

Empathy and the Anthropocene

Jessica Phillips

ABSTRACT: This article seeks to show how literary texts can expand, challenge, and advance existing understandings of empathy. In this article I discuss Australian author Jennifer Mills' novel, *Dyschronia*. Through excursions into the thought of Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricoeur I demonstrate how *Dyschronia* can reconfigure existing ideas about what it means for humans to empathise with nonhuman animals.

KEYWORDS: empathy, Anthropocene, Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricoeur, *Dyschronia*, nonhuman studies

“Anthropocene” is the term geologists have given to our present epoch; an epoch “in which human disturbance outranks other geological forces.”¹ Animal Studies scholar Danielle Sands has argued that the Anthropocene exposes the “contingency and precarity”² of the human as it is with “shock not mastery”³ that humans confront and are confronted by the extent of their impact on “landscapes and ecologies.”⁴ In addition, the Anthropocene confronts humanity with their own animality, in that they are dependent upon the health of the same landscapes and ecologies that sustain nonhuman life forms. In this sense, the Anthropocene brings into focus how humans are both similar and different to nonhuman others. Despite the prefix “Anthropo” or human, anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing claims that the widescale destruction of the natural world is not due to our species biology, but rather is a direct consequence of modern

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capitalism—a system in which “techniques of alienation”⁵ have turned “both humans and other beings into resources.”⁶ Both Sands and Tsing claim that the Anthropocene is replete with contradictions. For Sands, the Anthropocene is on the one hand “informed by a messiah complex”⁷ which asserts that only we can undo the damage we have created, whilst on the other, it both foregrounds and undercuts a human power that could bring on our extinction. Tsing agrees. For Tsing, the term implies both the triumph of the human while unmasking the mess we have made of the planet.⁸ Humans are therefore similar to nonhuman life in that their survival is threatened by the possibility of ecological collapse. Humans differ, however, in their power to do something concrete to forestall and prevent that collapse. In this sense, relations of similarity and difference are central to navigating the Anthropocene, and so too is empathy. Sands engages with the usefulness of empathy in confronting the problems posed by the Anthropocene in her discussion of Karen Joy Fowler’s fictional account of primate relations in *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*.⁹ Throughout her inquiry she demonstrates that the dominant modes of anthropomorphism and empathy are inadequate for destabilising the ways of relating with nonhuman others that have “long licensed cross-species abuses”¹⁰ and characterise the Anthropocene moment. Too, Sands shows that literature has a “key role to play”¹¹ in transforming these modes of thinking and relating with nonhuman others.

In the chapter “Anthropomorphism and ‘the Ends of Man’ in The Anthropocene” Sands draws links between empathy and anthropomorphism and argues that Fowler’s novel demonstrates, like empathy, that “anthropomorphism is a clumsy but useful tool for understanding kinship and difference.”¹² The lesson of the novel is, she writes:

not that we can transcend the strangeness of other animals but rather that we are also strange, that this odd mixture of distance and kinship which characterises human relationships with nonhumans parallels the relationships they have with themselves.¹³

Through complexifying anthropomorphism and demonstrating how Fowler both invokes and questions it, Sands claims that the kind of “empathetic anthropomorphism”¹⁴ developed by Fowler may undermine an anthropomorphism grounded in the “ethical superiority”¹⁵ and “political sovereignty”¹⁶ of the human and instead, become a tool for prompting concern for nonhuman others. Fowler’s “empathetic anthropomorphism” does this precisely because it offers ways of navigating relations of similarity and

difference, or “kindship and difference” as Sands writes, without collapsing the tensions that these relations give rise to. Sands concludes her discussion of Fowler’s text by gesturing towards the importance of world building for reconfiguring the dominant modes of empathy and anthropomorphism. She claims that “Fowler both advocates a model of cross-species co-authorship and highlights the political potential of fiction; in our fictional co-imaginings, we conceive of, and begin to bring forth, other worlds.”¹⁷ Here, Sands suggests that the world building potential of fiction can reconfigure ways of relating to and with nonhuman animals. She also implicitly signals to entanglement, but does not examine how it may also be considered, like anthropomorphism, an empathetic tool for engaging with nonhuman others in the worlds conceived of and brought forth by literature.

ENTANGLEMENT

Entanglement is a useful concept for examining empathy in the context of the Anthropocene as it concerns the worlds made and inhabited by multiple species, both human and nonhuman, while considering how relations of similarity and difference interact within and across these worlds. Sands argues that entanglement “has become the primary mode for thinking about subjectivity and agency within animal studies.”¹⁸ Sands cites Rosi Braidotti’s account of the post human subject and claims that it epitomises entanglement. For Braidotti, entanglement exists “within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated but still grounded and accountable.”¹⁹ In Braidotti’s view, entanglement is fundamentally concerned with difference, not as an obstacle to overcome, but as the state of our relations with nonhuman others. The subject relates across, with, or we might say despite difference, but also recognises that differences do not absolve one of their responsibility to another. If anything, entanglement foregrounds one’s ethical responsibility to nonhuman others by forcing a recognition that one is “distinct yet always co-constituted by the relationship one is in.”²⁰ In this way, entanglement is an ethical mode that is underpinned by the interaction between relations of similarity and difference.

