

“Disabilities” and Trans-Species Connections in Luis Bernardo Honwana’s “We killed Mangy-Dog,” Paul Auster’s *Timbuktu* and Helen Humphreys’ *Wild Dogs*

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Abstract This paper implicitly engages with the homology of disability and animality as it brings together disability studies and animal studies in its analysis of three narratives with “disabled” characters. It suggests new ways of interpreting disability in relation to humans and dogs. Rather than promoting a humanist interpretation which celebrates the agency and autonomy of the individual, the essay argues for a posthumanist reading of common human-animal vulnerabilities via Cary Wolfe’s theory of trans-species shared being and via Ato Quayson’s theory of literary representations of disabilities. Embodied interconnections with a nonhuman animal “resist” representation as the stories extend human disability into other realms of being, both real and metaphysical. Trans-species entanglements in themselves are border-crossing balancing acts; as thresholds, they proffer conduits to a doubled immanence of human and nonhuman animal. Yet trans-species affiliations between people and dogs who are stigmatised engender a certain narrative of “nervousness” in the stories, all of which end tragically in the death of the characters, both human and animal.

Key words disability; animality; trans-species; literary; narrative

Non-fictional accounts of a “disabled” human deeply connected to a nonhuman animal recur in popular culture. In *The Horse Boy*, an alpha mare and the joy of riding improves the speech of an autistic boy to such an extent that his parents take him to Mongolia in the hope that his uncanny acceptance by horses, as well as visits to shamans, will heal him. In *A Street Cat named Bob*, James Bowen’s life is transformed from a solitary one of addiction and poverty in London by the ginger

cat he rescues and whose presence provides a “sheet anchor to reality” (227) in his withdrawal ordeal. The bi-opic *Temple Grandin* has recently brought Grandin’s life story to a wider public — her struggles against prejudice because of her autism and her extraordinary relationships with nonhuman animals because of her ability to “think in pictures.” Locally, an SABC documentary, *Distant Cousins*, features Kate Jagoe-Davies and the indigenous primates. Paraplegic after an adolescent diving accident, Jagoe-Davies was accepted as a member of the Pringle Bay baboon troop who visited her balcony daily en route to their foraging grounds. Because of her immobility, the baboons were entirely at ease in her presence, going as far as to groom her like a fellow-baboon.

These trans-species affiliations gesture to the possibility that humans who are physically or cognitively disabled may connect more directly with the nonhuman. Perhaps humans, like Temple Grandin, who are othered by society, even ostracised, are primed to form profound relationships across species — either from a desperate desire for connection or from a compassionate recognition of common vulnerabilities. Such bonds may be fruitful and sustaining for both human and nonhuman — as they were in relation to Jagoe-Davies and the baboon troop, vilified in the village for their foraging activities, and in relation to James Bowen and the stray Bob. For Rowan, the “horse boy”, being with horses opened the possibilities of his healing. Grandin’s unusual capabilities have ameliorated the experience of slaughter for cattle in a third of all abattoirs in the United States (Wolfe 128). The popularity of such narratives can be attributed to their potentially redemptive content about a “disabled” human in relation to an animal, and to their concomitant sentimental appeal.

The narrative texts in this paper are far from sentimental, and my reading will focus not on the triumphalism of “Supercrip” stories, which set “an impossibly high standard [that] other people with disabilities can’t reach” (Wheeler 557), with the added dramatic dimension of trans-species connections, but on representations of subjectivities constituted by the embodied vulnerabilities of both human and nonhuman. A conventional negative trope has disability and animality homologised. As Lennard Davis notes, “To have a disability is to be an animal, to be part of the Other” (8). While this homology may recur in the narratives, trans-species connections and the inter-meshing of the human self and the animal other constitute alternative spaces for the characters. Yet both human and animal remain vulnerable physically and socially. None of the narratives, unlike many of the popular non-fictional texts, celebrates such inter-connections as a kind of romantic merging or as a source of alternative empowerment for the disabled human.

Cary Wolfe suggests that animal studies and disability studies have much to offer each other as they both contradict the liberal justice tradition with its primary reliance

on the notions of rights; as Wolfe reminds us, “ethical standing and civic inclusion are predicated on rationality, autonomy, and agency” (127). Certainly, the narratives under discussion of disabled humans and their trans-species affinities with dogs gesture to posthuman epistemologies, as the reader is made hyper-aware of animals’ forms of knowing and interpreting the world. Yet, tragically, this cannot be sustained as the potential of trans-species relationships is foreclosed in all three stories. Death, which is an undeniable contradiction of the humanist subject, features centrally in the texts under discussion: the very title “We Killed Mangy-Dog” describes the action of the short story; the eponymous space in *Timbuktu* refers not to the famed African city but to a realm after death, and in *Wild Dogs* the cognitively impaired Lily is shot by hunters along with many members of the feral dog pack she has joined. The dogs themselves, in all three narratives, suffer from disabilities in further affinities with their humans: both Mangy-Dog (he has no other name) and Mr. Bones in *Timbuktu* are physically challenged by disease and poverty; the feral dogs in *Wild Dogs* might have the freedom of living without strictures but they suffer from the unaccustomed stress of hunting for their food and some are undermined by disease and injury — both of which are disabling.

