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## Narratology beyond the Human

This essay uses Lauren Groff's 2011 short story "Above and Below" to explore aspects of a narratology beyond the human, considering how ideas developed by scholars of narrative bear on questions about the nature and scope of human-animal relationships in the larger biosphere. Bringing Groff's text into dialogue with the concept of "self-narratives" as developed by Kenneth J. Gergen and Mary M. Gergen, anthropological research on the ontologies projected by the members of different cultures, and ideas from literary narratology, I discuss how the structure and narration of Groff's story reveal a fault line between two competing ontologies in the culture of modernity, one parsimonious and the other prolific when it comes to allocating possibilities for selfhood across species lines. More generally, in addition to illuminating how a given self-narrative locates the human agent in a transspecies constellation of selves, a narratology beyond the human can assist with the construction of new, more sustainable individual and collective self-narratives that situate the self within wider webs of creatural life.

After the initial founding of the field of narratology in the 1960s and its systematization and consolidation in the 1970s and 1980s, scholarship on narrative over the last several decades has been marked by a resurgence of theory-building activity, enabled in part by analysts' engagement with ideas from other areas of inquiry. Cross-disciplinarity has driven – even constituted – narratological research from the start; but whereas the early narratologists, following a larger structuralist trend, looked to linguistics as their "pilot-science" for the study of stories, more recent contributions to the field have drawn on ideas from a variety of source disciplines, ranging from feminist theory, philosophical ethics, and cognitive science, to digital media studies, evolutionary biology, and ecocriticism. At the same time, scholars of narrative have expanded the corpus of stories – and broadened the range of storytelling media – on which these new, integrative frameworks for analysis have been brought to bear. The resulting proliferation of case studies across genres, periods, media, and cultural settings has both productively diversified and helpfully constrained research in the field; this double benefit derives from the way claims about narrative *tout court* must now be checked against attested storytelling practices in multiple fictional and nonfictional genres distributed over a constellation of media platforms, historical epochs, and cultural contexts.

Such, arguably, is the state of the art when it comes to narrative studies; or, to shift to the vocabulary of Thomas S. Kuhn (1962), the research situation that I have described thus far amounts to the normal science of contemporary narratology.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, much more paradigm-extending work of this sort needs to be done, given that theorists are still refining their methods for investigating narratives within (let alone across) particular genres and formats, and given too the constant innovation and renewal of the source disciplines from

which cognitive narratologists, analysts of narrative vis-à-vis questions of gender and sexuality, and students of visual storytelling, among others, continue to recruit concepts and models. But there is another important task for narratology in the twenty-first century. This task, more reflexive or metanarratological in nature, differs from the process of mapping out the explanatory reach of current paradigms for narrative study, or for that matter furthering normal narratological science by supplementing existing paradigms with new research frameworks of the same general kind. Instead, this other task for twenty-first-century narratology entails reassessing the place of scholarship on narrative within a wider ecology of inquiry, a broader system of values and commitments, taking stock of how stories and traditions for analyzing them relate to the norms, institutions, and practices that structure academic and other engagements with today's most pressing concerns, social, jurisprudential, environmental, health-related, and other.

The present essay uses Lauren Groff's 2011 short story "Above and Below" to outline an approach to narrative scholarship that, while continuing to leverage the invaluable gains of paradigm-extending work in the field, also brings into view alternative pathways for research and engagement – pathways that may lead to a re-envisioning and recontextualization of normal narratological science. More specifically, I explore aspects of a narratology beyond the human, considering how ideas developed by scholars of narrative bear on questions about the nature and scope of human-animal relationships in the larger biosphere.<sup>2</sup> Groff tells the story of an unnamed female protagonist who leaves behind the life she knew as a graduate student in literature at a university in Florida and who then experiences the vicissitudes of homelessness over a period of approximately eighteen months, no longer able to embrace what Kenneth J. Gergen and Mary M. Gergen (1997) would characterize as the self-narrative in terms of which she had previously made sense of her experiences.<sup>3</sup> By not using quotation marks to distinguish instances of speech and thought representation from narratorial reports, and by blending such reports with moments of narrated perception<sup>4</sup>, Groff creates maximal consonance between narrator and protagonist; the story thus stages, through a sequence of vignettes strictly focalized through the protagonist, what it is like to live in the aftermath of a self-narrative that has fallen into obsolescence. Further, in tracing out the lived consequences of the main character's having "chosen to lose" and said "goodbye to longing" (Groff 2011, 106) by the time the story begins, Groff's text suggests how it requires the creation of another, different account, an off-setting narrative, to register the loss or active rejection of a previously sustaining story of self.