This aligns with Jacques Derrida’s claims about what it means to be ethical. For Derrida, agonising over “two contradictory imperatives”²¹ is what it means to be ethical. “Agonising” with contradictory relations of similarity and difference is what entanglement may achieve, for it does not collapse or resolve the tensions that relations of similarity and difference give rise to, but wrestles

with and allows them to remain in opposition. Despite these tensions, however, entanglement insists that we still have an imperative to act. Entanglement is therefore a useful ethical frame for navigating the problems posed by the Anthropocene because it foregrounds the need for action despite the muddled space between relations of similarity and difference. And because the Anthropocene brings into question relations of similarity and difference, entanglement emerges as a useful frame through which to approach the question of “what to do?”

Entanglement is also a helpful notion to examine human and nonhuman animal relations in literary texts because literary texts conceive and call forth worlds for readers to inhabit. The “co-constructing” central to notions of entanglement and the “co-imagining” Sands argues is central to literary texts, together suggest that literature is a key site to both witness entangled relations between humans and nonhuman animal subjects and to become entangled with the worlds evoked by the texts themselves. Put differently, through engagement with the worlds projected by literary texts, one bears witness to relations of entanglement, whilst also becoming an entangled participant.

The concept of entanglement seems also to be implicit in Derrida’s reflections on his cat looking at him naked in *The Animal that Therefore I Am*. Here, Derrida recognises that his cat has a point of view regarding him, but what precisely the cat sees and thinks when it “observes me frontally naked”²² is lost to him. He is flooded with embarrassment at being observed, admits to “trouble repressing a reflex of shame”²³ and goes on to contemplate whether animals are cognisant of their own nakedness. The cat “doesn’t feel its own nudity”²⁴ and “neither feels nor sees itself naked”²⁵ but in saying so, he acknowledges that he may be wrong, for “at least that is what is thought”²⁶ but not necessarily how things are in the cat’s subjective experience. This last claim suggests that the cat inhabits a world and has a point of view regarding him that he cannot access. And perhaps this is it: Derrida ties himself in knots contemplating this point of view, which suggests that “reducing a subjective phenomenon”²⁷ to “an objective, physical theory”²⁸ necessarily abandons the point of view one is trying to access in the first instance. His reflections suggest that both he and the cat are affected by one another, shaped and co-constituted, yet the precise ways in which either is shaped and affected are not open to one another’s view.

The utter inaccessibility of the point of view of a nonhuman other, and indeed any human other including oneself, and the difficulty humans face in accommodating that point of view in language does not mean that this other

does not have a subjective experience that is “fully comparable in richness and detail to our own.”²⁹ That is, utter inaccessibility does not equate to the utter absence of a point of view that is complex and richly detailed, as far as we can know. Derrida’s thinking adds to the concept of entanglement and shows that the state of being shaped and co-constituted by others is fundamentally about negotiating relations of similarity and difference, but not with the aim of collapsing differences or reaching for a shared ontology, or a *something in common*. Entanglement seems to be an ethical way of connecting that is open to affecting and being affected, without any claims to understanding “what it is like for the experiencing organism.”³⁰

Entanglement is not a new concept. Gruen argues, for example, that feminist care theorists such as Carol Adams, Josephine Donovan, and Marti Kheel have claimed since the mid 1980s that humans are “inextricably entangled with other animals.”³¹ Also writing in the mid 1980s was feminist scholar Donna Haraway, who in “A Cyborg Manifesto” speaks to cross-species entanglement. Here, she argues that the figure of the cyborg has much to teach us about entanglement:

[A] cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point.³²

For Haraway, “joint kinship with animals and machines” requires the negotiation of “partial identities” and “contradictory standpoints.” Her vision therefore insists on the need to navigate relations of similarity and difference. She paints this relationship as a “struggle” thereby suggesting, like Derrida, that it is an agonising, frustrating relation with an other that is always, already partial and inaccessible. This struggle is ultimately fruitful *and* ethical for it can reveal new possibilities and expose expired ways of being (“dominations”) that do little to correct the mess of the Anthropocene.

Entanglement as I have shown, is not a case of either or; proximity or distance. It is as Lori Gruen claims, a “way of connecting”³³ that emphasises kinship and interdependence as well as distance. For entanglement acknowledges that humans are not the only beings capable of world building and that the worlds made and inhabited by different species may not always speak logically to or reveal themselves to each other. World building and entanglement

are linked and for that reason, entanglement is a helpful frame for examining the unfolding of empathy within the worlds built and projected by literary texts.

The role of stories in articulating entanglement is emphasised by Tsing in *The Mushroom at The End of The World*. Tsing argues that “life requires the interplay of many kinds of beings”³⁴ yet to truly capture this interplay, simplistic “progress stories”³⁵ must be traded for complex narratives that depict “open ended assemblages of entangled ways of life.”³⁶ Tsing’s field is anthropology, and the complex narratives she speaks to are non-fiction ones; those written by ecologists and biologists. Her thinking on the potential for non-fiction narratives to depict polyphonic assemblages, that is, to outline moments of “harmony and dissonance”³⁷ and “multiple temporal rhythms”³⁸ can apply to literary texts.

