# Narrative Bodies and Nonhuman Transformations

Marco Caracciolo (marco.caracciolo@ugent.be)
Shannon Lambert (shannon.lambert@ugent.be)
Ghent University

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## Abstract

In this essay, we identify and discuss three motifs that enable literary narrative to perform a shift from a phenomenological, common-sense understanding of the body to the far more challenging nonhuman corporeality articulated by poststructuralist theorists in dialogue with Deleuze and Guattari’s work. We argue that such reconceptualization of the body via narrative form aligns closely with contemporary debates surrounding the Anthropocene and material as well as nonhuman turns. We illustrate the three motifs—which we label metamorphosis, blending, and unraveling—through the analysis of passages from contemporary novels that engage, in deeply embodied terms, with environmental issues.

In the Sahara, there is a species of silver ants with coats precisely calibrated to adapt to the harsh landscape around them. Their tiny radiant armor is made of triangular, reflective hairs on their midsection that dissipate heat through thermal radiation, thus enabling them to survive in the greater than 150 degrees Fahrenheit temperatures during the twenty minutes or so each day when they leave their nests. By midcentury such examples of extreme adaptation may have increasing significance for us. How we are able to become constituents of a broader landscape will gain more relevance as the earth warms and its population reaches the nine billion mark. Our deeply held values about individuality may even become passé.

Akiko Busch, *How to Disappear* (80)

## Introduction

Akiko Busch’s essay collection *How to Disappear* examines the benefits of invisibility in our hyperconnected and mediatized world, where the ultimate aspiration is becoming visible, public, shared on a global stage. Busch argues that the struggle for visibility, far from being a universal drive in nature, admits of many exceptions beyond the human domain: sometimes, as for the silver ants discussed in the epigraph, there is much to be said for receding into the background, becoming one with the seemingly “external” environment. Here Busch pivots back to the human: she points out that deepening our embodied coupling with the physical environment will become increasingly important for our own species as we learn to cope with an overpopulated world in the grip of climate change. The very real possibility of anthropogenic catastrophe calls for a profound transformation in humans’ embodied engagement with the environment. Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker propose a similar shift as they argue for an “understanding of ourselves as weather bodies” (560), a reconceptualization of embodiment that—along the lines of Stacy Alaimo’s influential notion of “transcorporeality”—blurs the boundary between human subjectivity and disruptive meteorological patterns resulting from climate change.

In this article we explore how such transformations of the human body can be envisioned and probed through the medium of storytelling—how narrative, and particularly creative narrative in the genre of the novel, can respond to our environmental crisis by imagining how human or human-like bodies bleed and fade into the nonhuman world. In focusing on bodies, we seek to problematize the phenomenological bounds of the human organism—what one might call the “anthropocentric body.” Methodologically, our approach is associated with two “turns” that foreground the body: the affective and material turns.[[1]](#endnote-1) In particular, we follow approaches within these turns which are influenced by the work of Gilles Deleuze (both alone and with Félix Guattari).[[2]](#endnote-2) Our drawing together Deleuzian (and post-Deleuzian) philosophy and narrative theory is reminiscent of Ridvan Askin’s work (“Prolegomenon”; *Narrative and Becoming*). However, instead of proposing a differential theory of narrative which rejects “*anthropocentric, epistemological,* and *experiential*” understandings from the outset (Askin, *Narrative and Becoming* 1), we suggest that stories (and by extension narrative theory) are ideally positioned to span the gap between experiential notions and a more radical metaphysics that transcends the human domain.

In *Narrative Bodies*, Daniel Punday outlines a theory of narrative geared towards the body and its fundamental role in narrative representation and interpretation. For Punday, embodiment has long been a blind spot of narrative theory: by endorsing an objectifying conception of the body, structuralist narratologists have relegated it to the margins of narrative. Instead, Punday argues that narrative—and especially literary narrative—projects a “general body” that is central to “our readerly ingress to the story” (83). This general body is never merely a matter of directly representing characters’ bodies but reflects a “corporeal atmosphere” that emerges at the intersection of narrative representation and its stylistic and thematic dimensions. More specifically, the general body is defined by the following four factors: how a narrative conceptualizes the categorical boundary between animate bodies and “non-bodies,” or inanimate matter; how a narrative engages with body types relating to gender, race, disability; how bodies interact with “other human bodies as well as the surrounding environment—narrative space, objects, and natural forces” (63); and, finally, the extent to which the embodiment of individual characters is foregrounded (“women and ethnic minorities are more typically associated with their bodies than are men in the ethnic majority”; 66).

