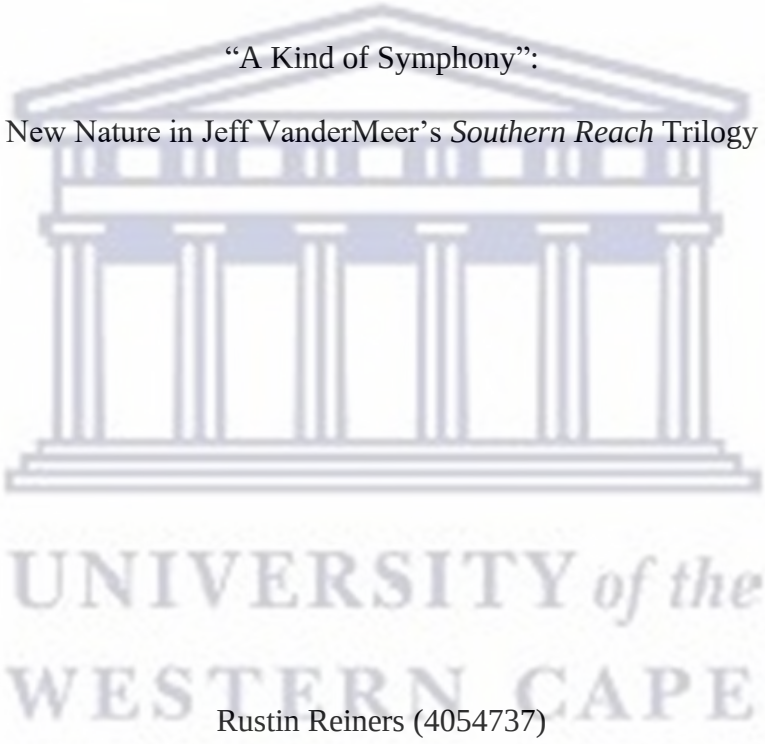
University of the Western Cape

“A Kind of Symphony”:
New Nature in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach* Trilogy



Rustin Reiners (4054737)

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Supervisor: Dr. Delphi Carstens

Co-supervisor: Dr. Alannah Birch

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Abstract

The Anthropocene is the proposed name for a new geological epoch that has come about due to significant human changes to climate and environment. In response to the Anthropocene crisis, this thesis proposes a re-evaluation of the agency of non-human interlocuters – ultimately questioning the place of humans in the natural world. This viewpoint is explored through an examination of the New Weird, a literary genre that blends elements of transgressive horror and speculative fiction, often with an environmental lens. A close reading of Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy reveals an attempt to challenge the conventional boundaries between human and non-human, which is predominantly achieved through an invocation of the ecological uncanny – a blurring of ontological, epistemological, and ethical boundary lines between humans and the environment. The *Southern Reach* novels present an environment where the fixed laws of nature proposed by reductive science begin to unravel. Therefore, VanderMeer – through elements of the genre of contemporary fantasy and science fiction known as the New Weird – casts doubt on the separation of humans and nature. The critique of the human/nature binary is something that is explored extensively by continental philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as well as feminist scholars like Stacy Alaimo, Rosi Braidotti, Donna J. Haraway, and Elizabeth A. Povinelli, who can all broadly be termed as 'new materialist' thinkers – owing to their insistence on cultivating new modes of thinking about human and non-human relations. It is through the combination of various new materialist theories and New Weird fiction that I am able to formulate an argument for a less anthropocentric reading of the Anthropocene; an interpretation that draws no distinction between nature and the human, and which allows for different forms of existence that exceed the human.

Keywords: New Weird fiction, Jeff VanderMeer, the Anthropocene, new materialism, posthumanism, trans-corporeality, the ecological uncanny, becoming, affect, geontopower

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"A Kind of Symphony": New Nature in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* Trilogy

Introduction

In 2000, atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen and climatologist Eugene F. Stoermer suggested that the Earth was no longer in the Holocene but had transited into a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. The proposed naming of the Anthropocene (derived from the Greek word *anthropos*, meaning human) is categorised by the "still growing" detrimental ecological impacts of human activities (Crutzen and Stoermer 17). These anthropogenic impacts are said to be severe enough to have produced a cascading crisis in contemporary times involving factors such as global climate change, ecosystem destruction, species extinction, and increasing socio-economic precarity. In this time of potentially catastrophic change, it has become necessary to think beyond the conventional humanist refrains – ways of thinking, doing and feeling – that have produced the Anthropocene. This requires not only a re-evaluation of the usual binary constructions that have been used to separate individual humans and societies from the rest of the living and non-living environment, but also a consideration of transversal movements[1] that are able to uproot the refrains or territorial expressions of anthropocentricism (human exceptionalism, individualism, etc.). A world on the brink of ecological collapse underscores the necessity of seeking out different forms of imaginative expression – artistic, literary or theoretical – that send us spinning away from the normative expressions that have been used to mark out the apocalyptic territory of humans.

[1] According to Félix Guattari, transversality or transversal movements imply a kind of interactive exchange or movement "that strives to overcome two impasses", namely, "pure verticality and a simple horizontality" – in other words, a bi-directional "communication" between different institutional "levels" and/or different "directions" of thought, interest, or specialism that ensures "multidirectional flows" and "enriched encounters" in response to ever-changing conditions (qtd. in Young et al. 321).

The reconsideration of nature/culture, human/non-human, living/non-living binaries and more-than-human ecological, social, and individual relations is synonymous with new materialism. New materialist/posthuman thinkers, as philosopher and feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti (2013) observes in *The Posthuman*, refuse normative and universalising standards of thought, tracing "transversal connections among material and symbolic, concrete and discursive lines of relation or forces" (95). New materialism, therefore, places emphasis on the "primacy of the relation" and the "interdependence" between human and non-human forms of life (95). As Delphi Carstens (2019) writes:

> Instead of enforcing illusory conceptual gaps between the subject and object of knowledge or cutting up the world into discreet partitionings, new materialist interventions – whether termed posthuman, agential realist, vital materialist, etc. – seek to make connections between the vibrant agential and affective capacities of matter as well as the intermeshed entanglements of material things, objects and subjects. ("New Materialist" 139)

This interdisciplinary ontological, epistemological, ethical and political school of thought proposes that less destructive ways of being human require deeper engagements with materiality, relationality, and the distribution of agency. As Jane Bennett (2010) writes in *Vibrant Matter*, new materialist theory calls for a renewed engagement with the vibrancy of human and "non-human bodies, forces, and forms" (122). Such new modes of thinking about materiality and agency, as Braidotti observes, are critical of the "human, all too human, resources and limitations" that have been used to "frame" as well as constrain "collective and personal levels of intensity and creativity" (12). To think and feel our way out of the crisis of the Anthropocene, "we need to devise new social, ethical and discursive schemes of subject formation to match the profound transformations we are undergoing" (12).

Literature is another medium that can help us to creatively configure a new symphony of more-than-human becoming; one constructed from more inclusive and less destructive refrains of cognition and feeling. As Donna J. Haraway (2016) observes: storytelling is a crucial element in the "practice of thinking" and world-making (*Staying* 39). Yet, she continues, "it matters what thoughts think thoughts; it matters what stories tell stories" (39) – making the humanist stories that produced the current crisis inadequate for 'reasoning' or feeling our way beyond it. Where it overlaps with new materialist and 'post' humanist themes, contemporary examples of speculative fiction, or science fiction (sf), offer particularly useful storytelling practices that present a renewed engagement with the future conceived of in terms of non-dualistic more-than-human entanglements, relations, and affects. A subgenre of sf known as the New Weird provides a particularly ideal creative laboratory for exploring the Anthropocene dilemma along such lines. My thesis will explore how New Weird modes of storytelling challenge the problematic humanist notion of a bounded self by emphasising the imbrication of human and non-human bodies, affects, and atmospheres in processes of entangled world-building and world-sustaining. To do this, I will focus on a specific example of New Weird sf – American author Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy (*Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance* – republished together in 2014). Along with VanderMeer and various new materialist thinkers, I will argue that a post-anthropocentric, post-humanist shift is imperative in the quest for renewal beyond the ruin of the Anthropocene.

Before articulating what such a shift could entail in relation to my investigation, it is necessary to undertake a brief historical cartography of the Anthropocene crisis. While there is as of yet no official starting point for the onset of the Anthropocene, Crutzen and Stoermer believe it to have very specific origins in the trans-Atlantic Industrial revolution that began with James Watt's invention of the steam engine in 1784 (18). They note that the interval

between the 18th century humanist Enlightenment and the so-called post-industrial 21st century include many significant anthropogenic industrial changes to the Earth's systems. For example, it is during this period that the data retrieved from glacial ice cores show the beginning of a growth in the atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases directly because of progress-driven industrial processes of production and consumption; notably the sudden release into the atmosphere of hundreds of millions of years' worth of geologically sequestered carbon deposits via the burning of fossil fuels (17). Furthermore, industrial 'engineering' processes effected radical ecological alterations to terrestrial ecosystems, the morphology of freshwater systems, as well as Earth's biotic assemblages via extensive deforestation, mining, plantation-agriculture, dam-construction, and other terraforming projects (18).

Other scholars, like Jan Zalasiewicz et al. (2014), suggest the Anthropocene officially began when the first nuclear bomb was exploded on July 16, 1945, at Alamogordo, New Mexico – an event that, along with more than 2000 nuclear test explosions that followed in subsequent decades, left detectable radiocarbon traces in the bodies and skeletons of the Earth's living creatures (5). While this view does not deny the shift in anthropogenic influence seen in the preceding centuries of triumphalist western colonialism and industrialisation, it highlights the 'great acceleration' in human population and industrial production of the mid-20th century. The Alamogordo explosion, in this case, acts as a threshold, or geological 'golden spike' – a point at which the environmental impact of the accelerating Industrial Revolution became "both global and near-synchronous" (6).

While debates around the confirmed historical starting point of the Anthropocene are unlikely to be resolved any time soon, what is undeniable is that industrialised humans, driven by humanism's progress stories, have emerged as a geological force with profound consequences for the present and future of life. The Anthropocene draws attention to the

possibility of extinction for many lifeforms – including humans. In this way, it is closely linked to the literary concept of apocalypse, which – even in its historical/biblical sense – is concerned with the destruction and subsequent renewal of the physical world. In sf, which is primarily a literary genre concerned with crisis and transformation, the Anthropocene evokes storytelling practices that engage with calamity by projecting not only beyond it, but also through it. In sf such as that of VanderMeer, as well as in new materialist theory, the urgency of the current apocalyptic situation is mobilised to direct attention to our flawed human relations with the other-than-human world, as it is on the recognition, continuity and strengthening of these relations that the possibility for renewal after the ruin of the Anthropocene rests. With the knowledge that humans do not exist independently from other lifeforms, comes the realisation that we will not be able to fix this "Anthropocene mess" we have made by ourselves (Carstens and Bozalek 5). As environmental historian Jason W. Moore (2016) writes, the Anthropocene poses a question that is fundamental to our times: "How do humans fit within the web of life?" ("Introduction" 2).

The Anthropocene, in this case, is a suitable point of departure for further exploration into the place of the human in contemporary times. The recognition of anthropogenic changes wrought on the body of the Earth has warranted the naming of a new geological era, which in itself represents a clarion call for new and less ruinous ways of engaging with the world. Many scholars, however, believe that the naming of the Anthropocene is not enough to accurately describe the severity, cause and complexity of the contemporary crisis. Moore prefers what he calls "an ugly name for an ugly system" ("The Rise" 111) – the *Capitalocene*. This is a response to the central problem of the Anthropocene; that there have been detrimental changes to climate and environment due to specific human actions. The Capitalocene does not dismiss this, but rather attempts to shed light on the perceived root cause – exploitative capitalism. According to Moore, the argument for the Capitalocene

understands the degradation of nature as a "specific expression of capitalism's organisation of work" (111). This "work" is primarily the capitalist perception of nature as a "force of production" (112), which has led to a global ecological crisis. Moreover, the Capitalocene recognises the apocalypticism of capitalism's economic telos; namely, that the only change that is conceivable is that undertaken according to the intractable profit-making logics of the marketplace.

Sf, as a literary genre, attempts to look beyond times of crisis by imaginatively reflecting on the causes and conditions of catastrophe, by crafting novel experiments in becoming, and by projecting forward into speculative futures beyond calamity. Sf, concerned as it is with crisis, is an inherently apocalyptic genre (Carstens, *Uncovering* 3). Nevertheless, it is mostly focused on conceptual and creative forms of renewal, plotting escape routes and transformations by mobilising ideas and theories as driving forces in its narrative frameworks (12). Farah Mendlesohn (2003) goes as far as to say that in particular readings of sf "the idea functions as the protagonist" (3). Not all theoretical protagonists in sf, however, are constructed around the possibilities of renewal. The idea of the Capitalocene finds particular expression in what Fredric Jameson (2005) calls apocalyptic sf – a subgenre that presents catastrophe as inevitable and imagines no possibility of transformation, conceiving of the end of human existence, alongside the extinction of most terrestrial lifeforms. As Jameson puts it, apocalyptic sf presents "visions of total destruction and of the extinction of life on Earth, which seem more plausible than the utopian vision" of redemption through a new beginning (199). The Capitalocene links are bolstered by a well-known quote that Mark Fisher (2009) attributes to Jameson and Slavoj Žižek: "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (*Capitalist* 8). This reading of the apocalypse, explored through the lens of sf, is significant in terms of assessing the urgency of the Anthropocene (or

Capitalocene) crisis, and opens the door for further discussions around the intractability of capitalist logics.

Another proposed naming of our current apocalyptic era that has relevance to my investigation is what Delphi Carstens and Vivienne Bozalek (2021) term the *Shadowcene*. This formulation is particularly appropriate to the uncanny themes of New Weird fiction**.** "The uncanny[2]" – or *das Unheimliche* as coined by Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud – "has been a focus of critical, literary, philosophical, and political reflection from at least the mid-19th century to the present" (Royle 3-4) and is a central concept in my reading of the New Weird. Author Marjorie Sandor (2015) claims the "uncanny-in-fiction" is "capable of inspiring a special form of unease" as the reader experiences a "growing sense of dreamlike disorientation, as if the story's terrain has begun to waver and reorganise itself…" As Nicolas Royle (2003) explains, the uncanny draws on Russian-formalism's literary technique of *ostranie*, namely, "defamiliarization" or "to make strange" – whereby the representations of the unfamiliar, the shadowy, the unhomely, and the ghostly are "never fixed but constantly altering", acting as metaphors for the fluctuating, precarious, and "fundamentally unliveable modern condition" (5-6). In an age of anthropogenic climate change and mass extinction, the uncanny is perhaps more at work than ever.