It is not just the narrative of one self that is at stake here, however. Groff's text also reveals how fictional accounts can serve as a workspace for reconsidering – for critiquing or re-affirming, dismantling or reconstructing – narratives about human selves in a world in which selfhood extends beyond the domain of the human.<sup>5</sup> Scholars of story are well-positioned to contribute to a broader, cross-disciplinary investigation of how self-narratives are imbricated with as-

sumptions about humans' place within a more-than-human world. But a narratology beyond the human can take on another critically important task in this connection: not just analyzing how a given self-narrative locates the human agent in a transspecies constellation of selves, but also assisting with the construction of new, more sustainable individual and collective self-narratives grounded in this expanded sense of the self's relationality – of the self's situation within wider webs of creatural life. These new narratives can be viewed as more sustainable because they reintegrate the human self in a much larger community of selves than that recognized by dominant scientific, social, legal, and moral norms. In turn, stories in which selfhood extends beyond the human prefigure and help make possible ways of living on which the continued survival of the earth's entire biotic community arguably depends.

### Self-Narratives and Nonhuman Selves

Unlike texts in which nonhuman animals assume, from the start, a primary actantial or thematic role vis-à-vis their human counterparts (as in Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* [1877], Virginia Woolf's *Flush* [1933], Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* [1984-87], or Karen Joy Fowler's *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves* [2013]), Groff's narrative brings transspecies encounters and relationships into view intermittently. More precisely, as I discuss in more detail in my next section, human-animal relationships come to the fore at key junctures in the unfolding story, marking transition points in the protagonist's attempt to move beyond an obsolescent self-narrative. Thus, with the title of "Above and Below" linking issues of identity with the dynamics of relationality, the text highlights how humans' understanding of their relations to other kinds of selves takes on special salience when self-narratives come under pressure, or no longer find purchase at all. Reciprocally, the protagonist's recognition of her place within a world that extends beyond the human shapes how she goes about reconstructing the story of who – and what – she is. The text thereby demonstrates how narratives ostensibly centering on human protagonists can nonetheless raise important questions about the scope and limits of selfhood in a wider world of selves, nonhuman as well as human.<sup>6</sup>

As already indicated, I adapt the concept of self-narrative from Gergen and Gergen (1997), although research by other analysts such as Jerome Bruner, Daniel Hutto, Andreea Ritivoi, and Alasdair MacIntyre also informs my approach (see Herman 2013, 73-99, for a fuller discussion of this and other relevant research). In their study of "Narratives of the Self," Gergen and Gergen confer on self-narratives crucial psychological, interactional, and more broadly sociocultural functions. Suggesting that self-narratives result from persons' attempts "to establish coherent connections among life events" (Gergen / Gergen 1997, 162), they further argue that "although self-narratives are possessed by individuals, their genesis and sustenance may be viewed as

fundamentally social,” since such narratives are ultimately “symbolic systems used for such social purposes as justification, criticism, and social solidification” (ibid., 163; see also Ritivoi 2009, 27-36). In other words, “as the individual’s actions encounter varying degrees of approbation, [...] it becomes increasingly necessary for the individual to articulate the implicit narrative line in such a way that the actions in question become intelligible and thus acceptable” (ibid., 177). In addition to characterizing self-narratives as sense-making resources “constructed and reconstructed by people in relationships, and employed in relationships to sustain, enhance, or impede various actions” (ibid., 163), Gergen and Gergen situate these strategies for self-narration within a broader taxonomy of storytelling modes circulating in the culture, consisting of what they term stability narratives, progressive narratives, and regressive narratives. Gergen and Gergen base this taxonomic scheme on the assumption that the development of certain rudimentary narrative forms is favored by functional needs within the society. Stability narratives are favored by the common desire for the social world to appear orderly and predictable; progressive narratives offer the opportunity for people to see themselves and their environment as capable of improvement; and regressive narratives are not only entailed logically by the development of progressive narratives, but have an important motivational function in their own right. (ibid., 175)

