning for allowing Elisa to have a pet is not based on the cat's independent existence but on the cat's ability to serve as a relatable figure, paralleling the way pets are often conditioned to reflect human emotions and expectations (Berger 12). This is the same concept present when Elisa remarks to her father, "Oscar Santos never took food off the table" (Sarmiento 18), suggesting that pets are expected to conform to behavioral norms imposed by human society.

A similar dynamic emerges in *The Age of Umbrage,* depicting how human-animal relationships center around feeding and dependency. The novel depicts Guada and Rhodora feeding a colony of stray cats behind their grade school canteen, providing them with leftovers (Zafra 38-39). This interaction exemplifies the shift from nonhuman animals as independent beings to nonhuman animals as reliant on human kindness, reflecting how pets in modern societies exist within structures of dependency (Berger 12). Even as these moments suggest compassion for nonhuman beings, they exist within a world where other nonhuman animals are simultaneously commodified and consumed, making pet culture an isolated expression of care rather than an extension of ethical concern for animals (Singer 20).

The relationships depicted in *Stray Cats* and *The Age of Umbrage* support the argument that a pet "completes" its owner, offering "responses to aspects of his character

which would otherwise remain unconfirmed" (Berger 12). In these narratives, nonhuman animals continue to be ever-present in human lives, but only within the limited framework of human purpose, proving that nonhuman animals exist not as cohabitants of the world but as extensions of human identity.

Messenger: Cultural Marginalization of Nonhuman Animals

While nonhuman animals are physically marginalized as food or pets in the two novels, their cultural marginalization is more complex. Instead of being encountered as real entities, nonhuman beings often serve as anthropomorphized figures, supernatural symbols, or metaphors for human experiences. This transformation is evident in *Stray Cats* and *The Age of Umbrage*, where nonhuman animals are repeatedly framed as symbols or spectacles. A posthumanist lens repudiates such an approach. As Anna Barcz argues,

> The animal ceases to be a mirror of human desires, passions, anomalies; a carrier of permanent features of the moralistic character – like in fairy tales; it does not symbolise the world of humanist values any more mainly because it becomes a specific, individually characterised hero, a persona hiding a real creature behind the mask. (257)

In *Stray Cats*, Oscar Santos pointedly asks, "What am I?" before answering his own question: "I'm a cat. But you already knew that." (Sarmiento 10). This moment underscores the anthropocentric scripting of nonhuman animal characters, their identities already determined by cultural expectations (Berger 13). Even Oscar Santos, a cat who speaks, cannot escape his symbolic role as his speech serves only to reflect Elisa's emotional or narrative arcs rather than assert his own subjectivity. Oscar's narrative role becomes clearest when he functions as a source of reassurance or protection. "As angered as she was with his disappearing act," the narrator notes, "Elisa did feel comforted that Oscar Santos found his way back to her" (Sarmiento 26). In another moment, Elisa claims

him as hers: "'I have my Oscar Santos. There's no one like him anywhere else in the world'" (Sarmiento 190). These declarations position Oscar as a source of emotional stability, whose value is defined by what he provides Elisa. Even at key plot junctures, such as when he defends her from Edgar Rintala, Oscar's actions function in service of Elisa's protection. He leaps from a picnic basket "large and tense," baring fangs and claws as he confronts Rintala, stopping short of contact only when the man retaliates by hurling a chair at him (Sarmiento 130). In this scene, Oscar becomes a symbol of both courage and loyalty, yet his intervention reinforces a familiar trope: the nonhuman animal as guardian of the protagonist, scripted into action to serve the story's human center. While Oscar may appear to possess agency through speech and physical action, his narrative function remains instrumental. He is summoned in moments of emotional need or physical danger, his presence offering insight into Elisa's inner world rather than illuminating his own. His character thus illustrates how nonhuman animals in literature, even when given human-like traits, often remain bound by representational limits that prevent them from being perceived as subjects in their own right. Similarly, when Elisa reads *Creatures of Lower Philippine Mythology*, her engagement with nonhuman animals is filtered through folklore rather than direct experience (Sarmiento 13).

The role of nonhuman animals in Philippine folklore further emphasizes their cultural marginalization. When the Lady of the Hippopotamus, a soothsayer referred to Guada by the *arbularyo,* explains the legend of the *tikbalang*, describing it as "the demon horse" whose role is "to lead travelers astray in the forest" (Sarmiento 47), she highlights how nonhuman animals in mythology are often framed as tricksters, threats, or omens rather than as real creatures. Similarly, in *The Age of Umbrage*, Guada's dream sequence features a cat participating in a mythical battle with a *manananggal* who flows "into the window" and seizes "Guada in its talons"; the cat tries "to scratch the monster's face" but is "batted away" (Zafra 22). In both cases, nonhuman animals are inserted into human-centered supernatural narratives, their existence shaped by storytelling rather than lived realities (Berger 16).