While Punday’s first category does take into account the fraught distinction between humans, animals, and seemingly inert and disembodied of matter, the emphasis of his “corporeal narratology” falls on the *human* body and how it orients and shapes narrative meaning-making. In that sense, Punday’s account remains tied to a humanist understanding of embodied subjectivity. This understanding has been forcefully critiqued by thinkers writing in the wake of Gilles Deleuze—most notably in this context, corporeal feminist scholars like Elizabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti, as well as Brain Massumi, Stacy Alaimo, and (despite her animosity towards Deleuze) Donna Haraway.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Taking our cue from these critiques of an anthropocentric understanding of the body, this article raises two questions. First, what kind of “corporeal narratology” is enabled by an extension of embodiment to nonhuman materiality? Second, what are the narrative motifs that evoke the transition from human to nonhuman embodiment? While the framing of these questions is extremely broad and spans across literary history, we will explore them in connection with contemporary fictional narratives that engage with today’s ecological crisis—a set of narratives related to Adam Trexler’s category of “Anthropocene fiction.” Discussions on the Anthropocene and the devastating consequences of anthropogenic climate change call for a reconfiguration of human-nonhuman relations: as suggested by Akiko Busch in our epigraph, human societies must relinquish notions of mastery over the natural world and learn to act in ways that sustain their fragile entanglement with nonhuman processes. That feat cannot be accomplished without revising our cultural understanding of what counts as a “body”; put otherwise, changing the outlook on the nonhuman of Western (or Westernized) societies involves rethinking embodiment beyond the confines of the human subject. As Alaimo argues:

[Thinking] across bodies may catalyze the recognition that the environment, which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use, is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions. By emphasizing the movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures. (2)

The narratives we’ll examine in this article dynamically stage a movement from human bodies to bodies beyond the human. In the next section we will reconstruct the philosophical stakes of this trajectory by discussing phenomenological and Deleuzian approaches to embodiment. In light of this discussion, we will then explore three broad categories of narrative transformation of the body that potentially destabilize the human-nonhuman divide as well as the distinction between sentient organisms and inanimate matter: metamorphosis, blending, and unraveling. These transformations differ in the extent to which they take up the idea of transcorporeality. Experiences of metamorphosis challenge anthropocentric bodies through emphasizing perceptible corporeal malleability and changeability. However, as Penelope Murray (89) argues in her study of Ovidian tales of metamorphoses, many metamorphic tales are limited in their defamiliarizing effect on the human since they involve a continuity of human, or a human-like, consciousness. The second motif, blending, is an impermanent transformation which straddles the line between mimicry and more subtle physical experiences of affective exchange. Blending involves a Gestalt-like shift from figure to ground that unsettles the embodied figure without completely undermining it: transcorporeality is evoked as a result of an affective merging with the environment, but it is not directly foregrounded. Finally, instances of unraveling offer the most radical challenge to the anthropocentric body through their interrogation of human/nonhuman boundaries as well as those of life/non-life. In instances of unraveling the embodied figure itself comes apart and becomes indistinguishable from the nonhuman ground, seen in fully transcorporeal terms.

## From Embodied Experience to Nonhuman Materiality

In “What Makes a Body?”, philosopher Mark Johnson discusses the multiple dimensions of human embodiment, a phenomenon that has its roots in our evolutionary history and biological make-up but is profoundly shaped by socio-cultural factors. For Johnson, at the center of this biocultural continuum is the *phenomenological* dimension of the body, or the body “as we live and experience it” (165). This phenomenological approach has become more and more central to fields such as gender and disability studies (Snyder and Mitchell; Young), largely as a reaction to a poststructuralist understanding of the body that downplayed its experiential substance and materiality in favor of its linguistic constructedness and performativity (Butler).

The experienced body is also a starting point for narrative. Stories are grounded in the world of everyday interactions with our physical surroundings and with other subjects: this is the fundamental feature of narrative that Monika Fludernik describes as its “experientiality” in *Towards a “Natural” Narratology*. After all, narrative is woven into the fabric of intersubjective engagements, as one of the main psychological instruments allowing humans to make sense of other people’s embodied behavior in terms of beliefs, desires, and other mental states: in many situations, we work out other people’s mental life by interpreting their overt actions via narrative scenarios (see Bruner; Hutto). It should thus come as no surprise that, even in the domain of fiction, narrative presupposes a human or at least a human-like body, just as it presupposes notions of agency and (moral) responsibility that are derived from everyday social interactions. This link between narrative and the experienced body operates at multiple levels: it affects storytellers’ and recipients’ imagination of characters’ bodies, but it also shapes narrative interpretation as a process that is—as demonstrated by Punday—oriented by a “corporeal atmosphere” based on experience.[[4]](#endnote-4)

In terms of the “default” embodiment of narrative, then, we couldn’t be farther from the conceptualizations of embodiment proposed by Deleuze and, often in his wake, many theorists of the posthuman. Like many other concepts within his oeuvre, Deleuze’s work does not put forth one coherent philosophy of the body; however, his work consistently engages with bodies. This lack of a “definitive account of an embodied life” allows us to approach the body as, to use Joe Hughes’s words, “a site for creative-conceptual experimentation” (5).[[5]](#endnote-5) Following Bergson, Deleuze believes that “the meaning of philosophy [is] to go beyond the human condition” and throughout his work, we find a sustained interrogation of the concept of the human (Deleuze, *Bergsonism* 28; quoted in Roffe and Stark, “Introduction” 7). Rather than being that which arranges the world, humans—and their bodies—are merely one particular organization of the world’s material forces:

It is not a question of being this or that sort of human, but of becoming inhuman, of a universal animal becoming—not seeing yourself as some dumb animal, but *unraveling your body’s human organization* exploring this or that zone of bodily intensity, with everyone discovering their own particular zones, and the groups, populations, species that inhabit them. (Deleuze, “Letter to a Harsh Critic” 11; our emphasis)

Deleuze and Guattari’s “Body without Organs” (or BwO) is perhaps the most well-known example of this organizational “unraveling.” Through reference to mobile “unformed, unstable matters,” “flows,” “free intensities” and “mad or transitory particles” (46), Deleuze and Guattari describe a zone of movement adjacent to “the organism”—a zone which is “less a destruction than an exchange and circulation” (181). For Deleuze and Guattari, the human organism is a whole or mass—what they term a “molar” entity—which is the product of policing the functions of and specifying the relationships between organs. In place of this determinate organization, Deleuze and Guattari ask: “Why not walk on your head, sing with your sinuses, see through your skin, breathe with your belly . . . . Let’s go further still, we haven’t found our BwO yet, we haven’t sufficiently dismantled our self” (175). Importantly, Deleuze and Guattari use the organism as a means through which to access the varying constellations and capacities of “bodies.” What happens to the body when we attempt to see through the skin, or breathe with our belly? What new relations do these alternative configurations of the body open up? In shifting from the anthropocentric body of the organism to the BwO, processes of “becoming” (a concept we will return to shortly) replace the stability of “being” (188).

The BwO, with its emphasis on connectivity and processes of becoming, is a concept which can be traced, in varying manifestations, through the work of a number of scholars writing from new materialist, feminist, and posthuman perspectives. Elizabeth Grosz,for example, develops a corporeal feminism which, through the BwO, encourages “opening the body to connections” (187) and seeing it as “a set of valves, locks, floodgates, bowls, or communicating vessels” (177). More recently, Alaimo’s transcorporeality, which we discussed in the introduction, considers an “unraveling of the human” (3) brought about by “thinking across bodies” (2). In addition, Rosi Braidotti’s “nomadic body” offers an open, relational, and trans-species approach, which “explodes the boundaries of humanism at skin level” (*Metamorphoses* 124). For Braidotti, nomadic subjectivity seeks to create spaces for “becomings” that avoid binary and hierarchical thinking(*Nomadic* 7). In this conception, subjectivity is always “unfinished because it exists in the present, . . . in the real-time unfolding materiality of our body” (Blackman et al. 16). Through her figurations of the cyborg and “becoming-with” companion species, Donna Haraway’s work also probes the boundaries of the human embodiment. Indeed, her evocative question “Why should our bodies end at the skin?” appears to foreshadow the nomadic body’s challenge to the “boundaries of humanism at skin level” (220). Through Braidotti’s and Haraway’s work, we also enter the realm of biotechnological bodies: for example, Haraway’s “cyborg,” engages with the “boundary breakdowns” of “human and animal,” “organism and machine,” and “physical and non-physical” (293-94); Braidotti’s “post-human bodies . . . occupy the spaces in between what is between the human and the machines, that is to say a dense materiality, and relentlessly reproduce themselves. The terms of their reproduction . . . are slightly off-beat by good old human standards, in that they involve animal, insect, and inorganic models” (*Metamorphoses* 227-28). In all of these examples, embodiment is thus uncoupled from human phenomenology, and even from the phenomenology of nonhuman organisms, being extended to “inorganic models” that fundamentally challenge “good old human standards.”[[6]](#endnote-6) The experienced body is replaced not just by machinic extensions (Haraway’s cyborg), but by an interest in the inherently embodied nature of matter, whether it is animate or inanimate. Thus, the parameters of the type of “inclusive” corporeality we map extend from the human/nonhuman binary to include life/nonlife (Rogowska 62).

The problem, then, is how narrative can transition from a “general body” grounded in human phenomenology to this inclusive corporeality. This is where the three “nonhuman transformations” that we examine in the next part of the article enter the picture. These transformations are motifs emerging in contemporary fiction—but not limited to it—that enable narrative to uncouple embodied patterns from human and even biological sentience. In this way, narrative moves beyond the confines of the experienced, organismic body and engages with key ecological questions related to humanity’s entanglement in a more-than-human world. By moving first through metamorphosis, then blending, and finally unraveling, we present these motifs in an order that reflects their increasing distance from the experienced body.

