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BIOPOLITICS IN *THE BRIEF AND FRIGHTENING REIGN OF PHIL*, BY GEORGE SAUNDERS

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ABSTRACT. In this article, I analyze George Saunders's novella *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* (2005) from the perspective of biopolitics, following the theoretical frameworks established by Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Frédéric Lordon. I focus on two aspects of biopolitics: one linked to the extermination of the enemy, and the other to the manipulation of the passions of the governed. Regarding the first aspect, I discuss the strategies that Phil, the sovereign dictator in the story, uses to kill or displace the Other. In the second aspect, I study the use of desire and affect as biopolitical technologies that contribute to maintaining and reinforcing power. Finally, I examine the critical position of various characters in relation to Phil's biopolitical regime and the political dimension of the novella itself.

Keywords: George Saunders, The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil, Biopolitics, Contemporary American Fiction.

LA BIOPOLÍTICA EN *THE BRIEF AND FRIGHTENING REIGN OF PHIL*, DE GEORGE SAUNDERS

RESUMEN. En este artículo analizo la novela corta de George Saunders *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* (2005) desde la perspectiva de la biopolítica, siguiendo los marcos teóricos establecidos por Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben y Frédéric Lordon. Me centro en dos aspectos de la biopolítica: uno de ellos está ligado a la exterminación del enemigo y, el otro, a la manipulación de las pasiones de los sujetos gobernados. En relación con el primer aspecto, examinaré las estrategias que Phil, el dictador del relato, utiliza para matar o desplazar al Otro. En relación con el segundo objetivo, indagaré en el uso del deseo y del afecto como tecnologías biopolíticas que contribuyen a mantener y reforzar el poder. Por último, abordaré la posición crítica de varios personajes vinculados al régimen biopolítico de Phil y la dimensión política de la novela misma.

Palabras clave: George Saunders, The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil, biopolítica, ficción norteamericana contemporánea.

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1. INTRODUCTION

George Saunders (Amarillo, Texas, 1958) explores various technologies of power in his literary works. These technologies and the resulting sense of alienation constitute one of the major topics of his *oeuvre*[1]. Here I propose interpreting his writing as a literary approach to the multiple ways in which biopolitical power operates in contemporary US society[2]. By presenting in his work "dystopic scenarios that are both deeply unsettling and alarmingly familiar" (Huebert 106), Saunders makes visible the theories of power that Foucault, Agamben, Lordon and others have explored in their writings. The purpose of this article is to analyze the presence and function of biopolitical technologies of power in *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* (2005).

It may seem challenging to justify a biopolitical interpretation of this novella due to various reasons. First, the novella is considered to be "speculative, experimental fiction" ("Kirkus Reviews") and, hence, some may think, disconnected from factual reality; second, it is a humorous "mind-bending work" ("Kirkus Reviews") and, therefore, some may believe, should not be taken seriously. Third, Saunders himself has claimed that the main purpose of his fiction is "to provide a wild ride for the

[1] David Huebert has stated that "biopolitical dystopia" constitutes "a particular mode of Saunders's fiction" (106).

[2] Clare Hayes-Brady has said that "the wild, dysfunctional corporatism of Saunders's fictional worlds is simultaneously alien and familiar, the uncanny shadow of contemporary America" (32). By extension, this "uncanny shadow" applies as well to contemporary Western societies.

reader" (Treisman, "George Saunders's Wild Ride"). This could suggest that he is not concerned about the political or moral implications of his work [3]. However, the author himself and critics of his work have disputed these three arguments in multiple texts and interviews.

Regarding the first point mentioned above, it is important to note that Saunders prioritizes truthfulness over realism in fiction. According to him, if a story is true to its own nature, it can actually refer to reality even more effectively than literature that is considered realist from a traditional standpoint. In his essay "The Door to the Truth Might Be Strangeness," on "The Nose" by Nikolai Gogol, Saunders claims exactly this:

> "Realism" exploits this fondness of ours for consensus reality. Things happen roughly as they do in the real world; the mode limits itself to what usually happens, to what's physically possible. But a story can also be truthful if it declines consensus reality - if things happen in it that don't and could never happen in the real world. If I assign you to write a story in which the characters are a cellphone, a pair of gloves, and a fallen leaf, chatting away in a wheelbarrow in a suburban driveway, could that story be truthful? Yes. It could be truthful in the way it reacts to itself, in the way it responds to its premise, in the way it proceeds -by how things change within it, the contours of its internal logic, the relationships between its elements. With sufficient care, that wheelbarrow full of things could become an entire system of meaning, saying truthful things about our world, some of which might have been impossible to say via a more conventionally realistic approach. (277)

The argument that Saunders makes about "The Nose" is equally valid for *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*. Non-realist as it is, the "fictive world's psychological physics" (277) of the novella speak openly about the world, about our world[4]. As Hayes-Brady has said, referring to Saunders, "the absurdity and chaos of the more irrealist stories paint the paradoxes of modern life in garish, inescapable brightness, fueled by a desperate desire for correction" (32).

As for the second concern, some critics have described *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* as a work that is "absurdist in tone" and "marked by urgent anger, the satire deep, absurd and furious" (Hayes-Brady 32). However, Saunders thinks that this tone enables the writer to represent reality more accurately. As he explains in an interview, referring to his childhood in Chicago:

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[3] Saunders himself has frequently made apolitical comments, that Kasia Boddy connects with his "avowed Buddhist holism." Saunders has stated, for instance, that "we should try not to think of 'our companies and our government and our media' as hostile environments which oppress and exploit workers and which they must resist […] but rather, he says, as 'manifestations' of qualities that exist 'within us' all" (10). I think that these apolitical comments are at odds with his literary work.

[4] Dana del George has interpreted the presence of the supernatural in Saunders's work as a result of the postmodern cultural context: "Saunders can write stories that play freely with both science and the supernatural because the consensus reality of his postmodern reader allows it. Postmodernism allows for the unhesitating representation of the supernatural […] by implementing the law of total fiction" (123).

> Some of the funniest things in South Chicago were also the most deeply true - these sort of over-the-line, rude utterances that were right on the money and undeniable. Their truth had rendered them inappropriate; they were not classically shaped, not polite, and they responded to the urgency of the moment. (Sacks)

Then, as Hayes-Brady explains, for Saunders "humor is not only compatible with difficult reality, but integrally connected to it, a medium that allows the expression of truths that are perhaps otherwise inexpressible" (32). It follows from this that it is just natural that satire and humor inform the tone of *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*, as this novella deals with complex issues such as oppression, exploitation, and genocide.

