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literatur für leser:innen

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Contagious Becomings: Carmen Stephan's *Mal Aria*

Abstract

Carmen Stephan's debut novel, *Mal Aria* (2012), is notable not least of all for its surprising narrator: the much-maligned mosquito. Given our shared history, this perspective could easily devolve into misanthropy. However, the narrator's relationship with Carmen, her malaria-stricken victim, is in fact deeply ambiguous. Although gifted with the power of self-reflection, she struggles in vain to save Carmen as doctors repeatedly fail to recognize the disease ravaging her body. This article argues that the physicians' failure, read through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of *becoming-animal*, stems from the blind application of their expertise and subsequent refusal to engage meaningfully with the world on which that knowledge is predicated. Entranced by a hierarchical epistemology based on chimeric individuality and thus unable to unite theory with an openness to the world, they are rendered at best ineffectual, and at worst, complicit in Carmen's eventual death.

On July 27th, 2019 the *New York Times* published an article ominously entitled "The Mosquitoes are Coming for Us." In the disturbing exposé that follows, the author makes the surprising argument that humans, accustomed to placing themselves firmly atop the food chain, have in fact been haunted for millennia by a predator entirely unparalleled in its lethality.

Mosquitoes are our apex predator, the deadliest hunter of human beings on the planet. A swarming army of 100 trillion or more mosquitoes patrols nearly every inch of the globe, killing about 700,000 people annually. Researchers suggest that mosquitoes may have killed nearly half of the 108 billion humans who have ever lived across our 200,000-year or more existence.¹

These numbers are striking, to say the least. However, in making the case for the mosquito's centrality over the course of human history, they also point to a surprising absence. If our struggles with the minute insect have spurred the creation of scientific and technological inventions intended to scour it from the earth, it has remained conspicuously absent from our art. While popular culture has easily made room for animal horrors like sharks (*Jaws*), dogs (*Cujo*), and even birds (*The Birds*), it would seem the most appropriate candidate to fill our collective nightmares has gone largely unnoticed.² While not exactly a horror novel, Carmen Stephan's, *Mal Aria* (2012) represents a notable exception to this gap in representation, recounting the final days of a woman languishing in a Brazilian hospital and dying of malaria through the eyes of the mosquito who bit her.

1 Timothy Winegard: "The Mosquitoes Are Coming for Us". In: *The New York Times*. 27 July 2019, p. 4.

2 In the German context, an interesting exception to this gap in representation is Hellmuth Unger's 1938 novel *Germanin – Geschichte einer deutschen Großtat*, as well as the nazi-era film that followed five years later (with a slightly modified subtitle: *Germanin – Die Geschichte einer kolonialen Tat*). Both works served propagandistic purposes, relating the story of a German expedition to African colonies in an effort to develop a remedy for malaria. *Germanin* valorizes (and largely fictionalizes) a specifically German contribution to fighting the disease, casting itself as a benevolent colonial power willing to make sacrifices in its struggle against the English military for the greater good of the continent. As will be seen, while Stephan's novel shares some important plot elements with these works, it is deeply critical of humanity's historical attempts to eradicate malaria, regardless of nationality.

It is perhaps not surprising that a narrative told from the perspective of the “deadliest hunter”³ of humans could be described as anti-anthropocentric. And yet the figure of the mosquito in this text does not function merely as an antagonist. Quite the contrary, she is wracked with guilt at her role in the rapidly approaching death of her victim and spends the vast majority of the novel in a desperate attempt to change the course of events set in motion by her bite. The relationship that develops between these two figures represents a radical recasting of the usual roles ascribed to each side in the millennia-old struggle for species survival; a struggle perhaps most succinctly summarized by Dr. Rubert Boyce in his portentous book *Mosquito or Man?*,⁴ which takes up the question of how best to improve the practice of medicine in tropical climates. The unique power of Stephan’s narrator lies precisely in her ability to transform the conjunction of Boyce’s question from an “or” to an “and”, shifting the narrative away from hierarchical models of exclusion and emphasizing nature’s ability to unite supposedly disparate individuals. From the moment she draws Carmen’s blood she breaks the bounds of a typical mosquito existence; endowed with new-found powers of reflection and language, she vows to end the cycle of infection and death that have for millennia plagued the actors on both sides of Boyce’s inquiry. While the mosquito struggles to achieve her goal, Carmen wastes away in a Brazilian hospital, losing control of her faculties and becoming ever more aligned with aspects of animality as traditionally understood. The transfer of blood (and parasites) from mosquito to human effectively shakes each party free from their previous categories, joining them as *blood-sisters*⁵ in a new kind of hybrid family.

The joining of these two figures in Stephan’s narrative thus challenges basic assumptions about the impermeability of the animal-human divide. Their union, however, is anything but harmonious. As the narrator grapples with her inability to alter the course of Carmen’s misguided treatment, she vacillates between futile pleas for sympathy and diatribes against human vanity and ignorance. Forced to bear witness to the slow death of her reluctant “Blutsschwester”,⁶ the mosquito soon turns this frustration on herself with the recognition that her insights have come at great cost for her new-found human companion. She thus sets about trying to right her wrong, and after a series of misdiagnoses from close-minded physicians, the narrator draws an explicit connection between the ability to understand malaria (i.e. the intertwining life cycles that underlie it) and the recognition of universal interrelation. From this fundamental interconnection follow two corollaries, both of which are suggested to be particularly difficult pills for humans to swallow. First, that the idea of a persistent and static identity separate from and, indeed, *antithetical* to an imagined outside world has always been chimeric. Second, that traditional hierarchies of species are based on anthropocentric assumptions regarding human capacities and sovereign status over nature. According to Stephan’s narrator, successfully understanding (and in Carmen’s case, diagnosing) malaria requires recognizing the truth of these statements. As will be seen, the concept of *becoming-animal*, as developed by Deleuze and Guattari, also serves as a helpful lens for understanding the interspecies encounters in the text, as