The very term “disability” is a contentious one as current debates in disability studies attest, and as theorists move away from liberal humanist constructions. Lennard Davis suggests that disability, like impairment be regarded as an “unstable category”; only then can these categories “transcend the problems of identity politics” (271). In his essay on integrating disability studies and ecocriticism, Matthew J.C. Cella suggests, in relation to what he calls “the ecosomatic paradigm,” that bodies and the natural world are not discrete, that they “are not just conterminous but continuous with each other” regarding this merging as a source of empowerment (585). Elizabeth A. Wheeler, in her critique of the “unexamined ableism in ecocritical discourse,” argues that people with disabilities should not be represented as further from nature than those who are able to physically participate in it (553). She stresses the paradox that vulnerabilities may include their own strengths, that “accomplishment” may involve recognition of one’s own “limitations” (566). For Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, because we all evolve into a state of disability as we age, the very concept of disability is “perhaps the essential characteristic of being human” (524). Simi Linton, on the other hand, is impatient with the notion that “everyone is disabled in some way” (520) and is critical of the inadequacies of linguistic formulations which cannot address subtleties of the “disabled-nondisabled configuration” nor what she terms “the formulae of disability and impairment” (519). In a literary context, Garland-Thomson contends that “the blind, mad, lame, crippled, and unusually embodied have fired the imagination and underwritten the metaphors of Western literature. From Sophocles

to Toni Morrison, disability confers distinction on protagonists and drives narrative” (523).

Like Garland-Thomson, Ato Quayson stresses the universality of disability in literature “suggest[ing] that we consider the plot of social deformation as it is tied to some form of physical or mental deformation to be relevant to the discussion of all literary texts” (22). In *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*, Quayson proffers a masterly analysis of literary representations of characters regarded as disabled or impaired. For Quayson, “nervousness” surfaces in the structure and language of novels on the level of character, text, and the (nondisabled) reader because the aesthetic cannot seamlessly incorporate ethical issues which collate with disability (15-19). Further, this dis-ease, Quayson maintains, is redolent of the nervousness surrounding the disabled in “reality” (19). Significantly, for my argument in this essay, Quayson proposes that “[d]isability returns the aesthetic domain to an active ethical core that serves to disrupt the surface of representation” (19). Further, for Quayson “disability is a marker of the aesthetic field as such,” because in its representation it encapsulates ethics as well as drawing attention to the dividing line between the “real” and the “metaphysical” (22). Along with the sublime, he argues, it “inaugurates and constitutes the aesthetic field” and like the sublime, disability elicits language and narrativity even while resisting or frustrating complete comprehension and representation and placing itself on the boundary between the real and the metaphysical (22).

How much more does an embodied interconnection with a nonhuman animal “resist” representation as it extends human disability into other realms of being, both real and metaphysical? Trans-species entanglements in themselves are border-crossing balancing acts; as thresholds, they proffer conduits to a doubled immanence of human and nonhuman animal.

If neither Quayson nor Garland-Thomson theorizes how a narrative might shift when a nonhuman animal features as a significant character along with the disabled or impaired human, Quayson’s sense of the “active ethical core” may be further extended in novels where animals feature centrally in the narrative in trans-species relationships. My concern in this paper, to analyze literary intersections of disabilities and animalities, is congruent with Garland-Thomson’s imperative to “reimagine” or “resymbolise” disability (525, 524) especially in relation to what she terms madness, as well as an attempt to extend Quayson’s construction of disability in my close reading of the Mozambican short story “We Killed Mangy-Dog” by Luis Bernado Honwana and the North American novels *Timbuktu* by Paul Auster and *Wild Dogs* by Helen Humphreys. These fictional narratives have the human characters profoundly connected to nonhuman animals, as they foreground deep affiliations between

cognitively disabled humans and their dogs. Their imagining of the subject, not in humanist terms but in ways which incorporate connections and vulnerabilities, is echoed in Cary Wolfe's particular emphasis on the "shared vulnerability" of humans and animals (140). Wolfe insists that we think beyond constructing service animals, like guide dogs, as merely instrumental in the quest for the disabled human to be seamlessly incorporated into the liberal social formation. Instead, he advocates that we acknowledge an "irreducibly different and unique form of subjectivity," one which is neither *Homo sapiens* nor *Canis familiaris*, neither "disabled" nor "normal," but something else altogether, a shared trans-species being-in-the-world constituted by complex relations of trust, respect, dependence, and communication (141).