As regards the third concern mentioned above, it is true that Saunders has repeatedly declared that the primary objective of his fiction is to entertain the reader[5]. In an interview with Deborah Treisman, he claimed that his stories are the result of an intuitive creative process, and that their political or moral implications are simply an unintended byproduct of the writing process ("This Week"). However, Saunders still believes that literature has the potential to transform readers, and that they must be altered by the stories they read. Discussing the impact of Kurt Vonnegut's *oeuvre* on his own work, Saunders suggests that the function of short stories must be precisely to change their audience:

> [Before reading Vonnegut,] I'd understood the function of art to be primarily descriptive: a book was a kind of scale model of life, intended to make the reader feel and hear and taste and think just what the writer had. *Now [after reading Vonnegut] I began to understand art as a kind of black box the reader enters. He enters in one state of mind and exits in another […] What's important is that something undeniable and non-trivial happens to the reader between entry and exit*. ("Mr. Vonnegut" 78. Italics my own)

The fact that a story has the power to transform its reader, suggests that it has some political potential. Therefore, Saunders acknowledges that his stories are not just for entertainment purposes, but rather they should be meaningful and relevant to the readers' lives, in addition to any "wacky invention" they may include:

> especially with a story like this one [he refers to his short story "Ghoul" (2020)] -a speculative story, built around a comedic, over-the-top premise- I think the reader is always asking, somewhere in the back of her mind, "But what does this have to

[5] When discussing his writing process and the impact he tends to have on the reader, Saunders has stated the following: "Another aspect of my approach is simply to allow that my goal is to *compel a reader to keep reading*. And/or to wildly entertain/amaze/outrage/engage the reader. I see myself, very much, as an entertainer. I am trying to entertain you by talking about something important and urgent that we have in common. By the above method, I am trying to *find out*, for that particular story, what that common thing we share is going to be. I don't know at the outset and try not to know -well, ever. I am trying to design a thrilling roller coaster for you without knowing the exact effect riding it will have on you. My mind is on the thrill. I know that the story will have an effect, and I know where it will" ("Office Hours").

> do with me? With now? With my real life?" As I'm writing, I'm continually asking the same thing -trying to get the story to swerve in a direction that takes it away from being just a wacky invention and toward being a wacky *relevant* invention. (And that imperative might be even more pressing when the real world seems to be falling apart). (Treisman, "George Saunders on Surprising Himself")

It is obvious to me that *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* is not just a "wacky invention," but a "wacky *relevant* invention." The novella offers a privileged insight into the forms of biopolitical power that permeate contemporary Western societies. By this, I mean both its racist and genocidal dimension and the way passions are captured and made productive by political power. The interpretation that follows is a close analysis of how these aspects are portrayed in the story. On the one hand, I explain the genocidal logic that is at play. On the other, I study the ways power seizes the desires and emotions of the governed.

2. BIOPOLITICAL POWER

In *Society Must Be Defended*, Michel Foucault explains that the emergence of "biopolitical power" took place in the 18th Century. According to him, this is a new "technology of power" focused on the "man-as-species," that is to say on the "population." (242). Therefore, from the end of the 18th Century, Western societies have

> two technologies of power which were established at different times and which were superimposed. One technique is disciplinary; it centers on the body, produces individualizing effects, and manipulates the body as a source of forces that have to be rendered both useful and docile. And we also have a second technology which is centered not upon the body but upon life: a technology which brings together the mass effects characteristic of a population, which tries to control the series of random events that can occur in a living mass (249)

This new form of power, then, in Foucault's words, took "control of both the body and life, or […], if you like, [took] control of life in general -with the body as one pole and the population as the other" (253). If modern power, as we see, is primarily concerned with life, Foucault asks himself how is the right to death (that was an attribute of sovereign power in the Classical period) exercised after the 18th Century. He answers that "the emergence of […] biopower" "inscribes [racism] in the mechanisms of the State" with the result that "the modern State can scarcely function without becoming involved with racism at some point" (254). In modern societies, "killing, or the imperative to kill,"

> is acceptable only if it results not in a victory over political adversaries, but in the elimination of the political threat and the improvement of the species or race. There is a direct connection between the two. In a normalizing society, race or racism is the precondition that makes killing acceptable. When you have a normalizing society, you have a power which is, at least superficially, in the first instance, or in the first line a biopower, and racism is the indispensable

> precondition that allows someone to be killed, that allows others to be killed. Once the State functions in the biopower mode, racism alone can justify the murderous function of the State. (256)

Giorgio Agamben argues that the implementation of the "state of exception" enables modern biopolitical regimes to enact racism, as examined by Foucault. Agamben thinks that the "state of exception", that is, "that moment -which is supposed to be provisional- in which the legal order is suspended, has become during the 20th century a permanent and paradigmatic form of government." (Costa, "Introducción" 5. My translation). In this way, as Flavia Costa explains, the "state of exception"

> is actually the original structure that founds -gives origin and foundation to- modern biopolitics: that is, the politics that includes natural life [*zoé*] within the calculations of state power. By including the living being, as bare life, within the law through its exclusion (to the extent that someone is a citizen, he is no longer a mere living being; but at the same time, to be a citizen he puts his natural life, his bare life, at the disposal of political power), politics becomes biopolitics. And the state of exception, insofar as it creates the legal conditions for power to dispose of citizens as bare lives, is a biopolitical device of the first order. ("Introducción" 7. My translation)

George Saunders has also reflected on biopolitical power and he believes that the "genocidal impulse" is a natural human tendency. He has explored this impulse in his fiction and often refers to two historical moments where the human inclination to reject, enslave or kill the Other had disastrous consequences in real life: Nazi Germany and the Southern United States before the Civil War. For him, the idea of a group of people taking over and abusing others has always been a matter of reflection and concern. As he stated in 2005:

> I am interested in this strange time of tranquility in between great genocides that we are currently living in. I try to understand where the genocidal impulse hides itself when there is no actual genocide going on. I actually doubt if humans have radically changed since 1944 and, of course, Bosnia or Rwanda make clear that they have not. I am curious for the US (or British or Spanish) features, now silent, that can reach their heads and make one of these sensible and pacific countries to start a killing. That is to say, I am suspicious that the hate that is necessary to start a genocide is latent and that there could be revealing signals, in the language and in the behaviors, that alert us about their imminence and about their origin. (Saunders qtd. by Rendueles)

Saunders argues that the propensity to discriminate against those who are different is a constant tendency in the United States. This tendency may remain dormant most of the time, but it is always present and could emerge at any moment. According to Saunders, this inclination is manifested by those citizens who are "suspicious" of "the Other" and want to "dominate it, deport it, exploit it, enslave it" or "kill it as needed" ("Who Are All?"). In the following chapter, I explore how this "genocidal impulse" is depicted in the novella.

3. PHIL AND THE "GENOCIDAL IMPULSE"

The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil is an account of the rise of a "sovereign dictatorship" led by Phil where the provisional legal order is based on a logic of "association" and "dissociation"[6] ("Carl Schmitt"). This means that citizenship is based on a biopolitical distinction between two groups of people, the Outer Hornerites and the Inner Hornerites. Phil, the dictator in the story, invents the enemy for personal reasons[7], out of sheer hatred, and transforms the border area into a thanatopolitical space where the only possible fate for the Other -the Inner Hornerites- is to be annihilated.

To justify and legally carry out his actions, Phil calls a state of exception under the name of "Border Area Improvement Initiative." He determines that the Inner Hornerites represent an external threat that has to be purged to ensure that the Outer Hornerites' lives and political existence remain appropriate and healthy. The Inner Hornerites represent a social excess that has to be eliminated; at the same time, they are the enemy that allows the Outer Hornerites to form, by contrast, their own identity.