3 Winegard: “The Mosquitoes Are Coming for Us”, p. 4.

4 Rubert Boyce: *Mosquito or Man? The Conquest of the Tropical World*. New York 1909.

5 Carmen Stephan: *Mal Aria*. Frankfurt am Main 2013, p. 13.

6 Ibid.

well as the continued failure of Carmen's doctors to properly diagnose and treat her condition until it is too late. By emphasizing the centrality of affect, Deleuze and Guattari push back against the tendency to apply a close-minded diagnosis to a dynamic process like becoming-animal. Their criticism, leveled at the overeager psychoanalysts of their day, applies equally well to many of Carmen's doctors, whose lack of curiosity regarding her condition renders them ineffectual at best. However, just as Stephan's hybrid narrator forces a reevaluation of Boyce's *us* versus *them* mentality, her unique perspective also pushes the reader beyond the interpretive possibilities offered by Deleuze and Guattari. Saddled with the responsibilities of life in the Anthropocene, it is no longer enough that humans open themselves up to the affects surrounding becoming-animal; one must also be willing, like Carmen's final doctor, to interpret the symptoms and diagnose what ails us, before it is too late.

Bloody Beginnings: *Mensch, Mücke*, and the Sanguine Sisterhood

At the novel's outset, Carmen first appears as a healthy European woman and promising architect, who, at 27, has nearly completed a year-long position at a Brazilian architectural firm. When her boyfriend, Carl, agrees to visit her just weeks before her departure, she soon sees her previous good fortunes unravel on an ill-fated river cruise along the Amazon river.⁷ She boards a small steamboat in Manaus and joins a group of tourists on a sight-seeing journey through the groves and settlements nestled along one of the river's tributaries. Reflecting on her victim's arrival on the mangrove-covered riverbank, the narrator quickly identifies Carmen's fatal mistake:

Klick, klick. Die Kamera vor ihrem Gesicht. Die Natur war für sie etwas, das man ansehen und anfassen konnte, von dem man aber letztendlich getrennt blieb. [...] Wie naiv sie war. [...] Ihr glaubt, eure Haut grenze euch ab, sie sei der Schutzgraben um euer Fleisch. Dabei ist sie der Ort eurer größten Verwundbarkeit. Ein kleiner roter Punkt, und der Tod ist drin.⁸

The description of Carmen's journey out of the city and into the jungle clearly foreshadows her eventual end at the hands of the deadly malaria-causing parasite. More importantly, however, it explicitly connects the presence of death with a particular attitude shared by Carmen and her fellow tourists: a perceived separation between humans (as subjects) and nature (as object). Filtering her gaze through the lens of a camera, Carmen seeks to isolate and subsequently capture what she observes on her tour. Seen through her viewfinder, the world around her is reduced to a series of compositions, arrested images ready to be archived for her repeated viewing pleasure. This model leaves little room for a supposedly external world to act in turn upon the viewer; action proceeds in a single direction and agency is reserved as the privilege of

7 Readers familiar with German-language travel narratives will no doubt recognize in the Brazilian setting a connection to Robert Müller's *Tropen*, which similarly begins with an adventurous excursion in South America before shifting focus to the inner workings of its protagonist. Müller's novel also raises hybridity to a central theme, yet, unlike other travel narratives which condemn overly intimate contact with the native population (e.g. Hans Grimm's *Afrikafahrt West*), Müller's (as well as Stephan's) narrative valorizes the resulting hybridity. For a helpful comparison of these two works and the role of hybridity in similar narratives see Andreas Michel: *Travel and Hybridity*. Hans Grimm's "Afrikafahrt West" and Robert Müller's "Tropen." In: *Colloquia Germanica*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2007, pp. 141–56.

8 Stephan: *Mal Aria*, pp. 24–25.

the human subject. The final sentences of the passage further connect this worldview to a particular understanding of human biology, wherein the separation between a thinking subject and an objectified nature is made manifest in the skin, which marks the physical barrier (“abgrenzen”) between the self and the outside world.⁹ Here the narrator’s use of direct address, marked by a switch from the third-person singular “sie” (she) to the second-person plural “Ihr” (you all), emphasizes that the mistaken belief in one’s separation (and thus protection) from nature is not unique to Carmen. Such hubris, the narrator argues in no uncertain terms, has in fact characterized the majority of human history, making Carmen only the latest in a long line of unwitting victims.