The Anthropocene/Capitalocene and their associated effects are uncanny in that they take place over "huge scales of space and vast spans of time" (Carstens and Bozalek 9). In this way, the term Shadowcene implies an uncanny situation in which it is impossible for humans to capture the consequences of their actions in their entirety, access them completely, or even bring them under rational control. The philosopher Timothy Morton (2013) provides the term *hyperobjects* to refer to these kinds of 'eventful' shadowy things, like climate

[2] The uncanny is the subject of an infamous 1919 essay by Freud titled "*Das Unheimliche*" and, more recently, Jacques Derrida's 1993 book *Specters of Marx*, subtitled "Marx – *Das Unheimliche*".

change or an unfolding mass extinction event, that are "massively distributed in time and space" relative to humans (1). They are viscous, nonlocal, and – due to their unique and expansive temporality – mostly ungraspable in their entirety to humans (1). The Anthropocene event itself can be described as a hyperobject; in fact, many of its main drivers, such as climate change, land degradation (from plantation-based agriculture), or mass species extinction are, in a sense, hyperobjects too (Carstens and Bozalek 9). These unfolding events stretch so far backwards and forwards in time, that we are "literally living in their shadowtime" (9). As a concept, the Shadowcene suggests humans and non-humans find themselves in the throes of "extreme conditions and trends" that are "conceptually subterranean" – as they cannot be made easily visible or rendered easily intelligible (9). Not just humans, but all forms of life are embroiled in the "spectral indeterminacy" of an environmental crisis that is being "enacted across multiple geographical, temporal, material, psycho-social, and affective fronts" (10). Understanding this shadowy/spectral crisis and moving beyond and through it requires a recognition of its uncanny indeterminacies and an appreciation of "the saving power of thinking in uncanny coexistent more-than-human terms" (10). This too, as I will argue, is the work of the contemporary new materialisms, as well as forms of Anthropocene sf.

The revelation of agency for non-human interlocuters in the face of an increasingly destructive anthropocentric worldview is a hallmark of new materialist theory. New materialism ultimately involves an urgent rejection of any clear boundaries between human and non-human. Feminist new materialist philosophers like Haraway, Elizabeth Grosz, Stacey Alaimo, and Deborah Bird Rose go further in their rejection of dualistic thought by insisting, along with continental philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, that ontological, ethical, epistemological, political, and aesthetic practices be made immanent to one another. This kind of immanent accountability is crucial to Haraway's (2015) suggested

alternative naming for (or renaming of) the Anthropocene – the *Chthulucene* – which accounts for the innumerable acts of material world-building/world-making in which humans are embroiled with a multitude of non-human others, and on which our continued survivability depends. The Chthulucene envisions a post-anthropocentric world, where "flourishing" for multi-species assemblages – including humans – will be possible (Haraway, "Anthropocene" 160). For flourishing to be possible, however, requires ethical, ontological, epistemological, aesthetic, and political commitment in the present to inter-species collaboration and *sympoiesis* (making-with); an urgent work of reconstituting "refuges" and making possible processes of "biological-cultural-political-technological recuperation" (160). This is closely linked to Alaimo's concept of *trans-corporeality*. Trans-corporeality is feminist new materialist concept described as "the opposite of distancing or dividing the human from external nature" (Kuznetski and Alaimo 139). As a posthuman thinking aid it presents a distinct connection between human and non-human bodies, suggesting a corporeal enmeshment "in the material physical world" (139). Bodies – human or not – are inextricably caught up with other bodies, species, ecosystems, and more-than-human processes.

The Environmental Humanities – according to Serpil Opperman and Serenella Iovino (2017) – contextualises and complements environmental science and policy with a strong focus on narrative and critical thinking (1). It calls for "new modes of knowing and being" (1) which include the "reconfiguration and extension" (2) of nature, agency, and materiality. It can be said these "new modes" are necessary due to the emerging knowledge of human enmeshments with the more-than-human world. We need "complex modes of analysis" or "conceptual patterns" that allow us to make sense of these "entangled territories" (2). This is what makes environmental crisis significant not only to natural science, but to the humanities as well. One of the ways in which the humanities can contribute is by providing these conceptual patterns or modes of analysis through the form of narrative. For example, while

apocalyptic sf differs from the traditional sf narrative, it utilises certain techniques of the genre to comment on times of crisis.

One of these techniques is cognitive estrangement, or defamiliarization; a well-known sf characteristic that allows the author to create a world that differs from their own, while still maintaining a connection to it. Sf theorist Darko Suvin (1979) calls this "the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition" – which he sees as "necessary and sufficient conditions" of sf as a literary genre (8). This is how sf and its subgenres are able to provide narratives that map conceptual patterns to help create space for further analysis. In a 2020 interview with Julia Kuznetski, Alaimo says: "Art, literature, and popular culture can make scientific facts and data into something much more meaningful for people" (140). This emphasises how the literary imagination can be useful in providing a more accessible framework for contextualising and disseminating scientific understanding (140).

In the Berlin Family lectures (published as *The Great Derangement*), Indian author Amitav Ghosh (2016) claims climate change casts "a much smaller shadow" in literary fiction than it does in the world (7). His reasoning being that fiction dealing with climate change is not taken seriously by prestigious literary journals; even the mention of the subject is enough to "relegate" a novel to the genre of sf (7). This is largely due to the extreme weather events associated with climate change being perceived as outside the formal limits of literary realism. As Ghosh says: "The modern novel, unlike geology, has never been forced to confront the centrality of the improbable" (23). These catastrophic events associated with climate change have a high degree of improbability that "defies both literary fiction and contemporary common sense" (26). As literary fiction struggles with improbable occurrences, it is natural to turn to neighbouring genres with more freedom, such as magical realism or surrealism. Ghosh, however, claims these events are neither surreal nor magical – they are "overwhelmingly, urgently, astoundingly real" (27). Therefore, speculative literary

genres might be more capable of handling issues related to the Anthropocene – by representing the emergence of the 'improbable' in fictional worlds that resemble our own.

The medium of film has also seen an emergence of the speculative in times of environmental crisis, to contemplate on-going non-human extinction and the advancement of issues like anthropogenic climate change. Selmin Kara (2016) calls this *Anthropocenema* – "a neologism to think about film in the age of the Anthropocene" (9). While sf has been a prominent genre of film since the early 1900s, the awareness of the accelerating pace of the Anthropocene has created a shift in many contemporary sf films, from far-fetched futuristic fantasy to a genuine attempt at examining times of change and crisis. As Kara notes, the invocation of "our future self-annihilation" is not a case of fantasy or sensationalism, as apocalyptic narratives have become "fact-based speculations on the foreseeable consequences of the Anthropocene" (8). Apocalyptic sf films like Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) or Bong Joon-Ho's *Snowpiercer* (2013), for example, conjure of dystopian futures out of the current problems of late capitalism, echoing Moore's Capitalocene proposition.

Due to an increasing awareness of improbable events and conditions, humans living in the Anthropocene are frequently confronted with defamiliarizations or estrangements from the confident, familiar, and comforting progressive humanist vision of the world. The uncanny embodies this confluence of the strange and the familiar. Freud (2003, first published in 1919) defines the uncanny as "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well-known and had long been familiar" (124). In the era of the Anthropocene, the sense of dread induced by uncanny events seems to have "stirred a sense of recognition" (Ghosh 30) about the presence of non-human interlocuters and the dire consequences of humanist progress stories. This has led to a re-evaluation of the conventional boundaries that humanism inserted between human and non-human bodies, which transcends our preconceptions about the world and conjures the uncanny. A renewed creative

engagement with nature in theory, literature, and the arts is often referred to as the ecological uncanny. Siobhan Carroll (2016) explains that the ecological uncanny works against "traditional nature discourse" to "expose the human in the natural and vice versa" ("*The Terror*" 67). The ecological uncanny and defamiliarization (or cognitive estrangement) work in tandem in certain examples of sf – which reinforces the argument that it is more equipped to present issues related to the Anthropocene than literary texts.

In a 2016 essay called "Hauntings in the Anthropocene", VanderMeer claims that New Weird fiction is able to map "elements of the Anthropocene" to create a "greater and more visceral understanding". Furthermore, hyperobjects like "global warming" in the modern era are so vast and extreme that they escape the grasp of what our five senses can perceive, so much so that the "fixed laws of nature" seem more and more "to have become un-fixed" ("Hauntings"). In the *Southern Reach* trilogy, humans are launched into an alien and monstrous system of ecological mutation and assimilation in a manner that questions the effectiveness of humanist reductionist scientific frameworks, fictions of human/non-human separability, and other humanist existential constructs. According to Carroll, this questioning characterises VanderMeer's trilogy – and the genre of the New Weird overall – as constituting a renewed engagement with the uncanny ("*The Terror*" 67). The ecological uncanny, in particular, is evoked by VanderMeer as his human characters are haunted by the spectral presence of a more-than-human world (67). In this way, the *Southern Reach* trilogy explores and extends Freud's original concept with a clear focus on challenging the human/non-human binary.

In order to formulate a definition for the New Weird, it is necessary to note that the clarification of the 'new' in its name reveals the existence of a preceding version of the genre. The ecological uncanny is an integral part of making this distinction between the New Weird and more traditional weird fiction. Gry Ulstein (2017) says what can be looked at as the "Old

Weird" is closely linked to the cosmic horror of H.P Lovecraft from the early 20th century (75). This brand of fiction is usually characterised by "encounters with, and subsequent escapes from, inconceivable monsters" such as Lovecraft's famous Cthulhu (75). The New Weird, while adopting the cosmic horror of the old, dissipates its abysmal paralysis by "researching, articulating, and embracing the monster" instead of attempting to escape it (75). This is the nature of the ecological uncanny; the defamiliarization of conventional binaries, moving towards an "attachment to" rather than an "emancipation from" nature (76).

In an anthology called *The New Weird* (2008), edited by VanderMeer and his wife Ann, the author provides a working definition for the genre:

> New Weird is a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticised ideas about place found in traditional fantasy… [New Weird] has a visceral, in-the-moment quality that often uses elements of surreal or transgressive horror for its tone, style, and effects. (14)

This definition demonstrates how New Weird fiction presents a reworked, refocused version of the traditional weird narrative. While the latter prioritises cosmic horror over features of place, style, or characters – the former sees it only as an element to larger thematic objectives (Ulstein 81). It is not abundantly clear when the Old Weird pivoted to the New Weird, but VanderMeer sees the shift as occurring between the introduction of Clive Barker's body horror filled films and fiction in the 1980s and the publication of China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* in 2000 (*The New Weird* 20). With *Perdido Street Station,* Miéville displays a "fascination with the permutations of the body" like Barker, but "with techniques more common to writers like Charles Dickens" (24). In this way, Miéville, and his New Weird contemporaries, are said to "surrender to the weird" – the writer's surrender to the material, without ironic distance (24). In order to fully grasp this, it is necessary to look deeper into what the concept of the weird entails.

In his 2016 book *The Weird and the Eerie,* Fisher describes the weird as that which "lies beyond standard perception, cognition, and experience" (8). From his point of view, this is the distinction between the weird and Freud's concept of the uncanny. While regularly understood to mean 'uncanny', the German word *unheimliche* (as it appears in Freud's original essay) translates closer to 'unhomely'. As established before, this is about the strange *within* the familiar – the "strangely familiar" experience of the homely being rendered unhomely (10). Fisher claims the weird, on the other hand, is that "which does not belong" – bringing to the familiar something which ordinarily lies beyond it, which "cannot be reconciled with the homely" (11). This means that while the uncanny involves an estrangement from within, the weird exists outside our current understanding of the world – that which escapes the grasp of "what our five senses can perceive" (VanderMeer, "Hauntings").

While this concept of the 'outside' the weird represents is often linked to the supernatural, it is "by no means clear" that supernatural entities are inherently weird (Fisher, *The Weird* 15). To substantiate this opinion, Fisher compares the natural phenomenon of a black hole to the supernatural figure of a vampire. He argues that a creature like a vampire is easily recognisable in literature, which "disqualifies" it from "provoking any sensation of weirdness" (15). A black hole, on the other hand, is entirely weird because it actually belongs to the natural-material cosmos, but is "completely outside of our common experience" (15). It exists, but it is so massively distributed in time and space that we cannot see the whole of it. This can be extended to the biosphere itself. We are in it, but the full weight of it escapes our cultural way of looking at the world. In other words, the biosphere – like a black hole – is a hyperobject; it lies completely beyond human comprehension. As Fisher says, "If the entity or object *is* here, then the categories which we have up until now used to make sense of the world cannot be valid" (15). In that case, a literary genre like the New Weird can push the

boundaries between the known and the unknown, to take us one step closer to that which exists on the outside.

The various factors that contribute to the New Weird are evident in VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy. The first book, *Annihilation,* follows the expedition of four women – a biologist, a psychologist, an anthropologist, and a surveyor – into an uninhabited zone known as Area X. This is a region of coastline closed off to the rest of the world, apart from the expeditions sanctioned by a Military-Industrial research facility called the Southern Reach. The region is said to have been transformed by an unspecified "Event" about 30 years prior (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 94). This resulted in it being closed off by an invisible border, and therein the first expedition's discovery of "a pristine wilderness devoid of any human life" (95). Other expedition teams did not return, up until the 11th expedition, who returned as uncanny versions of themselves – like a "mirage" or "apparition" (56) – to subsequently die of "inoperable, systemic cancer" (57). The four women make up the 12th expedition and the novel is narrated by the biologist, taking the form of her field journal. With an objective to make sense of "the mysteries" (4) surrounding Area X, she discovers an external environment that actively manipulates the relationship between humans and nature.