Tsing argues that narratives of human progress establish the “driving beat”³⁹ and in doing so assume nonhuman rhythms into their own. These narratives, she writes, obscure the ability to notice and attend to “the divergent, layered and conjoined projects that make up worlds.”⁴⁰ For world building is not limited to humans:⁴¹

Beavers reshape streams as they make dams, canals and lodges; in fact all organisms make ecological living places, altering earth, air, and water. Without the ability to make workable living arrangements, species would die out. In the process, each organism changes everyone’s own world. ... Humans shape multispecies worlds when our living arrangements make room for other species. This is not just a matter of crops, livestock and pets. Pines, with their associated fungal partners, often flourish in landscapes burned by humans; pines and fungi work together to take advantage of bright open spaces and exposed mineral soils. Humans, pines and fungi make living arrangements simultaneously for themselves and for others: multispecies worlds.⁴²

Tsing’s thinking has implications for the application of an entangled *kind* of empathy to the Anthropocene because she too shows that relations of similarity and difference constitute our relations with nonhuman others. In her view, nonhuman others build and inhabit worlds, as do we. We are similar in this regard. Our point of view regarding each other’s world, however, is obscured. We shape each other’s world, and Tsing here attends to the observable ways in which humans and nonhumans indeed influence one another, however, these observations fail to tell us anything about the lived experience of that world. It is one thing to acknowledge that nonhumans inhabit a world that differs from our own. It is quite another to attempt to inhabit that world. And it is through these

attempts at representing worlds other than our own that contradictions, and the “struggle” Haraway speaks to occur. Without this struggle between relations of similarity and difference, “contradictory imperatives” or “harmony and dissonance,” as Derrida remarks, there can be no ethical response to the crises of the Anthropocene. Navigating this tension through the complementary lenses of worlds and entanglement may be one way to confront the problems posed by an epoch that itself is replete with contradictions.

Gruen has already developed what she terms “entangled empathy” as a theoretical construct. It is worth examining her thinking before I make a case for how I will use the concept of entanglement to discuss empathy in Jennifer Mills’ novel *Dyschronia*. Gruen’s entangled empathy is attentive to both similarity and difference. In defining the term, Gruen claims that through entangled empathy:

The empathizer is also attentive to both similarities and differences between herself and her situation and that of the fellow creature with whom she is empathizing. She must move between her own and the other’s point of view. This alternation between the first and third person points of view will minimize narcissistic projections, a worry associated with some forms of empathetic engagement ... in moving between the first and the third person perspective, one genuinely attempts to understand how the one being empathized with experiences the world and one tries to gain as much knowledge of the ways she lives as is possible. It also usually involves accepting the best explanations, even if they may ultimately be flawed.⁴³

In Gruen’s view, entangled empathy does not attempt to collapse differences between self and nonhuman others. It attempts, like animal studies scholar Kari Weil’s critical anthropomorphism, “to open ourselves to touch and be touched by others as fellow subjects”⁴⁴ but stops short of “believing we can know their experience.”⁴⁵ It is important to highlight the use of “attempt” here by Gruen. “Attempt” implies and accounts for distance. It also implies that entangled empathy is a “struggle.” Gruen’s concept is therefore attentive to the difficulties one faces in accessing the point of view of another. That one “attempts” to understand, acknowledges how fundamental distance is to our relations with nonhuman others. It also suggests that entangled empathy is an ethical mode of relating to nonhuman others in a Derridean sense precisely because it is an attempt: one has an imperative to attempt to understand, even if that understanding is, and it will most certainly be flawed. “Attempting” seems to be the point. Gruen, like Haraway, emphasises that the alternation between

differing points of view is necessary for entangled empathy; here lies one of the crucial limitations of their accounts.

Considering perspective taking to be necessary for empathy is limiting because it sets the standard impossibly high, for there is no way to evaluate whether one has succeeded. Perspective taking is further complicated in the case of nonhuman animals who cannot speak a language we understand and therefore confirm for us whether we have got it right. It seems that Gruen's emphasis on the need to adopt the perspective or point of view of a nonhuman other is at odds with her insistence that through entangled empathy one *attempts* to understand the other. If emphasising and maintaining distance is key, adopting one's perspective seems to be ill suited to the task.

In Tsing's view, entanglement is attentive to *worlds*, not perspectives or points of view. Considering empathy through the prism of worlds, not perspectives, shifts the emphasis away from trying to uncover *what it is like* to be another, and instead moves towards a more distanced relationship that touches on what is valuable, important and painful for another, which can be told to some extent through their actions, while remaining cognisant of the differences between self and others that make it impossible to access the subjective character of another's experience. Through inhabiting the world of another being, we are shaped, affected and co-constituted by them, in the same ways that Gruen argues occurs through entangled empathy, however, entanglement does not occur through inhabiting their point of view or perspective, but rather, through inhabiting their world. The prism of worlds is therefore attentive to difference in a way that adopting one's perspective is not. Literary texts are particularly well suited to examining entanglement because engagement with the worlds built and projected by literary texts is, as Sands alludes to, itself a kind of entanglement.