It is worth noting that the narrator’s ability to recognize Carmen’s flawed worldview and to connect it with her vulnerability to contracting malaria is itself carefully situated and justified in the text. From the perspective of Stephan’s mosquito, everything begins with the bite. Her brief moment of contact with Carmen catalyzes a momentous change in her consciousness, forcing her to confront her role in supporting what she will later call a *curse circle*,¹⁰ i.e. the transmission and proliferation of the parasite that causes malaria:

Gib mir, und ich gebe dir. Blut strömte, Geißeln strömten. Durch Arterien, ihre, meine, unsere. Wir waren verbunden. Ich wusste jetzt alles über sie. Kannte jeden ihrer Gedanken. Jedes Gefühl, mit dem ihr Herz das Blut schneller pumpen ließ. [...] Ich trank und trank. Ganz langsam. Schluck für Schluck verstand ich. Ein Stich, der nicht das Ende war, sondern der Anfang. Der mich endlich erkennen ließ. Als würde sich im Wald der Nebel lichten und die Bäume Gestalt annehmen. Weil ihr Blut anders war? Weil ich dafür vorgesehen war? War es beides? Die Menge Blut, die ich trank, dreimal so schwer wie mein Leib, wirkte in mir, veränderte jede Faser in mir. Beim ersten tiefen Schluck stieg die Klarheit nach oben: Indem ich euch benutze, werde ich benutzt. Für den Sprung der Dämonen.¹¹

In the opening lines of this passage, the otherwise banal occurrence of an insect bite is related in excruciating detail, along with its surprising consequences for the narrator. The bite itself is framed as a mutual (if asymmetrical) act of giving. The gift of Carmen’s blood is reciprocated by a stream of “Geißeln”, or flagellates, the single-celled parasitic organisms which cause malaria and are transmitted through mosquito saliva. While the presence of these parasites in Carmen’s body will have significant consequences for her as the narrative unfolds, here the primary focus of the mosquito’s description is on the transfer of blood between bodies. Far from a mere feeding, this act unites the two figures on an intimate level. From this moment on, Carmen ceases to be another faceless human target for the mosquito, becoming instead her “Blutsschwester”, a title which is repeated frequently throughout the remainder of the novel.¹²

The quiet violence of this first encounter does not just forcibly unite the two protagonists of Stephan’s novel. It also directly challenges the worldview attributed to Carmen (as well as to humans in general) in the previous passage. Here, the supposed separation between an isolated (human) subjectivity and an external Nature is explicitly

9 For a deeper exploration of the historical understanding of skin as a barrier between self and world, see Claudia Benthien: *Haut. Literaturgeschichte, Körperbilder, Grenzdiskurse*. 2. Aufl. Reinbek bei Hamburg 2001. Of particular interest in this context is chapter two, “Grenzmetaphern: Die Haut in der Sprache”.

10 Stephan: *Mal Aria*, p. 59 (translation mine).

11 *Ibid.*, p. 35–36.

12 E.g. *ibid.*, pp. 13, 83, 89, 182.

challenged and rejected. In the transmission of blood and the accompanying parasites, what had been perceived as separate, vital systems (“Arterien”) now converge to serve the needs of multiple beings. Grammatically this connection is established through a list of possessive pronouns, culminating in a transition from the singular to the plural (“Durch Arterien, *ihre, meine, unsere.*”¹³) and punctuated by an emphatic statement of interconnectivity (“Wir waren verbunden.”¹⁴). This connection extends beyond mere physical intertwining, however, as with the transfer of blood the narrator gains access not only to Carmen’s thoughts and feelings (“Kannte jeden ihrer Gedanken. Jedes Gefühl, mit dem ihr Herz das Blut schneller pumpen ließ.”)¹⁵ but to the entirety of human history as well. As Carmen’s health continues to deteriorate under the not-so-watchful eyes of a series of doctors and nurses, the mosquito uses her super-human capacity for reflection to great effect, criticizing their ignorance and failed diagnoses as just more examples in the “Geschichte der falschen Annahmen”¹⁶ that characterized human investigations of the disease for centuries.

Misunderstanding Malaria: Anthropocentrism and the *Geschichte der falschen Annahmen*

Using her new-found powers to trace the course of this history, the narrator frequently interposes descriptions of her attempts to save Carmen during her stay in the hospital with anecdotes about various historical efforts to understand and eradicate malaria. As described above, the mosquito’s bite, rendered in German as an even more violent and intrusive *Stich*, interrupts Carmen’s delusions of her essential separation from and power over nature. Her anthropocentrism renders her unable to recognize malaria, leaving her woefully unprepared for the dangers posed by a parasite whose very existence is predicated on its ability to travel seamlessly across the animal-human divide. As the historical anecdotes reveal, Carmen’s case is hardly the first time that human hubris has obscured the true nature of the deadly disease.

Emphasizing the ignorance surrounding a disease that has for so long plagued humanity, the narrator begins her chronicle of malaria with a lesson in etymology: “*Mal’ Aria*, schlechte Luft, böse Luft. Früher dachtet ihr Menschen, dass faulige Dämpfe aus den Sümpfen aufsteigen und durch den Atem in eure Körper eindringen.”¹⁷ The idea that malaria could be lurking in the air itself proved to be as stubborn as it was misguided, persisting for centuries in Europe and displacing an increasingly long list of alternative hypotheses. According to the narrator, the possibility that a disease as devastating as malaria could be traced to such a minute creature as a mosquito was deemed laughable at best and was easily ignored.¹⁸ The value ascribed by humans to the insect that would later prove to be so consequential for the study of malaria is neatly summed up by the narrator in her citation of the genus to which she (and all other malaria-transmitting mosquitos) belong: “Ihr gabt mir einen griechischen

13 Ibid., p 35, emphasis mine.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., p. 42.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., p. 23.