Phil has to convince the Outer Hornerites that the Inner Hornerites are their opponents to make them participate in the genocide. The first strategy that Phil uses is to explain the difference between the Inner Hornerites and the Outer Hornerites as the result of divine will, in a similar logic to that of the US Puritan tradition that conceives earthly rewards as a result of God's generosity:

> I've been thinking about our beautiful country! Who gave it to us? I've been thinking about how God the Almighty gave us this beautiful sprawling land as a reward for how wonderful we are. We're big, we're energetic, we're generous, which is reflected in all our myths, which are so very populated with large high energy folks who give away all they have! If we have a National Virtue, it is that

[6] "A sovereign dictator is a dictator who does not defend an already existing constitution but attempts to create a new one and who does so not by his own authority but in the name of the people" ("Carl Schmitt"). Phil, the sovereign dictator in the story, puts aside the previous legal order represented by the old President and creates a "novel positive legal or constitutional order, together with a situation of social normality that fits it" ("Carl Schmitt"). In order to create this new situation of normality, the sovereign dictator assumes that "it is possible to speak of the existence of a people in advance of the creation of any positive constitutional framework" ("Carl Schmitt"). A people can exist before a specific constitutional order because of the nature of the political. As Schmitt says, "the specific political distinction […] is that between friend and enemy," and this distinction refers to the "utmost degree of intensity […] of an association or dissociation": "the utmost degree of association is the willingness to fight and die for and together with other members of one's group, and the ultimate degree of dissociation is the willingness to kill others for the simple reason that they are members of a hostile group" ("Carl Schmitt").

[7] Phil had been in love with and rejected by Carol, one of the Inner Hornerites. Also, Phil's father had been humiliated by a guard of Inner Horner called Smitty. Nayebpour and Varghaiyan (852) and Hayes-Brady (27) have pointed out Phil's personal motivation to become a dictator.

> we are generous, if we have a National Defect, it is that we are too generous! Is it our fault that these little jerks have such a small crappy land? I think not! God Almighty gave them that small crappy land for reasons of His own. It is not my place to start cross-examining God Almighty, asking why He gave them such a small crappy land, my place is to simply enjoy and protect the big bountiful land God Almighty gave us! (9-10)

Even if the differences between the Inner Hornerites and the Outer Hornerites in body shape and habits are the result of their spatial and social contexts, Phil essentializes them and uses them to justify their racial superiority. As he tells his followers: "Friends, take a look at these losers! If they are as good as us, why do they look so much worse than us? Look how they look! Do they look valorous and noble and huge like us, or do they look sad and weak and puny?" (10). Similarly, when the Outer Horner Militia finds the Inner Hornerites piled one on top of the other to avoid paying taxes, the Militia does not understand that the reaction is a consequence of the difficult situation the Inner Hornerites have been forced into. Instead, they essentialize their behavior and consider them "animals":

> "My God, look at those people," said Melvin.
>
> "So uncouth," said Larry.
>
> "Animals," said Melvin. "How do they live with themselves?"
>
> "I mean, look at us," said Freeda. "You don't see us piling on like that."
>
> "They seem sort of imprisoned by their own dark urges," said Larry. Everyone looked at Larry, impressed.
>
> "No wonder we treat them so unfairly," said Melvin, trying to counter Larry.
>
> "Not that we treat them unfairly, Melvin," said Phil a little sternly.
>
> "Oh, we treat them fairly," said Melvin. "I'm just saying, you know, think how fairly we'd treat them if they didn't behave like uncouth animals imprisoned by their dark surges."
>
> "Urges," corrected Larry. (36)

Despite the ongoing genocide, Phil blames the Inner Hornerites for the mistreatment they are subject to. Moreover, he thinks they should be grateful for the immense generosity of the Outer Hornerites, who are lending them the tiny "Short-Term Residency Area:"

> "You people," Phil shouted in the stentorian voice, "via shiftlessness and inertia, have forced us, a normally gentle constituency, into the position of extracting water from the recalcitrant stone of your stubbornness, by positing us as aggressors, when in fact we are selflessly lending you precious territory, which years ago was hewed by our ancestors from a hostile forbidding wilderness!" (61)

The goal of Phil and the Outer Horner Militia is to make Inner Horner and the Inner Hornerites completely disappear. When he explains Phase III of the "Border

Area Improvement Initiative" it is clear that he wants to establish a "permanent peace" by eliminating them (107-108). According to this plan, women and kids must perish too, as the biopolitical logic makes invisible any distinctions based on gender or age: the only operative division is that between friends and enemies, between *us* and *them*. This has also been noted by Nayebpour and Varghaiyan, who say that "Phil's discourse functions based on a fixed, uncompromising duality -a we/they (Outer/Inner) dichotomy- fueled by an ideology of racism" (853). When Phil and his Special Friends are implementing Phase III of the Initiative to destroy Inner Horner, Phil explains it this way:

> "All of them, sir?" Jimmy the Special Friend was saying at that very moment. "Even the ladies?"
>
> "Even the kid?" said Vance.
>
> "I do not see any lady or kids!" shouted Phil. "I only see some curvier Inner Hornerites with longer hair, and one smaller Inner Hornerite with two freakish brains! With Inner Hornerites there is no lady, there is no kid, there are only evil, which must be dealt with harsh, before it spread [sic]! Hurry, boys! Seize all remaining national asset, lift said national asses out from the Peace-Encouraging Enclosure plonto [sic]!" (117)

Phil uses medical vocabulary to refer to the enemy, who is considered to be an infection. The "evil" that the Inner Hornerites represent must be "dealt with" "before it spread [sic]." In another intervention, Phil claims that he wants to keep out from Outer Horner the democratic habits of the Inner Hornerites to avoid the possibility of a contagion. Phil's discourse frequently involves racism and eugenics because he uses them to justify his genocidal agenda. To the citizens of Outer Horner, it seems completely natural that to keep their population safe and healthy the Other must be eradicated. The use of health vocabulary in Phil's speeches and the consideration of the Inner Hornerites as animals represent that moment in modern biopolitics, when, as in Nazi Germany, "the care of health [of the body, of the nation] and the fight against the enemy become absolutely indistinguishable" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 85).

From what I have explained, it is evident that Phil's rule is based on a biopolitical distinction according to which the lives of the Outer Hornerites are worth living *because* those of the Inner Hornerites must be eliminated. This discrimination is thanatopolitical because the self-perception of the Outer Hornerites is determined by the qualities and character of the opposite group and because the annihilation of the enemy and its habits is a matter of national survival. As Foucault explained in relation to modern biopolitical regimes: "the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal), is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer" (255).

4. THE DESTRUCTION OF THE BODIES

In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault highlighted the centrality of the body in contemporary punitive systems:

> we can surely accept the general proposition that, in our societies, the systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain 'political economy' of the body: even if they do not make use of violent or bloody punishment, even when they use 'lenient' methods involving confinement or correction, it is always the body that is at issue -the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission. (25)

For this reason, he proposed to analyze the body, the imprisoned body, as a "microphysics of power" and to consider "penal practices less as a consequence of legal theories than as a chapter of political anatomy" (*Discipline* 28). In the context of modern biopolitics, the body is the preferred place for power to exert its force and therefore a privileged space to understand its logic.

The abuse and subjection of the human body are present in many of Saunders's short stories. As David Huebert has explained "George Saunders's fiction finds astonishing ways to manipulate and subdue the human body": "These spectacles of physiological confinement, coupled with Saunders's recurring interest in prosthetics and physical deformity, present a consistently unsettling vision of the human and its persistently pathological relationship to the synthetic environments in which it is housed" (105). Huebert specifically refers to "Escape from Spiderhead", "My Flamboyant Grandson" and "The Semplica Girls Diaries," but the presence of the body in *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* must also be underscored and analyzed.