In *Time and Narrative*, French theorist Paul Ricoeur argues that the world of the text is not some hidden intention that lies "behind"⁴⁶ the text but rather it is what lies "in front of it as that which the work unfolds, discovers, reveals."⁴⁷ Ricoeur argues that literary interpretation is:

not a question of imposing upon the text our finite capacity for understanding but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self, which would be the proposed existence corresponding in the most suitable way to the world proposed. So, understanding is quite different from a constitution of which the subject would possess the

key. In this respect, it would be more correct to say that the *self* is constituted by the 'matter' of the text.⁴⁸

In Ricoeur's view, the self, the reader, is co-constituted by the matter of the text. One is reshaped and enlarged through engagement with the worlds projected and proposed, as is the case with entanglement. Entanglement, as I have shown, is the process of co-constitution through engagement with multispecies worlds. The self is affected and shaped through the "struggle" inherent in attending to relations of harmony and dissonance, or similarity and difference, and "the divergent, layered and conjoined projects that make up [human and nonhuman] worlds."⁴⁹ For Ricoeur, understanding does not occur through unlocking the subjective experience of another, or by assuming that such a feat is possible through adopting another's perspective from the impoverished position of one's own. Understanding, rather, occurs through attending to the lived experiences that literary texts unfold and reveal. In this way, engagement with the worlds proposed by literary texts is a form of entanglement. In the next section I will argue, like Gruen, that entanglement is a kind of empathy. I will extend Gruen's "entangled empathy" by attending to the lived experience of entanglement in Mills' *Dyschronia*. I will attend to worlds and not perspectives and through close reading, I will show how relations of similarity and difference and the tensions these relations give rise to are fundamental to entanglement, and subsequently, to empathy.

CEPHALOPODS AND ANTHROPOCENE EMPATHY

In the previous section, I demonstrated that relations of similarity and difference are central to the Anthropocene and are fundamental to an entangled form of empathy. In the context of the Anthropocene, similarity is evidenced in the threat of extinction human and nonhuman species collectively face, while relations of difference are asserted through the myriad ways in which multispecies worlds are impacted by ecological catastrophe. Difference is likewise evident in the distance between species worlds, which makes understanding another's experience of an Anthropocene world, as Haraway suggests, a "struggle" and something one can, and arguably must "attempt." I also argued that inherent in this "attempting" is an ethical mode of relating to nonhuman life because to attempt, is to be cognisant of distance, but also of the imperative to *try* to understand, even if one might never truly know *what it is like* to be another. In this present section, I will argue, through my reading of *Dyschronia* that literary texts can immerse readers in complex multi-species

worlds and in doing so, may foreground entangled relations. Here, I will argue that entanglement is a process of co-constitution, a way of connecting, in which humans and nonhumans are mutually shaped and affected by one another. In this way, it proves useful for thinking about nonhuman and human relations in the context of the Anthropocene. For the Anthropocene is a moment, this moment, in which “staying alive – for every species”⁵⁰ depends on “liveable collaborations”⁵¹ or the capacity to work, think and live across and with difference.

Jennifer Mills’ novel *Dyschronia* is set in a not too distant future and centres on a small, Southern Australian town, Clapstone. The citizens of Clapstone wake one morning to discover that the sea has disappeared, leaving behind a smell that is “baroque ... white noise, ... aggression”⁵² as “hundreds, maybe thousands” (D,12) of bodies decompose on the beach. The novel oscillates between the time before and after “the sea” (D,44). And for good reason. “The sea,” a kind of shorthand that enters the local vernacular three days after the event that “ruins everything” (D,15) becomes a time mark, an event so destabilising it takes “the place of clocks” (D, 44). Relations of similarity and difference, as opposed to similarity alone, I will show, are central to Mills’ novel. Indeed, relations of similarity and difference structure the novel’s major concerns about how to respond to the crises of the Anthropocene. Similarity and difference are central to the world of *Dyschronia* because they are shown to underpin the reality of Sam, the novel’s protagonist. I will begin by examining how Sam’s reality is constructed because it is shown to inform how she relates to nonhuman animals.

In the world of *Dyschronia*, Sam is both similar and different to the humans around her. From an early age, she begins to experience debilitating migraines which are accompanied by prophetic visions. Sam’s headaches lead her to experience time as multidirectional, as opposed to unidirectional and linear. Indeed, this multidirectional experience of time *is* her reality. Her reality tests the boundaries of her acceptance and her normality for she is at once “gifted” (D, 71) and “just a kid” (D, 14), while also demonised and labelled a “witch” (D, 86). Over time, she comes to occupy a kind of in-between or liminal state.