My first chapter will involve a closer reading of *Annihilation,* in order to clarify the biologist's journey through an uncanny terrain, as well as the contamination and transformation that occurs along the way. I will consider how – like the Anthropocene itself – Area X can be read as a hyperobject, which emphasises the futility of Southern Reach expedition teams attempting to apprehend and domesticate the region. This challenges the plausibility and efficacy of the human/non-human binary, and the aforementioned contamination will be explored via the ecological uncanny, Alaimo's trans-corporeality, and

Haraway's[3] concept of *symbiogenesis*. I will consider the benefits of a text being converted to film with a closer look at English director Alex Garland's 2018 adaptation of *Annihilation*. The chapter will also assess the novel's capacity to conjure more-than-human affects and atmospheres, which are closely related to what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as a *haecceity*. Furthermore, *Annihilation* tracks the changes in the biologist's body and subjectivity, which frees her from the confines of a bounded self and opens her up to the more-than-human world. This is synonymous with Deleuze and Guattari's work in *A Thousand Plateaus* (2013, first published as a English translation in 1987) – and I will expand on their concepts of the rhizome and becoming, illuminating the transversal relations and transformations seen in the novel. In light of these transformations, I will investigate how Deleuze and New Weird authors attempt to 'undomesticate' or free the potential of the Romantic sublime. To add to this, the more-than-human vibrancy the author presents with Area X – and Garland's renaming of it to The Shimmer – will be compared to Rose's notion of shimmer, as well as her ideas on Aboriginal Dreamtime.

The second novel in the trilogy, *Authority*, focuses on the Southern Reach after the events of *Annihilation*, as they navigate the changes creeping into their lived environment. Their former director – revealed to be the psychologist from the 12th expedition – has died, and is replaced by an operative named John Rodriguez, mostly referred to as Control. The rest of the 12th expedition – including the biologist – have returned, and it is Control's job at the Southern Reach to "acclimate, assess, analyse, and then dig in deep" (*Authority* 8). He soon discovers the job is not as straightforward as he expects it to be. His colleagues are secretive and aloof, the biologist is asking to be called Ghost Bird and is seemingly "not the

[3] While Haraway's exploration of symbiogenesis will be the main focus for the purposes of my investigation, she describes her work on the subject as "indebted" to the prior efforts of biologist Lynn Margulis, and notes that "formulations of symbiogenesis" even predate Margulis – which can be seen in the work of Konstantin Mereschkowsky in the early 1900s (*Staying* 63).

same person" (91). Furthermore, the Area X border is expanding, and is not as clear or as stable as expected. While the novel is set mostly within the human inhabited spaces of the Southern Reach headquarters, Area X begins to infiltrate and threaten its safety.

With this, VanderMeer directly addresses the impossibility of a separation between humans and the rest of the natural world. Building on that point, my second chapter will be based on *Authority*, and will employ a close analysis of the text to address the failed attempts at human control over the landscape. As sovereignty becomes unattainable, the dismantling of institutional codes and systems in order to think-with the environment becomes an increasingly necessary development. This will be explored using Guattari's three ecologies – the environmental, social, and mental – and his conception of *ecosophy* to help express their interconnection (as laid out in a 2000 edition of his book *The Three Ecologies*). In the exploration of the relations between these three registers, a reconsideration of human and non-human subjectivity arises. As a result, the chapter will look at the subsequent implications for more-than-human agency, as well as the limits of a Capitalocene notion of techno-scientific progress. The representation of regressive technology in the novel will also be broadly related to Deleuze and Guattari's writing on machinic assemblages[4]. This will include a look into how the relationship between technological machines and the human body is often explored in literature and film through the science-fictional grotesque, or body horror. Lastly, I will expand on an integral revelation in *Authority*, which is the emergence of the word terroir, an agricultural term that is repurposed to investigate Area X and the situation of humans in the Anthropocene.

[4] In the book *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari (1994) call an assemblage a "fragmentary whole" (16) – where the parts of it are "not pieces of a jigsaw puzzle" but like a "dry-stone wall, and everything holds together only along diverging lines" (23). This links to Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, as an assemblage is a multiplicity that is "an arrangement or layout of heterogenous parts" and relies on a network of external relations (Nail 22).

The third and final book, *Acceptance*, deals with different timelines as it jumps between the perspectives of different characters. Firstly, it follows the psychologist from the 12th expedition and her journey to becoming director of the Southern Reach. It also tracks Control and Ghost Bird's present journey through Area X, as well as events 30 years prior to that, where Area X's origins are slowly revealed. In the latter timeline, the reader is introduced to a few key inhabitants of Area X from before the Event: The lighthouse keeper, Saul Evans, and a nine-year-old, named Gloria, who is the psychologist/director as a young girl. These parts of the novel document Saul's life leading up to the creation of Area X, where he is transformed into the creature the biologist names the Crawler in *Annihilation*. This is the first anomaly to occur as the environment – and its inhabitants – begin to transform. Saul spots a brightness in a "tuft of weeds" and reaches out to touch it, but it swirls and glints and eludes his grasp, and he feels faint, before noticing a "sliver" has entered his thumb (*Acceptance* 25). This demonstrates how the weirdness involved in the *Southern Reach* trilogy is not restricted to the external environment but infiltrates human bodies as well.

My third chapter will closely explore *Acceptance* and the porous boundaries of the skin through a comparison of how ecosickness, or environmental illness, is presented in the novel and in Todd Haynes' 1995 film *Safe*. The respective work of Alison Sperling (2016) and Heather Houser (2014) can aid this discussion, as they evaluate the role of sickness in representing the co-constitution of humans and the natural world. This speaks to how New Weird fiction re-evaluates the role of the monstrous in sf, as the trilogy's gradual embrace of Area X's nature reaches its climax in *Acceptance*. The chapter will consider the role of temporality in Area X, in contrast with the multiple narrative perspectives and time jumps

seen in the novel. This relates to Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology[5], as formulated in his 1994 book *Specters of Marx*. In addition, I will elaborate on posthumanist ideas, with the help of posthuman philosopher Francesca Ferrando and her book *Philosophical Posthumanism* (2019). This will be filtered through Deleuze and Guattari's proposition of the Body without Organs (BwO), and how it relates to the science-fictional becomings experienced by VanderMeer's human characters. The chapter will also look at Elizabeth Povinelli's 2016 book *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* and her concept *geontopower*; which troubles the relationship between life and non-life. Povinelli's three spectral geontological figures – the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus – become crucial in the attempt to comprehend the inner workings of Area X.

The Anthropocene has forced humans to re-evaluate their relationship with the environment. Global climate change, resource consumption, and the erosion of biodiversity and ecosystems are rapidly changing the world around us. This means more urgent attention has to be paid to ways in which the human overlaps with and forms relational assemblages with the non-human, to make an attempt at finding a solution to these anthropogenic problems. While the problems of anthropocentrism do not necessarily inspire optimism for the future, new materialist theory is significant in its attempts to envision a trans-corporeal future. From a new materialist point of view, humans are not separate from the rest of nature, but unavoidably tied up with it. The *Southern Reach* novels embrace the ethos of new materialism, while utilising elements of the New Weird. The term 'weird' automatically conjures the monstrous and uncanny via affects like fear and horror, but New Weird authors – like VanderMeer, Miéville, Brian Catling, and Steph Swainston – have taken this engagement

[5] Hauntology is a portmanteau of 'haunting' and 'ontology' that acknowledges the spectral presence of the past and the uncanny awareness of lost futures that haunt the present. As Derrida writes: "To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology" (202).

in explicitly ecological and environmental directions. Through its engagement with the ecological uncanny, the genre presents a potentially emancipatory catalyst whereby defamiliarization is used to subvert the boundary between humans and the rest of nature. In this way, the monstrous is embraced as kin rather than rival and the human position in nature is reimagined in the context of the unfolding Anthropocene.

Chapter 1 – *Annihilation*

In the introduction to their anthology *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*, Ann and Jeff VanderMeer (2012) write that the weird tale can be "transformative" – it strives for "a kind of understanding even when something cannot be understood" and acknowledges failure as "sign and symbol of our limitations" (18). These limitations are inherently linked to the seemingly fixed laws of anthropomorphically and anthropocentrically constructed nature, which include a clear separation between humans and nature, as well as between human and non-human bodies. In the same way Ghosh claims the effects of the Anthropocene lie beyond the formal limits of literary realism, the epoch in its entirety also appears to exceed the limits of human comprehension. Therefore, the Anthropocene effectively destabilises standard humanist criteria for making sense of the world, especially when the world defies the rigidity of those criteria. Morton, who has described the Anthropocene event as a hyperobject, says one cannot access hyperobjects "across a distance" – they are right here, and "their very nearness is what menaces" (27). The New Weird, with its affinity for defamiliarization, functions as a storytelling practice that re-evaluates the usefulness of the humanistic criteria that provide a false sense of mastery or control. By recognising entanglements and more-than-human relationalities, the New Weird elevates strange and inconceivable forces that amplify the presence of a nature that exceeds constructed boundaries of purely human(ist) cognition.

VanderMeer claims Morton's book on hyperobjects "has become central to thinking about storytelling in the modern era" ("Hauntings"). In developing this theme, the *Southern Reach* trilogy revolves around the hyperobject of Area X. This defiant object exists right on the doorstep of the Southern Reach, and continues to defy logic and reason. Despite multiple scientific expeditions launched to measure and quantify it, how it works or how to control it remains a menacing mystery. It is bewildering, threatening, and advancing – in ways not too

dissimilar from anthropogenic climate change. As the biologist begins to realise in the first book of the trilogy, *Annihilation*: "When you are too close to the centre of a mystery there is no way to pull back and see the shape of it entire" (VanderMeer 130). This applies equally to the human characters who find themselves in Area X and the humans who are currently living in the Anthropocene. The region's elusiveness is reinforced by VanderMeer's choice to name it Area 'X' – a symbol used to represent an unknown variable, or an object yet to be uncovered. In terms of the trilogy, this choice can be read as the author's play on the anthropocentric conceit of naming and the failure of the military-industrial complex (symbolised by the Southern Reach) to fully understand a nature that defies control (Area X). In the larger context of the Anthropocene, the trilogy can therefore be read as a critique of reductive science when faced with the ontological menace of a weird nature that both exceeds and destabilises the progress stories of humanist reason.

Annihilation allows the reader to take a unique first-hand look at Area X, functioning as the biologist's journal and tracking her experience in real time. However, this is not an ordinary first-person narrative. An ordinary journal or personal account tells only one particular perception of events, leaving the reader at the mercy of what the writer chooses to tell them. VanderMeer troubles this by making the unreliability of such a narrative clear. The biologist becomes aware of this fallibility near the end of her story, as she writes: "It may be clear by now that I am not always good at telling people things they feel they have a right to know, and in this account thus far I have neglected to mention some details…" (150). With this revelation, the reader is pushed further away from the goal of apprehending the true nature of Area X. The admission that the biologist's point of view is completely subjective suggests the omission of details is a necessary part of giving people things they "feel they have a right to know", and it is precisely this kind of hubris or entitlement that Area X defies.

This relates to the trilogy's depiction of a doomed fight for sovereignty and control when faced with the vastness and complexity of entangled nature and its hyperobjects.

VanderMeer's depiction of Area X interrogates the anthropogenic poisoning that has led to the Anthropocene. It is made clear that the region's pristine nature is largely due to the lack of human interference. This can be seen in the description of the air inside it as "so clean, so fresh" – while everything outside is "what it always had been during the modern era: dirty, tired, imperfect, winding down, at war with itself" (30). The naming of the first book itself – *Annihilation* – hints at the sixth mass extinction of biological life that scientists claim is underway in the Anthropocene (Carstens, "Navigating" 256). For instance, researchers have called the massive loss of wildlife in the era of the Anthropocene a "biological annihilation" representing a "frightening assault on the foundations of human civilisation" (Carrington). The biologist's negative depiction of the modern world as "what it always had been" emphasises the idea of Area X as something new and unblemished, where humanity is no longer central to proceedings.

The idea for Area X stems from VanderMeer's anger and grief over the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Despite reports that the spill had been cleared up, oil was still "infiltrating and contaminating the environment" at the microscopic level – proving that "just because you can't see something, doesn't mean it isn't affecting you or the places you love" (VanderMeer, "From Annihilation"). Significantly, VanderMeer chooses to use the word "can't" instead of "don't" here, which relates to this inability to see the whole. The oil spill is no longer visible but is still affecting local ecosystems, which poses larger questions about our awareness of ecological catastrophe when it eludes our limited worldview. After a bout of strep throat and then bronchitis, induced by dental surgery, the haunting memories of the oil spill resurfaced in terrifying, uncanny fever dreams for VanderMeer – dreams of walking

down the steps of a "tower sunk into the ground" with "living words on the walls" ("From Annihilation").

This, of course, is the birth of Area X's tower – where the biologist is contaminated by spores released by living words on the wall:

> I was unlucky—or was I lucky? Triggered by a disturbance in the flow of air, a nodule in the *W* chose that moment to burst open and a tiny spray of golden spores spewed out. I pulled back, but I thought I had felt something enter my nose, experienced a pinprick of escalation in the smell of rotting honey. (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 25)

The biologist's uncertainty about what the infection means, and about Area X's intentions, are confirmed when she wonders if she might be "lucky" to be on the receiving end of the spores. The admission that a nodule in one of the letters "chose" a moment to release the spores is significant, as it provides a sense of agency for the non-human counterpart of this interaction. Furthermore, the fact that they enter her nose and immediately heighten her senses show how her body is beginning to change after the encounter with the organism on the wall. She becomes more alert to the vitality of Area X's nature, which is embodied in her realisation that the tower itself is not an inert structure: "I had a moment of vertigo despite being in such an enclosed space, a kind of panic for a moment, in which the walls suddenly had a fleshy aspect to them, as if we travelled inside of the gullet of a beast" (27). The tower is rendered undeniably alive to the biologist, fleshy and monstrous, and her moment of panic represents the bewilderment of this experience.

There are multiple contaminations, or infiltrations, at play in VandeMeer's vision of Area X – the author's own immune system giving way to strep throat and bronchitis, the Gulf of Mexico polluted with leaking oil, as well as the "symbiotic fruiting bodies" (26) on the walls of Area X's tower that infect the biologist. This demonstrates how the uncanny transformations of Area X are not restricted to the environment; they affect bodies as well. As

Alison Sperling (2016) writes, VanderMeer's novels stage the conditions of environmental crisis "not only in the marshes and coastlines" of Area X, but "in the body" itself (232). This relates to Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, as it reveals the co-constitution of human and non-human bodies being infected and changed by the environment. This embodied co-constitution is what Sperling refers to as a "body-ecology" (232).