Wolfe's conceptualising of an inter-related form of subjectivity is powerfully convincing with regard to imagining cross-overs between human and nonhuman animals which contradict notions of disability and normality. In the texts under discussion the trans-species beings-in-the-world do not live within conventions of animal service or seamless mutuality; instead, they exist in the contingent with an edgy openness. Grosz suggests that "becoming animal" involves risk-taking (174); similarly, a disabled character's longing to become inextricably connected with an animal may involve a distancing from the society which ostracises them. All the characters, human and animal, discussed below are pathologised within the narratives for what Braidotti calls "categorical otherness (zoomorphic, disabled, or malformed)" (526). They are labelled variously, as "not all there" (Isaura), "mad as a hatter" (Willy G.), having "some level of retardation" (Lily). The cognitively disabled characters in these narratives are socially stigmatised: Isaura for not coping at school and for loving Mangy-Dog, Willy G. for his schizophrenia and living on the streets, Lily for being inarticulate and apparently mistreating Dog. The dogs they relate to are also stigmatised: Mangy-Dog in the eponymous story and Mr Bones in *Timbuktu* are street dogs lacking health and beauty, Lily's dog, named simply Dog in *Wild Dogs* lives with the feral pack of dogs who are perceived as a threat by urban-dwellers and farmers alike. The roles that these canines play in the stories do, of course, vary. They could potentially be read as symbolising the constraints under which the ostracised humans have to live or as signifying forms of their animalised madness. My reading will, however, analyze a number of recurring tropes which confirm common human-animal vulnerabilities — trans-species embodiment, language, stigma, and death — and how these tropes impact on the modes of narration and to what extent "aesthetic nervousness" manifests. For Davis, the "hegemony of normalcy" is confirmed by almost all literary texts which could account for the recurrence of deaths, both human and animal, in the narratives under discussion (10).

Forms of Impairment

The categorizing of disabilities is, of course, problematic in its negatively limited construction of subjectivities. In these narratives, however, such fixed categorizing of a physically disabled, cognitively or psychologically impaired character is multifaceted and often deconstructed within the narrative, with the broader society most often guilty of negative stereotyping. Characters who are closer to the disabled person, as well as extra- and intradiegetic narrators tend not to fix the disabled person in a sedimented identity; the self-definition of the disabled characters themselves may also reveal unacknowledged complexities. Like Quayson, I will be using “disability” and “impairment” equivalently, although, as he points out, the latter “refers to the specific physical or cognitive deficiency that leads to a reduced capacity to fully actualize all aspects of one’s life” and the former “to the socially regulated parameters that exacerbate the effect of the impairment” (3).

In *Timbuktu*, Willy Gurevitch assumes that the name of Willy G. Christmas is after Santa Claus, as an “incarnation of the Buddha” (28), speaks to him from the television set late one night. Willy has recently returned to his mother’s Brooklyn apartment after a spell in “the loony bin” (20). The combination of Willy’s family history, his psychological instability and an excess of drugs he “smoked ... snorted ... or shot ... into his veins” (19) as a student culminated in his “schizo flip-out of 1968” (13); the subsequent hospitalisation, shock therapy and psychopharmacological intervention meant that “he was never quite the same again” (13). He lives on the streets except for a few winter months each year in his mother’s apartment. Nearly eight years before the present time of the narrative, Willy acquired Mr. Bones as his guardian, but now the dog himself feels vulnerable at the prospect of life without Willy.

As Willy dies on the streets of Baltimore, the dog is a “nervous wreck” (79). Mr. Bones is disadvantaged by his appearance which renders him unappealing to potential adoption. He is a “hodgepodge of genetic strains ... and to make matters worse, there were burrs protruding from his ragged coat, bad smells emanating from his mouth, and a perpetual bloodshot sadness lurking in his eyes” (4). After Willy’s death, when he has to fend for himself for the first time, he is acutely aware of his lack of capabilities and his physical impairments. Rather than being an “athletic” dog who could hunt birds, he has become a “soft, civilized creature, a thinking dog” (111), worrying about being killed for Chinese restaurant fare.