Namen, Anopheles, was so viel wie 'Nichtsnutz' bedeutet."¹⁹ Uninterested in a *good-for-nothing* insect like the mosquito, human vanity required a mightier image of our tormentor. In this case, the environment itself was held to be responsible, as the narrator remarks: "Was gibt es für einen mächtigeren Feind als einen, der sich in der Atmosphäre verbirgt."²⁰

Egos assuaged and having agreed upon the source of suffering, humans set about tailoring their environment to combat the scourge. This involved what was essentially a two-pronged approach. On the one hand, concerted efforts were undertaken to destroy elements of the natural environment that were thought to contribute to the *bad air*, e.g. setting large fires near bodies of water where the sickness was believed to spread.²¹ At the same time, built environments were consciously altered to address what were considered aggravating factors. Drawing further on her historical knowledge, the narrator cites ancient architects who, believing that the deadly vapors could collect in narrow alleyways, built wide streets and varied settlements to allow such atmospheric dangers to more quickly escape into the sky and disperse.²² Summarizing the collective effects of these efforts over time, the narrator explains: "Eine Architektur der Malaria entstand, deren Spuren sich bis heute weit verbreitet finden. Es ist eine Architektur der Missverständnisse."²³ What these historical examples make clear is the degree to which malaria and the fight against it became interwoven with the lived experience of vast swathes of the global population, shaping the course of human history as well as the earth itself. Crucially, these human interventions stemmed from an essentially flawed understanding of the disease they were intended to combat. Until that failure was addressed, there could be little hope of finding a cure.

Unsurprisingly, the *misunderstandings* cited by the narrator in the fight against malaria hardly stopped with the identification in the late 19th century of the humble Anopheles mosquito as the true disease vector. With the isolation of the culprit came the invention of new methods to target and eradicate it, often bringing with them a cascade of dangerous side effects. Perhaps the most famously destructive of these quickly enacted remedies was the spraying of dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane, or DDT, the monstrous results of which became the subject of Rachel Carson's celebrated environmental novel *Silent Spring*.²⁴ Stephan's narrator reserves a particular scorn for this chapter in the battle against malaria, citing it as a key example of humanity's failure to consider the effects of their actions in a fundamentally interrelated world:

Was tun? Von einem neuen Wundermittel war die Rede, das schnell seinen Einsatz auf den Schlachtfeldern fand: DDT. Let us spray, hieß es allorts, und die Menschen falteten ihre Hände. Die Mücken starben wie ihre Opfer. Sie zuckten, lagen in Krämpfen, DDT lähmte ihren Körper, bis er verging. [...] Als dann die

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., p. 43.

21 Ibid., p. 42.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., p. 43.

24 Drawing connections between pesticidal interventions and nuclear fallout, Carson's novel emphasized the power that modern humans wield over their environment and the negative consequences that follow from its careless manipulation. As the biographer William Souder points out, the publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 is now recognized as a pivotal moment in the environmental movement, marking a shift away from benign conservatism to urgent environmental preservation. For more on this topic see: William Souder: *On a Farther Shore. The Life and Legacy of Rachel Carson*. New York 2012.

Eierschalen der Vögel zerbrachen, als das Gift in der Muttermilch schwamm, als das Wort Krebs so laut wurde. Als Katzen zugrunde gingen, Kinder ohne Augen geboren wurden, und Frösche mit drei Händen, wurde nicht mehr gesprüht. Da war es vorbei. Für den einen Teil. Der Krieg gegen die Moskitos war ein Krieg gegen euch selbst.²⁵

The narrator's sardonic description of this stage in humanity's attempt to eradicate malaria is notable both for its catalogue of environmental devastation as well as for its religious undertones. The latter are made clear in the glorification of DDT as a "Wundermittel", a *miracle* cure for a disease previously thought to be unstoppable. The use of the English phrase, "Let us spray", is of course an obvious play on a call to prayer, wherein the act of communion with God (represented by the folding of hands) is replaced by the enthusiastic distribution of DDT across the globe. The religious language in this passage suggests that humans have in essence become their own saviors, capable of performing miracles in the form of technological advancement. In this way, technology itself comes to take the place of divine intervention while proselytizing consists in the necessary spread of such miracles throughout the world. It goes without saying that language suggesting humans occupy the space on the Great Chain of Being previously reserved for God is deeply anthropocentric. In using such language, the narrator's sarcasm is all the more palpable as she enumerates the catastrophic consequences of deploying DDT on a global scale. It is telling that in the list of horrific consequences that follows, human tragedies (e.g. children born without eyes)²⁶ are intermixed with those of non-human animals (e.g., dangerously fragile bird eggs).²⁷ This narrative strategy underscores the fact that humans were one species among many to suffer in the wake of their embrace of the technological "miracle" that was DDT. Far from enjoying a privileged place of safety above the rest of the animal kingdom, here the terrible consequences of the supposed cure are shared among a long list of victims topped not by humans, but by mosquitos.

It is no coincidence that the narrator's brief historical interludes stop with the realization of the damage caused by DDT to our environment and to those with whom we share it. While hardly a time for celebration, it nevertheless represents a rare moment in the centuries-long war against malaria when humans were forced to reckon both with their power to alter the environment on a global scale, as well as with their essential inseparability from it. As the narrator remarks at the end of the previously quoted passage, "Der Krieg gegen die Moskitos war ein Krieg gegen euch selbst."²⁸ As our technology became more powerful, our misguided 'cures' only grew more devastating for the world at large, one that necessarily included humans as well. The essential mistake at the heart of these ill-advised remedies was always the assumption that, like Carmen with her camera, humans might isolate the dangerous element in nature, rendering it harmless while preserving its surroundings. Whether explicitly sought or merely implied, this act of separation is suggested by the narrator to be the root cause of no small amount of suffering. "Ihr habt etwas Böses getan. Wieder habt ihr euch getrennt von den anderen. Von dem, was sich nicht trennen lässt."²⁹ Here the

²⁵ Stephan: *Mal Aria*, pp. 164–165.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

assumption of a clear divide between humans and their environment is further criticized in moral terms as an act of *evil*, humans' original sin against the natural order that opened the door to so much collateral devastation in the struggle to identify and eradicate a microscopic parasite.