The body-ecology of Area X involves the "intrusion of the Anthropocene" into the body and the porosity of skin, and other bodily organs, to infections, atmospheres, and affects (233). This uncanny trans-corporeal nature can be seen as one of the key elements of the trilogy's deployment of the weird. Much like the invisible border separating humans from the rest of nature, or Area X from the rest of the human-controlled world, skin is meant to protect the human body from external threats. However, according to Sperling, the *Southern Reach* trilogy reveals the skin to be "the most vulnerable and open system of the body" in relation to the non-human environment (243). The Area X border proves to be just as incapable of containment, as the psychologist admits Area X will soon "eat a mile or two at a time" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 129). This is one of the ways that VanderMeer is able to challenge humanist notions around the fixity of borders, or the false safety of critical distance, as both are easily bypassed.

The biologist is contaminated through the inhalation of spores, but her symptoms initially present as a visual and sensory "epidermal phenomenon" (Sperling 242). She notices her skin gives off a "phosphorescence against the darkness" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 143), and experiences a hot and cold sensation like "cigarette burns" as a "searing snow" infiltrates her skin (149). The comparison of this hot and cold sensation to weather highlights the heightened effect and affective resonance of more-than-human elements and sensations in and around the body after contamination (Sperling 243). To the biologist, this presents the reality of an inextricably entangled relationship with the world around her; a sense that

derives from her material corporeality. Her entanglement with Area X has fundamentally changed her perception and experience of the natural world. The comparisons to weather also relate to the inexplicable unpredictability of weather conditions in the era of the Anthropocene – which are apprehended, felt, and corporeally sensed because of this more-than-human entanglement. As Alaimo observes, "the environment is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves" (*Bodily* 4). Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality resonates with the transformations witnessed in the *Southern Reach* trilogy, where the interconnectedness of environment and human is often expressed through and via the porous boundary of the skin. VanderMeer himself writes elsewhere that the effects of the Anthropocene are felt "in and under the skin" ("Hauntings"). This relates to Sperling's argument that skin might be an "active site of trans-corporeality" – an organ that does not maintain the "fixity of the body" as it is meant to, but rather opens it up and embroils it with other bodies, both human and not (245).

Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker (2014) draw on trans-corporeality and other feminist new materialist theories to describe our relationship to climate change as one of "weathering" (558). As established before, climate change is undeniably a hyperobject, nestled within the larger hyperobject of the Anthropocene. It has remained largely abstract in the daily lives of humans, due to its vast distance in terms of "time scale and global reach" (559). We cannot grasp it in its entirety and we withdraw in denial from its menacing presence, which has led to a lack of urgency in response to the problem, as well as a sense of separation between humans and environmental changes. The purpose of weathering the world is to bridge the distance of abstraction by "bringing climate change *home*" (559). This home, as Neimanis and Walker write, is a trans-corporeal one – where we can reconfigure "our spatial and temporal relations to the weather-world" (559). This means realising

environmental change and crisis are not events that occur around us, but events we are inextricably caught up with.

The biologist's sensitivity to weather and environmental elements after contamination is emblematic of this reconfiguration:

> The wind picked up, and it began to rain. I saw each drop fall as a perfect, faceted liquid diamond, refracting light even in the gloom, and I could smell the sea and picture the roiling waves. The wind was like something alive; it entered every pore of me and it, too, had a smell, carrying with it the earthiness of the marsh reeds. (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 74)

The description of the raindrops appears to be the moment the biologist begins to see the whole of something that was previously obscured, as every drop is now "perfect" and "faceted". She also describes each drop as a "liquid diamond" – a metaphor that indicates a revelation wherein she realises the true value of the weather. It is clear that her senses are heightened and more attuned to the natural world – the rain brings with it the smell of the sea, and the wind carries an earthy smell. Her unmistakeable identification of these smells demonstrates her closeness to environmental elements. The wind is also described as something "alive", something that can "enter" her body – which directly addresses the imbrication of humans and nature. Furthermore, the biologist's heightened sensory experience of the natural world highlights the presence of more-than-human affects.

Dominic Schaefer (2019) says affect theory "asks what bodies do – what they want, where they go, what they think, how they decide - and especially how bodies are impelled by forces other than language and reason" (1). Affects – like dread or fear – are subjective, preindividual experiences that are not consciously processed like feelings or emotions. Due to the prepersonal, precognitive nature of affects, they are often driven by the sensory experiences of more-than-human textures, smells, and moods. This is evident in the

biologist's experience, as the smells of the rain and the wind infiltrate her system and immediately conjure images of "roiling waves" and "marsh reeds". However, despite its concern with the prelinguistic, affect theory can be extremely useful to literary explorations of the uncanniness of nature.

To expand on this, Schaefer's definition can be extended to include not only human bodies, but non-human bodies as well. Bennett champions this point of view, as she focuses less on the "enhancement to human relational capacities resulting from affective catalysts" and more on the "catalyst itself as it exists in non-human bodies" (xii). Therefore, weather and environmental elements in the extract contain a power of their own, with the ability to be active outside of the biologist's perception. This can be seen in the description of the wind as something alive, and also the biologist's later admission that "even the darkness seemed more alive" – surrounding her like "something physical" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 75). In this way, the wind and the darkness are both affective, and an example like this is what might lead one to equate affect with materiality (Bennett xiii).

Deleuze and Guattari (2013) use the term haecceity to describe this particular mode of more-than-human individuation in *A Thousand Plateaus*. They write:

> A season, a winter, a summer, an hour, a date have a perfect individuality lacking nothing, even though this individuality is different from that of a thing or a subject. They are haecceities in the sense that they consist entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected. (304)

They are speaking of a non-personal mode of individuation here, where something other than a thing or a subject can have a certain quality – a thisness or hereness – that is unmistakeably unique. This is a haecceity, and it provides a season or a temporality with the ability to conjure affective responses and be affected itself. The environmental elements seen in *Annihilation* appear to possess this sense of impersonal and contingent individuality – or

haecceity – that helps to sculpt the depictions of uncanny nature that run through the novel. The darkness is a significant example of this. Darkness can't really be described as a thing, subject, or object – but the biologist can feel it physically, around and inside of her. In this way, the "relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles" that constitute the weather are entangled with bodies and are able to affect and be affected in innumerable material ways.

We are ultimately caught up with weather and nature because our bodies are trans-corporeal: "Like all other bodies of water, human bodies are replenished by rain; the winds that whip around us also fill our lungs and feed our blood; the sun's warmth allows us, like sea algae and sunflowers, to flourish" (Neimanis and Walker 563). The words "replenish", "feed", and "allow" provide the weather elements with agency in relation to maintaining both human and non-human bodies. This makes it difficult to think of the human as "discrete in time and space" and somehow "outside of the natural milieu that sustains them" and "transits through them" (563). For these reasons, whether the biologist's transformation can be construed as natural or unnatural hardly seems to matter. After a trip to the lighthouse, she returns to base camp and is met by the surveyor:

> "You've come back and you're not human anymore. You should kill yourself so I don't have to." I didn't like her casual tone.
>
> "I'm as human as you," I replied. "This is a natural thing," and realised she wouldn't understand I was referring to the brightness. I wanted to say that I was a natural thing, too, but I didn't know the truth of that… (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 146)

The changes to the biologist's body after contamination have left her visibly intertwined with the more-than-human aspects of Area X. She is not human in the normative sense anymore; she is becoming as humans always already are (and always have been) – trans-corporeal and inextricably entangled with a more-than-human world. The surveyor's response that the

biologist has to be killed confirms the idea of this transformation being unnatural and offensive to the normative sense of being human. Furthermore, the "casual tone" indicates that this appears to be the next logical step for the surveyor, or may be part of her training, which holds significant implications about the human response when faced with the uncanny or the inexplicable.

The biologist's reply is an assertion that her contamination is "a natural thing", which shows how she is processing it – she does not see it as a dangerous or monstrous event and might even be beginning to see it as something inevitable. However, her ambivalence is shown when she admits to not knowing "the truth" of the bounded categories of natural and unnatural. Both of the responses demonstrate the uncanniness of trans-corporeality. Alaimo writes, "Understanding the substance of one's self as interconnected with the wider environment makes a profound shift in subjectivity [possible]… what was once the ostensibly bounded human subject finds herself in a swirling landscape of uncertainty" (*Bodily* 20). In its challenging of boundaries between self and other, order and chaos, matter and unformed potential, Area X becomes a trans-corporeal zone of exchange, interconnection, and bi-directional flow.

Alaimo (2008) claims trans-corporeality involves a literal "contact zone" between human corporeality and more-than-human nature ("Trans-corporeal" 238). The 'trans' prefix indicates "movement across different sites" – which allows trans-corporeality to open up an epistemological 'space' that emphasises the interconnections between humans and non-human bodies (238). It can be said that VanderMeer conjures a trans-corporeal zone or space with his creation of Area X, as the trilogy's human characters are faced with a version of nature that physically infiltrates and changes them. Brian McHale (1987) also identifies the "zone" as a prominent motif not only in sf narratives, but in "all postmodernist fiction" (45). The world-building aspects of literature are present in all forms, but in realist or modernist

examples the spatial construct is typically "organised around a perceiving subject" like a character or detached narrator (45). Postmodernist writing – sf and the New Weird included – is more about constructing and *deconstructing* space. McHale writes that these zones involve "introducing an alien space *within* a familiar space, or *between* two adjacent areas of space where no such 'between' exists" (46). This is an adequate description of Area X, the alien topography of which is imposed on the marshes of coastal Florida – inspired by the author's hikes at the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge, near the Gulf of Mexico.

Writing about St. Marks, VanderMeer explains: "It is a landscape and a series of transitional ecosystems that have enchanted me, fascinated me, and at times scared me" ("'Weird' Nature"). The fact that Area X is based on a deconstructed and defamiliarized existing place elevates the affective response from the reader, due to the force of this estranging encounter with the familiar. The setting of a nature reserve, or a transitional environment, is a familiar space, but Area X subverts expectations with its inherently weird and 'alien' nature. Nothing is what it seems in Area X – "the trees are not trees the birds are not birds and I am not me" (*Annihilation* 82). The "between" McHale speaks of is compromised as well; Area X is expanding, and the borders intended to contain it do not appear to be sufficient. The zone VanderMeer constructs is deconstructed through a subversion of the conventional relationship between human and non-human nature. For that reason, the concept of a zone functions on two distinct levels in the novel – to challenge the idea of a separation between humans and nature and to destabilise a narrative construct, both through ecologically uncanny defamiliarizations.

The biologist refers to this disruption of the human/nature binary when she says: "We were scientists, trained to observe natural phenomena and the results of human activity. We had not been trained to encounter what appeared to be the uncanny" (69). As Carroll notes, the biologist automatically assigns human activity and natural phenomena to separate

categories, even though "something uncanny impinges on her senses" at the same time ("*The Terror*" 77). She is attempting to cling to her scientific objectivity, despite the weirdness inherent in Area X. This is expressed in an earlier event as well, when she sees a pair of otters through binoculars and gets the uncanny sensation that they see her watching them. In that case, she claims: "… I had to fight against the sensation because it could overwhelm my scientific objectivity" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 30). Objectivity requires a certain amount of repression, which shows how the ecological uncanny unravels and exposes the biologist's repressed awareness about her implication in the natural world (Carroll, "*The Terror*" 77). It is through this invocation of the ecological uncanny that VanderMeer questions the efficacy of reductive notions around science and nature. To dismiss the full more-than-human dimensions of the human role in environmental change can impede humanity's ability to respond to the challenges of the Anthropocene (76).

Carstens (2020) explains how – in the mediated crisis of the Anthropocene – affects like fear, dread, or terror, jump between bodies caught in the affective undertow of present or future events ("Navigating" 96). Similar to Area X's effect on the biologist, the Anthropocene is an uncanny, affect-laden event that intrudes on the senses – which inspires many contemporary authors who write about it to conjure up an "affective tonality of fear" (96). VanderMeer achieves this in the *Southern Reach* trilogy by creating atmospheres of dread, often through his use of the ecological uncanny. Carroll (2015) draws attention to how the novels expose the humanist sense of alienation or separation from nature as false, as we are "as much an alien part of a natural world as a plant or a whale" ("The Ecological"). A turning point for the biologist in *Annihilation* is an uncanny encounter with dolphins swimming in the canal:

> I knew that the dolphins here sometimes ventured in from the sea, had adapted to the freshwater. But when the mind expects a certain range of possibilities, any

> explanation that falls outside of that expectation can surprise. Then something more wrenching occurred. As they slid by, the nearest one rolled slightly to the side, and it stared at me with an eye that did not, in that brief flash, resemble a dolphin eye to me. It was painfully human, almost familiar… I had the unsettling thought that the natural world around me was some kind of camouflage. (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 96)

The uncanny, in the Freudian sense, is concerned with what our cultural way of looking does not allow us to see. These are repressed ideas and beliefs that hover in the subconscious, only to return and produce uncanny experiences. The biologist speaks to this when she admits there is a "certain range of possibilities" that a mind conditioned by cultural norms will expect in a given situation. When the explanation falls outside of these expectations, like a group of dolphins swimming down a canal, one is faced with the uncanny. Despite the realisation that she "knew" the dolphins had adapted to the freshwater, their eventual emergence from underneath creates a visceral response.

The infiltration of the uncanny does not stop there, and is eventually presented in a more ecological light, as the biologist begins to notice an agency that is usually regarded as exclusively human in one of the dolphins. She claims the dolphin "rolled" to the side and "stared" at her – which, in itself, makes it clear the dolphin recognises her presence, and looks at her out of its own volition. Moreover, she notices a strangely familiar intelligence in the dolphin's eye – not in a contrived anthropomorphic way, but as a stark realisation of Area X's uncanny nature. Neimanis and Walker write that reconsidering the agency of non-human nature is better described as "responsivity… the capacity to engage with other agents" (563). This links to Deleuze and Guattari's explanation of haecceity; a specific quality that creates room for more-than-human affects, but also illuminates the contingent, impersonal, and more-than-human qualities of life that exceed the bounded categories humans arbitrarily impose on it.