## Three Nonhuman Transformation Motifs

### Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis looms large in discussions on literature and the posthuman. Bruce Clarke offers an insightful reading of metamorphosis narratives as “allegories of the contingency of systems” (11)—particularly technological systems that trouble the boundary between humans and machines. From an animal studies perspective, Marion Gymnich and Alexandre Segão Costa examine human-animal transformations in contemporary fiction and how, by raising “questions about the relationship between human beings and animals” (69), such narrativized transformations participate in a broader “cultural ecology” (in Hubert Zapf’s terminology). As the work of these scholars demonstrates, metamorphosis is a process in which physical (bodily) transformation can never be uncoupled from broader conceptual shifts and tensions within a cultural system: a disruption in bodily form suggests and enacts a destabilization of conceptual categories. We discuss here two fictional narratives in which metamorphosis challenges everyday notions of embodiment: the first involves a direct human-animal transformation, the second a case of technological augmentation (reflecting Haraway’s category of the “cyborg”) and objectification of a nonhuman body.

The first example comes from Jonathan Lethem’s science fiction novel *Girl in Landscape* (1998). The protagonist—Pella—is a teenage girl who relocates with her family to a distant planet, where they are among the first human settlers. The desolate landscape of their new home is strewn with ruins left behind by the Archbuilders, a peaceful and now fading alien civilization. But another, far more vivacious alien species inhabits the planet: known as “household deer,” they are small, rodent-like animals and nearly invisible. The deer are also a constant presence around Pella. The key scene of Pella’s transformation starts, significantly, with two household deer spying on her: “Looking at the girl as she lay there was somehow overwhelming, nauseating. The problem was the girl was a mixed-up thing, a combination of two things. If not more. She was growing a new body, a woman’s body, raw new shapes under her clothes” (159). The phenomenology of the human body is foregrounded, but it is an embodiment already destabilized by puberty—already hybrid and “mixed-up” before the nonhuman transformation occurs. Further, the strangeness of Pella’s changing body (“The girl’s body was pretentious with womanhood,” we read a few lines below; 159) is evoked through animal focalization, because it is the consciousness of one of the two household deer that orients the narrative.[[7]](#endnote-7) The nonhuman perspective *on* the girl’s body is soon internalized in Pella’s first-person experience. The group of two household deer is joined by a third one, which remains unidentified for two pages until the following passage: “At this the deer confessed to herself what she’d been evading. That she was Pella” (161). Pella’s body has thus turned into a deer, with the reader’s initial lack of awareness of the metamorphosis reflecting the girl’s own attempt to erase her identity, disappearing into an anonymous, and largely invisible, nonhuman creature. During that oblivious spell as a deer, Pella leaves behind the altered embodiment of adolescence and embraces a more streamlined way of being: “Running to forget wasn’t as pure as running for no reason at all, but it was still a consolation to zip along implacably, . . . making silent ribbons across the surface of the world” (160). These “silent ribbons” are an epiphany of embodied pattern: as Lethem’s narrative spells out, they are imbued with affect, with the sheer kinetic quality of the girl’s coupling with the landscape offering “consolation.” Pella’s nonhuman transformation negates the human body image already destabilized by the experience of adolescence; it is a reversible “unraveling” which suggests freedom of engagement with a space that becomes abstract and in itself formalized (“across the surface of the world”). Movement here is central to the metamorphosis described. As Brian Massumi writes, “When a body is in motion, it does not coincide with itself. It coincides with its own transition: its own variation. In motion, a body is in an immediate, unfolding relation to its own nonpresent potential to vary” (4). Yet, even as these affective patterns are projected onto the material world, they remain tied to an experiencing consciousness, and the experiencing consciousness here is a *human* one: Pella shifts between two different “types” of bodies in a metamorphic experience which does little to destabilize the structural coherence of either. An effect of this is that the transformation potentially reinstates a Cartesian dualism whereby minds can be slipped into the “shells” or “machines” of differing bodies. In this figuration there’s always a risk that, to echo Murray, nonhuman bodies entrap (88). Metamorphosis is thus a step in the direction of transcorporeality, in that it draws on a shared sentience to expand our understanding of an experiencing body to the nonhuman, and inherently affective, world; however, it is limited by its preservation of the key link between the body and sentient organisms.