In this novella, the destruction of the bodies of the Inner Hornerites and of "dissidents" like Freeda is Phil's preferred method to discipline and punish the governed. The fact that in Outer Horner people are killed by dismantling their bodies has to do with the continuity between body and bare life that is constitutive of modern biopolitical power. According to Agamben, the first register of bare life in the constitution of the modern political subject is implicit in the *Writ* of the *Habeas Corpus* (1679):

> [The new subject of politics] is not the free man and his statutes and prerogatives, nor even simply *homo,* but rather *corpus* […]. And democracy is born precisely as the assertion and presentation of this "body": *habeas corpus ad subjiciendum,* "you will have to have a body to show." (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 73)

From then onwards, the body becomes the foundation of the political, and the material that the sovereign will have to shape through biopolitical technologies of power. The fact that the bodies of the populations presented in the story are artificial and constructed with different pieces points precisely at the biopolitical control of the body that is part of political modernity. In the novella, the disassembling of the bodies represents the destruction of bare life and its political potential.

This conception of the body is evident, for example, when Phil proposes to the Inner Hornerites to sell to him a member of their group, Carol, for twelve "smolokas" -an amount that would make up for three days' taxes. As a response to this proposal, Cal (Carol's husband) crosses the border and hits Phil. Cal asks the other Inner Hornerites to start a violent revolt, but his compatriots do not move because they are fearful of Phil's Special Friends. Cal's body parts are disassembled by the Outer Hornerites "for the good of the nation, in the interest of preventing further violence" (63). Phil then asks Leon, the guard, "to incarcerate the various parts of Cal at several discrete locations across the length and breadth of Outer Horner, in the interest of national security" (64) but Cal's blue dot, the upper part of his body, is made visible to the remaining Inner Hornerites as a way to discipline them: "as per Phil, [Cal's blue dot] was placed in a glass case a few hundred feet from Inner Horner, as a warning and a reminder to the other Inner Hornerites, who all night long, from the Short-Term Residency Zone, watched the sad blue dot that had formerly been Cal's torso expand and contract, as if hyperventilating, or sobbing" (64). Also, Freeda, one of the members of the Outer Horner Militia, has her body disassembled to prevent further disloyalties to Phil or to his initiative at the border. She is taken to pieces precisely because she is "not sure" about Phil's plan to make Inner Horner disappear. Phil interprets that Freeda is being "Disloyal" (108) to the "Certificate of Total Approval" (88) that she had previously signed and her body is disassembled to discourage any betrayals and to prevent the *spread* of any democratic tendencies in Outer Horner:

> "What a sad thing, that Freeda should prove to be a traitor!" Phil said. "Well, let this be a lesson to all! *A lesson that the disgusting traits that make those Inner Hornerites so disgusting, such as Disloyalty, such as undermining one's leaders via constant questioning, can even take root in us Outer Hornerites. I wouldn't be surprised if some of us didn't start getting smaller and doing mathematical proofs. We'll have to watch for that. We'll have to be vigilant.* Jimmy, Vance, please help Freeda remind us to be vigilant, by constructing an attractive yet sobering display of the components of Freeda, so people can witness Freeda's components, and thus learn from them! What a wonderful thing for Freeda, to be so very educational! In this way, her life will not have been a total waste!" (110. Italics my own)

Before having her body disassembled, Freeda has a dream that involves the body of her daughter. This dream reveals her fears about what is going on in the Border Area. In it, Freeda is a dog and her daughter, Gertrude, is a tall vase that Phil holds looking for flaws until he shatters it:

> "Put her down, put her down," Freeda barked at him. "Why do you want to be so bad?"
>
> "I am not bad," said Phil. "I am totally good. What I do, benefits all."
>
> *Then Phil found a flaw and threw Gertrude against the wall, breaking her into a thousand pieces.*
>
> Freeda woke and rushed to Gertrude's room. Relieved to find that Gertrude was not a broken vase and that her pink shelving was still intact, she gave Gertrude a kiss on the middle of her three rosy cheeks. (68. Italics my own)

As we see, the destruction of Gertrude's body in Freeda's dream is a consequence of an imperfection found by Phil. It is clear then that Phil's destruction of the bodies refers to the racist logic that, according to Foucault, is characteristic of modern biopolitical power. As Phil says in the passage just quoted: "I am totally good. What I do, *benefits all*" (68. Italics my own). The bodies of Cal and Freeda were destroyed so that their political attitudes could not "take root" or "infect" the Outer Hornerites in any possible way. The eugenic logic of Phil's dictatorial state justifies the killings to remove any excesses that could menace the health and security of the nation. In the totalitarian regime led by Phil, the perfect body is the equivalent of the perfect nation, and any physical or political deviation must be removed. This is why in his inaugural speech as President of Outer Horner, Phil defines the Outer Hornerites by saying that "everything about us is as it should be" (86). Phil's destruction of his enemies' bodies represents the annihilation of bare life, which Agamben considers to be the condition of the political. This annihilation is a consequence of Phil's efforts to keep the "beautiful animal"[8] (Rancière, "Le malentendu" 51. My translation) of the political order in agreement with itself.

5. DESIRE AND AFFECT AS BIOPOLITICAL TECHNOLOGIES

In *Willing Slaves of Capital,* Frédéric Lordon analyzes the role of affect and desire as technologies of power to achieve consent in contemporary societies. Lordon studies how the dominant subjects today -notably business owners but also masters in general- manage to align the desires of the employees and subordinates with their desires. Following Spinoza, Lordon argues that

> human essence, which is the power of activity –but generic and, as such, intransitive, a pure force of desire but as yet aimless– only becomes a directed activity due to the effect of a prior affection –something that happens to it and modifies it. It is the affection that points the desire in a particular direction and gives it an object for its concrete exertion. From this follows a radical reversal of the ordinary understanding of desire as the pull of a preexisting, desirable object. It is rather the push of the conatus that invests things and institutes them as objects of desire. And these investments are entirely determined by the interplay of affects. (14-15)

[8] According to Rancière, both politics and aesthetics imply a certain "distribution of the sensitive [*partage du sensible*]" because they both intervene in the "distribution and redistribution of spaces and times, of places and identities, of words and of noise, of what is visible and what is invisible" ("Politique" 12. My translation). Based on this notion, Rancière explains that, in the French Classical period, the perfect political order was conceived as "a beautiful animal, constituted as a harmony between members and functions in an organic totality" ("Le malentendu" 51. My translation). As he says: "This model of the beautiful animal is also a paradigm of proportion between bodies and significations, a paradigm of correspondence and saturation: there must not exist in the community bodies in excess, bodies that circulate in excess of the real bodies; there must not be floating and supernumerary names, susceptible of constructing new fictions capable of dividing the whole or of unmaking its form and its fictionality" ("Le malentendu" 51. My translation).

This implies that individual subjects are not in control of themselves or of their own will. On the contrary, they are alienated because "the real chains are those of our affects and desires," and these are generated externally (Lordon 17). Neoliberal corporations and other institutions hold that the gap between the desire of the master and that of his or her subjects is always too large. For this reason, they try to achieve the maximum possible alignment between the desires of the subordinate and those of the master. Following a logic that can be considered totalitarian, corporations and other institutions do this by totally mobilizing individuals to their service. This opens the possibility for the "unlimited commitment" of the subjects who are pushed "to enter a regime of *total vocation*" (Lordon 38).