The dolphin's eye being "*painfully* human" and "almost familiar" is an undeniably uncanny event. It embodies the biologist's moment of bewilderment, as she is forced to consider that the conventional laws imposed by humans on nature do not apply in Area X. This is the crux of the ecological uncanny; it breaks down the societal or cultural belief of a clear separation between human and non-human, just as Area X does when the humans who enter it start to become part of its living assemblages. This is hinted at in the biologist's emerging idea of the natural world around her as "some kind of camouflage". Along with the ecological uncanny, comes the trans-corporeal notion of nature as something other than "a passive resource for the exploits of Man" (Alaimo, "Trans-corporeal" 244). It is not something around us but something "of us, in us, through us" (Neimanis and Walker 559). The suspicion of Area X's bewildering camouflage lies in VanderMeer's gradual introduction of the region's transformative properties.

The transformations seen in the *Southern Reach* novels typically involve becoming more-than-human for the humans going into Area X. Not only does this challenge anthropocentrism, it also questions the idea of a fixed human identity. From this, one can begin to draw parallels to Deleuze's ontology, as well as his work with Guattari. In *The Deleuze Dictionary* (edited by Adrian Parr), Claire Colebrook (2005) writes: "Deleuze's ontology… is a commitment to perceiving life; life is connection and relation, but the outcome or event of those relations is not determined in advance by intrinsic properties" (5). Deleuze proposes a dynamic way of being in the world, one that dismisses any preconceived code or setting that constitutes the human (or non-human) experience. His work is critical of "the western metaphysical notion of human subjectivity as the centre of the world" (Neimanis 283). In this way, he dismisses the conventional construct of "transcendent identities within a hierarchy of being" and argues instead for "immanent multiplicity… in which identity is constantly in a process of becoming something new" (Saladino 2). The trans-corporeal

revelation that we do not relate *to* the natural world but rather relate from *within* it – and are constantly connecting and changing with it – is solidified by the preference of immanence over transcendence.

Deleuze's philosophy of immanence "emphasises connections over forms of separation" and ideas of transcendence (Williams 126). These immanent connections, however, are non-linear and non-hierarchical; as embodied by Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome, which is developed in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Rhizome is a botanical term defined as "a somewhat elongated usually horizontal subterranean plant stem" that "produces shoots above and roots below" ("Rhizome"). This means these shoots and roots run horizontally in various directions, often entangling and interconnecting with each other. Deleuze and Guattari adapt this literal definition to formulate their conceptual framework for the rhizome; a network of connections and relations that follow no discernible pattern or order. They write that, unlike trees or their roots, "the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature" (*A Thousand* 21). There are multiple examples of rhizomatic assemblages in the *Southern Reach* novels, as the interconnection of different organisms result in inevitable changes to the ecosystem of Area X. This can be seen when the biologist examines samples under her microscope: "…moss from the 'forehead' of one of the eruptions, splinters of wood, a dead fox, a rat. The wood was indeed wood. The rat was indeed a rat. The moss and the fox… were composed of modified human cells." (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 159). Area X is a transitional environment, which the biologist specialises in, but it is one where traditional notions of status or hierarchy do not apply.

The words on the wall of the tower are another prominent sign of a network of relations. The letters themselves are described as a "mini ecosystem" – "a type of fungi or other eukaryotic organism" host to more translucent "creatures… shaped like tiny hands

embedded by the base of the palm" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 24-25). The words are written by an organism as well – the Crawler – and the tower itself is identified as a living creature. This is a type of rhizomatic structure, where the multiplicity of these organisms are expressed through differentiated lines of connection. The biologist even speculates that the words might be "a form of symbiotic or parasitic communication" between the Crawler and the tower (91). As established before, the words infect the biologist, which shows how the human in Area X is not exempt from this communicative, boundaryless interchange. Deleuze and Guattari explain how a virus can "take flight" and move into the cells of different species, while maintaining the "genetic information" from the first host (*A Thousand* 10). To expand on this, "we form a rhizome with our viruses, or rather our viruses cause us to form a rhizome with other animals" (10). The biologist's contamination at the hands of the tower causes her to form a rhizome with Area X and marks the beginning of her becoming more-than-human.

In the film adaptation of *Annihilation*, directed by Alex Garland[6] and released in February 2018, Area X is reimagined and renamed as The Shimmer, and the expedition team that enters it encounter similar instances of uncanny transformations. However, the film also contains representations of rhizomatic networks that are not present in VanderMeer's novel. For example, the film's team comes across a corpse from a previous expedition into The Shimmer, and in the middle of its torso is "an intricate, rhizomatic collage of multihued moulds, mosses, and lichen" which "spiral out in abundant growths" (Saladino 4). Similar to the words on the wall in VanderMeer's novel, it is evident this burgeoning ecosystem is not kept separate from the human. Furthermore, its presence between two halves of a human

[6] Alex Garland is an English director and author that is widely known for writing and directing the films *Ex Machina* (2015) and *Annihilation* (2018), as well as the television show *Devs* (2020), which all broadly fall under the genres of sf and horror. He has written screenplays for post-apocalyptic sf films such as *28 Days Later* (2002), *Sunshine* (2007), and *Never Let Me Go* (2010), as well as three novels – *The Beach* (1996), *The Tesseract* (1998), and *The Coma* (2004). Garland's films often use sf and horror tropes to explore different conceptual territories, which is closely related to the New Weird.

corpse shows that death in The Shimmer might involve becoming something new. This draws parallels to the biologist's thoughts about Area X in the novel: "Death, as I was beginning to understand it, was not the same thing here as back across the border" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 144). As the reader becomes aware of the Area X border's fragility, the biologist's understanding of death (or non-life) applies in more realistic ways.

From this, one can begin to see how Deleuze's concept of becoming weaves through the text and intensifies the discussion around human identity. In the "Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible" plateau of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari write: "Becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree. Becoming is certainly not imitating, or identifying with something; neither is it regressing-progressing… Becoming is a verb with a consistency all on its own…" (279). To unpack this, becoming does not occur as a linear sequence of events towards a desired ending, but rather as a consequence of the rhizome's multiplicity. There is an insistence on it not involving imitation, or a conscious change of identity, as it is seen as an inevitable event. By way of rhizomatic becomings, the human is not reduced to – or striving towards – anything; rather, the human is simply broken free from normative and fixed cultural constructions and classificatory schemes. As Samantha Bankston (2017) explains, becoming "decodes, deterritorialises, and destroys everything in its path which is fixed" (29). Deterritorialisation – another key concept for Deleuze and Guattari – is about movement and change; freeing up the "fixed relations that contain a body" to subsequently expose it to "new organisations" (Parr 67). If becoming is "the movement by which the line frees itself from the point" which leave points indiscernible (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand* 342), then both of these concepts work to create a more fluent and dynamic understanding of identity.

The concept of becoming can be applied to the way supposedly fixed boundaries come undone in the *Southern Reach* novels, especially the one between human and non-

human bodies. Due to the reader's awareness of *Annihilation* being the biologist's field journal, it can be said that the novel itself tracks the multiple lines that constitute her becoming more-than-human. From the infection in the tower, to the aforementioned brightness and heightened senses she experiences, the novel presents a literal representation of the erosion of the border between her body and the environment. In her own words, "… the brightness washed over me in unending waves and connected me to the earth, the water, the trees, the air, as I opened up and kept on opening" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 160). The metaphor of the brightness washing over her in "unending waves" intensifies her increasing connection to the natural world. Similarly, to "open up and keep on opening" in the face of this connection not only addresses the efficacy of fixed borders, but also signifies change.

The climax of the novel finds the biologist confronted with another stark example of a human caught up in Area X's rhizomatic network, albeit much further down the line: the Crawler. An inadequate and reductive name, by her own admission, for what is essentially an organism; a "complex, unique, intricate, awe-inspiring, dangerous organism" (179). The Crawler is the embodiment of Fisher's idea of the weird; something that exists on the periphery of what we are able to perceive. It also challenges the limitations of reductive science, as the biologist notes: "It might be beyond the limits of my senses to capture – or my science or my intellect – but I still believed I was in the presence of some kind of living creature…" (179). This displays how VanderMeer deals with the weird, the uncanny, and the inexplicable. He breaks down the barriers that separate the human from that which exists on the outside. The Crawler exceeds the limits of what the biologist is able to comprehend, but it is her recognition of it as a life form – no different to herself – that grounds her.

The biologist slowly begins to recognise the Crawler from a picture she saw of the lighthouse keeper from before the event that created Area X. With this knowledge, it becomes apparent that the Crawler is an assemblage born of the lighthouse keeper and Area

X's dynamic, ever-changing nature. It is, therefore, a representation of a Deleuzian becoming – a subject deterritorialised and reterritorialised as a result of flowing rhizomatic connections. The biologist explains this network of relations as "assimilator and assimilated" interacting through "the catalyst of a script of words, which powers the engine of transformation" (191). In Deleuze and Guattari's terms, the script of words would be the rhizome, and the engine of transformation would be becoming. If you apply this to *Annihilation*, the assimilator would then be the biologist, and the assimilated would be the Crawler.

However, as mentioned earlier, becoming and the rhizome function on multiplicity; "a pack, a band, a population, a peopling" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand* 278). Therefore, it can be said that the assimilation transcends just the biologist and the Crawler, and includes the entire history of Area X:

> … imagine the expeditions – twelve or fifty or a hundred, it doesn't matter – that keep coming into contact with that entity or entities, that keep becoming fodder and becoming remade… Imagine these expeditions, and then recognise that *they all still exist* in Area X in some form, even the ones that came back, especially the ones that came back: layered over one another, communicating in whatever way is left to them. (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 191)

This demonstrates how the novel subverts the normative status of the human and instils agency in the more-than-human world. It disputes human exceptionalism, as the multiple human expeditions into Area X are seen as "fodder" to be absorbed and "remade" by the landscape. The biologist's uncertainty, or even indifference, with regards to concrete numbers ("twelve or fifty or a hundred, it doesn't matter") or distinct origins ("entity or entities") is representative of the vast multiplicity of Area X. This relates to Deleuze and Guattari's claim that one cannot reach becoming "as long as a line is connected to two distant points" or composed of "two contiguous points" (*A Thousand* 341). Instead, becoming constitutes "a

zone of proximity and indiscernibility, a no-man's land, a nonlocalisable relation" existing between points (342). This can be seen in the realisation that every human who has passed through Area X still exists – albeit in other forms – "layered over one another" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 191). The points are indiscernible, but what they have become still exists – in the middle of things, assimilated into the landscape.

One of the most distinctive choices VanderMeer makes with *Annihilation* is to not provide any names for his characters. This is a process of deindividuation that reduces characters to their function in society; the biologist, the psychologist, the surveyor, etc. As the biologist realises: "A name was a dangerous luxury here. Sacrifices didn't need names. People who served a function didn't need to be named" (134). This is largely due to the impermanence of identity in Area X, where organisms – including humans – are constantly changing and becoming something else. It also links with Deleuze and Guattari's critique of a subjective, constructed identity. In the opening passage of *A Thousand Plateaus*, they write: "Why have we kept our own names? Out of habit, purely out of habit… To reach, not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I. We are no longer ourselves… We have been aided, inspired, multiplied" (1-2). This reinforces the idea that individuation should not be reduced to fixed binaries. In other words, instead of thinking with names, hierarchies, and subjectivities, we should extend our perception through haecceities and affects. A consequence to becoming-multiple in this way is accepting the presence and influence of non-human bodies. Neimanis (2007) writes that "our material interconnection" with non-human bodies "consistently pulls us out of our place of human privilege" (283). The human characters in the *Southern Reach* trilogy have no choice but to accept this as the only way forward. In reality, this reconsideration is completely necessary in the face of the Anthropocene crisis.

Garland's rebranding of Area X as The Shimmer is indicative of the pristine – yet undeniably weird – wilderness described in VanderMeer's novel. It demonstrates how the adaptation of text into film can provide a new perspective, but still illuminate the source material – as the refractive nature of The Shimmer contrasts the lines of connection in Area X. In an interview after the release of his film, Garland claims to have been inspired by the "atmosphere" of the novel, as well as the "strange" and "dreamlike" feeling of reading it (Bishop). This is an ultimately affective experience and it fuels Garland in the exploration of his own thematic interests, with the help of VanderMeer's framework. This highlights two distinct points – the ability of New Weird aesthetics and atmospheres to portray ecological issues, as well as the capacity for film adaptations to build on existing literature and be valuable in the analysis of it. In this way, The Shimmer is one of Garland's decisions that adds to the reading of VanderMeer's Area X.

The *Merriam-Webster* dictionary defines the word "shimmer" as: "to reflect a wavering sometimes distorted visual image" ("Shimmer"). As seen in Garland's response to *Annihilation*, New Weird fiction is known for conjuring affects by distorting the familiar – with characters and readers alike confronted by the imperceptibility of the world around them. This stems from how early weird fiction uses the Romantic sublime, as conceived by Edmund Burke, and later developed by Immanuel Kant. Burke (1990, first published in 1757) writes that the sublime evokes "that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (53). To substantiate this, he reminds us that the sublime objects which cause this response are "vast in their dimensions" (113), with Kant (2007, first published in 1790) also describing the sublime as "a representation of limitlessness" (75). Lovecraft's fiction, in particular, conjures the sublime by presenting situations where the natural world appears as supernatural – "overwhelming, beyond human control, awesome and threatening" (Wight and Gadd 298).

Carstens (2012) explains that Burke, in the era of Romanticism, seeks to tame the sublime, while some authors of early weird fiction like Arthur Machen – as well as theorists like Deleuze – want to "liberate its excessive potential" (*Uncovering* 49). This emancipation or undomestication of the sublime rests on Deleuze's reading of the Kantian notion of it; as rooted in what Carstens calls a "dynamic and peculiar aesthetic encounter" (66). The affects that emerge in this encounter engage the senses in "such a manner that they struggle against each other like wrestlers, pushing each other to new limits and new inspirations" (Deleuze 34). The contradiction of both awesome and threatening associated with the sublime is channelled in *Annihilation* too, with the biologist's first impression of Area X as "beauty in desolation" (VanderMeer 6). She goes on to say that "something changes inside you" when seeing beauty in desolation – "desolation tries to colonise you" (6). Kant finds a clear distinction between beauty and sublime, with beauty in nature involving the "form of an object" and the sublime existing in an object "even devoid of form" (75). Therefore, it can be said that VanderMeer – and the New Weird by extension – attempts to subvert and undomesticate the Romantic sublime. Both Area X and The Shimmer present this shimmering affective landscape where the underbelly of dread and terror appear to take over.

