

“Fingeryeyed” Description: Laboratory Animals and Transspecies Empathy in VanderMeer and Yanagihara¹

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Abstract

This article explores the potential for description to produce in readers a sense of transspecies empathy. Rather than focusing on animal narration, I consider description as a disruptive “material power” (Hamon 25; Rodriguez 4). Focusing on Jeff VanderMeer’s *The Strange Bird* (2017) and Hanya Yanagihara’s *The People in the Trees* (2013), the article argues that synaesthetic, or what Eva Hayward calls “fingeryeyed” (2010), description challenges notions of animals as passive scientific equipment; instead, in both texts, animals emerge as object-agents who shape the descriptions and engage readers (Stewart 33).

Introduction

In the introduction to the recent collection *Environment and Narrative: New Directions in Econarratology* (2020), editors Erin James and Eric Morel consider the potential of written narratives to generate transspecies empathy in readers (15). Unlike a media form such as film, which makes use of a broad range of audio and visual cues to portray a psychosomatic state like “suffering,” James and Morel argue that literary representations of nonhuman animal experience often face the additional challenge of mediation through human language. For example, “in such texts, [representations are] always packaged by a narrator and thus always rendered in human terms to some degree, even if that narrator is nonhuman” (15). Taking this observation as a prompt, this article joins a growing number of narratological studies turning to questions of anthropomorphism, transspecies (narrative) empathy, and real-world altruism in literature (Keen 2006; Bernaerts et al. 2014; Herman 2018; James 2019). Research exploring transspecies empathy in narrative often foregrounds nonhuman narration and focalization, drawing on work by Suzanne Keen and Amy Coplan, for whom “mind reading” is one of the primary “mechanisms underlying empathy” (Keen 207). Indeed, commenting on this issue in the context of animal studies, Allan Burns goes as far as to claim that “[w]ithout an interest in the minds of other animals, empathy cannot exist” (348).

Yet, in recent years, we find attempts to step away from the centrality of mind-based approaches to transspecies empathy. For example, Alexa Weik von Mossner (2017) and Erin James (2019) consider, respectively, “affective contagion” and an adaptation of Suzanne Keen’s “bridge character”—a human character whose compassion for an animal within the

text generates similar feelings of compassion in the reader—as alternatives to empathy built on the anthropomorphic representation of nonhuman animal consciousness. Unlike Weik von Mossner and James, my contribution to these discussions shifts the focus to narrative’s notorious counterpart: description. In particular, I consider corporeal descriptions of the bodies of laboratory animals—bodies that are chronically under-described or ignored in scientific writing.² Such a focus allows me to ask, what kind of transspecies exchanges can take place in writing that stays with the body? By framing description as a *haptic* form of engagement, we might begin to deepen our understanding of how a wider array of aesthetic forms—forms that “refuse to anthropomorphize nonhuman characters”—might be capable of generating “care.”³ In addition, focusing on the affective impact of haptic, aural, alimentary, and olfactory sensory modalities grounds acts of description in a situated and receptive body—a move which highlights the epistemic and ethical limitations of visual models of knowledge construction. Taking two literary texts as examples—Jeff VanderMeer’s ‘new weird’ novella *The Strange Bird* (2017) and Hanya Yanagihara’s fictional memoir *The People in the Trees* (2013)—I look for moments where description “attunes” and “engages” readers, drawing attention to corporeal resonances and moments of bodily continuity and community (Despret 35).

The structure of this article is based loosely on two of Amy Coplan’s (2004) three categories of readerly engagement with characters in narratives: narrative empathy and emotional contagion.⁴ The first section considers VanderMeer’s *The Strange Bird* through the lens of narrative empathy. During an empathetic experience, Coplan writes, we take up the psychological perspective of another person (or character) (143). While not intuitive in psychological terms, beginning with the affective-cognitive category of “empathy” (rather than affective-level ‘emotional contagion’) helps to introduce the distinct methods focalization and description offer for engaging with animals—a contrast I draw out through the common (if contested) spatial metaphor of surface and depth. In my reading of VanderMeer, our relation to the text’s nonhuman protagonist relies on the consistent evocation of human-like cognition—a reliance which risks rendering the animal absent through anthropomorphism. At the same time, however, the novella’s graphic bodily descriptions may offer another avenue of human-nonhuman engagement—one where we attend affectively to the animal *as animal*. In other words, rather than diving deep into the interior of animal cognition and finding ourselves reflected, VanderMeer’s novel gestures to the ways in which descriptions can force us to linger

on the surface of nonhuman animal experience—on what is perceptible in nonhuman bodies at the level of ‘skin.’