Sam’s first vision occurs at an age of dolls and prams, “a difficult age” (D, 25) according to her mother Ivy. Sam watches as “the other Sam” (D, 18) is propelled into a near future in which “a large, chocolate brown dog” (D,18) licks “her on the back of the neck” (D, 18) before disappearing around a corner. Days

later, Sam experiences a “warm feeling” (*D*, 23) for “she’d been here before, in this very scene” (*D*, 23). Confused, she re-experiences the events of her headache: “That’s when she felt a wet sensation on the back of her neck. As she turned, some part of her was pleased to find the right move to remember. She watched Milo bound away, an echo of himself” (*D*, 23). Sam’s distended experience of time is enlarged by the shifting temporalities of each chapter and the odd language she is chided for using as she attempts to explain her subjective experience to her mother. “That was the dog” (*D*, 25) Sam tries to tell Ivy. Her mother corrects what she believes to be Sam’s improper use of the definite article ‘the’ “That was *a* dog” (*D*, 25). “No, I mean that was the dog from the before headache” (*D*, 25) Sam tries harder: “Last...now” (*D*, 25). “What do you mean, last now?” (*D*, 25) Ivy quizzes, while dismissing her as being “silly” (*D*, 25). “The now before” (*D*, 25) Sam exclaims. “There’s only the one now, my love. But I know what you mean. Everybody gets it. You think you’ve seen something before, but you haven’t really. It’s called *déjà vu*” (*D*, 25). In this moment, it is clear that Ivy does not know what Sam means. Rather, Ivy reaches for some similarity between hers or a universal experience and Sam’s in an attempt to explain what is otherwise different and strange. She attempts to bridge distance and in doing so, enlarges the distance between them. Indeed, rather than relate with Sam as “the thing in itself”⁵³ Ivy relates to Sam as “other than”⁵⁴ herself. She sees, to paraphrase literary scholar Erica Fudge, what she is able and what she expects to see, what she has decided to see,⁵⁵ and what she perceives to be a dormant pathology: “She wondered, with a treasonous pang, whether her daughter was depressed, or maybe a bit on the spectrum” (*D*, 26).

Sam’s reality in *Dyschronia* is experienced as multidirectional and in this way, it defies and disrupts the illusion of order that linearity imposes on the disorder of the Anthropocene. Sam therefore inhabits a world in which chronology is drained of its connotations with hope. Sam’s world is a kind of anti-capitalist world, in this sense, because it is composed of “multiple temporal rhythms”⁵⁶ and not the linear narrative of unending progress that “capitalism entangles us with.”⁵⁷ Sam’s multidirectional reality *can* account for bad things. In the novel, it is her voice alone that believes bad things are already happening; bad things that are difficult, if not impossible to contemplate through an outlook that cannot navigate the tensions that arises from the clash between what is known and unknown or expected and unexpected. The townspeople, in opposition to Sam, can only accept bad things when it is too late. They rationalise their ignorance and allegiance to progress narratives through the hollow notion

that “on some level, though all the plans we made, we always expected something like this to happen to us instead. Something to go wrong, like the sea” (*D*, 32). Sam’s reality suggests that narratives that fail to accept that bad things are already happening, and fail to attend to multiple temporal rhythms, both human and nonhuman, are inadequate for navigating the complexity of the Anthropocene. Mills’ novel therefore sets two world views in opposition to one another. Indeed, the structure of the novel is such that Sam’s multidirectional narrative and in turn, her worldview is situated alongside the linear narrative of the townspeople. The two narratives occur concurrently, and their direct juxtaposition highlights the gulf between them.

Sam’s reality is a valuable lens for observing how relations of entanglement unfold between human and nonhuman animals in the text because her experience of time, being outside a progressive, linear “forward march”⁵⁸ generates space for “other temporal patterns.”⁵⁹ She is able to attend to other nonhuman species in a way that others restrained by the imaginative limits of unidirectional time cannot.

When Sam is a child sitting in the doctor’s office, half listening to another medicalised assessment of her headaches, she becomes mesmerised by a children’s book about cephalopods. Sam’s engagement with the book bound cephalopods offers a distinct way of being with and attending to difference while suggesting that anthropomorphism may be an ethical tool for relating across difference. “Sam traced the skin of the cuttlefish, tried to imagine its shine ... The animal’s eyes looked kind and sad ... Special cells they had, like traffic lights. Chromatophores, iridophores and leucophores” (*D*, 52-53). “A giant squid stretched across the page and glistened pinkly. The animal with the largest eye in the world, it said, and the eye gazed back at her, a black circle in a white, knowing whatever it knew” (*D*, 53).⁶⁰ Sam first observes her likeness to the cuttlefish. In doing so, however, her observations of its “kind and sad” eyes are cognisant of the fact that she is “looking” at the animal. The cuttlefish does not and cannot have a point of view regarding her, as it is a book bound creature, yet she makes an interpretation of the creature’s gaze with an awareness that she is in fact making an interpretation. She does not exclaim, for example, that the animal’s eyes *were* kind and sad. Rather, they “looked” that way. In this way, she engages with “what is individual and actual”⁶¹ or “the thing in itself”⁶² rather than the “concept” of the creature. This may also be evidence of an “attempt” at understanding. An attempt that ultimately produces the “best flawed” impression of *what it is like* to be a cephalopod. When Sam encounters the giant