Mangy-Dog, who lacks a sustained human relationship, is also disadvantaged on the streets. Mocambique, a colonized nation at the time, is the setting for “We Killed Mangy-Dog” a short story written in the 1960s and narrated by the young adolescent

Ginho, who is black. It thematises hyper-masculinity and its attendant dangers: a gang of boys are assigned the task of shooting a severely ill street dog who is known only as Mangy-Dog. Like Mr. Bones, Mangy-Dog himself is physically disabled — emaciated and covered in sores. He is constantly “trembling” and his gait odd as he “sway[s] his head to and fro like and ox, and take[s] such crazy steps that he looked like a rickety old cart” (75). While Ginho is disturbed by his very vulnerability and the power of his gaze, it is Isaura who is more attached to the dog, caressing him and feeding him her school lunch. Ginho rationalises “[b]ut then Isaura was crazy — everybody knew that” (79). The girl is victimised and isolated by the teacher who tells the pupils that “she was not quite right in the head” (79) and by her peers, particularly the girls who encircle her and chant repetitively “Isaura-Mangy-Dog” (79) as though the girl and the dog share subjectivity — or lack of it. Honwana illustrates connections between disabilities and other inequalities: Ginho, mocked by the gang for being a “shit of a black” (108) and nicknamed Toucinho or Porky, strikes up an alliance with the ostracised Isaura because they both care about the dog who is to be sacrificed. At least the cognitively impaired character is supported by a compassionate ally who sees beyond social prejudice and relates, if not entirely openly, to his putative friend.

In *Wild Dogs*, attitudes to Lily, a brain-damaged young woman, are almost universally ambivalent. The novel is polyphonic, with separated sections for each character’s first-person narration, but Alice is the protagonist and the most protracted voice, beginning and ending the narrative. A group of ill-assorted people assemble every evening at the woods just outside town in the hope of retrieving their dogs who have, for various reasons, joined a pack of dogs led by a wolf-cross. Alice describes Lily as a “tiny girl in her twenties,” justifying the juvenile appellation “because she’s got something wrong with her, some level of retardation that keeps her young and guileless as a child” (11). Lily, when asked, is unable to identify the breed of her dog, whom she simply calls “Dog” and whom, she insists she cared for, in spite of her parents’ claim to the contrary which motivated them to dump her dog in the woods. Lily is doubly stigmatised: her body is covered in burns incurred when she rescued her baby brother from a house fire she had unwittingly started, and her mind “lost some brain function” in a botched skin graft operation after the fire.

When Lily takes the others on the walks she did with Dog, the adolescent Jamie who has lost his pitbull mocks her illogicality and castigates her for “[d]og abuse” (21). She had walked her dog very speedily through a child’s playground; Alice assumes “we are all glad for Dog, living in the woods and not having to circle a bench fifty times each morning” (21). Because of this lack of empathy for Lily, nobody notices when she goes missing on a reconnoitring expedition in the woods. Her death, after she has gone feral, could even be attributed to this lack of caring.

Embodiment, Language, Stigma, and Death

On a very basic level, deep intertwined connections between human and nonhuman may counter, or potentially compensate for, the human and nonhuman loneliness of being stigmatised and potentially outcast. Isaura in “Mangy-Dog” is effectively an outsider at school and her interaction with the eponymous dog is judged by her classmates and by the teachers as signifying her “craziness.” Also judged as other because of his colour and being overweight, Ginho is complicit with the currency of hyper-masculinity, even as he is torn ethically because of the planned killing of Mangy-Dog and Isaura’s suffering. After the boy is goaded by the gang, into which he so longs to be incorporated, into shooting the ailing and trembling dog, he hears Mangy-Dog “scream like a person” and then “whimpering” (108). That Ginho cannot differentiate whether the sounds emanate from Isaura, now hugging the dog, or the dog himself, dramatizes their trans-species connection, as well as animalising the disabled girl. Ralph R. Acampora’s notion of “symphysis” is useful in this regard. He defines it as a “jointly held form of bodily consciousness” (114) across species, stipulating that it holds “an ontological and moral dialectic of difference and similarity” (114). Further, for Acampora, vulnerability and compassion intersect in a human’s “symphysical awareness of animal vulnerability” (128).

Honwana foregrounds Ginho’s sense of Isaura’s embodiment as he pulls her off the dog’s body and explains manically, why it is better ethically to shoot the animal, even as he fears the dog’s gaze. She “moaned and went limp all over” (112) as Ginho drags her out of the line of fire but, symphysically, and unlike Ginho, she is able to meet the gaze of the dog with her “wild eyes” (112). Her brave statement of attempting to protect the dog’s body with her own is denied as both she and the dog are feminised in their victimhood by the actions of the gang. Ginho, in a situation fraught with fear and violence, is bullied further by Quim, the gang leader; he urgently grabs the cognitively impaired girl from the body of Mangy-Dog so that the boys can shoot the whining animal, whom Ginho might have already wounded. Ginho himself is overcome with terror as the gang begins to shoot and he and Isaura fall together with the bullets flashing over them. Isaura feels bodily what Mangy-Dog is experiencing as her “body was stiff and jerked at every explosion” (114). Even after the dog is dead the shooting continues hazardously and crazily; still the two lie together as though bodily contact can compensate for their loss.