Prompted by Coplan’s category of emotional contagion—that is, the experience of “catching” the emotion of another through the often involuntary and automatic mimicking their physiological or expressive states (144-5)—the second section of the article develops the idea of descriptive surfaces to argue that a shift from visual to haptic description in Yanagihara’s *The People in the Trees* encourages an affective encounter between human reader and textual animal. Rather than being passive, descriptions of laboratory mice in this section are “fingeryeyed” in that they suggest a form of tactile looking where, rather than subject-object relations, there are transfers of intensity between active (readerly and animal) bodies (Hayward). In her novel, Yanagihara couples the emotional contagion of these fingeryeyed descriptions with narrative positioning devices (like second-person address) that encourage particular forms of “alliance” and “allegiance”—to use Murray Smith’s terms⁵—between the reader, narrator, and described animals. Nuancing the somewhat utopian link some scholars have made between affectively-engaging literary encounters with animals and altruistic empathy,⁶ I gesture to some of the ways in which the novel’s positioning devices might provide moral direction for readers’ emotional responses to the described nonhuman animals. While more research is needed to explore how affectively-charged descriptions work with narrative structuring devices to bridge the gap between sensation and sympathy (Coplan’s third category) the readings in the latter part of this article aim to offer a preliminary step in this direction.

Experimenting with Description

Description is a contested category within narratology and, since the field emerged as a distinct branch of literary theory, description has frequently been defined oppositionally and by negation: it is everything its counterpart, ‘narrative,’ is not. Associated with qualities like simultaneity, the imperfect verb tense, plural subjects, repetition, and parallelism, description is often understood as text which is passive, static, and aesthetic—not unlike the visual art equivalent of a still-life painting (Blanchard 1981).⁷ In fact, description has been called by literary scholars the “visual” in narration, associated with techniques like ekphrasis and the tableaux (Fowler 1991; Beaujour 1981). As well as offering a starting point for problematizing description’s perceived passivity, attention to the visual dimension of description helps to explain this paper’s focus on the ‘scientific’ bodies of laboratory animals.

While, in practice, experimental science is based on the assumption of biological continuity between the bodies of humans and animals, biomedical writing frequently “hides the bodies” (Field, Kindle Location 2958). In the Western framework of science we’ve inherited from early moderns like Robert Boyle, Robert Hooke, and Francis Bacon, to see or witness the ‘truths’ of science is to see without the biases, particularities, and markings of the body (Haraway 1997, xviii). Tracking the scientific gaze in writing, Donna Haraway argues that early modern men of science like Boyle and Hooke laid the groundwork for a type of scientific writing that “would not be polluted by the body. Only in that way could they give credibility to their descriptions of other bodies and minimize critical attention to their own”—a type of rhetorical disembodiment that would systematically continue over the centuries with the increasing institutionalization of science (Haraway, 1997 32).

In the nineteenth century, experimental physiologist Claude Bernard articulated this desire to obscure the situated and embodied quality of the scientific gaze, writing that:

The coming of the experimental method will result in dispersing from science all individual views, to replace them by impersonal and general theories, which will be, as in other sciences, but a regular coordination deduced from the facts furnished by experiment. (Bernard in Zola 45)

In its desire for impersonality, the experimental method (both as articulated here by Bernard and in its contemporary instantiation) disappears an active human agent, “mask[s] investments,” and “obscure[s] the real conditions” of its production and existence (Marcus, Love, Best 4). Hiding not only the hand of the scientist but also the bodies of laboratory animals, scientific writing frequently employs passive grammatical constructions, a focus on nonhuman body parts rather than wholes, overdescription of “methods of measurement and surrounding apparatus,” vagaries, euphemisms, and jargon (Birke and Smith 31).

To decide the question of whether the pneumogastric produces movements in the larynx, it is absolutely necessary to have exposure. It is necessary to remove the cerebellum, avoiding the sinus, then, the larynx being exposed by the ordinary procedure, it is necessary to cut the vagi, and respiration will stop immediately. On cutting the spinal accessories the voice will be seen to stop while breathing nevertheless continues. (Bernard in Field, Kindle Location 225)⁸

In this example, body parts proliferate, but as well as being hidden behind the opacity of technical language, the rhetorical partitioning that runs parallel to the physical obscures the sense of a holistic animal. Just as it removes an active agent from the scene, this type of writing helps to produce and perpetuate the idea that nonhuman animals are malleable scientific ‘materials,’ and that description deals with “motionless object[s] lying outside the dimension of time” (Mosher 422). Despite these rhetorical manoeuvres, however, the scientific gaze is

never a “view from nowhere”⁹ and descriptions (whether literary or scientific) always take place from a certain perspective. Classicist D. P. Fowler notes how “[t]he question of focalization, of ‘who sees?’, is raised with particular and obvious force by description” (29). Rather than looking to scientific writing (where it is often difficult to discern the presence of an animal), I turn to literary representations of animal experimentation. In the examples from VanderMeer’s and Yanagihara’s work, far from being passive, or static text, visceral descriptions have a “material power” that challenges the idea of descriptive neutrality (Hamon in Rodriguez 4)—something which seems particularly important when considering how descriptions of nonhuman animals contribute to (and trouble) bodily objectification.