An immediate consequence of this rejection of fundamental separation from one's environment is a deep skepticism regarding the existence of a static and immutable self. The narrator makes this connection explicit near the end of her observations of Carmen, as she watches her victim suffer through the final stages of the disease that will eventually take her life.

Das Selbst ist eine Erfindung, die euch von den anderen trennt. Das Schlimmste ist, dass ihr euch nicht verbunden glaubt. Ich aber frage euch. In wie viele fremde Körper ist euer Blut geflossen? Wo schwirrt euer Blut durch den Wald? Wo ruht es im warmen Magen unter schattigen Bäumen?³⁰

Here the particular value of the mosquito as a figure to challenge human egotism becomes clear; as a symbolic carrier of identity and vitality, one could hardly do better than blood. This passage is all the more striking for the way in which it deploys such a powerful symbol to challenge these typical associations. As a counter argument to the anthropocentric views of Carmen's contemporaries, the mosquito offers a series of rhetorical questions. Taken together, they suggest that even our blood can hardly be said to belong to us; the reader is instead invited to imagine it passing freely into *foreign bodies*.³¹ More disturbing still, these bodies do not even belong to our species, a fact emphasized by the *buzzing*³² of the blood through the forest, carried, one imagines, on the wings of a tiny mosquito. The final question is as evocative as it is blasphemous, suggesting the blood comes to rest, comfortably, it would seem, in a warm stomach under shady trees,³³ nourishing a being who could hardly be more distant from the vaunted status humans afforded themselves on the Great Chain of Being.

In the eyes of Stephan's narrator, humans could stand to learn a great deal from reflecting on the seeming inability of our own blood to respect the boundaries we set between ourselves and a supposedly external environment; one populated by animal others rendered utterly alien and inferior by a persistent anthropocentrism. Acutely aware of her role in the interspecies life cycle of the malaria-causing parasite, the mosquito is accustomed to the ability of human blood to leave its source, flowing, buzzing, and finally resting on the other side of the human-animal divide. It is a worldview that emphasizes connections, where others would insist on separation. In an early passage soon after the fateful bite, the narrator remarks on the status of her newly acquired *Blutsschwester*, stressing precisely this aspect of their relationship and the world they both inhabit:

Wir waren so eng miteinander verbunden, wie man es nur sein konnte, wir waren für unser restliches Stück Leben in dem Kreis eingeschlossen – die Natur trennt nicht, sie verbindet, knüpft ihre Knoten, wo sie kann, und sei es durch den Tod.³⁴

30 Ibid., p. 194.

31 Ibid., translation mine.

32 Ibid., translation mine.

33 Ibid., translation mine.

34 Ibid., p. 67.

Here the endless complexity of the natural world is reduced to a single action, that of *connecting* (“verbinden”). The narrator’s intimate knowledge of malaria and the intersecting life cycles that sustain it bring her to a morbid conclusion: even the continuation of life itself is subordinate to a fundamental drive to forge connections. According to the mosquito, moments that appear to humans as transgressive are simply expressions of a natural order that valorizes interconnectivity above all else. Any intervention that fails to account for this is, as evidenced by the long line of historical missteps in the fight against malaria, doomed to failure. With the arrival of DDT serving as her final and most instructive example, the narrator would seem to suggest that the most such an anthropocentric approach could hope to achieve is mutual destruction.

In summary, the narrator’s historical accounts serve to underline several key aspects of Carmen’s unenviable situation. She appears as only the latest in a long line of victims of a disease that has been woefully misrecognized from the very beginning. Missteps on the path to a cure are recorded in our architecture, our art, even in our very language. While these lessons go unheeded by the medical staff overseeing Carmen, to the mosquito, they remain eminently legible and increasingly urgent. Her intimate knowledge of the manner in which Malaria is spread, coupled with her access to a seemingly infinite trove of historical failures to treat the disease, allow the mosquito to draw a crucial connection. Understanding the spread of malaria is predicated on the recognition of fundamental interconnectedness, and yet as witnesses to the disastrous dispersal of DDT could testify, acknowledgement of this fact alone is dangerously insufficient. What is also required is an understanding that this interrelation extends equally to all, and not merely to those occupying the lower ranks on the Great Chain of Being. Under this model, humans are just as susceptible to bodily interventions (beneficial and otherwise) as their less technologically savvy fellow-beings.

Infecting Identities: Carmen and Becoming-Animal

It is hardly coincidental that the most extreme example of human vulnerability in the novel is none other than Carmen, who, in sharing the author’s first name, would seem to be the most likely candidate to narrate her story. Nevertheless, for the vast majority of the novel she appears as the *least* able contender for such a role. Through being bitten by an infected mosquito, her as-yet non-lethal exposure to malaria robs her of most cognitive function, rendering her easily objectified by medical staff and aligning her with traditional understandings of non-human animals as purely material beings. For her part, in drawing Carmen’s blood and taking on the role of narrator, the mosquito becomes individualized to a degree unmatched by other members of her swarm. In essence, the contact between these two central figures propels them beyond the limits of previous species categories and transforms each into a new kind of inter-species assemblage.