How might beginning with the nonhuman influence the potential for a transcorporeal reading of metamorphosis? Unlike Lethem’s novel, in Jeff VanderMeer’s *The Strange Bird* (2017), a nonhuman consciousness takes center-stage. The titular strange bird is a human-animal-technological hybrid—a product of (forced) metamorphosis at the hands of the human scientists who kept the bird captive in an underground research facility. At the beginning of the novella (which is set in the postapocalyptic world of VanderMeer’s novel *Borne*), the Strange Bird emerges from the research laboratory and experiences for the first time the freedom of flight: “the joy of flying overtook her and she went higher and higher and higher, and she did not care who saw or what awaited her in the bliss of the free fall and the glide and the limitless expanse. Oh, for if this was life, then she had not yet been alive!” (Kindle Location 24). As in Lethem’s novel, experienced space becomes abstract and affective at the same time, with VanderMeer’s parataxis signaling the seamless continuum of bodily movement and landscape (“the free fall and the glide and the limitless expanse”). Even if the Strange Bird has unspecified “human parts” in her, human embodiment is not the point of departure of VanderMeer’s novella, but a feeling of vitality that will inevitably resonate in readers’ own embodied experience as they engage with this evocation of nonhuman consciousness.[[8]](#endnote-8) Yet the organismic vitality of Strange Bird’s flight is repeatedly denied and trampled in the course of her life: this is the more challenging transformation of embodiment that VanderMeer’s *The Strange Bird* stages. The Strange Bird’s inebriating freedom doesn’t last long: soon taken prisoner again, her body is objectified in the literal sense that she is turned into a sentient—and suffering—cloak by the Magician. The familiar phenomenology of embodied vitality gives way to the stagnant temporality of object-like existence: “forever there was the sensation of being undone, of being only a skin slid across the skin of the Magician, and that this made her less than animal, less than nothing, a mere surface with no depth, a flat pool of water that would in time recede to even less than that” (Kindle Location 736). Note here how the nexus of body, space, and movement comes apart, resulting in a one-dimensional spatiality (“a mere surface with no depth, a flat pool of water”) that suggests, at the same time, the depths of the Strange Bird’s loss and the possibility of embodied affect inhering in material things like the Magician’s coat. Both *Girl in Landscape* and *The Strange Bird* thus challenge a view of the body grounded in human phenomenology, but the latter narrative pushes the organismic conception of sentience to its limit, imagining a living body (almost) becoming a thing. Further, their nonhuman transformations pull in opposite affective directions as the loss of human identity, positively connoted in Lethem’s novel, yields to nightmarish disempowerment in VanderMeer’s novella.

### Blending

In the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write:“Mimicry is a very bad concept, since it relies on binary logic to describe phenomena of an entirely different nature. The crocodile does not reproduce a tree trunk, any more than the chameleon reproduces the colors of its surroundings” (11). Deleuze and Guattari warn us against mimicry *as a concept* because of how easily it brings in dualistic distinctions between the imitating animal (crocodile, chameleon) and the imitated object (tree trunk, color). Imitation and mimicry are suspect because their deliberateness (*wanting* to look or sound like something else) can tip over into subject-object dualism. By contrast, Deleuze and Guattari outline a case of spontaneous sharing of sensory space—the calls of two bird species coming to occupy the same niche in a broader soundscape, for example—resulting in an experience they label “becoming.” At its most basic, becoming describes “change” or the very “dynamism of change” (Stagoll 25). It is concerned with bodies (conceived of in the broadest sense) and relations between bodies. Unlike the perceptible change apparent in an act of mimicry, becomings occur at “molecular” levels and at speeds which are “below and above the threshold of [human] perception” (327). Becomings are dynamic encounters involving material exchanges in which one “extract[s] particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness, that are *closest* to what one is becoming” (318; italics in the original). One of the most famous examples Deleuze and Guattari give of this type of encounter is the relationship between wasps and a certain type of orchid. The orchid imitates the colorings and patterns of a female wasp encouraging the male wasp to attempt to mate with the flower: “the wasp, enlisted into the reproductive cycle of the orchid’s reproduction. The same is true in turn for the orchid itself, which engages in a becoming-wasp, not by copying the female wasp, but by crossing over into the zone of indiscernibility between it and the wasp” (Roffe and Stark 1).

In this example, the wasp and orchid share an affective space, a zone of “proximity” or “indiscernibility.” This spontaneous sharing puts pressure on the self-other differentiation that is an integral component of our phenomenological body. We can think about this process in Gestalt terminology: in perception, animate bodies tend to serve as a figure projected against a background seen as passive and inert. While the mimicry criticized by Deleuze and Guattari involves an embodied figure actively trying to look like the background (and thus inadvertently reaffirming the background’s passivity), the form of “imitation” they propose is a matching or convergence of figure and ground in which the subject gives up any deliberately imitative efforts. Instead, bodies take on specific relations corresponding to the other’s body, which promotes an embrace between the phenomenological, organismic body and the nonhuman world, ultimately resulting in a deep sense of transcorporeality. Here, we give the name “blending” to those wasp-orchid-like experiences which potentially involve both “layers” of bodily engagement: both external imitation and becoming.[[9]](#endnote-9)

We find a sustained exploration of the narrative possibilities of this blending in James McLaughlin’s novel *Bearskin* (2018). The protagonist, a character named Rice, is a biological science technician looking for a fresh start after being sentenced for drug trafficking across the US-Mexico border. To avoid the vengeful Mexican cartels, Rice takes up a position as caretaker of a private nature preserve in Virginia. Rice’s approach, the novel suggests, is directly modeled on the natural world: “Ever since he’d moved to Virginia, Rice had engaged in a nearly religious practice of keeping himself to himself, employing a human analogue to the behavioral strategies of certain prey species: drab coloring, quiet habits, never leaving cover, avoiding conflict” (20–21). But this deliberate mimicry of the natural world fails: Rice’s past catches up with him when he makes contact with the local underworld to investigate repeated bear killings in the nature preserve.