Beyond mythology, nonhuman animals in both novels are frequently used as metaphors for marginalized human groups. In *Stray Cats*, Oscar Santos draws a direct parallel between homeless children and stray nonhuman animals: "Street children are like cats" as they "keep within a certain radius" when choosing where to live and move (Sarmiento 156). This comparison does not shed light on the nature or experience of cats; instead, it highlights the precarity of the street children's lives. Rather than being acknowledged as sentient beings with lives of their own, nonhuman animals are positioned as conceptual placeholders within human narratives of suffering and abandonment (Berger 17).

This reduction of nonhuman animals to symbolic roles is reiterated by their transformation into spectacle. In *Stray Cats*, a climactic moment describes cats emerging "out of the smoke" (Sarmiento 195), turning them into supernatural figures whose primary function is to create dramatic effect. Similarly, in *The Age of Umbrage*, a storm is imagined as being accompanied by "the neighborhood cats and dogs shriek[ing]," reducing them to background noise in a moment of human crisis (Zafra 9).

In these moments, stray cats are largely unseen by society, reflecting how marginalized groups also occupy invisible corners of cities. In *The Age of Umbrage*, nonhuman animals deemed useful by humans exist only to "fight vermin" (Zafra 12), tolerated only because they serve as pest control rather than because they possess intrinsic worth. If nonhuman animals serve no purpose, they are depicted as dead, with "the flattened carcass of a bullfrog" (Zafra 114) being ignored and a taxidermied iguana used as an absurd prop of destruction. Guada's frustration in *The Age of Umbrage* escalates into a violent fantasy in which the iguana becomes a weapon: she imagines picking up a microscope to bludgeon her classmates, hurling a stool at a cabinet of preserved specimens, and finally, grabbing the stuffed iguana to wield as a club. In this imagined sequence, she moves through the classroom in a destructive rage, culminating in an act of grotesque violence as she forces the reptile down a classmate's throat (Zafra 113). The scene's exaggerated brutality emphasizes how dead nonhuman animals—detached from

their former lives—become absurd, decontextualized objects, highlighting their perceived lack of value beyond human use. This treatment of nonhuman animals as consumables, contaminants, or mere background elements in urban landscapes reflects the deep-rooted structures of human dominance over other species; their use in narratives as props exhibits how cultural narratives sustain the marginalization of nonhuman animals, shaping how they are perceived, valued, and, ultimately, discarded.

Nonhuman animals are further reduced to symbols of consumerism in *The Age of Umbrage*, their cultural meanings increasingly shaped by branding and media. Guada as an infant wearing "a Hello Kitty onesie" (Zafra 9) illustrates how nonhuman animals have been commodified into sanitized cartoon representations, detached from their real-world existence (Berger 13). This commercialization is present even in Guada's early education, which is shaped by stories such as *The Little Mermaid* and *Little Red Riding Hood*, where nonhuman animals are filtered through folklore and fairy tales (Zafra 7). Similarly, Guada names the three stray cats in her nursery school Han, Leia, and Luke, directly linking them to pop cultural fantasy (Zafra 16). Even in adult characters, nonhuman animal references are used for dramatic effect: Guada's father, Nani, is described as a man who cannot be held down by Siony— "[o]nly his carefully maintained image as a suave man about town prevented him from leaping up and howling like a werewolf" (Zafra 3). Nonhuman animals in the novel are either turned into sanitized icons that entertain or reshaped into exaggerated representations of vice. The portrayal of landlords as vultures or corrupt figures as crocodiles exemplifies this process, where nonhuman animals are assigned human traits for dramatic effect rather than being understood as creatures with their own distinct realities (Berger 17).

Even when nonhuman animals appear in daily life, they are often framed in ways that reinforce their exclusion from human society. In *The Age of Umbrage*, Guada's mother scolds her after seeing her near a cat: "I told you not to touch those filthy animals" (Zafra 16). The association of stray animals with filth and disease mirrors the common perception of nonhuman animals as undesirable and outside the bounds of human

civilization (Berger 14). Instead of being acknowledged as part of the same ecological system, they are treated as nuisances, highlighting their cultural displacement.

The cultural displacement of nonhuman animals in *Stray Cats* and *The Age of Umbrage* extends beyond folklore and metaphor to physical spaces where their visibility is carefully controlled. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the zoo, a site that claims to offer access to nonhuman life while reinforcing its confinement and separation from human society. While symbolic constructions in myth and folklore obscure the realities of nonhuman animals in cultural narratives, zoos reinforce their marginalization through physical captivity, framing them as spectacles rather than autonomous beings. Rather than fostering genuine encounters between humans and nonhuman animals, zoos function as monuments to the impossibility of such encounters, offering only controlled and artificial displays of nonhuman animal life (Berger 19). This impossibility is also a consequence of modernity's efforts to control and distance the nonhuman. In this context, as Anna Barcz notes, "the return of animals is also the return of the Other who arouses interest and enforces being referenced to but cannot be completely familiarised" (257). The zoo, therefore, becomes a site where this "Other" is contained and managed, its unfamiliarity made safe for human viewing.