Phil, the dictator of Outer Horner, manages the affects and the desires of the governed subjects to align them with his goals. In one of his speeches to the Inner Hornerites, Phil explains that he and his people will achieve political control through war and love: "But shoulder that musket we must, that musket of subduing you, and this we will, using our usual indomitable methodology and excellent creativity and spirit of love" (61). Therefore, at the same that he exterminates the Inner Hornerites, Phil gains adepts to his totalitarian regime by manipulating the passions of his population.

In the story, Phil uses language as a means of manipulating the Outer Hornerites and maintaining his power over them. Phil utilizes languages to enact his biopolitical agenda and to secure the support and compliance of those he governs. Saunders follows a Foucauldian concept of discourse, which suggests that the language used by subjects conforms to a pre-existing "order of things," determined by power. Foucault thinks that "in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality" (Foucault, *Archaeology* 216). In many of his short stories, Georges Saunders's presents language as an ideological prison that reflects how power has become embedded in the identity of the characters, shaping it from within and leaving no possible exit. This is precisely what Hayes-Brady has noted in regard to Saunders's conception of language:

> The ironic quasi-metafictional devices with which Saunders peppers his voices move away from being an artistic commentary, *becoming a socio-political analysis of how language and linguistic control liberates and restricts society*. […] By immersing the reader in the protagonists restricted or incomplete vocabulary, by highlighting its absurdity, the reader is necessarily attuned to the absurdity of the struggle for linguistic independence, and by extension the struggle for independence from the commercial and political forces that govern and prescribe available vocabularies. (37. Italics my own)

In the same way, Saunders thinks that there is a correlation between the use of language, quality of thought, and high political standards –a view that he shares with George Orwell. In "Politics and the English Language" (1946) the British writer explained that "modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits. […] If

one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration" (3). For Saunders too, language has the power to found reality. As he explains in "The Braindead Megaphone," "we consider speech to be the result of thought (we have a thought, then select a sentence with which to express it), but thought also results from speech (as we grope, in words, towards meaning, we discover what we think)" (4). And he thinks that political and moral problems result from an inappropriate use of language. Therefore, the solution to these problems can be linguistically induced: "The world, I started to see, was a different world, depending on what you said about it, and how you said it. By honing the sentences you used to describe the world, you changed the inflection of your mind, which changed your perceptions" ("Esther Forbes" 62).

Considering Saunders's belief in the precedence of language over thought, it is no surprise that Phil's control of Outer Horner comes with a corrupt and untruthful language that he uses to manipulate his followers. As Hayes-Brady says, Phil "alters the political landscape of the imaginary Horner by manipulating the vocabulary of the other inhabitants" (25). Phil's words do not aim to represent the truth of a given situation. Instead, the situation is presented in such a way as to serve his political interests and strengthen his totalitarian regime. This is clear, for example, when Phil describes the fall of a pile of Inner Hornerites inside Outer Horner as an "Invasion." This fall could never constitute an invasion as the Inner Hornerites were unarmed and they only happened to be inside Outer Horner because the tower to escape from taxation had collapsed (37). Even though this is clear to Phil, he calls it an "Invasion" and names the day when it happened "Dark Dark Thursday" to manipulate the emotions of his acolytes. Similarly, the next day (when the Outer Hornerites had to collect the overdue taxes from Inner Horner) is called the "Memorable Friday of Total Triumphant Retribution" by Phil (54).

In the story, Phil employs language numerous times to alter reality to his advantage. One such instance is his assault on the Inner Hornerites, which he portrays as an act of kindness, thus reversing the actuality of the situation. When Cal attacks him, Phil tells him that the Outer Hornerites should not be considered aggressors "when in fact we [the Outer Hornerites] are selflessly lending you [the Inner Hornerites] precious territory" (61). In the same way, when Phil is called to talk to the President about the fact that he disassembled Cal and scattered his severed parts throughout the country, his words -in a fragment that qualifies for the type of rhetoric despised by Orwell in the essay cited above- do not reveal, but hide the truth:

> "Yes, Mr. President," said Phil. "You called me here for a report on the situation at the border. And I'm happy to report that I was recently able to gracefully quell a disturbing outbreak of violence at the border by enacting certain physical rearrangements designed to prevent further outbreaks of violence, thus rendering the instigator of the violence incapable of instigating further violence, via separating the instigator's component parts and relocating them in discrete physical locations." (74)

Phase I of the "Border Area Improvement Initiative" (88) consists of building a fence around the "Short-Term Residency Area". However, instead of using the words "fence" or "cage," Phil invents the term "Peace-Encouraging Enclosure" (102). The dialogue that follows is characteristic of Phil's linguistic manipulation:

> "What, we're in jail?" said Elmer.
>
> "You're putting us in jail now?" said Wanda.
>
> "How typical of the Inner Horner mindset!" said Phil. "To be unable to distinguish a jail from a Peace-Encouraging Enclosure. Safe inside the Peace-Encouraging Enclosure, you will be protected from your innate violent tendencies, and we will be protected from you. It is a real win/win." (102)

The manipulation of language is evident whenever the author capitalizes words that should normally be written in small letters. The capitals mark that the term contains a certain ideological nuance, for example: "Border Area," "Peace-Encouraging Enclosure," "Special Friends," "Outer Horner Militia," "Expeditionary Force," "Invasion in Progress," "Outer Horner Border Guard," etc. The capitalization of words -which is ultimately decided by the author himself (and not by the character)- indicates that they have been shaped by power and that they carry an ideological weight that exceeds their ordinary meaning. The author marks these terms with a capital letter as an indication that they represent the language of power and that Phil uses them to pursue his agenda. As Kasia Boddy explained, these terms constitute a sort of "euphemism" that, on the one hand, "provide an endlessly rich vein for satirical mining" (2), but, on the other, show how language is an effect of power and ideology[9].

Apart from the calculated use of language, Phil specifically targets the emotions and desires of his followers to make sure that they remain aligned with his own goals. Phil praises his acolytes and makes them feel important as long as they act as he wants, as we see in this example:

> Next morning, Phil and the Outer Horner Militia (Freeda, Melvin, and Larry) arrived at the border before dawn and stood watching the Inner Hornerites sleep while standing up.
>
> "Snooze, snooze, snooze," said Phil. "Sort of lazy, aren't they?"
>
> "Whereas us," said Larry, "we're up before dawn, diligently working."
>
> "That's right Larry," said Phil. "Good observation."
>
> "Doing our diligent work of collecting taxes," said Melvin.

[9] Referring to the short-story "Pastoralia," Hayes-Brady has explained that "the capitalization of the terms situates them in a corporate discourse, reflecting the emphatic capitalization of marketing languages, and, along with the recurrence of the phrase, suggests that it is a corporate mantra of sorts, used to manage employee behaviors. The same repetition of mantra-like language is visible everywhere in Saunders's work" (31).