From Depth to Surface: Animal Focalization and Description in *The Strange Bird*

I first enter the literary laboratory and my focus on description, through a side door, the door of animal focalization in Jeff VanderMeer’s *The Strange Bird*. I begin with this text because it allows me to sketch the contours of (interrelated) levels of readerly engagement with literary representations of nonhuman animals. Categorized by the spatial metaphors of depth and surface, the depiction and exploration of the nonhuman protagonist in VanderMeer’s text involves both deeper, cognitive, perspective-taking, but also the affective surfaces of exterior, visceral descriptions. Through this juxtaposition and the related binary of objectivity and subjectivity, we can begin to make a case for the significance—critical and ethical—of attentive animal descriptions.

The Strange Bird follows the misfortunes of its titular—and artificial hybrid bird-human-squid—protagonist as she navigates a post-apocalyptic and desolate world: beginning with her release from a laboratory, the novella tracks the Strange Bird’s experiences of the world—a world in which she is repeatedly captured and modified before finally finding a version of joy at the novella’s end. What is especially striking about VanderMeer’s text is the way in which it plays with aforementioned dichotomies like subjectivity and objectivity and depth and surface, with representations of the Strange Bird often fluttering between these poles. While written in third person and focalized through the Strange Bird, the reader’s knowledge of the protagonist is often acquired obliquely, through—as Gry Ulstein identifies in her detailed reading of the novella—an “eccentric” or “off-center” perspective (forthcoming 2021).¹⁰ For example, rather than self-description, readers learn about the Strange Bird’s body through the touch of others, like her captors Charlie X and the bio-engineer self-styled as “the Magician”: “...by the distant ghost of Charlie X’s hand she began to sense the map of her new body”

(VanderMeer 67 in Ulstein, forthcoming 2021). In many cases, the effect of these outside, or “off-center,” perspectives is the Strange Bird’s plot-level objectification. For instance, the scientists in the lab where we first encounter the Strange Bird view her as malleable material. We learn early on that the Strange Bird has been programmed to follow the directives of an internal compass, a “kind of genetic imperative, buried deep, tied to a location” (VanderMeer 97). Yet, it is not her bird-genes that lead her, “[i]t had been a human need, the compass pulsing at her heart, and she was, in the end, much diminished for having followed it” (VanderMeer 108). The Strange Bird is filled with the desires of human scientists; for example, to “reseed” (95) the world, or in the case of the scientist, Sanji, who worked most closely with the Strange Bird, to communicate with a (deceased) lover (107-8). As well as adding to her, the Strange Bird remembers how the scientists’ continual modifications lessened her: “[i]n the laboratory, the scientists had taken samples from her weekly. She had lost something of herself every day” (15). And, the Strange Bird’s objectification does not stop after she escapes from the laboratory: after her flight, she becomes the object of an avian attack (9-11), a body rolled about in a storm of beetles and a storm proper (16-17),¹¹ the prisoner and aestheticized memory-object of an Old Man (17-40), and most literally and graphically, a scientific-curiosity-turned-invisibility cloak for the Magician (63).

In what is, arguably, the most confronting passage of the novella, the Magician destroys the body of the trapped Strange Bird, violently dismantling and transforming her:

The pain hit sharp and piercing, as if each of the children held a lit match and set each individual feather on fire, with each quill turned into a blade driven into her flesh. And still this could not describe the agony as the Magician took her wings from her, broke her spine, removed her bones one by one, but left her alive, writhing and formless on the table, still able to see, and thus watching as the Magician casually threw away so many of the parts that were irreplaceable. As she gasped through a slit of a mouth, her beak removed as well. (VanderMeer 63).

In this painfully detailed description, the Magician disassembles the Strange Bird’s body, and she becomes—as the Strange Bird herself asserts—“just a surface. [N]ever the bird striking at the glass but only the windowpane” (VanderMeer 90). Yet, the plot-level objectification and ‘becoming-surface’ of the Strange Bird occurs simultaneously with our ‘deep dive’ into her subjectivity on the level of the narrative perspective (Ulstein, forthcoming 2021). The plot’s attempts to objectify the Strange Bird are continually resisted by our access to her consciousness—a consciousness which is consistent enough to allow for readers to empathize with her and adopt her point of view. In exploring how the novella suggests a form of subjectivity without agency, Ulstein identifies how VanderMeer counters intradiegetic