Regressive narratives are bound up with progressive narratives in the sense that a story about the increase in oneself of valued traits such as steadiness and maturity requires a countervailing story about the decrease of disvalued traits such as youthful volatility. For its part, the motivational function of regressive narratives stems from the way they provide an impetus for efforts to counteract what such narratives sometimes portray as worsening conditions or circumstances, whether in one’s own life or in the world more generally.

Groff’s story brings into focus how Gergen and Gergen’s account can be extended and enriched with ideas from other domains of inquiry; the text also suggests how the very concept of self-narrative opens out into questions for a narratology beyond the human. For one thing, the ideas of stability, progression, and regression are situated at what might be termed a meso-analytic level. These plot contours need to be dovetailed with finer-grained methods of analysis that scholars of narrative have developed to trace trajectories of change in storyworlds. Such plot shapes also need to be linked to macro-analytic frameworks for studying how narratives at once reflect and help constitute broader norms concerning what sorts of event-sequences count as improvement or degeneration.<sup>7</sup> More importantly for my purposes here, Gergen and Gergen’s emphasis on the sociointeractional functions of self-narratives – their relational approach to the self as a construction to be worked out through socially embedded sense-making acts that situate happenings, achievements, and projects vis-à-vis a more or less persistent narrative line – needs to be reframed within a wider, transhuman conception of self-other relations. As Groff’s text suggests, who one is emerges in a space of selfhood that ranges beyond the human, whether a given self-narrative involves ignoring, denying, or embracing relatedness to the full range of selves taken to populate the world.

“Above and Below” thus indicates how scholarship on fictional and other narratives can be brought into dialogue with the comparative study of the various ontologies projected by different cultures, past and present. A narratology beyond the human, in other words, links up with what might be called the “ontological turn” in anthropological research<sup>8</sup>; by broadening the remit of possible-worlds and text-worlds approaches, among other domains within normal narratological science, narrative analysts can help map out the ontologies not just of the storyworlds associated with individual texts or genres but also of the cultures in which those texts and genres are embedded, and by which they are animated. At issue are more or less widely shared understandings of the kinds of beings that populate the world, the qualities and abilities those beings are taken to embody (including the capacity to have a perspective on events, among other attributes linked to selfhood), and how the beings included in various categories and subcategories relate to those categorized as human.

For example, Bruno Latour (1993) has shown how a notionally modern ontology – one that posits a divide between nature and culture, things and persons – is belied by complex networks spanning human and nonhuman actants (Latour 1993, 10-12; see also Descola 2013, 32). But whereas Latour’s account flattens out contrasts among animals and other sorts of actants that can be categorized as nonhuman (computational devices, built structures, geological formations), other theorists have zoomed in on human-animal relationships in particular and explored the way different ontologies allocate possibilities for selfhood more or less prolifically across the species boundary.<sup>9</sup> Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998), for instance, explores the ontology projected by Amerindian peoples, for whom “the world is inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, human and non-human, which apprehend reality from different points of view” (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 469). In accordance with a process that Viveiros de Castro terms “cosmological deixis,”

the Amerindian words which are usually translated as “human being” [...] do not designate humanity as a natural species. They refer rather to the social condition of personhood, and they function (pragmatically when not syntactically) less as nouns than as pronouns. They indicate the position of the subject; they are enunciative markers, not names [...] Amerindian souls, be they human or animal, are thus indexical categories [and] Amerindian ontological perspectivism proceeds along the lines that *the point of view creates the subject*; whatever is activated or “agented” by the point of view will be a subject. (ibid., 476-477)