> "Super, Melvin," said Phil. "We really are a diligent people."
>
> "Diligently collecting taxes to protect the security of our nation," said Freeda.
>
> "You know what?" said Phil. "After spending some time with you folks, I am tempted, in terms of our most important National Virtue, to replace 'Generosity' with 'Remarkable Intelligence.'"
>
> Larry, Melvin, and Freeda beamed. (12-13)

Phil's "Special Friends", Jimmy and Vance, are manipulated similarly. However, in this case, the manipulation is requested by the workers themselves in an attitude that directly points to the "neoliberal quest for full alignment" explained by Lordon (51). When the "Special Friends" start to work for Phil, he agrees to pay them one "smoloka" per day. This makes them very happy, but, before signing the contract, Vance has an additional request:

> "Vance, jeez!" whispered Jimmy. "Don't get all demanding! You'll screw it up!"
>
> "Jimmy, don't worry, I know what I'm doing," said Vance. "What I want, sir, to, uh, request, additionally? *Is that, every now and then, you say something nice about us. If that's not too much. Like you could say something about how much potential we have, or how obedient we are, it doesn't even need to be true. Just something nice to us every day*."
>
> "We didn't get much of that at home," said Jimmy. "Mostly it was just, you know, Jimmy you jerk, how did you get so dumb? That sort of thing." […]
>
> "I'll tell you what," said Phil. "Every day, in addition to your smoloka, I'll say something nice about each of you." (50. Italics my own)

The "Special Friends" want to be praised and feel valued for their work, and the psychological reward is far more important to them than the monetary incentive. This emotional recompense has to do with the will of the subordinates to make their master happy. As Lordon explains, in today's society employees no longer work only for a salary but, among other things, "to be identified by the master as the cause of his or her joy, so that the master will love [him or her]" (71). Later on in the story, when Phil's "Inaugural Party" takes place, the Special Friends are sitting in a corner "wearing headphones, listening to personalized Tapes of Praise, made for them by Phil":

> "Oh jeez," said Jimmy, too loudly. "He just said I have great biceps!"
>
> "He just said, about me?" said Vance, also too loudly. "That he loves the focused look I get on my face when following an order."
>
> "He likes the way my lats flare when I pick someone up!" shouted Jimmy.
>
> "I work well with others!" shouted Vance.
>
> "There's a deep intelligence in me that others rarely see!" shouted Jimmy. (85-86)

This attitude is related to the "commercialization of human feeling," a motif that, according to Kasia Boddy, Saunders's stories explore in a variety of ways: "most directly, in stories set in theme parks, where employees are required to dress up and perform roles, but also in businesses that offer carefully edited experiences and feelings […]. Those who work in these places have strict 'feeling rules' to follow for it is 'negative' attitudes (rather than low productivity) that threaten their jobs" (5). In the case of the Special Friends, this "commercialization of feeling" appears in a sarcastic and inverted way, as it is the employees themselves who demand love and praise as a reward for their attitude at work.

In regards to the political manipulation of affect, I must also allude here to the exercise of biopolitical power in the nation of Greater Keller, whose "Expeditionary Force" liberates the Inner Hornerites from the genocidal project led by Phil. Greater Keller "ran like a six-inch-wide circular strip of ribbon around Outer Horner," and, because the country "was so thin it was almost nonexistent, it was rarely visited much less invaded, and was therefore very prosperous" (95). The nine citizens that form the nation of Greater Keller have their power relations, their body shapes and their habits determined by the particular spatial configuration of their country:

> The nine Greater Kellerites spent their days walking behind their President single-file, carefully placing one foot in front of the other, happy and cordial, engaged in endless energetic conversation about the appearance of the portion of Outer Horner they happened to be walking around, the nuances of the cup of coffee they were currently enjoying, and/or the enjoyable impression being made on them by the way the person in front of them looked when viewed from behind. (95)

In a physical disposition that represents a perfect alignment between government and the governed, the Greater Kellerites are numbered from one to nine, with President Rick, the First Lady, and the First Daughter taking the first three positions in the hierarchy of the country and in the walking line. President Rick and the rest of the Greater Kellerites give huge importance to the well-being of the nation and make "enjoyment" their main political goal. In this way, Greater Keller represents a "society of mass hedonism and consumerism" that is, together with totalitarianism, the main form that biopolitical power took in the 20th Century (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 13).

The importance given to enjoyment in the nation's life explains why Cliff, the "National Enjoyment Assessor," is the fourth person in the country's hierarchy. He is in charge of the "National Life Enjoyment Index Score" (114), a score from 0 to 10 that determines at any given moment the level of enjoyment of the nation and helps President Rick make his political decisions. The main habits of the Greater Kellerites -conversing and drinking coffee- have to do with the biopolitical need to keep this level as high as possible. When Dale, Citizen #9, reports to the group what is going on in the "Border Area" under Phil's command, the "National Life Enjoyment Index Score" in Greater Keller drops to 3 out of 10 because of the anxiety produced by the situation in Outer Horner. President Rick then sends an "Expeditionary Force" (114) to save the Inner Hornerites from extinction, but also, and maybe more importantly, to increase the "National Enjoyment Level" of his population.

When the "Expeditionary Force" of Greater Keller arrives at the Border Area, Phil's Special Friends, who "had never in their lives seen anyone bigger than themselves" (118), suddenly feel nostalgic for their previous job and abandon Phil. After Phil's death, President Rick frees the people of Inner Horner from the cage (the "Peace-Encouraging Enclosure") because, as he says, "that doesn't look very Enjoyable" (120), and gives this advice to the population he had just liberated: "Our advice, to all of you people, is Enjoy!" said President Rick. "Life is full of beauty. Why fight? Why hate? Learn to Enjoy, and you will have no need to fight, and no desire to! Love life, walk in a circle, learn to enjoy coffee! Will you do that? Will you promise to try that?" (120). As a consequence of the liberation of Inner Horner, the "National Enjoyment Level" of Greater Keller reaches 9.8 out of 10, "due to their pride in their recent heroism and their anticipation of the many days of Enjoyable storytelling that lay ahead" (121).

Throughout the novella, Saunders highlights how political control is achieved by manipulating the emotions and desires of the governed. The story portrays language, especially the language of power, as a tool that shapes social reality. As a result, it becomes a significant instrument of biopolitical governance, alongside violence. Phil alters the meaning of words to enforce his agenda and to achieve the alignment of his followers. In addition, he praises his supporters to cultivate loyalty, manipulating their emotions to ensure their allegiance to his regime. In the nation of Greater Keller enjoyment is the technology of power that allows President Rick to achieve the perfect alignment of his subjects. It is through enjoyment that the desires of the citizens perfectly correspond to those of the ruling family. The "National Enjoyment Level" serves as the index to gauge the political approval of the population and minimize the chances of dissent or rebellion. As discussed above, Phil uses fear and terror to consolidate his rule. He punishes even the slightest hint of disloyalty or rebellion with the destruction and display of bodies. Phil hates his enemies and seeks to annihilate them using racist and eugenic measures. This terrorizes the Inner Hornerites and Phil's followers, thereby reinforcing his power.

6. JUSTICE BEYOND BIOPOLITICS?

The totalitarian regime presented in the story is implemented through fear and love. As explained above, physical violence -the Outer Horner Militia, and the Special Friends- plays a significant role in the consolidation of Phil's rule. The threat of assassination is ultimately what makes the Outer Hornerites and the Inner Hornerites obey the dictator. It should come as no surprise then that the liberation from Phil's oppression is a result of violence. It is after being hit by an object thrown from Inner Horner that Phil starts to lose his linguistic ability and, therefore, his power, until he dies[10]. In addition to that, the arrival of the "Expeditionary Force" to

[10] Clare Hayes-Brady has noted this about the relationship between language and power in Phil's leadership: "the political heft of language […] is a way for Phil to cope with his embittered personal circumstances and to deflect attention from his ugliness and rejection

the Border Area scares Phil's Special Friends, who abandon Phil and allow the Greater Kellerites to liberate the Inner Hornerites from oppression.