During this trauma their solace is a kind of inter-embodiment, an extension of their subjectivities across genders and abilities, to compensate for the violent destruction of their trans-species affiliation with Mangy-Dog. Ginho, in a heightened state of panic, is acutely conscious of the girl’s body which seems part of nature itself

especially when she takes her final leave and runs through the trees: “For a long time we could hear the noise of her dress tearing the micaias” (115). Isaura then disappears as a character from the story, although in the final scene back at school, Quim reports derogatorily that she had asked her father to give all of them a “hiding” (116) for shooting Mangy-Dog. While the naïve narrator says nothing, the conversation reveals that he is miserable. Quim hypocritically comforts him and then cajoles him to pass him a crib note in the forthcoming test. Ginho is seduced in his desire to fit in, vulnerable as he is in his blackness and in his apparent “porkiness,” to conform to majority perceptions of normalcy. In his “nervousness” about being seen to be aligned with disability and femininity, he bolsters the ego of the gang leader, even if it means cheating in his school work and betraying the alliance with Isaura.

The ethical core of the story alerts the reader to the social responses to Isaura’s unnamed cognitive impairment, and to the affinities between her, the dog and the narrator. Further, her figuring as the ethical centre in the shooting of Mangy-Dog, to use Quayson’s terms, “disrupts the surface of representation.” Because Ginho never passes judgment on the action and never articulates his feelings, it is incumbent on the reader to interpret the ethics of the story and to understand his emotions through his embodied action. Tragically, in the closure of the story, Ginho is entirely alone without the friendship of the street dog or Isaura. He is still isolated in spite of the attentions of Quim, who merely wants to use Ginho’s intelligence, with the school dynamics indicative of the prejudice the narrator will encounter in the broader colonial society. Like Mangy-Dog, Ginho lacks a sanctuary, either at school or at home — his mother is depicted as a powerless figure sitting on a straw mat on the threshold of their house who cannot prevent Ginho from appropriating his father’s gun and bullets.

Timbuktu reflects retrospectively on the family life of Willy Gurevitch and the inability of his immigrant parents to find any homeliness in North America. As sole survivors in their respective families of the holocaust, their life in Brooklyn was a “posthumous” one, “an interval between two deaths” (16). Their withered existence exemplifies “creaturely life,” a concept which Eric Santner explains as one which opens a new way of understanding how human bodies and psyches register “the states of exception” which punctuate the “normal” run of social and political life. “Creatureliness” will thus signify less a dimension that traverses the boundaries of human and nonhuman ways of life than a specifically human way of finding oneself caught in the midst of antagonisms in and of the political field (xix).

As he grows up, Willy rejects his parents utterly, for their foreignness in North America, for being Polish, for being alien, even as his own psychological instability seems to hinge partly on their traumatic memories. Garland-Thomson notes that “bodies are shaped by their environments from the moment of conception” and

how we “register history on our bodies” (524). Thus Willy registers the history of the holocaust and his parents’ past and present suffering in his being. In New York, his lawyer father has to work at a menial job, his mother once a music teacher is a housewife. His father alternates between silences which last a week, and rage; when his mother is widowed young, she “knew the world was out to get her” (18-19). Also paranoid, Willy challenges the world rather than retreating from it, as she does, so that he is formed “as malcontent, as rebel, as outlaw poet prowling the gutters of a ruined world” (19).

Imagery of the holocaust recurs in the novel as though Willy himself becomes one of the “husk-men,” according to Primo Levi, a characterisation of men in the death camps (Santner xvi). Willy leaves his mother’s apartment for the streets because of her reaction to his tattoo of Santa Claus. She goes “wild, erupting in a tantrum of tears and angry belief” (27) partly because tattooing is against Jewish law, because of the tattooing of Jews in concentration camps and because she believes that Willy has sold out to Christians whom she equates with Hitler. In her mind, the tattoo is tantamount to having a swastika on one’s body. Further, Willy warns Mr. Bones about “the word shelter” (5) where he would be subject to “a lethal injection or a dose of poison gas” (5) which recalls the Final Solution. After Mr. Bones is traumatised by being lost and shot at in a North Virginia field, Willy berates him in a dream for his self-pity; his mother, he relates, was “hunted down like a dog, and she had to run for her life. People get treated like dogs, too, my friend” (150).