Rice’s initial response is to become even more committed to natural mimicry: he crafts a “ghillie suit” (a poncho in camouflage pattern) to increase his chances of observing the poachers undetected in the forest. However, even this aggressive imitation of the natural world doesn’t get him very far in terms of solving the mystery of the bear killings. Instead, when Rice realizes that a Mexican hitman is after him, his outlook on the nonhuman world evolves from explicit mimicry to a sense of losing control and abandoning himself to the forest. This feeling emerges in a state of altered consciousness that the novel captures repeatedly through the musical metaphor of the “fugue.” In another example of the failure of explicit mimicry, during one of these fugues Rice sees a bear which “seemed to be aware of his presence, able to see him despite his ghillie camouflage” (202). In an echo of Deleuze and Guattari, the bear here is “impossible to fool because [its] cruel little eyes see through appearances to the true ‘soul of movement,’ the *Gemüt* or non-subjective affect” (Deleuze and Guattari 313). In an abrupt transformation that Rice doesn’t “find . . . terribly surprising” (202), the bear turns into a mysterious mushroom picker, who offers Rice a handful of psychedelic mushrooms. Rice, the narrative continues, “was unclear exactly how the shrooms were going to help him find the bear poachers. A trip might finally push him past the threshold he’d been straddling. Maybe he could simply disappear, merge somehow with the forest, finishing the process he felt had already begun” (203). Of interest is how, in the course of this scene (and as a result of Rice’s fugue-like mental state), “ghillie camouflage” gives way to the promise of “simply disappearing,” fusing with the forest without any need for deliberate action.

During one of Rice’s fugues, the text channels a series of disjointed perceptions of the natural world, as if the protagonist’s own embodied perspective was being negated and absorbed into the transcorporeal embrace of the nonhuman: “As he waited, time ebbed and flowed—a black spider wasp took several minutes to fly past his face, but the sun cleared the spine of the mountain in seconds. By now he was used to this kind of distortion—if that’s what it was—and he didn’t fight it” (189). Note that the “spine of the mountain” is an embodied metaphor for the nonhuman landscape. At the same time, Rice’s human body is pared down to a sharp edge of perception, with events as different as a wasp’s flight and the sun’s motion being flattened together. The resulting loss of individuality is akin to blending into the background of the forest—a genuine, “higher” form of mimicry that inscribes the embodied subject into the patternings of the natural world without involving willfulness (Rice “didn’t fight it”). This sense of letting go or giving up control is restated later in the novel: “He waited with a quiet mind, motionless, placing himself in the focused fugue he’d learned over the past few weeks in the forest. The predator’s patience is not an act of will, of holding oneself in check, but one of faith, of an absolute certainty that prey will come” (264). Here, through the “relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness” of his body, Rice enters (if momentarily) into a state of becoming-predator which exceeds the external mimicry of his camouflaged clothes.

Ultimately, it is mastering the art of blending with the nonhuman that puts Rice in a position to overcome the dark forces of his past, diegetically and symbolically. While lying on the ground, wrapped in his camouflage poncho, Rice sees the Mexican killer and takes him out in self-defense. Before this final confrontation, Rice feels “the sloping contours of the land all around [him], he felt it as surely as the topography of his own body, felt the mountain rising behind him, all the trees in the forest leaning away from the wind” (292). The presence of the land resonates with, and expands, Rice’s proprioceptive awareness of his own body; but here the blending is figurative (being conveyed by the simile “as surely as”) and does not suggest an actual, and potentially self-destructive, loss of control, as was the case in the fugue passages. This is a sign that Rice has learned to balance between the phenomenological body (with its investment in biological self-preservation) and the loss of figure-ground boundaries: even as the latter threatens to unravel the body-as-experienced, Rice manages to rein in the threat and harness it for his individual ends (namely, killing the Mexican hitman and therefore regaining control of his life). It is this dynamic of experienced embodiment and transcorporeality that enables the narrative, and Rice’s life story, to achieve closure. All in all, while the motif of metamorphosis remains within an organismic conception of embodiment (even if the organism becomes more-than-human), blending opens up the experiential body to nonhuman landscapes and ecosystems that *resist* being thought of as a single organism: Rice’s forest, with which he blends, is what Deleuze and Guattari would call an “assemblage.” In blending, the body as experienced by an organism still tends to make a comeback, engaging in a productive tension with a transcorporeal understanding of reality. In what we call “unraveling,” by contrast, the organismic body gives way under pressure from the affective patterns in the nonhuman world.