objectification by giving the Strange Bird “a *form* of agency through focalization” (forthcoming 2021). Unlike the Strange Bird’s self-characterization as “just a surface,” and “therefore constrained to a non-life with no real agency,” the reader “has access *beneath* the surface of her stretched-out body, constantly confronted with the Strange Bird’s suffering and her complex ethical reflections” (Ulstein, in review, original emphasis). Yet, the framing here is important: while the surface-objects the Strange Bird compares herself to (“window pane[s]” [90] and “flat pool[s] of water” [71]) have the capacity to be “as hard and reflexive as a mirror” (Ulstein, forthcoming 2021), they are also surfaces that can be looked *through*. And, with the exception of one moment in the text, readers are continually encouraged to look through the surface of the Strange Bird’s body to an anthropomorphized consciousness—to such an extent that, at times, the nonhumanity of her body becomes, in parallel to the events of the text, invisible. As Marco Caracciolo and I have argued elsewhere (and with a different text in mind), even amidst her various objectifications, diminishments, and metamorphoses, the Strange Bird’s bodily shifts do “little to destabilize the structural coherence” of her experiencing consciousness (53). What we have in this novella is nonhuman consciousness, but one with so much of the human “put into her” that empathetic leaps are easily made by readers (VanderMeer 90).¹² Thus, while the Magician’s dismemberment of the Strange Bird pushes “the organismic conception of sentience to its limit, imagining a living body (almost) becoming a thing,” this “almost” haunts the text, asserting itself as mind that persists no matter what bodily shell it is painfully put or wrought into (Caracciolo and Lambert 54).

If, as I have suggested, access to the Strange Bird’s consciousness is an inadequate counter to her plot-level objectification, how else might we make a claim for the Strange Bird’s nonhuman agency? Here, I stay with the Magician’s dismemberment of the Strange Bird to posit a way of reading which resists this dive into an anthropomorphized nonhuman consciousness *and* her objectification, lingering instead on the surface of the Strange Bird’s lively nonhuman body. As Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus write in “Surface Reading: An Introduction” (2009), a “surface is that which insists on being looked at rather than what we must look through” (9).¹³ Instead of looking for that which lies beneath the surface, such as the existence of consciousness or, to use an example Best and Marcus allude to, a psychoanalytic interpretation of the unsaid in a text, surface readers “locate narrative structures and abstract patterns on the surface” (11).¹⁴ Importantly, this lingering on the surface is not a direct route to inspiring transspecies empathy but may function as an effective—and affective—entry point.

It is possible to argue that the “eccentric” or “off-center” gaze flagged by Ulstein is most affecting when attention is drawn to its embodiment. What is so powerful about the systematic description of the Magician’s destruction of the Strange Bird is the way in which focalization flits (if momentarily) between the Strange Bird’s perspective and the Magician’s. Looking down on the Strange Bird’s “writhing” body and “slit of a mouth” we are spatially-positioned as the Magician, gazing down on the Strange Bird as her body is dismantled in the novella’s only moment of syncing between intra- and extradiegetic objectification. Yet, unlike the Magician’s “vague,” “disconnected,” and “clinical” perspective (VanderMeer 64), with the proliferation of visceral language, few (if any) readers will read this passage with a similarly disembodied view. Instead, while the Strange Bird might find ways to “numb herself,” readers cannot: we are forced to “see [...] feelingly”¹⁵ descriptions of actions like “hit,” “sharp and piercing,” “blade driven into her flesh,” “agony,” “broke her spine,” “removed her bones,” “writhing,” “gasped” (VanderMeer 63). As will be elaborated on in the following section, the descriptions in this passage rely on the readers’ “embodied simulation,” creating an “empathetic affective response” (Weik von Mossner, *Affective Ecologies* 80). Rather than ‘putting on’ the Strange Bird’s perspective in what developmental psychology describes as empathy’s encouragement of “role taking” (Coplan 144), the bodily descriptions in this passage encourage readers to stay on the surface (of the skin), and—to use Susan Sontag’s words—experience the event’s (challenging) “sensuous immediacy” (in Best and Marcus 10). Best and Marcus 10). That is, instead of making an imaginative leap into ‘what it is like’ to be the Strange Bird, the description encourages a direct, corporeal exchange. As Best and Marcus put it, we “embrace the surface as an affective and ethical stance” by “attend[ing] to the text” and to our “affective responses to it” (Best and Marcus 10). The nonhuman animal body in VanderMeer’s novella is not only something we are forced to see but is, through descriptive surfaces, ‘refracted’ into a body we are forced to *feel*.

“Fingeryeyed” Description in Yanagihara’s *The People in the Trees*

While our encounter with nonhuman animals in *The People in the Trees* also operates through affective cues, unlike *The Strange Bird*, we never enter into the animal’s cognitive world. Instead, we ‘see feelingly’ through the eyes of a scientist—a scientist who is just as estranging in his moments of clinical disembodiment as *The Strange Bird*’s Magician. The scientist at the center of *The People in the Trees* is Norton Perina and the novel recounts his expedition with anthropologist Paul Tallent to a fictional Micronesian island called Ivu’ivu. On this expedition,

they come across a loosely-assembled group they call “The Dreamers” who demonstrate astounding longevity—a longevity Perina discovers results from consuming a rare turtle, Opa’ivu’eke. Yet, while the individuals who consume the turtle retain their physical health and youthfulness, their minds gradually deteriorate. Indeed, the novel ends in all-round deterioration: Norton’s reputation is (rightfully) destroyed by accusations of child molestation and, more devastatingly, the island is decimated by Western economic and epistemological greed.