In her constant sense of fear, Lily in *Wild Dogs* is also treated badly. Members of the group who have lost their dogs all identify with Dog’s suffering rather than with Lily’s when she demonstrates how she and Dog circumambulated a bench. In the car on a group excursion, Alice narrates how she “starts humming and rocking back and forth in her seat. ‘Where are we?’ she says every couple of minutes, and we all ignore her question after responding the first few times” (33). Once the group get out at an old train station, Lily is “all agitated and jumpy” in her anxiety that a train is coming (35):

She’s always afraid that she doesn’t understand what’s going on, or that she is the only one who does. Always there is danger. Always she has to flee the burning building. She’s never able to be at ease. “It’s all right, baby,” I say to Lily. I reach out and take her hand. “I’ve got you.” (35)

Intent on her nascent relationship with Rachel, however, Alice lets this caring slip. When the group are in the woods subsequently, hoping to encounter their dogs, it is, for Alice, “easy to ignore Lily” (49) as she stands some distance away, then

waves and disappears. Only when her parents become aware of her absence is Lily reported missing, but they sexualize their daughter in their interpretation that she met a boyfriend every evening, not knowing that she went daily with others who had lost their dogs, to search for the pack. Aesthetic nervousness recurs for the reader, who is unsure how to read the clues to Lily's disappearance in the woods and who is confronted by the characters' lack of compassion. Lily's mother, on hearing of her daughter's disappearance, seems unruffled and, suspecting that Lily had committed suicide, assigns it to "God's will" (52). Alice and the others who have lost dogs rationalise that it would be better not to tell the police in case they shoot members of the feral pack. For the reader, who has come to trust Alice as the main narrator, her lack of compassion for the disabled Lily, in Quayson's words, "disrupt[s] the surface of representation." In the meantime, Lily, without Dog, is as lost to the group as the "wild" dogs themselves until she locates the pack. With them, she can resume her trans-species shared beingness in relation to her own dog.

The polyphonic *Wild Dogs* has human voices speaking individually as serial narrators, but Mr. Bones, Willy's companion and guardian on the streets, is the predominant focaliser in Timbuktu. Auster has been criticised for the attendant anthropomorphism and the faux-naïf language (Begley), yet this narrative strategy denotes an ethical choice in which the reader is party to the fictionalised anxieties of a highly intelligent street dog who lives with a psychologically unstable man. Auster also playfully undermines the issue of animals' apparent lack of access to any discursivity, be it human or their own. An experiment that Willy had heard about at college to get a dog to type "Ollie is a good dog" (102) is gently ridiculed. Mr Bones, however, understands human language with some sophistication and because his "master" is a "logomaniac" (7) Mr. Bones had "earned the right to be called the world's leading authority on the subject" (18) of Willy G, according to the extradiegetic narrator. At times the point of view of the dog seems indistinguishable from that of the narrator, particularly in connection with Willy's history. We are also subjected to Willy's rants in direct speech which go on for pages, and some of his truly bad poetry which sounds like the worst of the Beat poets.

Because Willy is represented through the perceptions of a dog who does not judge him for being cognitively impaired, the "ethical core" in relation to a disabled character lacks the aesthetic nervousness that a more conventional representation of a psychologically impaired man living on the streets would elicit. Indeed, much of Mr. Bones' idea of Willy is rendered humorous: the dog believes that "[h]is master was a man with the heart of a dog" (36) because of his unconventionality and his commitment to travelling and living rough. Through Willy's winter-long project to create a Symphony of Smells for Mr. Bones, we are alerted to what Cary Wolfe terms

the “animal sensorium” (130), as Willy acts on his desires to create an art work for dogs based on smell. But the art work fails utterly — Mr. Bones is unimpressed as he regards “the whole world [as] a symphony of smells” (53), and Willy’s marketing attempt is disastrous. Uncle Al, who owns a novelty shop in Coney island, and whom, Willy had hoped, would admire his “invention,” is brutal: “‘You’re out of your skull, Willy,’ Uncle Al said, ‘you’re fucking bonkers, you know that?’ and promptly shooed him outside with his garbage bag of stinks and smells and collapsible cardboard labyrinths” (145-46).

Willy adores Mr. Bones, regarding him as an angel and a spiritual avatar: “How else to interpret the celestial pun [of dog/god] that echoed in his mind night and day?” (43). Auster refuses the patronising attribution of spiritual wisdom to the cognitively impaired or the trope that disability teaches the able-bodied gratitude. Instead, he constructs Willy’s psychological disability within racy, illogical discourse where the voice of the extradiegetic narrator echoes that of Willy himself as well as the inner voice of Mr. Bones, whose sensibilities and knowledge of the world derive, mostly, from Willy’s perceptions. Willy wants to style himself a “saint,” attempting to be kind and selfless, rescuing a drowning girl, a man being mugged. But he is far from saintly:

Mental mishaps dogged him, and whenever the pinball machine in his head speeded up and went tilt, all bets were off. How could a man of his ilk propose to don the mantle of purity? Not only was he an incipient lush, and not only was he a bred-in-the-bone liar with a strong paranoiac bent, he was too damn funny for his own good. (30-31)

If the reader is seduced and entertained by Willy’s pyrotechnical verbiage, certain “nervousness” does obtain within the narrative on the part of other characters who may encounter Willy as a “bedraggled, demented pain in the ass” (32).