squid a few pages later, she entertains the thought that its perception, experience, and knowledge of the world is different, but nonetheless rich and complex and in doing so, achieves what Derrida contemplates in thinking through his cat's point of view regarding him and what Friedrich Nietzsche declares to be a "difficult thing."⁶³ That is, "to admit to himself that the insect or the bird perceives an entirely different world from the one man does."⁶⁴ Sam recognises, like Derrida and Nietzsche, that whatever the squid knows is individual and particular, but also utterly inaccessible and vast: it knows "whatever it knows" in the same way that she knows what she knows, and while they will never know each other's subjective experience, or *what it is like* to be the other, they are still capable of shaping and affecting one another in ways that are not always, if at all, clear to the other. Sam's observations also hint at the limits of the human perspective while conveying something new about anthropomorphism. Sam remarks that the squid's cells looked like "traffic lights" (*D*, 53) and its shell, which "wasn't a proper bone at all ... looked more like a floatie" (*D*, 53). Sam uses metaphor in her attempts to understand and make sense of what she observes. In this way, she does not collapse the distance between herself and the squid, rather she maintains it. Ricoeur's theory of metaphor is a useful frame to unpick why this is the case.

Ricoeur argues that metaphor brings words into a relation, for instance "bone" and "floatie" or "traffic lights" and "cells" that cause contradictions, polysemy and friction to arise. He refers to this as a "clash"⁶⁵ between tenor (the underlying idea or the subject)⁶⁶ and vehicle (the object or idea whose attributes are borrowed).⁶⁷ In his view the metaphor does not offer reconciliation or a harmonic synthesis but maintains tension, or distance. Metaphor is therefore actualised in the tension that arises when tenor and vehicle (floatie and shell) clash. In Ricoeur's view, this tension, this distance is not an obstacle to be overcome, it is in fact the point. This tension is precisely what gives rise to polysemy—to multiple meanings. This tension is what generates the state of is-and-is-not that is fundamental to the metaphor. Ricoeur's theory of metaphor also suggests a new way of thinking about anthropomorphism.

For Sam, the squid "stretches" across the page, as it "gazes" back at her. In this moment, she perceives human attributes in the squid. This is what anthropomorphism does. Indeed, the word anthropomorphism, "Anthropo" from the Greek for human being and "morphism" meaning to exist in different forms, implies perceiving the human being in nonhuman forms and beings. Some critics, such as Sands, claim that a reconfigured anthropomorphism may undermine an

anthropomorphism grounded in the “ethical superiority”⁶⁸ and “political sovereignty”⁶⁹ of the human and become a tool for prompting concern for nonhuman others. *Dyschronia* may achieve a reconfiguration of anthropomorphism in the ethical direction Sands argues is needed in the context of the Anthropocene because anthropomorphism appears to be aimed at maintaining distance, not bridging it, while revealing the limits of human perception. Through anthropomorphism, humans can only perceive the human in the animal, not the animal in the animal. It is a tool that emphasises human lack, not power.

In this view, anthropomorphism can be viewed as part of the “struggle” or the “attempt” to understand and navigate nonhuman identities that Gruen and Haraway speak to because, at best, it can only achieve a best flawed explanation for difference. It may then be viewed as an ethical tool precisely because it maintains distance between self and nonhuman others.

Anthropomorphism is related to metaphor, not only, as John Berger claims, because of the roots of animal metaphors in ancient texts such as the *Iliad*, which, “without the example of animals”⁷⁰ certain “moments would have remained indescribable”⁷¹ but because it too, like metaphor is fundamentally a state of is-and-is not. The squid Sam observes is-and-is-not “stretching” in the same way that it is-and-is-not “gazing” back at her. It “is” because she is observing it stretching through her very human frame of reference. It is true for her in this moment. It “is-not” stretching however, because this is a human concept that she has applied to the squid. It cannot be stretching because she can never know this with certainty. The squid cannot confirm whether she has made the correct interpretation of its behaviour and in this way, anthropomorphism is shown to maintain distance, not bridge it.

Sam’s method of engagement with the cephalopods in the picture book also suggests that the classificatory terms humans impose upon nonhuman animals, such as “chromatophore” serve to enlarge, not minimise, distance. The difference between a scientific mode of engaging with nonhuman animals and the kind of entangled anthropomorphism that Sam displays is that science claims that in indexing nonhuman others we increase our knowledge about them, when in reality, as Berger notes, we push them further away.⁷² This is because indexation gives the illusion of understanding, when in reality, as Nietzsche argues in “Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense” these categories are not “universally valid apart from man.”⁷³ Sam’s mode of engaging with the book bound creatures, through a lens of curiosity and an entangled

anthropomorphism, may, when read together with Nietzsche, be viewed as somewhat “truer” than a scientific lens precisely because it is not claiming to be true. It is a richer mode of engaging with nonhuman animals as it engages a broader category of human faculties and does not construct categories and then point to those categories as proof of their existence (“look, chromatophores!”). Rather, an entangled anthropomorphism is shown to be a method of immersing oneself in complexity in a way that does not seek resolution of the tension that arises through the invention of categories as evidence of truth.