For the most part, the book is written in memoir form with Norton as first-person narrator—a perspective which challenges the objectivity usually associated with scientific writing. With clinical attentiveness, Norton’s recount largely proceeds through highly personal and detailed narration and description. Early on in the memoir, we come to a section titled “Part II. Mice.” Here, Norton spends a great deal of time describing the laboratory where he worked as a graduate student: its people, its resident animals, and some of the everyday tasks and procedures that were performed. The descriptions within this section are vivid in the way they render materiality, evoking a number of different sensory modalities. We begin, for example, with the olfactory,

Behind the main room, running its length, were the two animal labs. The first, to the south side, was the mice lab, windowless, and about three hundred square feet, and lined on three sides with cages stacked some seven feet high along the walls, which were here a shiny, curdled, charred orange color. The mice lab, like animal labs everywhere, stank of damp newspaper and feces and the moldy, algaeish stench of wet fur. Every night the floors were swabbed with disinfectant, but it seemed only to intensify the room’s native odors, which were so impermeable they seemed to have baked into the walls. (Yanagihara, Kindle Locations 826-31)

Before encountering a graphic amalgamation of different sensory modalities:

I opened up the dog and tied off the artery to its kidney and stitched it closed again. A few days later, when the dog was in kidney failure—it moaned and whined; its urine was treacly and venomous in appearance and leaked out in fat, viscous, reluctant drops—I redrugged it, removed its dead kidney (now the bruised, sheeny blue of rotting meat), and tried to transplant into the dog a kidney I had infected in another dog. I sewed both dogs back up. The donor dog I had incinerated. The one that had received the transplant soon expired as well, although whether from the infected kidney or from my poor surgical skills I was never quite certain. I observed it and took notes on its decline in my notebook, and when it died, I harvested its organs of interest and preserved them for further analysis and then had its corpse incinerated too. (Yanagihara, Kindle Location 883)

What is notable in these passages (and in second one especially) are shifts in register and a displacement of the visual. In terms of register, we see at work the neutralizing power of clinically descriptive language: in the very process of observation and inscription, Norton renders the animal body (which previously “moaned” and “whined”) a corpse which “expires,”

“declines,” and must be incinerated,” while the organs of interest are “harvested” and “preserved”—a transformation evocative of Michael Lynch’s (1988) argument that experimental procedures transform animals *as animals* into animals as *analytical* information.¹⁶ In the last passage the register shifts from the visceral to clinical—what David Herman describes as a contrast between action-oriented and event-oriented registers (*Narratology Beyond* 241). Herman equates these two registers with subjectivity and agency, and objectification and passivity, respectively. By placing these two registers in close contact, Yanagihara demonstrates how easily language reconfigures which “kinds of beings can be considered agents” (Herman, *Narratology Beyond* 241). In addition, the contrast between affective and clinical language creates a play of bodily presence and absence which reduces the likelihood that readers will become desensitized to the described violence of experimental procedures. The flickering of presence and absence also lends the description—and the object-agents which shape the descriptions (Stewart 33)—a “shimmering” quality (Houser; Bird Rose), adding to description’s power and ability to “capture the eye” (Bird Rose G54).

While Houser’s and Bird Rose’s “shimmering” description evokes the visual, in the passages cited above, description is extricated from sight—indeed, mention of the “windowless labs” in the first suggests that the visual medium is limited in its ability to represent the laboratory’s multispecies engagements. Observation only tells part of the story: the descriptions in these passages are multi-sensorial, evoking touch, smell, sound, and taste in a descriptive banquet serving leaking fat, rotting meat, whining bodies, and pulpy and savoury-looking spleens. Both within the laboratory and the textual description itself, despite attempts to “disinfect” these spaces (either chemically or rhetorically), animal bodies emanate (Yanagihara, Kindle Location 826-31). To invoke both Haraway and Hayward, there is something “indigestible” about the animals we find in the laboratory (Haraway 2007; Hayward). Rather than being “incorporated” (Kass 1999) into human systems of meaning-making or human ‘bodies of knowledge,’ animals in these descriptions are dynamic, forcing a recognition of reciprocity.¹⁷ In other words, these bodies are affective in that they bear *and produce* change. To foreground this affectivity, I read the multi-sensorial descriptions in Yanagihara’s text through Hayward’s haptic-optic model of “fingeryeyes”—a form of “tactile look[ing]” rooted in reciprocity rather than mastery (Haraway 2007, 6-7). While Hayward’s visceral approach to vision offers a means of attuning to affect, the final section of this paper problematizes the conflation of affective encounter and real-world altruism. In the disjunction between the ethical evaluations of the narrator and reader, we observe that it is not affect alone

but, rather, a coupling of our antipathy towards Norton and the affecting quality of the description that has the potential to produce a sense of moral concern or compassion for the laboratory animals.