The process by which they undergo this surprising transformation, as well as its relevance for Stephan’s larger narrative, may be further illuminated by making brief recourse to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of *becoming-animal*. The concept has rightfully received much critical attention since its appearance in *A Thousand Plateaus*, where the authors offer a lengthy exploration of its potential to disrupt

dominant modes of discourse.³⁵ For the purposes of this analysis, a short summary of its key features will suffice. It is important to note from the outset that Deleuze and Guattari contrast the process of *becoming* with that of *being*, associating the latter with a drive for stasis and a stable identity that reproduces itself through filiation. *Being*, as it is here understood, necessarily entails the creation and maintenance of a hierarchy, whereas *becoming* operates laterally, proceeding by the logic of contagion and reaching across supposedly stable biological categories like species.³⁶ There are perhaps few realms in Western thought defined by more rigid and jealously guarded hierarchies than animal-human relations, and this is hardly the first analysis to emphasize the subversive power of Deleuze and Guattari's theories. That being said, the potential of a process like *becoming-animal* to generate an alternative to the dominant historical relationship between humans and animals is difficult to ignore; as scholars like Brent Adkins have pointed out, "...if one wants to create something new with regard to the human [...], then one must pursue a becoming-animal."³⁷

Deadly as it may be, Carmen's contact with the mosquito and her subsequent illness represent an example of precisely this kind of novel recasting of the human. To borrow Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, through the transmission of malaria, Carmen and the narrator undergo a process analogous to becoming-animal. Forcibly made to acknowledge the multiple life cycles (both human and non-human) that intersect at the site of the bite, Carmen and the mosquito enter into a kind of alliance. It is worth noting here that in Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical framework, the deconstructing of identities that takes place during the process of becoming-animal does not utterly dissolve the involved parties.³⁸ Rather, by virtue of this alliance, each finds herself still recognizable and yet irrevocably changed. The mosquito appears newly individualized, empowered through the narrative *Ich* but seemingly separated from her swarm. Carmen is also relegated to the margins of her once-familiar society and soon begins to lose hold of the identity that previously defined her. Each thereby takes on aspects of what Deleuze and Guattari call an "anomalous" individual, endowed by virtue of their liminality with a unique power to generate something truly new; as described in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the *anomalous* "designates the unequal, the coarse, the rough, the cutting edge of deterritorialization."³⁹ Positioned at the outer edge of the pack, the anomalous individual thus creates an opportunity for alliances with heterogenous beings.⁴⁰

Carmen thus finds herself forever changed by her contact with an anomalous individual at the bleeding edge of their pack. The narrator, for her part, spends much of the novel bewailing her reluctant role in spreading the deadly single-celled "Dämonen",⁴¹ despite the miraculous transformation she undergoes upon

35 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis 1987.

36 Deleuze and Guattari set up this contrast in their description of two conflicting modes of organizing knowledge, whereby the latter rhizomatic model is endorsed as the mode by which becoming-animal operates.

37 Brent Adkins: *Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus. A Critical Introduction and Guide*. Edinburgh 2015, p. 141.

38 Steve Baker: *The Postmodern Animal*. London 2000, p. 133.

39 Deleuze and Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 244.

40 Adkins: *Deleuze and Guattari's A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 145.

41 Stephan: *Mal Aria*, p. 36.

consuming Carmen's blood. It is worth noting that in choosing to label the parasites *demons*, the narrator provides a further connection to Deleuze and Guattari's theories surrounding the process of becoming-animal. In their terms, relating to an animal as *demonic* requires understanding it as a flexible multitude, "the borderline of the animal pack, into which the human being passes or in which his or her becoming takes place, by *contagion*",⁴² an apt enough description both of the earth's population of *Anopheles* mosquitos as well as the malaria-causing flagellates scorned by the narrator. Most importantly, the demonic mode of relating is considered by Deleuze and Guattari to be the only mode through which a becoming-animal may occur.⁴³

Given the dire consequences of their brief exchange for the narrator and her reluctant blood-sister, it is clear that becoming-animal is not something to be advocated for unequivocally. That the possibilities opened up by the process may be dangerous for the involved parties is certainly not lost on Deleuze and Guattari, who point out that in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, for example, Gregor's becoming-animal results in his "becoming-dead."⁴⁴ In the context of *Mal Aria* the key lies in how, or indeed whether, the relationship is recognized by those who occupy positions of power in the traditional hierarchy. Unfortunately for Carmen, the nature of her transformation goes unnoticed by those around her with the notable exception of the narrator and one last unique visitor. Her final diagnosis, just moments before her death, offers some clues as to how the process was allowed to go so horribly wrong.

Der Arzt sagte nichts. Andere hatten geredet und weniger gesagt. Seine Augen schauten sie an, nicht wie die anderen Ärzte, die das, was sie sahen, verglichen mit dem, was sie wussten. Er schaute sie an, als wüsste er nichts. Als könnte sie, als könnten ihre Augen ihm erst alles sagen. [...] Es war einer dieser seltenen Momente, in denen Augen sich im Unendlichen begegnen, der eine fing nirgendwo an, und der andere hörte nirgendwo auf. Alles war gleichgültig, alles gut oder schlecht, weil alles wahr war. Ihr Gesicht war nass. Er legte seine Hand auf ihre Wange. Dann sagte er es, wie zu sich selbst, murmelte es: „Es ist Malaria.“⁴⁵

This final doctor, who alone is successful in recognizing Carmen's condition, has apparently done something none of her previous observers were willing or able to do. He explicitly refrains from hurried pronouncements, choosing instead to meet her gaze in thoughtful silence. His mode of seeing also differs significantly from that of the previous doctors and nurses. Where others dogmatically applied their preconceptions to what they saw in Carmen's condition, this doctor instead sees *as if he knew nothing*. Rather than force her to conform to his presumptions, he approaches with a radical openness that embraces ambiguity. He is rewarded with new knowledge inaccessible to his more rigid and incurious colleagues.