Eduardo Kohn (2013) maps out a similarly prolific matrix for subjectivity and selfhood among a particular group of Amerindians – namely, the Quichua-speaking Runa in Ecuador’s Upper Amazon region. Kohn seeks to develop an “analytical framework that goes beyond a focus on how humans represent animals to an appreciation for our everyday interactions with these creatures and the new spaces of possibility such interactions can create” (see also Kirksey / Helmreich 2010); he suggests how for the Runa “all beings, and not just humans, engage with the world and with each other as selves – that is, as beings that have a point of view” (Kohn 2013, 4). Accordingly, if perspectives, ways of experiencing the world, “exist beyond the human, then we humans are not the only selves in this world” (ibid., 72).<sup>10</sup> Rather, the very concept of self,

and hence the narratives used to bring the self's experiences into relation with a storyline constructed through processes of interaction, must be situated within a more or less expansive "ecology of selves" (Kohn 2007, 4; Kohn 2013, 16-17), whose membership criteria will vary depending on the ontological commitments involved.

In what follows, returning to Groff's narrative about a protagonist caught between an obsolescent self-narrative and an as-yet-unimagined storyline that might accommodate a different way of living, I adapt Latour's emphasis on the contest of ontologies within the ostensibly singular cultures of modernity. "Above and Below," I argue, dramatizes the protagonist's movement away from a restricted to a more inclusive ecology of selves, exposing a fault line between parsimonious and prolific allocations of the possibility for selfhood beyond the human. This fault line can also be described in terms of the contrast between anthropocentric and biocentric perspectives on the world; at issue are perspectives positing a hierarchical separation between humans and other species, on the one hand, and perspectives assuming a fundamental continuity across human and nonhuman forms of life, on the other. Groff's text registers two-way causal effects flowing between the breakdown of the protagonist's self-narrative and her growing recognition of her place within a more-than-human world. In this way, the story traces mutations in the concept of selfhood brought about by a rejection of anthropocentric geographies of the self; such geographies assign humans a position *above* other forms of creatural life, while gapping out experiences located *below* the imaginary elevation of the human.<sup>11</sup> The protagonist's intermittent encounters with animals punctuate phases of her movement away from an over-restrictive ontology that curtails or obscures her relational ties to a wide range of relevant others, suggesting possibilities for biocentric becoming within an expanded ecology of selves.

### **Reframing Relationality: Self-Narratives and Biocentric Becoming in "Above and Below"**

In a way that partly harmonizes with Gergen and Gergen's emphasis on the social embeddedness of self-narratives, Groff portrays the protagonist as taking the measure of her current situation by comparing it against a now-defunct narrative line, in terms of which she had once organized her ongoing interactions with others, her understanding of past conduct and relationships, and her hopes for the future. The ghostly presence of this inoperative storyline makes itself felt from the start, as the protagonist, extending her arm through the open car window, drives away from the university town where she used to live:

[S]he could almost see her hopes peeling from her palm and skipping down the road in her wake: the books with her name on them; the sabbatical in Florence; the gleaming modern house at the edge of the woods. Gone. (Groff 2011, 107)

Similarly, the opening references to the protagonist's ex-boyfriend, the bookshop owner who calls her used books "worthless," and the eviction notice