Distantly evocative of classical and early modern conceptions of materially-affective looking,¹⁸ Hayward’s visual concept is entangled with the haptic. “Fingeryeyes” names the “synaesthetic quality of materialized sensation”—in other words, experiences where “senses are amalgamated, superimposed” (580):

Attending to the interplay of vision and touch, I invoke fingeryeyes to articulate the in-between of encounter, a space of movement, of potential: this haptic-optic defines the overlay of sensoriums and the inter- and intrachange of sensations. Fingeryeyes, in this instance, is the transfer of intensity, of expressivity in the simultaneity of touching and feeling. (Hayward 581)

This touching-feeling is perhaps most obvious in one of Norton’s descriptions of the experimental procedures he performs. Moving through the alimentary and tactile senses, Norton touches and is touched by the animals’ bodies:

You’d cut out each spleen—a tiny, savory-looking thing, richly meatily brown and the size of a slender watermelon seed...[...] Spleens, of course, are soft and pulpy, like foie gras, and you had to be careful to only brush them against the mesh; anything more vigorous and you’d find the organ smeared over your fingers, sticky and dark as fudge. You might do this a few times, or until the organ had turned liquidy; then you’d pipette some of the sauce into a tube... (Kindle Location 859-64)

As well as positioning the reader in relation to Norton, the use of second-person address in this passage situates the reader *within* the frame of the text, cuing her into an affective engagement in which she can no longer ‘view events from a distance,’ from ‘outside’ of the text; instead, *you* are drawn into the laboratory space and the experimental procedure. Gazing with “fingeryeyes,” readers touch-look and are touched. The visceral descriptions in Yanagihara’s text are built on multimodal sensory cues—that is, *meaningful* visual, tactile, aural, olfactory, and alimentary language—which ‘touch,’ readers, encouraging “bodily simulation” or an “affective exchange” (Weik von Mossner 80; Deleuze and Guattari, 272).¹⁹ Verbs within the text like (the dog) “moans,” “whines,” and “leaks” and Norton’s “cuts,” “brushes,” and “smears” to the mouse spleens operate as “crosscurrents of affect” that destabilise perceived textual and species boundaries (Deleuze and Guattari 280). As recent neurological research by Klepp et al. (2019) demonstrates, action-related language such as this recruits “the brain’s motor system and can interact with motor behaviour” (1). In addition, Yanagihara couples this action-related language with evocative adjectives—largely alimentary and olfactory—like, walls of “curdled” orange, labs with an “algaeish stench,” and bodies (or body parts) that are “treacly”

urine, “rotting,” “sticky,” “dark,” and “liquidy.” As Saif Mohammad and Peter Turney demonstrate in their research on language and emotional response, adjectives are “some of the most emotion inspiring terms”—a finding they claim is hardly “surprising” given adjectives are used to “qualify a noun” (31).²⁰ The power of the “fingeryeyed” descriptions we find in Yanagihara’s novel lies not in their imitation of reality, but instead in their evocation of bodily response. The descriptions explored here “add up to a feeling: ambiguity, dissonance, anxiety, foreboding” and, in this case, disgust (Houser 10)—a response which, repurposing the work of Sianne Ngai (2005), draws readers out of neutrality and begins to position them.²¹

The positioning of the reader in Yanagihara’s text is significant for the potential ethical dimension of the encounter: not only does Norton’s “you” position us inside the text, it is also a tool he employs try to “align” the reader with himself (Smith, “Gangsters” 220). For Smith, alignment is the result of “our access to the actions, thought, and feelings of a character” (220), and as Weik von Mossner writes, is “therefore a matter of perspective” (“Feeling Cosmopolitan” 83). In describing his actions through second-person, Norton encourages the reader to imaginatively shadow him. Yet, while the narrative perspective and community-building devices like the use of second person draw together reader and narrator, readers are likely to experience a sense of disjunction as Norton describes the experimental procedures. While we are aligned with Norton on the level of perspective, the novel pulls our “allegiance” in a different direction (Smith “Gangsters,” 220). As Smith notes, in contrast to alignment, allegiance is used to refer to “the way in which narrative ‘elicits responses of sympathy’ toward a character. Such responses are ‘triggered—if not wholly determined—by the moral structure’ of the narrative” (Smith in Weik von Mossner “Feeling Cosmopolitan,” 83). Despite the clinical language Norton employs at times (and as discussed above), the descriptions of animal suffering are gratuitous rather than scientific. Yanagihara achieves this through her characterization of Norton: he is highly attentive, yet indifferent (“I rather enjoyed killing mice” [Kindle Location 829]) to the animals he describes.²² In addition, he appears well aware of the futility of and lack of necessity for the procedures he performs. For example, in his description of the kidney transplants in dogs, he provides no scientific justification for transplanting *infected* kidneys in healthy dogs other than, “They were very keen on organ transplantation in those days” (Kindle Location 874). The fact that Norton proceeds with such experiments while cognizant of the lack of scientific justification for his research works with the highly affecting descriptions to build allegiance between reader and the laboratory animals. In other words, not only are readers and the described animals drawn together through the kinds

of bodily resonance explored above, but also through a sense of (relative) shared passivity and the conflictual side-taking encouraged by a/ a clear link between Norton and the animals’ pain, and b/ a failure to contextualize this pain within a larger (judicial) frame of ethical responsibility and scientific necessity (Breithaupt “A Three Person Model” 89). From these strategies and cues in Norton’s characterization, our disgust in response to the descriptions is directed not at the animals described, but, instead, at the describer himself. As Fritz Breithaupt has argued, empathy is a phenomenon of positioning, or allegiance, rather than simply a feeling between two parties—a point which gestures to the deliberate and practiced dimension of literary affect (“A Three Person Model”).