The lack of care on the part of a supremely wealthy nation for the psychologically vulnerable is undeniable but Willy’s vagrant life which is represented as vibrant and stimulating from a canine point of view hardly seems deprived. Willy’s death on the streets of Baltimore, and Mr Bones’ subsequent survival strategies underscore their vulnerabilities, however. Willy death ostensibly from TB judging from his symptoms, leaves Mr Bones alone and unprotected in a city he does not know. The dog is well aware of his vulnerability to being taken to the pound where he will be killed. He takes up with the young schoolboy, Henry Chow, whose father runs a restaurant (Willy had always warned Mr. Bones about Chinese restaurants and how dogs were consumed there). Mr. Bones, now named Cal after a baseball player, sleeps concealed in a box at night and is fed too liberally with rich foods. The summer idyll comes to

an end when Henry has to return to school. Too scared to tell his father about the “best friend [he’s] ever had” (137) he berates himself for being a “retarded piece of shit” (137) as though lack of courage signals disability. Chased by Mr. Chow, the terrified dog runs until he ends up in North Virginia where he is adopted by a family, but when they go on holiday and he is lodged in the boarding kennels he becomes mortally ill.

For Mr. Bones, Willy is never a singular, unified subject, and the narration mirrors this in his intertwining with the perceptions of the dog. After Willy has died, he exists beyond death in the mind of Mr. Bones and in the dog’s vivid dreams. When Mr. Bones is housed at the kennels and a seriously ill dog, a false Willy appears, “vengeful and sarcastic...a devil Willy, a Willy bereft of all compassion and kindness” (209). It is a hallucination which recalls Willy’s fear that Santa could morph into Satan, but Mr. Bones is comforted by a subsequent dream in which Willy is his old self and ushers in the dog’s spiritual future. Willy tells him he will not have to be anxious when “the time comes” (221) for him to go to Timbuktu. Mr. Bones is incredulous:

You mean dogs are allowed?

Not all dogs. Just some. Each case is handled separately.

And I’m in?

You’re in.

Don’t kid me master. If you’re joking now, I don’t think I could stand it.

Believe me pooch, you’re in. The decision’s been made. (221-22)

After this dream, Mr. Bones, like a Keatsian poet feels sympathy for nearby sparrows and chickadees “not as nuisances but as fellow creatures” (223) but this epiphany does not divert his bodily feelings of weakness and illness.

Still, he has managed to escape from Dog Haven and encounters a highway which manifests as “a spectacle of pure radiance, a field of overpowering light” (226). He is inspired at the thought that stepping onto the huge road will transport him to Timbuktu, where he will meet up with his beloved Willy “where dogs talked as equal to men” (226). Heaven is not ineffable but clearly delineated in his mind as a “land of words and transparent toasters [which Willy had hoped to invent], in the country of bicycle wheels and burning deserts” (226). He convinces himself that he was not “proposing anything as vulgar as suicide. He was merely going to play a game that any sick and crazy old dog would play. And that’s what he was now ... [a] sick and crazy old dog” (226). Ultimately, Mr. Bones enlists the persona of Willy as he is about to die; in the game of dodging the car, the beauty lies in its paradox, for “[t]he moment you lost, you won” (227). As he courts his death, Mr. Bones imagines a return to his

trans-species connection with his beloved “master.” Unusually, in the fictions of trans-species beings examined here, the nonhuman animal is the consistent focaliser who signals, constantly, his absolute commitment to such an affinity. Through the death of Mr. Bones, the disabled dog unites metaphysically with his cognitively impaired, beloved human companion. The novel itself engages with the metaphysical in its representation of the telepathic connections between Mr. Bones and Willy G., and in the recurring trope of *Timbuktu*, even as the ethical core of the novel confirms Mr. Bones’s inability to exist without Willy and their trans-species affiliation.

In *Wild Dogs* by Helen Humphreys, the stigmatised and brain-damaged Lily dies, but unlike Mr Bones who orchestrates his death, she is entirely victim. Like Isaura, she can only find sanctuary in a canine world, where she expresses her bodily feelings for a dog in spite of finding herself in a hyper-masculinised space of gun-toting men. The anxious and frail Lily has become a trans-species being in reality now that she lives with a pack of dogs in the woods. The group of people with dogs whom they have lost to this pack share such a profound ambivalence to Lily that when she disappears they neglect to contact the authorities (“Everyone will be worried, and no one will care” (112), Lily intuits), a decision they justify because they fear that the police will shoot the dogs in search of her. In the event, hunters are sent into the woods to dispatch the dogs who have, apparently, been attacking “livestock” (82). It is Alice who is the first person narrator of the scene where the hunters emerge from the woods. One man has the dead wolf hybrid, the alpha male of the pack, draped around his neck, as though he is always already fur. The last man carries Lily who has been shot in the head, a fate which Isaura escaped by pure chance. Lily’s body is covered in leaves which “swirl around us as she passes, each one perfect and over, each one a prayer we couldn’t speak, wafting down to clothe us” (84). Given the lack of care for the brain-damaged young woman when she was alive, the quasi-religious comfort-thinking is surely indicative of the characters’ guilt and nervousness in relation to Lily, whom they have failed to protect.