on her apartment door all point to a narrative vector that has become palpable through its absence. More generally, Groff evokes this obsolescent story of the self by alluding to the relationships, practices, and institutions in which it once flourished, but from which the protagonist has, by the beginning of the text, chosen to distance herself. Groff's account thus intersperses scenic narration of the character's experiences of poverty and homelessness with analeptic shifts to prior contexts in which she had once been a very different self. These contexts include her relationship with the mother of her former boyfriend, "a soft-haired, hugging woman" from whom she expects a phone call that never comes after the break-up (*ibid.*, 108); her engagements with literary works she once admired ("the Goethe, the Shakespeare, the Montale. The sun was bleaching it all to dust" [*ibid.*, 110]); the former friends sitting at a table in a coffee shop who, though they had complained about being too poor to buy lattes, had "a kind of wealth you don't know you have until you stand shivering outside in the morning, watching what you used to be" (*ibid.*, 114); "the ghost of the professor [whom] she'd been" and whom she must summon in order to speak authoritatively to a police officer; and even the childhood stuffed turtle stolen from her ransacked and vandalized car. Anticipating a subsequent analepsis that reaches back even farther in time – one evoking difficult family relationships in the context of which the protagonist's self-narrative as an academic may have emerged as a compensatory strategy (*ibid.*, 109) – the first part of Groff's story also includes a telephone conversation between the main character and her mother, who is married to a domineering spouse and on painkillers for "chronic idiopathic pain" (*ibid.*, 108).

Interwoven with these references to a former life, fractured community, and obsolescent storyline, however, are moments in which the protagonist glimpses her place within another, wider community, transhuman in scope and opening up new narrative vectors leading to a different future. This expanded ecology of selves requires reframing Gergen and Gergen's idea of relationality, because it suggests how shifting to an ontology that is more prolific in allocating possibilities for selfhood also entails a rethinking of self-other relationships. In this alternative ontology, the others to whom human selves are accountable, and in dialogue with whom their self-narratives take shape, now include nonhuman beings who share the capacity to experience the world from a particular perspective on events. The structure of Groff's narrative, featuring animals who serve as gatekeepers at key transition points during the protagonist's journey away from an abandoned community, through relative isolation, toward a re-configured, cross-species collective, mirrors the process by which the main character disentangles herself from a reactive, defensive self-narrative and moves toward a new story of the self as one living creature among others, embracing new possibilities of biocentric becoming. This structure also underscores the difficulty of dis-inhabiting an ontology with which one has become familiar, and re-inhabiting the world otherwise.

Over the course of the narrative, the protagonist oscillates between fearful disavowal and open acceptance of her membership in this larger ecology of

selves.<sup>12</sup> For example, as she packs up her camping equipment while leaving her apartment, the equipment reminds her of the time she and her ex-boyfriend had tried camping out on the Suwannee river in Florida but found themselves “petrified by the bellows of bull gators” (Groff 2011, 106). Yet the protagonist, in vacating her former life, is herself “slithering out from underneath” a mountain of student debt (*ibid.*, 106), like one of the alligators or snakes repeatedly mentioned in the text – the animal metaphor in this instance arguably emanating from the character rather than imposed by the narrator, given the highly consonant mode of narration used by Groff. At another key transition point, the protagonist, moneyless and hungry, ventures to town with a view to seeking out support from services for the homeless – moving farther away from the storyline in terms of which she had once made a claim for self-sufficiency. The fountain at the center of town where she searches for coins has the design of a frog spitting up water, and from the side of the fountain “she sat like a second frog on the edge of the fountain, hunched over her hunger” (*ibid.*, 109).

Fearful disavowal again comes into play, however, when the protagonist stumbles upon the homeless camp later in the story, taking the first step toward joining a different community – a community of the disempowered, the marginalized, the unnoticed. The camp happens to be situated near the bike path “where she and her ex, once upon a time, had taken long, leisurely rides to see the alligators glistening on the banks of the sinkhole ponds. It was the dark of the woods, thick with Spanish moss and vines that looked from the corners of her eyes like snakes. She felt a new upwelling in her, a sharp fear, and tried to swallow it” (*ibid.*, 115). But later, just before the main character further solidifies her ties to a new community by living in the “squat” whose residents collectively earn enough money to pay the utility bills and buy food by selling items that have been thrown away, she again aligns herself with a nonhuman other. The protagonist recalls the amount of waste there is when students move out from dormitories and sneaks onto campus in search of food: “She felt ratlike on campus, scuttling from shadow to shadow. If anyone she knew saw her, if anyone smelled her” (*ibid.*, 117). Similarly, having just arrived at the Prairie House, the protagonist becomes alert to her position within a new ecology of selves. As she meticulously scours the kitchen, her habit of cleaning throughout the narrative perhaps serving to indicate her attempt to clear the way for a different story of self, the protagonist observes that

the moon had risen over the prairie and shot the hummocks with shadow. A small creature was moving at the edge of the lawn, and in the house she could hear the others sleeping, their small movements and breath. She was alert, as she hadn't been in years [...]. (*ibid.*, 118)