I have argued that Sam’s reality is largely one of entanglement and that this is directly related to her relationship to time. Sam’s relationship to time enables her to attend to multi species worlds and different temporal rhythms in a way that others cannot. The ethical implications of this world view are made manifest through her encounter with a long dead giant squid that is hauled onto the beach in *Clapstone*. When she encounters the squid on the beach, Sam engages her sense of smell, her vision and her hearing in ways that open her up to being co-constituted and shaped by the animal in ways that those around her do not. She does not push away difference, rather she invites it in. Her response to the smell of the animal is the first thing that differentiates her from the townspeople. “Most people had already covered their mouths” (*D*, 271) as they gripped the squid’s decaying frame and transferred it to the tarpaulin. Instead, Sam inhales the “complex odour” (*D*, 271) deeply “following an impulse to process the information before it was lost” (*D*, 271). The smell itself becomes a living thing as it morphs into a visceral sensation stretching “its tentacles around her face, pressing wetly into every orifice. Her ears were blocked by it” (*D*, 272). In this moment, smell becomes touch becomes sound as she alone attends to the squid’s “singing” (*D*, 272). This kaleidoscopic sense experience shows Sam opening all of herself up to being shaped and affected by the squid. She is porous in this moment and does not push these sense experiences away, but invites them in. She becomes, as Tsing writes, “contaminated”⁷⁴ by her encounter with the squid. This contamination, or “transformation through encounter”⁷⁵ alters her sense perception to the point where she alone perceives a kind of nonhuman animal music:

It hummed of its journey. It sang of becoming a ghost of itself in the water. Rising and rising from the deep, still self-propelling, but growing weak. Then riding up and down for a time without sinking, touched and tugged by whatever ate it from beneath. Backwards and forwards. The

gradual inclination towards death. Stripped of its pinkish skin until it was this yellow white and slippery thing (*D*, 272).

In a Tsingian sense, Sam “collaborates”⁷⁶ with the squid by opening herself up to being shaped and affected by its world. She reaches “across difference”⁷⁷ and in doing so notices and attends to the presence of a nonhuman world that is rich and entangled with her own. The squid’s song attends to observable details and evidently speaks to Sam’s imagining *what it is like* to be this squid. Its music, and the subsequent representation of its music through language, is therefore limited in its ability to distil the subjective character of its experience and in this way, echoes Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous claim, that even if an animal could speak, we could not understand it.⁷⁸ The squid is singing, yet it remains an enigma. The very presence of its song, however, suggests that it has something to say and that Sam is open to hearing whatever that is, even if she cannot grasp it. Difference in this sense is not an obstacle to Sam’s connecting with the squid, indeed it is what makes connection possible.

Sam’s willingness to be “contaminated” by her encounter with the squid is contrasted with the townspeople’s refusal to acknowledge the presence of multispecies worlds and the ways in which these worlds, including their own, shape and affect one another. Her neighbours become disgusted as the smell of the creature “fills every corner of the bar” (*D*, 276). The bar owner Jean pleads to have the squid removed. What is both fascinating and troubling in this instance is that the smell emanating from the dead squid is not entirely nonhuman; there are traces of humanity in it too. “Asphalt” (*D*, 271) chimes Curdie once the squid has been stored temporarily in the cool room of the town’s bar. “That’s what it’s like. Like a new laid road” (*D*, 276). The smell of asphalt emanating from the decaying squid reveals that it has absorbed the human made asphalt, “or somehow synthesised” (*D*, 277) it. The smell of the asphalt emanating from the squid presents an opportunity for the townspeople to recognise and attend to the ways in which their world shapes and affects the world of this nonhuman other. Rather than open themselves to being shaped and affected by the smell they express disgust, which closes down their capacity to recognise their state of entanglement with the squid.

Upon encountering the squid on the beach, Curdie seeks out confirmation from others that the squid smells wretched. “Weird smell,” (*D*, 273) he exclaims. “That smell” (*D*, 275) “Are they supposed to smell like that?” (*D*, 275). The townspeople’s disgust coupled with their desire to expel the abject squid has

important implications for my discussion of empathy. These implications become clearer when read together with Julia Kristeva's writing on abjection.

Kristeva argues that "refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live."⁷⁹ For her, "the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life."⁸⁰ It is however, "not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules."⁸¹ Kristeva's thinking suggests that abjection involves a kind of tension. That which is abject reveals that in order to live, one must thrust aside that which disrupts systems and order. One can choose to thrust aside that which arouses disgust, as the townspeople do here with the squid, or one can engage with the tension that a confrontation with the abject creates. The townspeople's disgust is not limited to the squid's decaying body, their disgust derives too from the reflected presence of the human within a nonhuman being. The presence of the asphalt in the squid violates the borders between humans and nonhumans and disrupts the idea that the two are thoroughly separate beings. In the common-sense use of the term, the squid has become contaminated by humans, and this contamination, presents an opportunity for contamination in a Tsingian sense; that is, to be transformed through an encounter with difference. This confrontation is a significant moment in which transformation through Tsingian contamination could occur for the townspeople as it provokes tension between relations of similarity and difference. Rather than engaging with the tension these relations create, the townspeople push the opportunity away, quite literally by having the scientists dispose of the squid like garbage.