The choice of The Shimmer as a new name for Area X can be explored in other ways too. Deborah Bird Rose's 2017 essay "Shimmer: When All You Love is Being Trashed" unpacks her lessons on the "shimmer of life" (51) from Aboriginal people in the Victoria River region of Australia's Northern Territory. She describes the term "shimmer" as an "Aboriginal aesthetic" that encourages multi-species kinship (53). It stems from the Yolngu term *bir'yun* – which translates as "brilliant" or "shimmering" – and draws attention to both the "brilliant shimmer of the biosphere" and the "terrible wreckage of life" in the era of the Anthropocene (51). The notion of shimmer parallels the work of Deleuze and Guattari, as it rejects dualistic thinking and proposes an immanent worldview, where the human is

recognised as inherently interconnected with and immanent to non-human bodies and processes. Rose views shimmer as indicative of what Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers calls a reciprocal capture – "the production of new, immanent modes of existence in which neither entity transcends the other or forces the other to bow down" (51). Therefore, like The Shimmer or Area X, shimmer embodies the search for new modes of existence in the face of an extinction crisis; ones that are not centred around limited and bounded constructions of human subjectivity.

Rose links shimmer to Aboriginal Dreamtime, as well as the symbiotic relationship between flying foxes and angiosperms. To Aboriginals, the Dreamings are the "creation ancestors" – "shape-shifters" who are the creators of "much of the biotic life on Earth" (52). They are essentially the founders of kin groups consisting of human and non-human descendants. Flying fox Dreamings are the ancestors of many people, and Rose is adopted into a kin group of "flying fox people" – with a commitment to bear witness to the "shimmering, lively, powerful, interactive worlds that ride the waves of ancestral power" (53). These interactive worlds are driven by multi-species relations. Many angiosperms, or flowering plants, need outcrossed pollination and depend on annual encounters with flying foxes to allow pollen to be taken from "tree to tree over some distance" (58). At the same time, flowering plants provide nutrients to the flying fox – and a "new generation" of flying foxes is "nurtured into life with lashings of glorious nectar" (60). It is this kind of "symbiotic mutualism" (60) or "multi-species interactive project" that allows Aboriginals to witness the shimmer of life flow out "from ancestors into the present and on into the future" (52). Loss of biodiversity and extinction cascades – due to anthropogenic damage – threaten the consistency of these symbiotic encounters and, in turn, "drag shimmer from the world" (52).

The reader becomes acutely aware of the shimmer and abundance of the more-than-human world in *Annihilation*. This is partly due to the lack of detrimental human interference,

but also because humans are unavoidably entangled with the symbiotic relations of the environment. For example, after coming across a deserted village, the biologist encounters more uncanny assemblages: “But in what had been kitchens or living rooms or bedrooms, I also saw a few peculiar eruptions of moss or lichen, rising four, five, feet tall, misshapen, the vegetative matter forming an approximation of limbs and heads and torsos” (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 96). These human/vegetal hybrids appear in the film as well, leading the expedition’s physicist, Josie Radek, to realise: “The Shimmer is a prism, but it refracts everything. Not just light and radio waves… animal DNA, plant DNA, all DNA” (Garland). Radek ultimately decides to succumb to The Shimmer’s nature, giving way to becoming more-than-human, with flowers and plants emerging from her limbs and torso. This literal depiction displays how The Shimmer rewrites the genetic codes of all species, allowing for potential transformations. This, along with the shimmering beauty of these hybrids – furnished with colourful flowers and vibrant vegetation – exemplifies Rose’s assertion that a different kind of human/non-human interrelationship is necessary to maintain the shimmer of life.

The genetic mutation of The Shimmer and the rhizomatic connections of Area X both present a world where it is abundantly clear there are no firm boundaries between humans and the more-than-human world. Haraway writes that “Every living thing has emerged and persevered (or not) bathed and swaddled in bacteria and archaea. Truly nothing is sterile; and that reality is a terrific danger, basic fact of life, and critter-making opportunity” (*Staying* 64). Inspired by the biologist Lynn Margulis, Haraway uses the term symbiogenesis to describe the “dynamic organising processes” of all lifeforms, who are “looped, braided, outreaching, and *sympoietic*” in entangled and co-imbricated processes of world-making (61). The aforementioned hybrids of Area X and The Shimmer can be seen as dramatized versions of Margulis’ view of life; that “new kinds of cells, tissues, organs, and species evolve primarily

through the long-lasting intimacy of strangers" – also expressed as "the fusion of genomes in symbioses" (60).

The multiple lines of connection in Area X can also be explained in terms of symbiogenesis. The Crawler and the tower are communicating symbiotically through the words on the wall, and there are also the microscopic organisms within the words that infect the biologist – which causes her to transform with the environment. Through the dynamic system of relations in Area X, all of these organisms (and more) no longer exist exclusively or consist of exclusive parts. Therefore, the biologist's transformation – and her growing acceptance of it – can be read as a symbol of symbiogenesis. The only chance for human survival in Area X is to become-with or make-with non-human nature.

Annihilation presents a drastic, feverish upheaval of how humans perceive the world around them, as well as a contemplation of their place in that world. This is achieved through an entirely weird and uncanny landscape, where the borders between human and non-human do not exist. The novel even speculates that it might be "the narcissism of our human gaze" that lends the sense of the uncanny to the landscape in the first place (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 192). As Rose writes, "To act as if the world beyond humans is composed of 'things' for human use is a catastrophic assault on the diversity, complexity, abundance, and beauty of life" (55). The more-than-human world – that which is beyond the human – is anything but an object for human use in Area X. Its shimmer is maintained by the agency of its non-human nature, as human characters lose their identities through a process of contamination and becoming.

While traditional weird fiction might display this as something for the human to escape or defeat, New Weird fiction seeks to embrace it as a necessary response to the uncanny Anthropocene event or hyperobject. For example, near the end of the novel, the biologist confesses: "The terrible thing, the thought I cannot dislodge after all I have seen, is

that I can no longer say this is a bad thing. Not when looking at the pristine nature of Area X and then the world beyond, which we have altered so much" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 192). As an agent of the New Weird, *Annihilation* seeks to redefine human and non-human relations while simultaneously challenging conventional notions around human exceptionalism. In an era where "our instruments are useless, our methodology broken" and "our motivations selfish" (193), this re-evaluation is imperative in the search for renewal beyond the Anthropocene crisis.

Chapter 2 – *Authority*

In a 2012 interview for *Weird Fiction Review*, Miéville claims that weird fiction captures "the sense that reality is always weird" (VanderMeer, "China Miéville"). Similarly, in an essay called "Toward a Theory of the New Weird", author Elvia Wilk (2019) writes: "By learning to read weird fictions on a literal level it may be possible to see how weird (the fiction of) reality already is." This contrasts with the discussion in chapter one of how traditional weird fiction authors, like Lovecraft, use the sublime – through an awe-inspiring entity that is transcendent, confoundingly dangerous, and limitless. Lovecraft's fiction often evokes the sublime as his characters "try and fail to understand and categorise" the "supernatural threats" they encounter (Wight and Gadd 298). This can even be applied to *Annihilation*, as the expedition team are consistently baffled by the unnerving hyperobject of Area X. However, the New Weird has the capacity to find this "numinous incomparable awesome" slipping into the everyday as well; what Miéville calls a "radicalised quotidian sublime" (VanderMeer, "China Miéville").

The quotidian sublime is an apt description for the second novel in the *Southern Reach* trilogy, *Authority*, where the perspective of the biologist in Area X is traded for a look into the organisation on the other side of the border, the Southern Reach – through the experiences of its new acting director, Control. In this way, the urgency of understanding Area X's landscape that pervades *Annihilation* shifts to the everyday processes of the institution tasked with researching and controlling it. By presenting perspectives on either side of the border, VanderMeer is able to dispute the perception of a boundary between the two, as *Authority* finds the weirdness of Area X beginning to seep into the Southern Reach offices – undermining the illusion of human control over the natural world.

The author claims this infiltration of the weird was present during the writing process of the novel as well – filling him with paranoia and uncertainty, not too dissimilar from his

protagonist, Control. He describes a moment where, after writing a particularly haunting scene, he goes for a walk outside to find "red-tinged latticework spilling out" from the boot of his car, which invokes the intrusive feeling that "the otherworldly mould that plays such a menacing role in Area X" has somehow found its way into the car (VanderMeer, "From *Annihilation*"). It turns out to just be regular puffball and tendril fungi, due to the combination of rain and a broken water seal. However, this kind of event is indicative of the porous boundaries separating human inhabited spaces and the non-human nature they attempt to exclude. It also provides a material example of how affects like fear and dread can work when the uncanny appears to infiltrate one's perception of the real. Despite the author's knowledge of Area X as part of his novel's fictive universe, the spores emanating from his car – coupled with the unsettling process of writing the novel – have created a precognitive, affective response. This can be understood as what Nathan Snaza (2019) calls "bewilderment" – an affective experience where "the self, always becoming in processual relation to myriad entanglements with non-human forces and agencies, registers its emergence in and from a world in flux that always exceeds control" (81).

The incapacity for control and subsequent disorientation is evident from the very first passage of *Authority*:

> In Control's dreams it is early morning, the sky deep blue with just a twinge of light. He is staring from a cliff down into an abyss, a bay, a cove. It always changes. He can see for miles into the still water. He can see ocean behemoths gliding there, like submarines or bell-shaped orchids or the wide hulls of ships, silent, ever moving, the size of them conveying such a sense of power that he can feel the havoc of their passage even from so far above. He stares for hours at the shapes, the movements, listening to the whispers echoing up to him... and then he falls. Slowly, too slowly, he falls soundless into the dark water, without splash or ripple. And keeps falling.

> Sometimes this happens while he is awake, as if he hasn't been paying enough attention, and then he silently recites his own name until the real world returns to him. (VanderMeer 3)

A noticeable detail in this opening passage is the shift in narrative voice from *Annihilation*. The choice of an unreliable first-person narrator – the biologist writing her journal – for the first novel accentuates the trepidation of being directly exposed to Area X. With *Authority*, while maintaining the focus on a single protagonist, VanderMeer opts for more distance, employing a third-person narrator. This distance is necessary due to Control's initial unfamiliarity with Area X, but it slowly begins to consume him, as foreshadowed in this repetitive dream of drowning in a sea of "ocean behemoths". VanderMeer's narrative choices mirror this as well, as the novel is not written with traditional third-person narration, but rather with smatterings of free indirect speech. This can be seen in the disclosure that "the sense of power" these behemoths convey allows Control to "feel the havoc of their passage" – a personal thought or sense that only the character himself can possess.

Control's dream presents the materiality of these creatures quite clearly – with a fixation on their "size" and "power", as well as their "shapes" and "movements". His assumption that their power in stature – and by extension, their agency – can potentially cause "havoc" is emblematic of the human expectation to tame the unknowable more-than-human world. This is emphasised by the distinct power structure set out, as he looks down on the still water "from so far above" – despite the perceived size and power of the unnamed organisms that pass through it. With this, not only does the author draw attention to what Bennett calls the "vitality of materiality" (10) for non-human bodies (depicted as actants rather than objects), but also the tendency of humans to feel superior and separate to them. This can also be seen in the proposed distance between Control and the water beneath, as he

can only hear “whispers echoing up to him” – which also implies a secure barrier between the two.

Ultimately, the dream dismantles the idea of a great distance between Control and the depths of the ocean, as he falls into it. His fall into the water is “soundless” and “without splash or ripple” – which indicates the boundary is not as fixed as it first seems. This means he does not exist firmly outside of what lies beneath the surface, as there is no resistance from the water. Furthermore, the water is described as “dark” and he “keeps falling” even after he is inside it – which symbolises the vast complexities of the more-than-human world, and its inscrutable nature in the minds of humans. The dream is telling of Control’s experiences as director of the Southern Reach, where the illusion of power and authority constantly give way to the agency of Area X – despite the supposed distance. This is embodied in the way the dream seeps into his reality as well, occurring even when he is awake, leading him to “recite his own name” until the “real world” returns. This does not mean his real name, John Rodriguez, but rather his life-long nickname, Control – another example of depersonalisation, where a human character is reduced to the function they represent. This displays how significant the idea of control is in keeping him tethered to the real world. However, this construction of a bounded reality is compromised, as the dream shows control is never really an option.

Control’s job at the Southern Reach – as his name suggests – is to moderate the advancement of Area X and the aftermath of the twelfth expedition, as chronicled in *Annihilation*. The goal is to eventually revert to normalcy, to the “real world” Control yearns for in his dream. However, as the first novel shows, an attempt at human mastery over environments they are inherently entangled with proves to be futile. In *Authority*, the reader is immediately aware of this, not only from the events of Control’s aforementioned dream, but also from his realisation that “he wasn’t above it all – he was in it” (VanderMeer 5). To add

to this, his first impression of the Southern Reach is feeling "contaminated by the dingy, bizarre building…" (5). From the beginning of the novel, the author is diminishing boundaries, and proposing the idea of a real world that is not as rigid or secure as Control and the Southern Reach expect.

This aligns with Elizabeth Grosz's (2005) reading of Deleuze; specifically his understanding of the real. She writes that, to Deleuze, the real is "dynamic, open-ended, ever-changing, giving the impression of stasis and fixity only through the artificial isolation of systems, entities, or states" (11). This is a suitable description of Area X's reality – fluid and ever-changing, where everything is in the process of becoming and unbecoming. It also captures the artificiality of the Southern Reach – designed specifically to manage Area X – and its failed attempts at control, which leads to a reputation as a "backward, backwater agency" (VanderMeer, *Authority* 8). The Southern Reach appears to be stagnating, also seen in the "worn green carpet" and "antiquated opinions" of the staff, which Control can't help but notice on his first day (5). This is largely due to the organisation's inability to acknowledge and accept the emergence of Area X – and, with that, "the fluxes of becoming that constitute the real" (Grosz 12). In Grosz's view, Henri Bergson (a significant influence on Deleuze's thinking) attributes a "durational power" to the universe, which enables everything to be "temporally mapped" relative to each other (11). Similarly, Grosz claims Deleuze himself understands the real as intimately linked to the "dynamism of temporality" (11). In this way, the Southern Reach's failure to grasp the complexity of the real has led to a literal depiction of decline and potential collapse.