This new alertness to nonhuman as well as human others had been prepared for in part by Euclid-Euclean, the epileptic cleaner of bars and restaurants whom the protagonist meets earlier in the story, and who serves as kind of mentor figure, a guide who points the way from a parsimonious to a more prolific ontology. Having criticized the university students he encounters, re-



marking that they “get sillier and sillier each damn day, filling up those heads with tweeters and scooters and facebooks and starbooks and shit” (ibid., 113), Euclid-Euclean continues:

This land, he told her, is full of living twits and unsettled spirits, both. The spirits were loud and unhappy and filled the place with evil. All them dead Spanish missionaries and snakebit Seminoles and starved-to-death Crackers and shit. He, Euclid-Euclean, come down from Atlanta near on four years back and got infected with the spirits and they were inside him and he couldn't find his way to leave. (ibid., 113)

As he tells the protagonist “about his talking dog when he was a kid, or [describes] his moments of illumination, when the world slowed and the Devil spoke in his ear until he was chased away by the brightness that grew inside [him] and bathed the world in light” (ibid., 114), Euclid, true to his namesake, takes on the role of a cultural geometer, redrawing the boundaries between the past and present, imagined and real, self and other. He thus affords access to an alternative ontology that the protagonist finds unsettling:

[as she cleaned the kitchen at the Prairie House, D.H.] she avoided the windows, sensing that if she looked out she would see Euclid's hungry spirits massing up from the prairie, the starved Crackers, the malarial conquistadores on their ponies. (ibid., 118)

Once established at the Prairie House, however, Groff's character begins to inhabit this world of altered boundaries and changed categories; it is a world marked by widened possibilities for selfhood, an expanded set of self-other relations requiring, in turn, a reconfigured self-narrative. One evening, as the other residents gather around a bonfire for a Christmas party, the protagonist walks away into the surrounding prairie, “each step a relief from the drunken voices, the flaming moths of paper spun from the fire, the sear of the flames. Past the first hummock of trees, the darkness took on a light of its own and she began to distinguish the texture of the ground” (ibid., 118-119). As this enlarged world takes clearer shape, her place within it likewise comes into focus, suggesting possibilities for biocentric becoming:

She moved calmly over the pits of sand, palmettos biting at her calves, strange sudden seeps of marsh. Small things rustled away from her footsteps, and she felt fondly toward them, for their smallness and their fear.

After ten minutes, human noise had scaled to nothing, and insect noise took on urgency [...] She kept herself still, and was so quiet for so long that the prairie began again its furtive movements. The world that, from the comfort of the fire, had seemed a cool wiped slate was unexpectedly teeming.

She could smell the rot of a drainage ditch that some well-meaning fools had dug through the prairie during the Depression. The land had taken the imprint of their hands and made it its own. She thought of the snakes sleeping coiled in their burrows and the alligators surfacing to scent her in the darkness, their shimmy onto the land, their stealthy bellying; how she was only one lost thing among so many others, not special for being human. (ibid., 119)

The recognition of her own relatedness to the members of other species, and the rejection of the hierarchy that places these species below humans, opens a space for biocentric becoming. The futility of the drainage ditch emblemizes such becoming, suggesting a world of unpredictable transformations, unplanned growth, that eludes and subverts human attempts to establish fixed positions in landscapes marked by ceaseless mutation.