Subsequently in the narrative we are in Lily’s consciousness, a strategy that Humphreys has made more poignant and tragic because, chronologically, she has already been killed. The retrospective representation of her joining the dogs in the woods is, variously, fraught and idyllic, “real” and metaphysical. Initially she cannot distinguish who she is there to save — her baby brother from the fire, or Dog, but soon the dogs find her, swirling around her and protecting her. She becomes dog, reiterating the mantra “Lily is a dog” (114). As a trans-species shared being, she is at the centre of the pack when they sleep as they make a “knot” around her and “it feels good to be tied up with them so snug” (115). Lily also develops dog senses: she loses words, makes sounds like the dogs which “say as much as any words say” (117) and

becomes part of the forest with the frogs responding to her croaking. She moves away from the visual, a sense favoured within humanist identity, to a more refined and animalised sense of smell, touch and embodiment, where she is no longer dis-abled, no longer an outsider but lyrically embodies ferality:

I have smelt my body become as fragrant as the bodies of the dogs. I know fear smells like old blood and the tin sky that happens before a storm. I know the difference between living and dead flesh. I have smelt the world green again. (120)

When the men come into the forest, initially she “seem[s] to have lost [her] words” (121). The dogs attempt to protect her with their bodies but Dog is shot through the ear in front of her. She “opens her rusty voice” making, as she thinks, “a human word” (121).

Her greeting to Spencer, the hunter, is, however, pre-verbal, as he attests. His public excuse for shooting her is that he was not aware that she was human, but in his confessional narration he admits that he knew that Lily was not a dog. He refers to her as “it” and is revolted and threatened by her wildness, by her struggle to stand erect and by the fact that she “was waving and moaning and starting to come towards me. Then it made a screeching sound and I shot it” (133). Most of all, he is repulsed by what he judges as her assertive femininity, by her “ris[ing], snarling and defiant, staring me down” (136) and he confesses that he shot her “not because I thought she was a dog, but because I knew she was a woman” (136). As Lerita Coleman Brown points out, “[s]tigmatised people are needed in order for the many nonstigmatised people to feel good about themselves” (149). While Spencer is not aware, at this moment, that Lily is cognitively impaired, it is her failure to conform to normal, human behaviour which renders her eminently killable. In her disability and femininity she is rendered “part of the Other,” as vulnerable as any nonhuman animal in the face of human violence. In the ethical core of the novel, Lily is sacrificed, then, to notions of the normate and how it is proper for women to perform.

Conclusion

Aesthetic nervousness manifests in what Humphreys scripts for a character who is perceived as disabled socially, even as Lily is represented as adept enough to attain, on a realistic and metaphysical level, the existence of a shared trans-species being. But ferality is too edgy and too abnormal for both human and nonhuman animal for it to be sustained. Normalcy is also reinstated in the closure of “Mangy-Dog”: while a remnant of Isaura reappears in conversation between Quim and Ginho, she is as effectively excised from the story as she had been expelled from school due to her

learning problems. An “aesthetic nervousness” obtains, for Honwana cannot imagine an ending which would involve any recognition of Isaura’s compassion for Mangy-Dog, any incorporation and acceptance of her “craziness” or Ginho’s emotions, even though he has the extra-diegetic narrator beyond the naïve narrations of Ginho implicitly critique a colonial society with its dramatised prejudices against the black narrator, the cognitively impaired girl and their love for a street dog. In the closure of *Timbuktu*, both disabled characters are dead — the only possible milieu for their symphitic acknowledgment of each other is the metaphysical space of *Timbuktu*, which surely confirms the narrative’s aesthetic nervousness of disability and cognitive impairment.

All the writers are bound by an aesthetic nervousness which cannot imagine a lasting connection between a disabled or physically impaired human and a nonhuman animal who might also be disabled or impaired. Trans-species affinities may be sources of love and interconnection but not one prevails. Animals, it seems, may help a disabled human to bear stigma and cope better with the quotidian, but, ultimately, disability and impairment remain tragic and unchangeable. To reach to the ethical core of all these narratives is to be assured, however, that the sharing of trans-species being is, in itself, a potential source of joy, love and creativity, but its very groundlessness and vulnerability cannot hold within cultures which negate the nonhuman and those with disabilities.

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