The deterioration of an organisation like the Southern Reach links to Deleuze and Guattari's insistence that "all becoming is a becoming-minoritarian" (*A Thousand* 339). The Southern Reach and Central (the shadowy CIA-like agency in charge of its processes) are inherently majoritarian organisations, unable to adapt and become due to rigid hierarchies

and institutional codes. This can be seen in Control's dismissal of the conventional phrase 'the fish rots from the head' – as "fish rotted all over, cell corruption being non-hierarchical and not caste-driven" (VanderMeer, *Authority* 15). This speaks to how Area X intrudes on the Southern Reach; the ecological and geological becoming with the human. Majoritarian forms assume "as pregiven the right and power of man" – meaning "women, children, but also animals, plants, and molecules" are minoritarian (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand* 339). The intrusion of Area X makes a mockery of the Southern Reach's attempts at gaining power over the landscape, and the only way forward is to deterritorialise – to become-minoritarian. Deleuze and Guattari explain that a minoritarian becoming emphasises "transversal communications" and "abominable couplings" that disregard the fixed borders set by majoritarian notions of individuality and hierarchy (*A Thousand* 10).

This is how *Authority* extends what has been gleaned from *Annihilation* – from the transformation of human identity to the disruption of supposedly fixed systems and codes, and the misconception of human mastery. In both cases, more-than-human agency is the key disruptor. This mirrors how the capitalist disregard of minoritarian nature values – which are seen as "fragile, and therefore non-competitive" – has been confronted by "escalating environmental pressures that call into question the future survival of life on earth" (Bignall et al. 459). In a similar fashion to how Area X encroaches on the bureaucracy of the Southern Reach, the effects of the Anthropocene intrude on the processes of exploitative capitalism – or what Guattari calls "Integrated World Capitalism" (IWC) (Bignall et al. 458). In the translator's introduction to a 2000 edition of Guattari's *The Three Ecologies*, Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton write that IWC is "delocalised and deterritorialised to such an extent that it is impossible to locate the source of its power" (6). In this way, IWC means capitalism has sunk into almost every facet of life on Earth, making it near impossible to escape. The resulting

environmental degradation has shed light on this, and the urgency of the situation has led to more attention but – to paraphrase VanderMeer's biologist – the motivations are selfish.

The current age of environmental crisis and extinction has exposed the fact that "human productivity is subject to natural limits", which has forced an attempt at managing natural resources for more "sustainable exploitation" – but only once it is clear that human flourishing depends on using them wisely (Bignall et al. 459). This evidently maintains a separation between humanity and nature and provides the image of a natural world that can be firmly placed under human control. Therefore, programmes and policies based on natural resource management aim to "maintain ecological stability in the interests of IWC" (460). Deleuze and Guattari, along with several other new materialist and posthumanist thinkers, seek "new approaches to life" (461) in response to the Anthropocene, and this includes an escape from the bounds of IWC. By highlighting the porous boundaries that constitute human identity, as well as extending the presence and vitality of Area X's nature into the Southern Reach, VanderMeer's trilogy builds on these new materialist ideas – and can be read as resistance to IWC.

In this light, *Authority* leans into Capitalocenic aspects of environmental crisis. The conceptual and felt distance between human and non-human nature is shrinking, and the economic military-industrial management of natural resources and policing of nature/culture boundaries no longer appears to be working. The gulf between the bureaucratic managerial expectations imposed on the Southern Reach research facility and the actual reality of Control's situation embodies this:

> Before he'd arrived, Control had imagined himself flying free above the Southern Reach, swooping down from some remote perch to manage things. That wasn't going to happen. Already his wings were burning up and he felt more like some ponderous moaning creature trapped in the mire. (VanderMeer, *Authority* 41)

Control's premature vision of his work at the Southern Reach represents an anthropocentric perspective with regards to the natural world, especially in relation to the parasitic nature of IWC – "flying free above" only to swoop down from a "remote perch" when it is necessary to make interventions to bring things back into line. From this viewpoint, "nature remains subordinate to humanity" – and any proposed management would only be to the benefit of the human counterpart (Bignall et al. 460). In this way, it is ironic that the metaphor used in the passage transforms Control into a bird; something non-human and dynamic, with a core trait that escapes humanity – the natural power of flight.

While this already indicates misplaced hubris on Control's part, he continues to find his wings "burning up" – echoing the well-known fall of Icarus in Greek mythology. As the myth goes, Icarus and his father Daedalus are imprisoned, with the latter making two pairs of wings for their escape. Daedalus tells Icarus: "escape may be checked by water and land, but the air and the sky are free" (Hamilton 181). This parallels the misconception of techno-scientific power over a domain seen in Control's vision of himself in relation to Area X. There are limits to what technology can do and an inherent hubris attached to its interventions. Icarus is warned not to fly too close to the sun, because the sun will melt the glue used to make the wings. He ignores this warning and soars "exultingly up and up" until his wings come off – and, as a result, he drops into the sea and drowns (181). This resonates with the recurring motif of drowning in *Authority* – not only Control's dream, but also when asked what the last thing she remembers doing in Area X, a returning version of the biologist – called Ghost Bird – says: "Drowning. I was drowning" (VanderMeer 26). The idea of being engulfed in water is a central image when considering the inseparability of humans from the environment, as well as the hubristic breaching of limits. Furthermore, the sense of entrapment and inevitability it conveys is represented in Control ultimately feeling like "some

ponderous moaning creature trapped in the mire" instead of an all-seeing entity in full control.

There is evident discord between Control's mindset and the realities of the situation at the Southern Reach. As mentioned before, he finds the building in a regressed, stagnated state, with certain parts of it in various stages of decay. For example, the former director's office contains "dusty and decaying bits of pinecone" on the shelves, traces of an ambiguous "rotting smell" in the air (41), as well as a locked drawer with an "earthy quality" that suggests something "rotted inside a long time ago" (42). These incidents of decay are strongly linked to nature, with the cause of the rot identified as a pinecone, and the drawer possessing an "earthy" quality. However, it exists in a human inhabited managerial space of supposed bureaucratic control, one that is uncannily described as being "placed inside someone's disorganised mind" (41). The office embodies the unavoidable entanglement of culture and nature, and foreshadows the encroachment of Area X into the ineffectually managed and controlled territory of the Southern Reach. Furthermore, the figurative description of a human mind coupled with the natural ephemera mirrors the gradual shift in Control's subjectivity. He has no choice but to accept the idea that the infiltration of uncanny nature is not a recent phenomenon but has been occurring for some time – much like the rotting locked drawer.

VanderMeer defamiliarizes the Southern Reach, but achieves it only through the limits of human perception. This reinforces how hyperobjects elude our all-too-human categories for making sense of the world. The assessment of the former director's office contains multiple indications that, not only is the border of Area X more arbitrary than he thought, but the hyperobject of Area X is beginning to creep into Control's consciousness. He cannot access the drawer, but can sense the rot within, and notices a "mess drooping off the sides of the desk" (42). The description of the mess "drooping" implies it is something

viscous, and viscosity is often associated with hyperobjects. This aligns with Control's first experiences in the building, feeling the "grimy, almost sticky" quality of the floor beneath his shoes, and the smell of a "low-quality cleaning agent" like "rotting honey" that follows him as he walks through the corridors (20). The recurring smell appears to have no origin and, further down the line it emerges in a motel – only for Control to speculate that "perhaps he's brought that with him" (314). This encapsulates the viscosity and nonlocality of hyperobjects, and represents what VanderMeer calls a "haunting" – the creeping realisation that "the uncanny has infiltrated the real, and in some sense, that boundary is forever compromised" ("Hauntings").

It is apparent that in order to engage with our current era of ecological crisis, there needs to be a radical reconsideration of human subjectivity. From Guattari's point of view – writing before the naming of the Anthropocene – "only an ethico-political articulation" between "the three ecological registers (the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity)" can clarify the problems we are faced with (*The Three* 28). He calls this particular articulation an "ecosophy" (28). Ecosophy constitutes attempts – literary, artistic, ethical, and political – to realise and effect the undeniable interconnections between the three ecologies – environmental, social, and mental. Attempts to separate the self from society and environment (via notions of technological and scientific mastery and progress as well as fictions of individual autonomy, for example) are ultimately self-destructive. As Guattari writes: "Ecology must stop being associated with the image of a small nature-loving minority or with qualified specialists. Ecology in my sense questions the whole of subjectivity and of capitalistic power formations" (52).

The inclusion of human subjectivity or mentality in Guattari's ecosophy implies that there needs to be new ways of thinking-with the world, ones that counter narratives of control and separation. According to Pindar and Sutton, "human subjectivity, in all its uniqueness –

what Guattari calls 'singularity' – is as endangered as those rare species that are disappearing from the planet every day" (6). Ecosophy seeks to combat the increasing passivity of human subjectivity, which is a result of "mass-media and telematic standardisation, the conformism of fashion" and "the manipulation of opinion by advertising" (Guattari, *The Three* 35). The "infantilisation of opinion" and "sedative discourse" (41) imposed by the mediated formations of capitalistic power are a significant source of danger to the singularity of thought and the possibility of transformation and healing. Guattari reminds us that we need to eradicate the homogenising "fatalistic passivity" caused by the "fix" of mass media in order to "apprehend the world through the interchangeable lenses or points of view of the three ecologies" (42).

Control's journey from fatalistic passivity towards resingularisation can be read with Guattari's framework set out in *The Three Ecologies*. The confluence of the environmental, social, and mental ecologies are integral to taking Control from the paranoia and anxiety of recurring dreams "atop the cliff, staring down" (VanderMeer, *Authority* 85) and of falling helplessly into the water, to the final certainty of a "voice in his head" telling him to jump the fence into Area X (340). His acceptance of Area-X's pervasive nature, and his awakening to the false façade of the Southern Reach and centralising/separating bureaucratic hierarchies, allows him – much like the biologist in *Annihilation* – to anticipate a form of more-than-human existence. This can be seen in the "seditious thought" he has when confronted with the shimmer of the coastline: "There would be nothing too terrible about dying out here, about becoming part of all of this" (336). While this conclusion is in tune with the implications of the biologist's study of transitional environments and her innate outsider tendencies, it is not such a straightforward shift in mindset for a corporate fixer like Control. This links to Guattari's insistence on ecology not applying only to the "nature-loving minority" or to "qualified specialists" – but rather encompassing the "whole of subjectivity" (*The Three*

Ecologies 52). Therefore, the integration of the three ecologies – particularly the recalcitrant mental ecology – is key to the necessary shift in Control's psyche, and his pull towards becoming-with Area X instead of attempting to control, compartmentalise, and defeat it.

The ultimate ecosophic goal for Guattari is to achieve what he calls "*heterogenesis*", or in other words, "processes of continuous resingularisation" (69). This means we must "ward off the entropic rise of a dominant subjectivity" (68) and strive for both individual and collective resingularisation. As established before, this dominant and increasingly passive subjectivity is sculpted by the role of mass-media and telecommunications, which ultimately work in the interests of IWC. This can be seen in the television news coverage once Area X has taken over the Southern Reach, and is continuing to expand, leaving the world in a state of panic in the face of impending apocalypse:

> The television was on, but nothing made sense. The television, except for the vaguest of footnotes about a possible problem at the "Southern Reach environmental recovery site," did not tell the truth about what was going on. But it hadn't made sense for a very long time, even if no one knew that… (VanderMeer, *Authority* 314)

The realisation that none of the information provided by the television "made sense" is indicative of its potential to mislead and, in turn, control the narrative of events. In the case of environmental crisis, this is often done through the assurance that the problem is happening elsewhere and does not directly endanger the viewer. This can be seen in the "vaguest of footnotes" about a "possible" problem at the Southern Reach – which distances, undermines, and questions the reality of Area X's encroachment. The label of "environmental recovery site" for the Southern Reach is vague and reductive, and assumes the threat of Area X can be countered or annulled. Furthermore, the admission that television has not made sense for a "very long time" – even if "no one knew that" – relates to mass-media homogenisation and the sculpting of a dominant subjectivity, and how it occurs over time without comprehension.

The three ecologies are transversally linked and, therefore, are under threat from the same source. In the same way Area X rebukes any form of human attempts at mastery, the trilogy's human characters have to resist the influence of a dominant subjectivity in order to resingularise and become. One of the most prominent ways this is presented in the trilogy is through the method of hypnosis. It is first introduced in *Annihilation*, when the former Southern Reach director – the psychologist of the expedition – uses certain phrases to hypnotise her team members in an attempt to shield them from the region's weird and uncanny nature. However, once the biologist is infected by the spores in the tower, she finds that she is "immune to the psychologist's hypnotic suggestions" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 33). This is a relevant example of how ecosophy works in the novel, as the literal entanglement of environment and human allows the biologist to resist the manipulation of her subjectivity.

In *Authority*, the hypnotic commands are carried out by a mysterious entity known as "the Voice" – Control's "primary contact in the upper echelons" (8), who he has to report back to about his progress at the Southern Reach. Control initially imagines the Voice as a "megalodon or other leviathan" (52) until he exclaims after spilling coffee on himself – spoiling "the image of a megalodon in Control's head" (59). In his imagination, the unseen villain of the Voice – hidden in the far reaches of Central and "disguised by a filter" (52) – must be some kind of inexplicable creature. Contrary to this, the Voice turns out to be human, and eventually revealed to be Lowry, the psychologist of the very first expedition into Area X. This poses a question about the fragile barriers that surround human exceptionalism, as the Voice presents as an omniscient being looming over Southern Reach operations but is just as caught up with Area X as Control or the biologist. It also highlights the ambiguity VanderMeer creates in regards to who the real antagonist of the novel is, with the Voice leading Control to believe it is Area X. It is clear that Control harbours ideas that contradict

this, as he makes sure not to tell the Voice that some scientists describe the region as an "environmental boon" with a "disturbing and demoralising subtext of 'Should we be fighting this?'" (59). The idea of succumbing to Area X described as "disturbing and demoralising" is also in stark contrast to Control's later viewpoint that there would be 'nothing too terrible' about becoming part of it.