Yet Groff uses ellipsis together with a massive increase in narrative speed to block full access to the reconfigured self-narrative that the protagonist has begun to elaborate by the end of the story. The sketchiness of the new narrative line is indicative; it suggests how moving from a parsimonious to a prolific ontology, and thereby reframing relationality in transhuman terms, constitutes only a starting point for new, more sustainable stories of the self, not their resolution. The final section of the narrative jumps ahead several years, after the protagonist attends her “mother’s funeral on a hill gone white with sleet” (ibid., 119), to focus on the character’s experiences during the difficult birth of her own daughter. As the protagonist undergoes an operation during the birth, Groff backtracks to the night of the party, indicating that the character felt panic after recognizing her status as one animal among others out on the prairie. When the vertical hierarchy dividing up the creatural world gives way to a horizontal model of affiliation and alignment, the protagonist has “the sense of being lost” (ibid., 119). Frightened by “the breath of some bad spirit hot on the back of her neck” (ibid., 119) she makes her way back to the light of the bonfire. It is not clear exactly what has transpired between that night and the final scene in the hospital years later, nor what narrative vector the protagonist may have pursued to make sense of the intervening events and experiences. But the conclusion of the text suggests that, whatever the specifics of this emergent story of who and what the protagonist is, her narrative-in-the-making has opened up new possibilities for biocentric becoming in an expanded ecology of selves. Even as the protagonist reflects on relational ties afforded by a community of human selves – “the hands [of the operating physician] in her flesh, her own crossed on her chest, her daughter’s tiny fists drawn up into the air” (ibid., 119) – she remains oriented to other ties to other possible selves, in the world beyond the human. Thus, observing the Christmas poinsettia in the corner of the hospital room, she finds herself thinking about what might inhabit the black dirt contained in the flower pot (ibid., 119).

## **Narratology beyond the Human**

In this essay, I have used Groff’s “Above and Below” to outline some directions for inquiry for a narratology beyond the human. I have argued that Groff’s text makes visible, through a story about a character caught between an obsolescent and an incipient self-narrative, a contest of ontologies in the culture of modernity, one parsimonious and one prolific when it comes to allocating possibilities for selfhood across species lines. A central irony of the text is that the protagonist begins to re-acquire agential selfhood, defined in part as an ability to generate a self-narrative, by recognizing her status as “only one lost thing among so many others.” Thus, although a more parsimonious ontology would seem to confer greater power and control on the select few selves admitted within its purview, it is the more prolific ontology, with its distribution

of selfhood across multiple life forms, that empowers the protagonist and enables her to reclaim agency in a world that extends beyond the human – a world in which the hierarchy of above and below gives way to an ecology of selves that cuts horizontally across differences among species. To put this point another way, the text suggests that the most sustainable self is one that insists least on its own sovereignty. In parallel with research on biodiversity, “Above and Below” implies that for individuals and cultures to flourish, the human community must acknowledge its membership in, and responsibilities to, the larger biotic community that it helps support and on which its own survival depends.

Extrapolating from Groff’s text, my broader claim is that fiction provides a domain for staging the dissolution and reconstitution of self-narratives, and for exploring the ontologies in the context of which selves are recognized as such. Thus, building on Gergen and Gergen’s work, I have suggested the need to reframe the modes of relationality that at once bear on and emerge from practices of self-narrative; the relationality at issue is ecological as well as social, since a human self takes shape in a larger constellation of selves, many of them nonhuman. Self-other relationships, in short, do not stop at the species boundary. Even more generally, in putting Groff’s text into dialogue with recent developments in anthropology, work in cultural psychology, and ideas originating from the study of literary narratives, I have indicated how stories about animals and human-animal relationships can open up productive routes of exchange among the arts, sciences, and humanities, and conversely how approaching these narratives from a cross-disciplinary perspective can in turn foster new ways of imagining and responding to transspecies relationships within the larger biosphere. Developing further these lines of inquiry – for example, by considering a range of fictional as well nonfictional narratives in which cross-species interactions raise questions about humans’ and other animals’ place within a larger ecology of selves – remains an urgent task for narratology in the twenty-first century.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Critics have suggested that Kuhn's contrast between normal or paradigmatic and revolutionary science is overly dichotomized, arguing that revolutionary scientific developments (e.g., the discovery of DNA) can occur in the practice of what would have to be classed as normal science on Kuhn's own terms (see Bird 2013 for further discussion). Nonetheless, the distinction provides a basis for my distinction between work that seeks to consolidate, extend, or supplement existing paradigms for narratological inquiry, on the one hand, and work that reconsiders those paradigms' conceptual and institutional status, range of applicability, and interconnections with other fields, on the other hand.