### Unraveling

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is widely seen as a forerunner of modern anxieties regarding nonhuman embodiment; Sheehan calls it “a switchpoint . . . between Ovidian metamorphosis, and the shadowy, hybrid genre of Gothic science fiction” (247). Shelley’s plot revolves around Victor Frankenstein’s dramatic attempts to live with the consequences of his creation of a nonhuman body. If the novel involves the transformation of inanimate matter into a sentient creature (the monster), the chain of events triggered by this nonhuman transformation comes to an end only when the monster’s body is physically taken apart in the final scene. As the monster himself remarks: “I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. The light of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds” (Shelley 257). This “conflagration” of the nonhuman body serves as the blueprint for the narrative motif that what we discuss under the rubric of “unraveling” in this section. In blending, as we’ve seen above, a balance is preserved between the phenomenological body and the extension of embodied categories to the nonhuman world. Unraveling is more radical than blending in that it causes an irreversible breakdown of the phenomenological body, via the vanishing of the conscious awareness that underlies organismic forms of embodiment; only embodiment in the transcorporeal sense remains.

Two examples from contemporary fiction will help us demonstrate the effectiveness of this motif to open onto nonhuman transformations. Michel Faber’s novel *Under the Skin* (2000) centers on an alien character, named Isserley, whose body has been surgically modified to look like a woman. Isserley’s job is to kidnap human hitchhikers and take them to a secret facility, where they are processed into food and shipped to Isserley’s home planet. Throughout the novel, Isserley’s hybrid embodiment is defined by feelings of discomfort and pain as she fails to adapt to her human-like body. This disrupted embodiment resonates with, and deepens, the ethical questions raised by Faber’s novel, particularly regarding transspecies empathy and its limitations (see Caracciolo, “Murky Mercy”). At the end of the novel, Isserley, in a deeply pessimistic response to these ethical difficulties, commits suicide. Just like Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, *Under the Skin* ends with the disintegration of the nonhuman body:

The aviir [alien explosive] would blow her car, herself, and a generous scoop of earth into the smallest conceivable particles. The explosion would leave a crater in the ground as big and deep as if a meteorite had fallen there.

And she? Where would she go?

The atoms that had been herself would mingle with the oxygen and nitrogen in the air. Instead of ending up buried in the ground, she would become part of the sky: that was the way to look at it. Her invisible remains would combine, over time, with all the wonders under the sun. When it snowed, she would be part of it, falling softly to earth, rising up again with the snow’s evaporation. When it rained, she would be there in the spectral arch that spanned from firth to ground. She would help to wreathe the fields in mists, and yet would always be transparent to the stars. She would live forever. (295–96)

Noteworthy in this passage is the body’s transformation from sentient organism to inanimate particles that “mingle” with the material fabric of reality. The account of Isserley’s imagined disintegration is rich in affect, drawing on the register of the sublime (“all the wonders under the sun,” “transparent to the stars”), and also in kinetic patterns (“falling softly . . . rising up,” the “spectral arch that spanned from firth to ground”). Isserley’s vision doesn’t go as far as panpsychism: she is poignantly aware of how her “living forever” involves a loss of consciousness—a painful parting from the experienced body. If Isserley lives forever, it is only transcorporeally, by completely externalizing embodied patterns through the falling, rising, and wreathing of the nonhuman world. The embrace of the landscape is a source of consolation for Isserley, attenuating—without resolving completely—the ethical tensions that feed the novel’s plot. As Sarah Dillon notes, Isserley transitions through a becoming-animal, becoming-woman, and, finally becoming-molecular and becoming-imperceptible: “Isserley wishes to become-imperceptible in the vodsel world; failing that, she becomes-imperceptible in the cosmic sense, enacting that ‘rushing toward’ becoming-imperceptible that Deleuze and Guattari identify as the ‘immanent end of becoming, its cosmic formula’” (Dillon 149–50; Deleuze and Guattari 307–08).

A similar vision is at the core of Jim Crace’s novel *Being Dead* (1999), which centers on a couple murdered on an isolated beach, their bodies left to decay for days before they are discovered. Crace’s use of the unraveling motif is remarkable because it does not serve as an *endpoint* of the narrative, as in Faber’s *Under the Skin* (and, prototypically, Shelley’s *Frankenstein*), but rather as the premise of a plot that insistently probes the materiality of death as well as its human impact. In several passages, the narrator offers a disturbingly detailed account of the modifications the two bodies go through:

In that dawn light and that hard rain and at a passing distance, the corpses would have looked like shiny human earrings made by fairy silver-smiths and dropped by giants, two shards of fallen ice, two metal leaves, two scaly sculptures beaten out of tin and verdigris’d with mildew and with mould. Even if the light was blocked, there would still appear to be a jewelling to their bodies, where life’s soft pink and death’s smudged grey conspired to find the silver in between. And there’d still be a tracery of lucent white where snails and slugs had made enamel patterns on the flesh with their saliva trails. (101)