Before Phil's downfall, some Inner Hornerites unsuccessfully revolted against his abuses. They engaged in democratic discussions, but were unable to protect themselves. When the Outer Horner Militia removed the apple tree, the stream and the dirt, the Inner Hornerites held "a whispered frantic national referendum" (17), but they were incapable of agreeing on what the "primary issue" (18) was, or on where they should start the debate. Their respect for each other and their democratic conventions results to be impractical and, ultimately, negative for themselves. For this reason, at some point, Curtis proposes to act: "I say enough talking," said Curtis. "I say it's time we *did* something" (20). Their first solution is to send a letter to the President of Outer Horner asking him to discuss with them the unfair taxation system that Phil has imposed upon them. This peaceful solution does not work out well as the President ends up validating Phil's actions and appointing him as "Special Border Activities Coordinator" (32). Later on in the story, when the clothes of the Inner Hornerites are removed by Phil's unfair taxation system, Curtis again proposes to act and to resist: "Oh, this is crazy," Curtis said. "How long are we going to take this? We've got to *do* something. We've got to start resisting" (57). However, when Cal is about to be disassembled and asks his compatriots to join him in the fight against the Outer Hornerites, they do not dare to do so as they are afraid of Phil's Special Friends. After Cal is disassembled, all the Inner Hornerites feel guilty, and Curtis justifies his cowardice by claiming that he was not advocating for actual violent resistance but only for "conversational resistance" (100). Here Saunders seems to criticize democratic forms of deliberation when they lead to weakness and inaction. He seems to acknowledge that only words and good intentions are not enough to fight a totalitarian regime that is ultimately enforced through violence. It seems then that violence is the only possible way to fight back against the abuses of power. Phil's regime only falls when he is hit by an object thrown from Inner Horner. The blow in the back of Phil's head leads to the loss of his linguistic ability and later on to his death. Thereby, the story makes evident the strong relationship between language and power, as Phil's political clout is coextensive to his control of discourse. This is how the text presents this moment:

> A great high-pitched wailing now sounded from Inner Horner. It may have been this that caused Phil's rack to spasm. Oh shoot, wow, Phil thought, that really hurts. He had only got this same spasming sensational [sic] once before in his life, and that had been the worse, due to, just after that, his speech would began suffering. Darn, Phil thought. It are [sic] happening now, somewhat slight [sic]. He'd better hurry, get this Phase III wropped [sic] up, so he could go homer and find that stupid brawn, and remont [sic] it (111)

[…]. This connection of the personal and the political resonates throughout Saunders's work, and Phil's final fall from grace further strengthens the link, turning him into a pitiable figure […]. Phil's demise, interestingly, is linguistically figured, with his indirect monologue descending into nonsense in the absence of his brain" (28).

In Outer Horner, all the characters are blind followers of Phil except for Freeda. She is kind and empathizes with the Inner Hornerites. For this reason, she keeps a distance from Phil's actions and is ultimately accused of disloyalty and disassembled. When Cal's body is broken up, Freeda is deeply concerned, and she writes a letter to the President of Outer Horner denouncing Phil's criminal practices. In doing so, she acknowledges the radical equality of the Outer Hornerites and the Inner Hornerites, even at the price of putting her own life at risk. This means that she firmly rejects the distinction between political existence and bare life that is imposed by the sovereign dictator. In doing so, Freeda represents "kindness" in the story, a virtue that Saunders encourages even in "the worst environments"[11] (Boddy 9). Freeda's in-betweenness represents a path to revolutionary politics that is explained by Flavia Costa (regarding Agamben) in these terms:

> In general, in our culture, the human being has always been thought of as the articulation and conjunction of two opposed principles: soul and body, language and life, and in this case a political element and a living element. On the contrary, we must learn to think of the human being as that which results from the disconnection of these two elements and to research not the metaphysical mystery of conjunction, but the practical and political mystery of the separation. ("Entrevista" 18. My translation)

According to Agamben, modern biopolitics constructs political subjects from bare life, *bios* from *zoé*. Political emancipation should come then from the disconnection of these two sides of biopolitical power. Recognizing the equality of Outer Hornerites and Inner Hornerites implies the suppression of the biopolitical bond and is a way to achieve actual justice, which, as Alain Badiou explains, "means examining any situation from the point of view of an egalitarian norm vindicated as universal" (20).

Apart from the political dimension of these characters (Cal and Freeda), the novella proposes the intervention of the "Creator" (123) as a way to overcome the biopolitical distinction between Outer Hornerites and Inner Hornerites. The massive hands of the Creator appear above the Border Area to stop the fighting and they create a new people out of the parts of the old inhabitants. The Creator is a kind of supernatural deity (different from the "God Almighty" that Phil refers to throughout the story) with the capacity to disassemble and assemble the bodies of the subjects and to form a new society:

> The Outer Hornerites and Inner Hornerites had all thought about the Creator, and talked about the Creator, and some of them had even prayed to the Creator, but none of them had ever dreamed the Creator was so big. The fighting stopped, the

[11] Saunders's commencement address at Syracuse University in 2013 was on the topic of kindness. It was published as *Congratulations, by the Way: Some Thoughts on Kindness* (2014). Kasia Boddy has noted: "For Saunders, being kind is both a personal and a political imperative, but, most importantly, […] it is something that requires work: 'go after these things,' he urged graduates" (8).

> dust cloud settled, the nations of Inner and Outer Horner stared up, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Then a second hand descended, with a vegetable garden running across the wrist, and two mechanical fingers, and a frozen lake in its palm, holding a spray can, and the Creator's left hand sprayed the Border Area, and the Outer and Inner Hornerites fell instantly asleep. The two hands, working together, gently disassembled the Outer Hornerites. Then they gently disassembled the Inner Hornerites. Using the Inner and Outer Horner parts, they rapidly constructed fifteen entirely new little people. (123-124)

As we see, the Creator seems to be a sort of social engineer (or surgeon) who puts the old society asleep with a spray and "gently" forms the bodies of the new subjects. The intervention of the Creator and the fact that the subjects' bodies in the novella are artificial seem to imply that there is no natural existence, but only a biopolitical one, mediated or constructed by power –in this case, divine power. By constructing the new subjects, the Creator aims to found a universal subject and a perfect society. However, these efforts do not succeed, as the tendency "to turn our enemies into objects" (Saunders, qtd. by Nayebpour and Varghaiyan 848) is soon going to reappear in New Horner.