Conclusion: Being *careful* with empathy

I opened this paper with James and Morel’s question of whether transspecies empathy is possible in written narratives that appear to have a greater anthropomorphic bias than other artistic mediums (15). While acknowledging that the textual animals readers encounter always appear with and through human language, this article has explored whether, by shifting the focus from narration or focalization to description, it is possible for written narratives to non-anthropomorphically depict animal suffering and generate moments of empathic engagement. In the graphic dismemberment scene in VanderMeer’s *The Strange Bird* and the vivid accounts of animal pain in “Part Two. Mice” of Yanagihara’s *The People in the Trees*, descriptions are detached from the visual, becoming sites of “affective exchange” (Deleuze and Guattari 272). As Mark Doty has argued, synaesthetic descriptions like those we find in these texts “avoid the convention of separating sense perceptions” and thus “come closer to the lived texture of experience” (Doty 125). The “fingeryeyed” description explored in this paper is a form of description tied to the body, one which synaesthetically engages the range of sensory modalities James and Morel worry written narratives lack, and which they cite as central to narrative empathy.

In staying with the body, I also problematized the notion that empathy can only exist with an interest animal minds and that “Without empathy, ethics cannot exist” (Burns 348). While VanderMeer’s text employs an anthropomorphic representation of nonhuman cognition, Yanagihara’s depiction of nonhuman animals refuses readers an insight into the cognitive dimension of their suffering. While readers of biomedical papers are accustomed to encountering analytic and/or invisible animal bodies ready for interpretive incorporation, the “fingeryeyed” descriptions in these two literary examples help to bring lively animal bodies

back into the mix. And, in their attention to unruly affect, they may also hint at the array of animal resistances that simmer under the clinical register of a biomedical paper.²³ Instead, the visceral quality of the “fingeryeyed” description ‘stays on the surface,’ honoring the unknowability of the other, forming “allegiance to the sensible, things as they are, the given, the incompletely knowable” (Doty 137, in Marcus et al. 13).²⁴ In a second troubling of Burns’ contention, I intimated that this allegiance is not the product of an affective encounter alone. Rather, the link between narrative empathy and ethics requires deliberate moral structuring and—both within and beyond the text—practice, or repeated entrainment.²⁵ In addition to James’ compassionate “bridge characters,” which guide the moral dimension of readers’ (affective) textual encounters with nonhuman animals, the inverse may also play a role: characters who, like Norton, stimulate our antipathy, breaking perspectival alignment and helping us to form new, transspecies allegiances.

Descriptions have the potential to engage us affectively, position us ethically, and encourage us to practice attentive, bodily forms of looking, which involve “a cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness” (Bennett xiv). Yet, for the link between literary experiences of empathy and ethics to be made, the kind of sensory attentiveness we find in, for example, “fingeryeyed” descriptions needs to be structured and directed. In place of fleeting feeling, the repeated patterns, or forms, of sensation coalesce or accumulate into habits of thought and—possibly—action; affective experience becomes “affective practice” (Wetherell 2012; Lambert 2020). To more clearly acknowledge that the relationship between affecting literary descriptions of nonhuman animals and an interspecies ethics is processual and not simultaneous, I suggest shifting the vocabulary we use to label such encounters from “transspecies empathy” to “transspecies care.”²⁶ Following the work of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, for whom “care” is a constellation of affect, ethics, and practice, this vocabulary might encourage readers to better attend to the literary forms and strategies which shape and direct their ethical evaluations.

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² In “Reporting animal use in scientific papers” (1997), Jane A. Smith, Lynda Birke, and Dawn Sadler sampled 149 papers published between 1990-91 from eight different journals. They demonstrate that nearly a third of all papers fail to note the number of animals used. Similarly, Barbara Migeon (2014) found that in more than 1000 biology research articles collected between 2012 and 2014, the animal species is not mentioned in the title 61% of the time, (if not in the title) in the abstract 35% of the time, or *at all* 23% of the time.

³ For more on the ethics of care approach and the role of aesthetics, see Josephine Donovan’s *The Aesthetics of Care: On the Literary Treatment of Animals*, Bloomsbury, 2016.

⁴ The third category, which I will not discuss here is “sympathy.” Unlike empathy and emotional contagion, sympathy does not involve shared experience; rather, it involves “feeling *for*” as well as the altruistic impetus to alleviate another’s suffering (Coplan 145). For more on transspecies sympathy, and how the coupling of affective description and narrative strategies suggests reading as an “affective practice,” see Shannon Lambert “Agents of Description: Animals, Affect, and Care in Thalia Field’s *Experimental Animals*.”