<sup>2</sup> In using the expression "narratology beyond the human," I build on the precedent set by Kohn (2013) vis-à-vis anthropology.

<sup>3</sup> Gergen and Gergen provide the following thumbnail definition of *self-narrative*: "the individual's account of self-relevant events across time" (Gergen / Gergen 1997, 162). I discuss this concept in more detail in what follows.

<sup>4</sup> An example of narrated perception occurs early in the story, as the narrator prepares to leave the apartment from which she has been evicted: "The apartment was a shell, scoured to enamel" (Groff 2011, 106).

<sup>5</sup> As suggested by *Blackfish*, Gabriela Cowperthwaite's 2013 documentary linking the deaths of several animal trainers to the treatment of killer whales kept in captivity, nonfictional accounts likewise afford space for exploring issues of selfhood beyond the human.

<sup>6</sup> In this connection, see Bateman's (2014) analysis of Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle."

<sup>7</sup> As suggested by my analysis of Groff's text, an event-sequence that might be interpreted as regressive, in the sense that the protagonist becomes homeless and exposed to the dangers of life in the open, can instead be read as progressive, in the sense that the protagonist, by entering a new, expanded constellation of self-other relationships, leverages the experience of homelessness to work toward an empowering self-narrative.

<sup>8</sup> As Matei Candea (2010) puts it, "the late 19th-century shift from singular capitalized Culture to the multiplicity of cultures, and the shift from the single Ontology of philosophy to an anthropology of ontologies can therefore be seen as analogous moves – they both serve to inscribe difference at the heart of the anthropological project. Not, of course, an exclusive, oppressive difference but a relational, productive difference" (Candea 2010, 175). Similarly, Philippe Descola (2013) argues that "for anthropology, no ontology is better or more truthful in itself than another [...] [At issue are, D.H.] schemes of coding and parceling out phenomenal reality by means of which [people] have learned to couch and transmit their experience of things, schemes issuing from historical choices that privileged, at a given time and place, certain sets of relations to humans and non-humans, in such a way as to allow for the combination of these relationships into sui generis ensembles – already constituted before the birth of the individuals that actualize them – to be experienced as naturally coherent" (Descola 2013, 66-67).

<sup>9</sup> In Kohn's (2007) formulation, "the distinction Latour makes between humans and nonhumans [...] fails to recognize that some nonhumans are selves" (Kohn 2007, 5; see also Kohn 2013, 7 and 91-92).

<sup>10</sup> Kohn (2013) offers the following transhuman, biocentric definition of self: "A self [...] is the outcome of a process, unique to life, of maintaining and perpetuating an individual form, a form that, as it is iterated over the generations, grows to fit the world around it at the same time that it comes to exhibit a certain circular closure that allows it to maintain its selfsame identity, which is forged with respect to that which it is not" (Kohn 2013, 76).

<sup>11</sup> A fuller analysis of the story would need to consider how Groff uses the protagonist's entrance into a socioeconomic underclass, the community of the marginalized poor, to suggest how an altered conception of self-other relations across species lines connects up with a rethinking of structures of power, wealth, and privilege within the domain of the human. In a phrase, prolific allocations of possibilities for selfhood across species pair naturally with recognition of the claims of disenfranchised members of the human community.

<sup>12</sup> On the concept of disavowal, i.e., humans' tendency to disavow their own status as one animal species among others, see Rohman (2009).

<sup>13</sup> A version of this essay is due to appear as a chapter in Shang Biwu (2014). I am grateful to Shang Biwu for his permission to publish this material in article form.