42 Deleuze and Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus* p. 247 (emphasis mine).

43 For more on this see Alain Beaulieu: "The Status of Animality in Deleuze's Thought". In: *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*. Volume IX (2011), Issue 1/2, pp. 69–88.

44 Deleuze and Guattari: *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*. Minneapolis 1986, p. 15.

45 Stephan: *Mal Aria*, pp. 205–206.

Tying the Knot: Affect and Interpretation

In Carmen's case, this new knowledge comes much too late to be of any use. With her death, the story thus comes to depict a failed act of recognition, one that culminates in the narrator witnessing Carmen's final moments and trying in vain to reach her victim's lifeless body.⁴⁶ The failure that unfolds over the course of the novel is explicitly coded as a lack of vision, a flaw attributed to Carmen's doctors specifically as well as to humanity in general. As the narrator summarizes in perhaps her sharpest invective against our species: "Vielleicht, wenn ihr einmal denkt, wenn ihr wirklich einmal zu denken anfangt, wenn ihr begreift, wenn ihr mit der Natur geht, nicht gegen sie. Wenn ihr anfangt zu sehen, dann seht ihr mich."⁴⁷ Despite the human tendency to place primacy on vision as a means of perceiving the world, the narrator's account locates the failure to see at the heart of Carmen's condition. In this criticism, the narrator draws together both the historical failure of humans to recognize and address the source of malaria, as well as the specific conditions leading to Carmen's death.

This failure to see is not only central to Stephan's novel. It also clearly echoes a criticism leveled by Deleuze and Guattari against a different kind of medical professional. This objection must be understood as central to their theoretical project and to the concept of becoming-animal, as they write in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

[Psychoanalysts] killed becoming-animal, in the adult as in the child. *They saw nothing*. They see the animal as a representative of drives, or a representation of the parents. They do not see the reality of a becoming-animal, that it is affect in itself, the drive in person, and represents nothing.⁴⁸

The importance of this insight for the theory expounded in *A Thousand Plateaus* is difficult to overstate. According to the authors, psychoanalysts consistently "overcode"⁴⁹ the behavior they witness in their patients, understanding it as an expression of some underlying truth with multiple representations all pointing back to the same conclusion. Crucially, this method is not limited to medical practitioners but extends into any realm where a psychoanalytic approach might be applied (e.g. in the interpretation of texts, films, and other cultural objects). In forcing such interpretations, psychoanalysis shows itself incapable of recognizing the value of a process like becoming-animal, producing instead the same stories about humans, our place in the world, and our ability to understand it.

The repeated misdiagnoses from Carmen's doctors, as speedy as they are inaccurate, clearly stem from the same flawed approach. They too fail to be affected by what is happening right before their eyes, instead dogmatically asserting their interpretation of her condition over the objections of an animal presence they are unwilling or unable to acknowledge. Following Deleuze and Guattari's argument, the doctors miss the mark in that they settle immediately on an interpretation, failing to attend to the multitude of biological and emotional processes that are constantly intersecting as their patient battles her illness. Until this point, it would seem that Stephan's novel essentially recapitulates Deleuze and Guattari's argument concerning the primacy of affect

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 207.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 167.

⁴⁸ Deleuze and Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus* p. 259 (emphasis mine).

⁴⁹ For an excellent summary of the use of this term throughout Deleuze's work, see Claire Colebrook: *Gilles Deleuze*. London 2002, pp. 136–139.

and the danger of over-interpretation. Such a reading, however, does a disservice to the complexity of *Mal Aria* and its ability to reframe the process of becoming-animal within a larger context.

It is certainly true that many of the doctors who see Carmen rush to judgment, and in doing so, fail in their most basic duty as her caretakers. However, immediately preceding Carmen's final diagnosis, she is visited by a doctor whose approach, if not his result, differs significantly from his predecessors. In many ways, Dr. Fernando's method mirrors that of the final doctor who offers an accurate, if belated diagnosis. Upon entering the room, he quickly kneels at her bedside, presses his hand in hers, and meets her gaze while checking her breathing and feeling her pulse and forehead.⁵⁰ After the coldly mechanical interactions with the previous clinicians, Carmen's emotional response to Dr. Fernando is so strong as to be made palpable to the narrator:

Es waren die einfachsten, die schönsten Handlungen, weil in ihrer ruhigen Sicherheit schon eine Magie lag, die Heilung versprach. War es so einfach? [...] 'Du bekommst einen Saft, der dich heilt, es wird alles gut', er drückte noch einmal ihre Finger. Ich war ganz dicht bei ihr. Ihr Haar roch nach Hoffnung. Ich spürte, wie durch jedes Wort etwas in ihr zu leben begann, frisch und hell wurde wie eine Zitrone. Ja, jetzt würde alles gut werden. Diesen Glauben hatte Dr. Fernando so mühelos gepflanzt wie einen seiner Grashalme. 'Was hat sie?', sagte Ana. 'Mein Saft wird ihr helfen. Der Saft ist phantastisch.' 'Aber was hat sie?', sagte Carl. 'Ich weiß nicht, Dengue vermutlich, ziemlich sicher. Der Saft wird alle Giftstoffe aus ihrem Körper ziehen, egal, was es ist, glaubt mir.'⁵¹