What Faber accomplishes through the material conflagration of Isserley’s body, Crace achieves by way of metaphorical language that breaks down the two bodies into an assemblage of disparate images—the earrings, the shards of ice, the metal leaves, and so on. Where the images converge is on the jeweler-like refinement of the natural forces that act on human embodiment in the aftermath of life. Here transcorporeality is not acted out through kinetic patterns traced externally, in the sky or ground (as in Faber’s novel), but rather implicated by way of analogies that associate the nonhuman world with embodied craftmanship. As the two characters, Joseph and Celice, are radically transfigured by nonhuman processes, their bodies fuse with the Earth’s own body: “The earth is practised in the craft of burial. It gathers round. It embraces and adopts the dead. Joseph and Celice would have turned to landscape, given time. Their bodies would have been just something extra dead in a landscape already sculpted out of death. They would become nothing special” (193–94). “Embrace” is, of course, an appropriately embodied metaphor for this merging with the landscape; unlike the blending of the previous section, this is a totalizing merging, in which the body-as-organism vanishes irretrievably and only leaves behind a “tracery” of aestheticized embodied patterns.

In Faber’s and in Crace’s novels, it is possible to identify moments of “becoming-imperceptible” which take readers from the organism to the BwO, from the personal to the impersonal. Those elements that originally defined the human organism are taken up into new relations, with earrings, ice, mold, snails, and slugs. Through the unraveling of the human body into both organic and inorganic forms, Faber’s and Crace’s novels highlight a relationship between life and nonlife which is processual rather than oppositional. The non/living is “uncontainable: it is not a life attributed to and enclosed in an individual body, but instead, an entanglement of material processes and transformations of living and non-living” (Radomska 389). Reading these narratives alongside the concept of the BwO encourages us to pay attention to the “forces [which] run through humans to connect them to animals and plants, to incipient brains, to milieus and atmospheres, to geographical and historical events” (Grosz in Roffe and Stark, “Deleuze and the Nonhuman Turn” 18-19), forces which move bodies towards becoming-imperceptible, or as Busch suggests in *How to Disappear* (80)*,* away from our deeply held values about individuality.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have explored three different manifestations of transcorporeality in literary narrative: metamorphosis, blending, and unraveling. Through analyses which foreground narrative devices, we considered how each of these manifestations moves increasingly away from conventional notions of the phenomenological body. The conceptual and affective space created opens onto a broader conception of the body which, like Deleuze and Guattari’s BwO, accounts for—and mixes with—nonhuman corporeality. Drawing inspiration from the work of scholars like Jane Bennett and Rosi Braidotti, we might consider the ethical consequences of this extended sense of embodiment. If people were more attentive to that fact that humans are an “*array of bodies*” in constant processes of change and reciprocal engagement, “would we,” asks Bennett, “continue to produce and consume in the same violently reckless ways?” (113; emphasis in the original). According to Braidotti, these “processes” begin by challenging notions of the phenomenological entity we call “self.” By tuning in to transcorporeal materiality, we can embrace the sustainable ethics that Deleuze calls “becoming-imperceptible” (Braidotti, “Becoming” 154), a type of merging with our environment evocative of the silver ants in the Busch epigraph. Like our two examples of “unraveling,” in her chapter “The Ethics of Becoming-Imperceptible,” Braidotti considers the collapse of the subject in relation to personal death, or the death of a (human) self; however, further work might also investigate what other narrative situations or encounters with the nonhuman in literary form encourage experiences of becoming-imperceptible or “becoming-world.” To “become-world” is an act of becoming-invisible, a disappearance created by “merging into an eternal flow of becomings” or material movement (Braidotti, “Becoming” 153). What, we might ask, will we see when the human becomes invisible, when “we” disappear? In our current ecological predicament, the imaginative transformations staged by narrative bring into view an answer to that key question.

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1. For more on the turn to affect, see Gregg and Seigworth and, more specifically related to Anthropocene studies, Bladow and Ladino. For the material turn, see Coole and Frost. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Here we align Deleuze with materialism and the affective turn. While it is outside of the scope of this essay to engage at length with varying interpretations of Deleuzian theory, we are aware that this is an area of contention within the field, with many scholars reading him in a Kantian vein (see, for example, Smith). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For more on Haraway and Deleuze and Guattari (including conflicts and possible complementarity), see Williams. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Caracciolo (“Interpretation”) for more on the embodied basis of narrative meaning-making. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For a collection of essays which offer a mix of theoretical and practical engagements with the concept of the body in Deleuze’s work, see Guillaume and Hughes. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The work of Ian Bogost and Steven Shaviro also converges on this insight that phenomenology can be uncoupled from the human and even the animal domain. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See Nell for more on animal focalization. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. On embodied empathy and the narrative evocation of animal consciousness, see Caracciolo (“Three Smells”). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For work which considers the division Deleuze and Guattari posit between mimicry and becoming, see Gibbs; Lambert. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)