In *Stray Cats*, the cultural displacement of zoo animals is reflected in the way they are spoken about rather than directly encountered. The isolation of zoo animals is made explicit in a conversation about Bertha, a real-life hippopotamus from the Manila Zoo. "I saw it on the TV," Nanay says. "Sad Bertha, died alone in the Manila Zoo. No baby hippos for her. You think I will be that way? All alone?" (Sarmiento 41). Here, Bertha's story is framed as a human metaphor for loneliness. This theme is echoed in *The Age of Umbrage*, where nonhuman animals are invoked as symbols of entrapment and control. The gated community of Alhambra, where the Almagro family resides, is described as being "surrounded by high walls, like a medieval castle, and patrolled by armed guards with large dogs" (Zafra 49), mirroring the controlled environment of a zoo. The presence of

guard dogs, much like the presence of zoo animals, is meant to be seen; it is a display of authority rather than a relationship between species.

In both novels, nonhuman animals, whether real or imagined, are consistently framed through the lens of their constructed surroundings; cats are defined by their being of the streets, dogs are characterized by where they defecate (Sarmiento 97), and Guada's imaginary iguana resides in the taxidermy cabinet of her school's laboratory (Zafra 113). Even when nonhuman animals appear on television or in online searches, they are mediated through human narratives, ensuring that they remain objects of observation. Nonhuman animals in *Stray Cats* and *The Age of Umbrage* exemplify the way captivity reshapes their existence to fit human narratives, illustrating a world in which nonhuman animals are seen but never truly encountered (Berger 24).

Enduring Bonds: Nonhuman Animals and Hope

Both *The Age of Umbrage* and *Stray Cats* conclude with a sense of uncertainty. *The Age of Umbrage*, whose beginning includes a scene in which Guada depends on Siony to take her on a bus home, closes with Guada boarding a bus "entirely alone" (Zafra 125), setting off on an adventure with no clear destination. *Stray Cats* leaves Elisa still searching for Raquel but content in the knowledge that "she saw that within each monster was a person, albeit one capable of terrible, terrible things" (Sarmiento 201). What makes these endings feel particularly optimistic is the presence of their feline companions. In the final moments of *The Age of Umbrage*, the familiar calico cat that has accompanied Guada throughout her journey watches her, yawns, and then disappears "through the ruins of the old building" before vanishing "into the bushes" (Zafra 126). This brief encounter sparks a moment of emotional clarity in Guada, leading her to a bus conductor and a bus full of strangers, where she is suddenly overwhelmed with "great affection for everyone she had ever met" (Zafra 126). This is in contrast to the beginning of the novel when, even as an infant, she took umbrage at strangers' opinions and told an old woman to die (Zafra 9).

Stray Cats ends with Elisa clutching a cardboard angel given to her by a homeless boy named Tomas, who knew Raquel. Elisa understands she would one day have to face similar "demons," but "along with Oscar Santos, she would be prepared to stand up against them" (Sarmiento 201). In that moment, Oscar Santos' gaze reminds her of "good things, good people" and those "willing to help rather than exploit others" (Sarmiento 201). Though their external circumstances remain largely unchanged, both Guada and Elisa experience internal transformations that fill them with renewed hope—changes that, if these endings suggest anything, are deeply tied to their connections with nonhuman animals. Echoing the narrative structure of Philippine epics, where heroes are aided by magical animal companions, Guada and Elisa may be read as contemporary heroines whose journeys are marked by the presence of nonhuman animals that, while symbolically powerful, are ultimately constrained by human-centered discourse.

While *The Age of Umbrage* and *Stray Cats* conclude with a sense of hope, largely underscored by the enduring presence of feline companions, a critical posthumanist lens urges deeper reflection on whether these moments of interspecies intimacy genuinely transcend anthropocentric frameworks. The "animal turn' in the humanities is a direct consequence of a crisis in traditional humanism that, as Carlo Salzani writes, opened an "ontological gap" where "other species [came] galloping in" (98). Posthumanism seeks to "challenge traditional, fundamental assumptions of the humanities which place the human at the top of the hierarchy" (Barcz 249) and, in doing so, interrogates the very classifications that "consign the animal to a lesser form of life" (Haraway, qtd. in Salzani 100). From this perspective, a truly hopeful ending would not just feature a nonhuman animal companion but would also recognize humanity's entanglement in a "human-animal continuum," treating the relationship as "an open experiment, not as a foregone moral conclusion about allegedly universal values or qualities" (Lindgren and Öhman 1205).

The novels certainly *suggest* subtle sites of interspecies connection, and the feline companions *complicate* the dominant anthropocentric framing, yet a full recognition of nonhuman animal subjectivity and agency often remains elusive, constrained by narratives

that prioritize human emotional or developmental arcs. Both novels inhabit a complex space, reflecting both the pervasive impact of Western anthropocentrism and the enduring influence of Philippine folklore. While the novels largely position nonhuman animals within utilitarian and symbolic constraints, the spectral presence of mythical creatures and the profound bonds with feline companions gesture toward a latent potential for more reciprocal interspecies relationalities. This potential invites further exploration into how Philippine literature might continue to challenge and reconfigure human dominance over nonhuman life.

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