⁵ “Alignment” and Smith’s companion concept “allegiance” will be elaborated on in the second section of this article.

⁶ It is possible to locate this tendency in, for example, Weik von Mossner’s “Engaging Animals in Wildlife Documentaries.”

⁷ While there’s a long tradition of viewing description in this way it’s distinction from narrative has been contested by scholars like Harold Moshier, Jr.’s “Towards a Poetics of ‘Descriptized’ Narration,” *Poetics Today*, vol. 12, no.3, 1991, pp. 425-445. In addition, a number of works are increasingly drawing attention to the dynamism of description. See for example, Caracciolo et al. *Narrating Nonhuman Spaces: Form, Story, and Experience Beyond Anthropocentrism*, Routledge, 2022.

⁸ In her reality fiction, Field blends historical sources with fictional characterisation. Yet, many other examples of these types of strategies can be found in contemporary biomedical papers. See, Birke and Smith and Smith et al.

⁹ Thomas Nagel *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, 1989.

¹⁰ See also Collins (81), upon whose work Ulstein draws.

¹¹ In this instance, even the grammar positions the Strange Bird as the object of an action: “The storm had smashed you out the sky,” the Old Man says (19).

¹² For more on empathy for those who are similar to us, see Suzanne Keen, “A Theory of Narrative Empathy,” *Narrative*, vol. 14, no.3, 2006, p. 228, n.33.

¹³ Best and Marcus’ use of this locution is borrowed from Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass’ “The Materiality of the Shakespearean Text,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44 (Fall 1993): 255-83, 257.

¹⁴ I am not, of course, suggesting that animals be understood as mere abstractions or patterns. Rather, by emphasizing the perceptible bodily component of suffering, I explore whether corporeal resonance rather than the anthropomorphic depiction of a human-like mind might offer a more expansive means of acknowledging a shared capacity to suffer. In making possible links to ethics, I am guided by the work of Ralph Acampora, for whom the inclusion of nonhuman animals in moral communities should not be based on privileged human capacities like “self-reflection” and “intellectual intuition.” Instead, Acampora argues that “we may ground moral compassion for other animals in the sensation of sharing carnal vulnerability” (236, 237).

¹⁵ Shakespeare *King Lear* 4.6.140.

¹⁶ According to Lynch, the transformation from “naturalistic” animal (or animal *as animal*) to analytic animal occurs when the animal is “sacrificed” and its bodily matter becomes data which offers itself to human interpretation (272-9).

¹⁷ In *The Hungry Soul*, Leon Kass argues that “we do not become the something we eat; rather, the edible gets assimilated to what we are...the edible object is thoroughly transformed by and re-formed into the eater” (25-6 in Bennett 48-9). In his essay “Intentionality,” Jean Paul Sartre links interpretation and the alimentary, arguing that interpretation is a somewhat narcissistic act which “trap[s] things in its web, cover[s] them with a white spit and slowly swallow[s] them, reducing them to its own substance.” Cited in David Detmer *Sartre Explained: From Bad Faith to Authenticity*, Open Court, 2008.

¹⁸ For more on the material-gaze in an early modern, interspecies context, see Phillip Armstrong “The Gaze of Animals” (2011). For more on ‘haptic vision,’ see Haraway’s *When Species Meet* (2007), Maria Puig de la Bellacasa’s *Matters of Care*, and Laura Marks’ *The Skin of the Film* (2000).

¹⁹ Weik von Mossner also calls this experience “embodied simulation” and argues that it occurs when “the description is vivid enough to cue a strong embodied simulation in the mind of the listener or reader” (80). However, throughout this article I give preference to the Deleuzian concept and language of the “affective encounter” because it speaks more directly to general bodily experience than Weik von Mossner’s concept which seems to locate the physical response in the mind.

²⁰ While a number of cognitive literary scholars have turned to neuroscience to consider the relationship between action-related language and bodily simulation, to my knowledge, more work remains to be done in extrapolating research on the relationship between adjectives and affect. Research in marketing and advertising may prove useful in this regard.

²¹ According to Ngai, disgust has an “urgency” which refuses “the indifferently tolerable” (345).

²² As Fritz Breithaupt contends, “Sadism is not the product of a lack of empathy but rather emerges from the wish for its intensification” (*Dark Side* 2).

²³ See Lynch (pp. 277-78) for an example of animal resistance in the laboratory. For more on animal resistance as a “form of political agency [...] not grounded in an innate capability or worth,” see Dinesh Wadiwel’s “Do Fish Resist?” (2016, 200).

²⁴ See also Caracciolo “Strange Birds.”

²⁵ For more on affective entrainment, see Lisa Ottum and Megan Watkins.

²⁶ Here, I favor the term “transspecies” over “interspecies” because it suggests a move *beyond*—rather than between—species difference.

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