This first meeting with Dr. Fernando offers a kind of counterpoint to Carmen's previous encounters with doctors, one that centers not on a quick and unreflective diagnosis, but rather on Carmen's emotional response to the physician's actions. Perhaps most striking is his seeming disinterest in the expediency of a diagnosis. The suggestion that she has dengue is immediately followed by several qualifiers before being dismissed as irrelevant; the attentive bedside preparation of his signature juice (a hand pressed mixture of Fuji apples, ginger, and wheat grass) will supposedly remove all toxins ("Giftstoffe") regardless of origin. His approach is essentially an appeal to the power of affect, attending to his patient's emotional needs so thoroughly as to ostensibly obviate the need for analysis of any kind. While this clearly fosters a great deal of hope in Carmen, its benefits prove short-lived as she is unable to stomach the carefully prepared remedy and her condition soon worsens.

With Dr. Fernando's failure and with the help of Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical framework, it becomes possible to sort the various approaches of Carmen's doctors into two distinct categories. In the first and largest category belong the series of physicians who prove unable to acknowledge the complex process of inter-species communication and interconnectivity taking place before their eyes. In Deleuze and Guattari's terms, faced with Carmen's story, the doctors disregard the primacy of affect and instead overinterpret, forcing their diagnoses on her and failing to recognize the dynamic process of becoming-animal. In contrast, the second approach is characterized by a focus on the power of affect over the necessity for a diagnosis. This is most clearly embodied by Dr. Fernando and his lovingly administered if ultimately ineffective natural remedy. In attending to her, he bears witness to her condition in a

⁵⁰ Stephan: *Mal Aria*, p. 91.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

way the previous doctors do not. While both strategies enjoy a measure of success, they ultimately fail to save Carmen.

In the context of these failures, it is necessary to revisit the narrator's summary of humanity's missteps in the long battle with malaria. As she hypothesizes: "Vielleicht, wenn ihr einmal denkt, wenn ihr wirklich einmal zu denken anfangt, wenn ihr begreift, wenn ihr mit der Natur geht, nicht gegen sie. Wenn ihr anfangt zu sehen, dann seht ihr mich."⁵² As previously argued, her criticism sets up the act of seeing as a necessary step toward addressing the root cause of malaria. Taken alone, however, the act of witnessing is insufficient. This is proven by Dr. Fernando's failure in spite of his ability to affectively respond to the pain and confusion that define the multi-species assemblage of Carmen, Mosquito, and parasitic plasmodium intertwined in a deadly process of becoming. As the narrator argues in the above passage, what is required is not just that one begins to see ("sehen"), but also to *think* ("denken") and to *understand* ("begreifen"). Taken alone, Dr. Fernando's openness to the affects that comprise Carmen's hybrid existence is as ineffectual as her other doctors' single-minded focus on arriving at a diagnosis. Instead, this thoroughly hybrid narrator advocates for an equally hybridized solution, one that incorporates both approaches and exhorts the reader to go *with* ("mit") rather than *against* ("gegen") nature.⁵³

What, then, could it mean to go *with* nature in this context, and where does this leave Carmen's final encounter with the only doctor who proves able to correctly diagnose her illness? While the narrator spends a significant amount of time in the novel bemoaning human (in)action in the face of repeated malarial outbreaks, relatively little space is devoted to opposing descriptions of Nature, generally conceived, or of something like its proper course. A notable exception occurs early in the novel, in a previously quoted passage where the narrator describes her relationship with her reluctant blood sister:

Wir waren so eng miteinander verbunden, wie man es nur sein konnte, wir waren für unser restliches Stück Leben in dem Kreis eingeschlossen – die Natur trennt nicht, sie verbindet, knüpft ihre Knoten, wo sie kann, und sei es durch den Tod.⁵⁴

As argued previously, this brief passage generalizes the manifold operations of nature into a single, overarching drive to forge connections between supposedly distinct beings. Applied to the above-cited exhortation, it becomes clear that according to the narrator, nature itself demands a hybrid approach, one that *ties the knot* ("knüpft ihre Knoten") between affect and interpretation.

The lone example of such an approach in Stephan's novel is of course Carmen's final doctor, who unites the attentive bedside manner of Dr. Fernando with the interpretive drive of her previous physicians. In doing so, he proves uniquely able to identify and diagnose the specific nature of Carmen's becoming-animal. That his intervention arrives too late to be of any use to his patient must be read as a further criticism of the previous approaches, now seen as inadequate in their refusal to unite openness to affect with careful analysis and interpretation. Crucially, this reading takes the novel a step beyond the kind of approach advocated for by Deleuze and Guattari, who in

52 Ibid., p. 167.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., p. 67.

their zeal to distance themselves from overbearing psychoanalytic interpretations, argue for the primacy of immanence and affect when encountering becomings-animal. According to the reading presented here, such siloed approaches are doomed to fail and indeed, run counter to nature itself, the unifying force par excellence that seeks to *tie the knot*, endlessly recombining elements regardless of perceived cost to the phantasmic individuals involved. With the horrors of DDT fresh in her mind and faced with the looming prospect of ever-increasing human control over the environment, Stephan's narrator finds it necessary to challenge the anthropocentric orthodoxy of the Great Chain in the strongest possible terms. What she offers in its place is a vision of human, animal, and single-celled lives arranged in a series of interlocking circles, not end to end in a vertical hierarchy, but rather side by side, extending in every direction and leaving nothing and no one separate from their surroundings.