The only part that the Creator does not use to form the New Hornerites is Phil's brain, which ends up eaten by fish, and Phil's body, which is mounted on a black platform with a plaque on it that reads "PHIL MONSTER" (126). The exhibition of Phil's body refers again to the centrality of the body in modern biopolitical regimes, as explained by Foucault and Agamben. Phil's torso becomes the bare life of the new world created by the Creator, that is to say, an excess (and a threat) that founds the life of the city through its same exclusion:

> As the months went by, the New Hornerites took to avoiding The Phil. Although nobody could exactly say why, The Phil gave them the creeps. Soon the path bowed out around it, weeds overtook it, and all that could be seen of The Phil was the tip of Phil's rack, which stuck out of the weeds like a bad flagpole. Animals burrowed in The Phil, birds nested there, balls accumulated there because the New Horner kids were too scared to retrieve them. And that is where Phil is today: hidden in a thicket of weeds, not loved, not hated, just forgotten, rusting/rotting, with even the sign that proclaims his name fading away. (129)

Once the New Hornerites are created, the massive hands of the Creator lift the new people and convey to them a message of love and peace:

> Then the massive hands lifted the new people up to a pair of giant indescribable lips and whispered, in a fundamentally untranslatable Creator-language, something that meant, approximately: THIS TIME, BE KIND TO ONE ANOTHER. REMEMBER: EACH OF YOU WANTS TO BE HAPPY. AND I WANT YOU TO. EACH OF YOU WANTS TO LIVE FREE FROM FEAR. AND I WANT YOU TO. EACH OF YOU ARE SECRETLY AFRAID YOU ARE NOT GOOD ENOUGH. BUT YOU ARE, TRUST ME, YOU ARE. (127)

In this message, the Creator is answering these very significant questions: "what becomes of the law after its messianic fulfillment?" or "what becomes of the law in a society without classes?" (Agamben, "State" 63). With the mandate to be kind, to be happy, to be free, and to love oneself, the Creator in the story proposes, like Walter Benjamin, a kind of justice "in which the world appears as a good that absolutely cannot be appropriated or made juridical" (qtd. by Agamben, "State" 64). Therefore, the path to justice proposed in the story does not imply the cancellation of the law, but a new use of it based on "its deactivation and inactivity" (Agamben, "State" 64).

Once the Creator delivers his message, the hands remove the strings that marked the Border Area and the "Peace-Enforcement Enclosure" and plant a sign that reads: "Welcome to New Horner" (127). Along with a new understanding of the law, the unification of the bodies of the Inner Hornerites and the Outer Hornerites conducted by the Creator aims to create a utopian society beyond biopolitical power. Referring to *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*, Kasia Boddy has explained how "working together with one's neighbors is Saunders's happy ending, […] a counter to the human tendency to continually divide the world into dualities" (10). However, the ending of the story is not as happy as Boddy assumes, because the equality among the New Hornerites and the overcoming of biopolitical distinctions can only be temporary[12].

Phil's body constitutes now the political excess that founds the new nation, and this excess allows the New Hornerites to be united and live in peace. When the New Hornerites wake up, they find Phil's platform and comment on its meaning:

> On the way to a nearby apple tree, they passed a hulking black mess on a platform.
>
> "What is that thing?" said Gil.
>
> "It's a Phil," said Clive.
>
> "What is a Phil?" said Sally.
>
> "A monster," said Leona.
>
> "Apparently," said Fritz.
>
> "Or maybe Monster was his last name?" said Gil.
>
> "You know: Phil Monster. Like: Hi, I'm Phil Monster? It's not entirely clear from the syntax."

[12] In his essay "The New Mecca," George Saunders reflects, ironically, on the benefits of globalization and of the mixing of races and cultures that comes with it: "in my tube at Wild Wadi [a waterpark in Dubai], I have a mini-epiphany: given enough time, I realize, statistically, despite what it may look like at any given moment, we will all be brothers. All differences will be bred out. There will be no pure Arab, no pure Jew, no pure American American [sic]. The old dividers -nation, race, religion- will be overpowered by crossbreeding and by our mass media, our world Culture o' Enjoyment. Look what happened here: hatred and tension where defused by Sudden Fun." (28)

> "Whatever," said Sally. "Let's go eat."
>
> Leona looked at Gil. *Syntax*? What the heck kind of word was that? What was Gil, some kind of bigshot? She hated big-shots, she suddenly realized. She'd have to watch Gil. She'd talk to Sally about it. Sally didn't seem like a big-shot. Sally seemed sensible and moral and down to earth. Sally, like Leona, was compressed and ball-shaped, unlike the freakishly elongated Gil. (128)

This minor disagreement marks a distinction between friends and enemies as it divides Leona and Sally from Gil, based on differences in body shape and language use. In the paragraph that marks the end of the story, the narrator explains that Leona has started to visit Phil's platform and that she dreams of a new world only populated by people like her:

> Except sometimes Leona comes to visit. She does not find The Phil monstrous, but strangely beautiful, and sometimes sits in the thicket for hours, dreaming, for reasons she can't quite explain, of a better world, run by humble, compressed, ball-shaped people, like her and Sally, who speak, when they speak at all, in short sentences, of their simple heroic dreams. (129-130)

Although a new world beyond the law was created where justice seemed attainable at last, the novella suggests that new forms of biopolitical power are emerging and that the next genocide is already in the making. This seems to imply that any attempt to create a perfect society is doomed because biopolitical racism - "the tendency to continuously divide the world into dualities" (Saunders qtd. by Nayebpour and Varghaiyan 848), and the "genocidal impulse" (Saunders qtd. by Rendueles)- are intrinsic to human societies.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have explained how Phil creates a totalitarian regime by inventing an enemy that needs to be annihilated. Phil justifies the genocide he is leading through racist and eugenic arguments, as he considers the destruction of the Inner Hornerites a matter of national care and security. I have discussed Phil's destruction of the enemies' bodies in relation to this biopolitical goal. In the totalitarian state of Outer Horner, any political or aesthetic excess must be removed to avoid any deviations and to ensure a strict coincidence of the population with itself.

In addition, I have analyzed how the biopolitical power presented in the story aims to control the desires and affects of the governed. In this regard, I have examined Phil's manipulative use of language and how he praises his followers to ensure their alignment with his political objectives. I have studied the use of "enjoyment" by President Rick, of Greater Keller, to achieve the complete domination of his subjects. I have interpreted the political positions of the characters who revolt or speak out against Phil's totalitarian regime. Moreover, I have explained how the novella ends with the creation of a unified nation, New Horner, that in the

beginning seems to overcome the biopolitical distinctions of the past but soon hints at a new genocide.

The biopolitical strategies presented in *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* constitute a literary transfiguration of the technologies of power that conform contemporary Western societies. If these technologies have existed in the West since the 18th Century, they have been perfected over time. A significant update of these technologies occurred after the 9/11 attacks with the onset of the "War on Terror." These events were the main preoccupation of public discourse in the United States at the time of the publication of Saunders's novella and constitute its historical background. As Kimon Keramidas has mentioned: "released in 2005, the cultural context is clear; Saunders would never be accused of subtlety. The book was written during aftermath of the US-Iraq war, and it clearly references the politics of the day." The creation of an external enemy, the obsession with the security and care of the population, the disciplinary destruction of the bodies, and the use of affect as a biopolitical technology may well be a *literary transfiguration* of these real-life events. As Saunders learned from one of his "literary heroes" (Huebert 116), direct representation may not be the most convenient or truthful way to represent historical facts in literature. A short story may carry the knowledge or experience of what happened in reality without the need to refer explicitly to the circumstances:

> Your real story [what happened to you] may have nothing to do with your actual experience, Vonnegut seemed to be saying. In constructing your black box [your short story], feel free to shorthand those [real life] experiences, allude to them sideways, or omit them entirely. Joke about them, avoid directly exploiting them, shroud them in an over-story about aliens: *you know what you know, and that knowledge will not be shaken out of your stories* no matter how breezy or comic or minimalist your mode of expression, or how much you shun mimesis. ("Mr. Vonnegut" 78. Italics my own)

Despite being probably inspired by real-life events, *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil* has the potential to be interpreted beyond its historical context. This is because it showcases the technologies of power that are inherent to political modernity. By presenting this gallery of biopolitical technologies to his readers, Saunders is effectively aiding in our comprehension of contemporary power dynamics and urging us to fight for our independence "from the commercial and political forces" (Hayes-Brady 37) that govern contemporary societies.

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