The kind of empathy emerging within Sam for the giant squid, an entangled form of empathy, prevents her from thrusting aside that which causes disgust and abjection. This form of empathy expresses itself as a willingness to be changed, shaped, and affected by encounters with nonhuman others, for similarity and difference are, as Sands has argued, central to the experience of disgust.⁸² For it is not that Sam is *not* disgusted. She can "hardly breathe" (*D*, 272) in the squid's presence. Yet for her, disgust presents an opportunity to be changed, affected, and co-constituted. She welcomes the disruption of order and the breaching of boundaries that disgust sets in motion. Conversely, the townspeople thrust aside the giant squid and dispose of her because they have no frame of relation that incorporates both similarity and difference. Their blindness to their own always, already state of entanglement, to the possibilities of connecting to and being shaped and affected by nonhuman others can be

summed up in Curdie's last words on the squid to Sam: "I never thought I'd see something like that" (*D*, 277). In this moment, Curdie denies the squid's capacity to return his look, to see him through the prism of its own world and to have a point of view regarding him. The squid exists to be seen and observed and catalogued, not to do the looking. In saying so, he denies the existence of the squid's world and in turn, his own influence on that world. This is in contrast to Sam who even in death, acknowledges the squid's "huge dead stare" (*D*, 272) returning her gaze. An entangled form of empathy as it unfolds in *Dyschronia* through the reality of Sam, shows that when humans deny the existence of nonhuman worlds, they also deny the extent of their influence on those worlds. This is why an entangled form of empathy, as I have argued unfolds in *Dyschronia*, has an ethical valence. To be ethical in a Derridean sense, is to wrestle with "two contradictory imperatives."⁸³ In the case of worlds, one is limited by the prism of their own world-view, yet, as *Dyschronia* suggests and the Anthropocene demands, one also has an imperative to recognise and attend to the existence of multi-species worlds, even if through attending one never quite understands *what it is like* to inhabit that world.

JESSICA PHILLIPS is a PhD candidate in Literary Studies at Monash University.

NOTES

¹ Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at The End of The World*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 19.

² Danielle Sands, *Animal Writing: Storytelling, Selfhood and The Limits of Empathy*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 67.

³ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴ Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷ Sands, *Animal Writing*, 68.

⁸ Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 19.

⁹ Sands, *Animal Writing*, 68.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹² *Ibid.*, 83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

- 15 Ibid., 89.
- 16 Ibid., 89.
- 17 Ibid., 89.
- 18 Sands, *Animal Writing*, 10.
- 19 Rosi Braidotti, qtd in Sands, *Animal Writing*, 10.
- 20 Lori Gruen, "Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Approach to Animal Ethics" in *The Politics of Species: Reshaping our Relationships with Other Animals*, ed. Raymond Corbey and Annette Lanjouw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 225.
- 21 Jacques Derrida and Elizabeth Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow...A Dialogue*, trans. Jeff Ford (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 96.
- 22 Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 4.
- 23 Ibid., 4.
- 24 Ibid., 5.
- 25 Ibid., 5.
- 26 Ibid., 5.
- 27 Thomas Nagel, "What is it Like to Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review* 83, no.4 (October 1974): 437.
- 28 Ibid., 437.
- 29 Ibid., 440.
- 30 Ibid., 442.
- 31 Gruen, "Entangled Empathy," 224.
- 32 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Manifestly Haraway*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 15.
- 33 Ibid., 226.
- 34 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of The World*, vii.
- 35 Ibid., viii.
- 36 Ibid., viii.
- 37 Ibid., 24.
- 38 Ibid., 24.
- 39 Ibid., 21.
- 40 Ibid., 22.
- 41 Ibid., 22.
- 42 Ibid., 22.
- 43 Gruen, "Entangled Empathy" 226.
- 44 Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 20.
- 45 Ibid., 20.

⁴⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative Vol.II*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 84.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 84.

⁴⁹ Tsing, *The Mushroom and the End of the World*, 22.

⁵⁰ Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 28.

⁵¹ Ibid., 28.

⁵² Jennifer Mills, *Dyschronia* (Sydney: Picador, 2018), 13. *Dyschronia* will be referenced as *D* with page numbers cited in text.

⁵³ Erica Fudge, *Animal*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 128.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 128.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 130.

⁵⁶ Tsing, *The Mushroom at The End of the World*, 24.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁰ That Sam encounters cephalopods through books suggests that the kind of entangled empathy that emerges though the world of *Dyschronia* is not limited to “real life” encounters. Indeed, books are significant sites in which empathy with the nonhuman can and does emerge.

⁶¹ Fredrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense,” in *Epistemology: The Classic Readings*, trans. Daniel Breazeale, ed. David E. Cooper (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 186.

⁶² Fudge, *Animal*, 128.

⁶³ Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies,” 188.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 188.

⁶⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (Oxon: Routledge, 2003), 225.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁸ Sands, *Animal Writing*, 89.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 89.

⁷⁰ John Berger, “Why Look at Animals” in *About Looking* (London: Bloomsbury, 1980), 9.

⁷¹ Ibid., 10.

⁷² Ibid., 16.

⁷³ Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies,” 188.

⁷⁴ Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 27.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 28.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁷⁸ Cary Wolfe, "In the Shadow of Wittgenstein's Lion: Language, Ethics and The Question of the Animal" in *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*, ed. Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.

⁷⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 4.

⁸¹ Ibid., 4.

⁸² Sands, *Animal Writing*, 173.

⁸³ Derrida and Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow...A Dialogue*, 96.