The Voice uses several hypnotic commands throughout the novel, such as "is your house in order?" (59) to extract a clear report from Control, or "is there something in the corner of your eye that you cannot get out?" (229) to elicit something he might be holding back. These questions function as a trigger for Control, and often cause him to lose time and consciousness. This shows how the Voice literally takes over his mind, functioning in a similar fashion to the "sedative discourse" (Guattari, *The Three* 41) of mass-media or advertising. He begins to realise this and likens the "wobbles in his conversation with the Voice" to "air pockets that pushed an airplane up and forward, while the passenger inside, him, sat there strapped in and alarmed" (VanderMeer, *Authority* 144). This image of a plane being driven up and forward by force with a helpless passenger inside is a suitable description of how a dominant subjectivity is produced, as one loses any semblance of control over their mindset – unable to fight against the "air pockets" created by the Voice, in any of its vast forms. As Pindar and Sutton write, "it is difficult to know where, or rather who 'we' are, especially when the most dominant refrains are provided by IWC's ideological arm, the mass media" (8). The Voice, in this way, is symbolic of how IWC pacifies and homogenises us through the images and sounds we are exposed to.

One of the most distinctive hypnotic procedures the Voice uses – also the way Control is able to break free – is the use of excessive profanity. The Voice's swear words are delivered in a "peculiar, halting way, as if the Voice were completing a Mad Lib where the only scripted parts were the words *fucking*, *goddamn*, *asshole*, and *fuckface*" (VanderMeer,

Authority 213). This is not the first occasion where a conversation with the Voice feels scripted or planned to Control, as if certain words are meant to trigger a response. The choice of profanity as a significant trigger is emblematic of the aggressive nature of the Voice's manipulation. Control's response to this particular bout of obscenities is a "structured and strung together" (213) tale of his progress, instead of the "plaintive, halting, start-stop of what-the-hell" (214) that was the reality of his situation. The Voice's hypnotism draws out a reductive version of events that is palatable and manageable, as opposed to the reality of inexplicability and bewilderment.

Control ultimately reverses the trigger in one of their phone calls, where before the Voice can even say anything he launches into "a shouted string of obscenities of the most vile kind, contorting his throat, hurting it" (230). This highlights the difficulty of breaking free from the Voice's grip – it causes Control physical pain – and he repeats it until the Voice's response becomes "feeble, disconnected, unintelligible" (231). With these tactics, Control lets the Voice know he is aware of the hypnotic triggers and does not give him a chance to intervene – diminishing any form of control over his mind. This is how Control begins to resingularise; to "overload the system" and "push the Voice into some kind of collapse" (233). The mysteries of Area X and its heightened presence in the Southern Reach are integral to this rebellion. Therefore, one can say that while *Authority* depicts the endangerment of the three ecologies, it also demonstrates how it is the realisation of their interconnection that can achieve Guattari's sought after heterogenesis.

According to Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato (2012), Guattari's purpose is to escape from "subject/object and nature/culture oppositions" to eradicate anthropocentric worldviews (45). As demonstrated by ecosophy and its three ecological registers, a key element to this objective is decentring subjectivity, and diminishing the idea that it is an exclusively human characteristic. By distributing the agency of subjectivity and singularity,

Guattari is essentially claiming there are no distinctions between humans and "animals, plants, rocks, but also machines" (45). This can be interpreted through Deleuze and Guattari's concept of an 'assemblage' – "a multiplicity of objects, affects, expressions, and (de)territorialisations that come together for an indefinite period of time" (Hetrick 54). An assemblage is inherently machinic (as opposed to mechanical) when it is defined by its "functional and pragmatic capacity to affect or be affected by other assemblages" (56). For example, when a character is contaminated in Area X and enters the process of becoming something more-than-human, they cannot be comprehended by the preconceived categories meant to define a specific subject, object, or thing. Rather, they are defined by the machinic heterogenous quality that "forces us to favour relations" instead of "individual elements" (57). The machinic network of assemblage-forming relations runs transversally, and all components are contingent and impersonal haecceities in their own right; human, Area X, spores, tower, Crawler, etc.

Anthropocentrism and the nature/culture divide rest on the idea of humanity's technological and scientific progress – which makes the reconsideration of the technological machine significant to eroding those boundaries. The "limits of humanity's techno-scientific power" (Guattari, *The Three* 42) have been illuminated by events linked with the Anthropocene. This includes run-away effects like anthropogenic climate-change, high-profile nuclear disasters like the one at Chernobyl in 1986, or widespread zoonotic diseases resulting from anthropogenic ecosystem disturbances like HIV/AIDS (discovered in 1981) or Covid-19 (discovered in 2019). Therefore, the fallibility of techno-scientific progress is another challenge in the era of the Anthropocene. The conception of the machinic assemblage implies a "new definition of the machine" – one that can "break down the iron wall between nature and technology by constructing a transversal relation between them" (Hetrick 58).

VanderMeer is aware of the role technology plays in our relationship with the environment, and emphasises it by depicting the technological regression of the Southern Reach in tandem with the infiltration of Area X. The former director's office is a relevant example here, with all its natural ephemera in contrast with the bugs – or listening devices – Control finds. They are described as "an unnatural history museum of bugs – different kinds from different eras, progressively smaller and harder to unearth" (VanderMeer, *Authority* 43). This displays the stagnant "unnatural" – getting progressively smaller until it cannot be found anymore. In comparison with Area X's expansion, the author asks questions about the perception of natural and unnatural with a subversion of roles. The name 'bug' itself is indicative of this dichotomy – a word that is commonly used for an organism used to describe an artificial device.

Another example can be found in the contents of the locked drawer; a plant, the corpse of a small brown mouse, and an "old first-generation cell phone in a battered black leather case" all on top of "layers of water-damaged file folders" (87-88). Despite being locked in a drawer, the plant is in perfect health with "eight slender leaves" and a "deep almost luminous green" colour and, from Control's point of view, it "had the look of a creature trying to escape" (87). The vitality of the plant is represented in tandem with a dead mouse, and he can't be sure if the plant has been "feeding" on it or not (87). Once again, the author is destabilising conventional patterns, as plants are generally seen as food for animals. The presence of the old cell phone inserts technology directly into the entanglement, and its regressed state as a "first-generation" cell phone with a decaying case proposes the idea that it might be working towards the plant's liveliness as well. The stack of file folders are even further regressed, as the former director did not have a computer in her office due to an aforementioned "mistrust of modern technology" (44). The cascading conditions of these items leads Control to think of it as a "compost pile" for the plant full of "eccentric intel"

(88). They all appear to be interlinked, and this draws attention to the presence of technological machines in human and non-human relations.

In contemporary sf narratives (literature or film), the infiltration of the technological machine on the body is often explored through what Roger Luckhurst (2005) calls "the science-fictional grotesque" or body horror – that which involves "human/alien/machine hybridisation" to "poetically subvert postmodern concerns with the disappearing body" and "the deterioration of affect" (213-214). This particular sf trope is relevant to New Weird texts, as it exposes the porosity of the human body, and opens it up for potential becoming. Film often has more freedom to explore the science-fictional grotesque, due to its ability to present these assemblages visually. A significant example here is the work of Canadian director David Cronenberg, whose films often track the transformation of the human body in the face of increasing technological pressures. Luckhurst notes that, with films like *Videodrome* (1983) and *EXistenZ* (1999), Cronenberg depicts "new audio-visual technologies symbiotically demanding new organic mutations in the human body" (214). While this elicits contemplation about how technological devices are "connecting with and altering our bodies", it also refers to how it can hinder our "affective capacities" (Carstens, "Navigating" 106). This demonstrates how the advancement of technology links back to Guattari's concerns about the erosion of subjectivity and the need for individual and collective resingularisation.

The communication between human and non-human bodies across transversal lines appears to be crucial to the Southern Reach novels. Aran Ward Sell (2018) claims the trilogy's defining structure is "the irreducible co-dependence of place, consciousness, and ecosystem" (91). A key term introduced in *Authority* that encapsulates this co-dependence is terroir. This is a winemaking term defined as "the combination of factors including soil, climate, and sunlight that gives wine grapes their distinctive character" ("Terroir"). The

character who brings it to light in the novel is an employee at the Southern Reach, called Whitby, and he echoes this, defining it as "the specific characteristics of a place – the geography, geology, and climate that, in concert with the vine's own genetic propensities, can create a startling, deep, original vintage" (VanderMeer, *Authority* 131). In terms of winemaking, this implies that a vine's uniqueness is drawn from its relationship with specific elements from its environment.

Whitby, however, believes terroir can also be used to understand the intricacies of Area X. In response to this theory, Control asks: "So you mean you would study everything about the history – natural and human – of that stretch of coast, in addition to all the other elements? And that you might – you just might – find an answer in that confluence?" (131). This implies that – with the framework set out by terroir – the only "answer" to the emergence of Area X is the confluence of all the elements that make up the landscape – human and non-human. This is an inherently ecocentric point of view; decentring humanity by confirming its position as part of the environment, not a separate and superior species. This runs counter to the ideal human position speculated on earlier in the novel; that even with an environmental conscience, most people want to be "*close to* but not *part of*" – they don't want the "fearful unknown of a pristine wilderness", but they don't want a "soulless artificial life" either (81). This causes the conventional idea of discrete boundaries separating humanity from both nature and technology, as well as the "fearful" prospect of disregarding those boundaries to accept the confluence of terroir. It is symbolised by Control initially mishearing Whitby's mention of "the terroir" as "the terror". Whitby dismisses this, saying: "Not 'terror'. Not 'terror' at all. *Terroir*" (130). His vehemence in the lack of terror in terroir parallels Control's (and the biologist's) ensuing doubt that Area X is an enemy to fear and fight against.

The terroir of Area X incorporates plant and animal life in their "native terrestrial form" but has a transformative effect on human characters, which metaphorically represents humanity's "self-created incompatibility" with the natural world in the age of the Anthropocene (Ward Sell 92). However, Area X is a hyperobject, and this leaves the incompatibility irreversible by human action. The understanding of terroir and its relevance to Area X does not shift power and authority to human hands, but functions more as a reality check to delusions of techno-scientific progress and rigid systems. As Control ruminates, through free indirect speech:

> Would terroir really be more useful than another approach? If something far beyond the experience of human beings had decided to embark upon a purpose that it did not intend to allow humans to recognise or understand, then terroir would simply be a kind of autopsy, a kind of admission of the limitations of human systems. (VanderMeer, *Authority* 132)

These thoughts represent the futility of trying to figure out the mysteries of Area X, as no amount of research – whether terroir or another approach – will lead them to see the whole of the region or control its actions. The description of the theory as a kind of "autopsy" – instead of an answer – confirms Control's realisation that it is already too late; it is merely a post-mortem to humanity and its systems and codes as they were traditionally understood. It is not a coincidence that once Area X has taken over the Southern Reach that he begins to go by his real name, John, instead of Control – "It was a common name. It didn't stand out. It didn't mean anything" (316).

Ward Sell argues that the *Southern Reach* trilogy depicts "total human alienation" from the biosphere as a "logical, perhaps inevitable, endpoint for near-future capitalism" (93) or IWC in Guattari's notation. This is a consequence of the Anthropocene, and VanderMeer implies it will ultimately be self-inflicted and unavoidable. The trilogy's characters'

incompatibility with Area X embodies this "self-inflicted helplessness" as human mastery is completely undermined – as Ward Sell puts it, "the human-made Anthropocene is beyond human control" (95). Area X does not, however, accept this incompatibility, and seeks to transform humans into compatible – and functional – parts of its terroir. Perhaps this is VanderMeer offering a way into "the abyss of (hu)man-made climate change in the unhaltable Anthropocene" – but showing no way out (98). As a result of this, the only way forward on Earth is to recognise the agency of the more-than-human world and accept the reality of being part of this entangled terroir.

Chapter 3 – *Acceptance*

In a 2014 article for *The Atlantic,* VanderMeer writes that despite the hubris tied to anthropocentrism, we are still essentially in "our infancy of understanding the world" – which makes it "cathartic to seek out and tell stories that do not seek to reconcile the illogical, the contradictory, and often instinctual way in which human beings perceive the world" ("The Uncanny"). He is speaking about the power New Weird fiction has to critically unsettle human perception by foregrounding bewildering more-than-human relations and affects, as well as the relative insignificance of the purely human. A particular trope that embodies this is the invocation of the monstrous, which Morton says provides a "refreshing exit from human-scale thoughts" (64). The emergence of Area X and its transformative properties provides such an exit, and the trilogy's characters' ultimate surrender to its force is typical of New Weird fiction and new materialist/posthuman(ist) philosophy that thinks with the monstrous instead of resisting it. From this renewed perspective, the monstrous facilitates the "recognition that we can never know" all of the world, "or even most of it – and that this seeming lack is not a failing but a strength" (VanderMeer, "The Uncanny"). In this light, it is incredibly fitting that the title of the final book in the trilogy is *Acceptance.*

In the New Weird, the monstrous, with its affective corollaries of dread and fear, acts as a direct metaphor of ecological crisis; a goad to "move beyond cosmic fear" in relation to climate change and other apocalyptic environmental threats in order to galvanise "future ecocritical thought" (Ulstein 75). As established in previous chapters, both *Annihilation* and *Authority* revolve around the realisations of its protagonists – the biologist and Control – that the infiltration of the so-called monstrous Area X might not be detrimental, but entirely necessary and inevitable. Therefore, by exposing the fallibility of normative ways of relating to the world via "typical binaries" of "society and wilderness, human and non-human", the trilogy encourages a move away from the humanist "fable of human excellence" (Ulstein 76).

Acceptance concludes this repudiation by moving between multiple timelines and perspectives to engender the monstrous and haunting spectrality of Area X. As a metaphor for the Anthropocene, this can be linked to the concept of hauntology, which Carstens (2021) explains is "a near-homonym for ontology" that "replaces the primacy of being and existence with the spectral" – that which "haunts the present with its absence" ("A Posthuman" 120). Derrida (1994), who first coined the term, uses it to describe the uncanny figure of the ghost; that which is "neither living nor dead, present nor absent" (63). For example, Area X haunts the Southern Reach offices in *Authority*, just as "spectres of displacement and extinction" (Carstens, "A Posthuman" 120) loom over our everyday lives in current times of anthropogenic climate change. This haunting manifests as an uncanny fracturing of time – as Derrida quotes William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in *Specters of Marx*: "The time is out of joint" (21). To add to this, Fisher (2012) writes that haunting occurs when a place is "stained by time" or when a particular place "becomes the site for an encounter with broken time" ("What is" 19). With *Acceptance*, VanderMeer depicts the non-linear presence of the haunting of Area X and its transformations by stretching the narrative of the book in multiple directions, both backwards and forwards in time. This implies that an awareness of multiple "temporalities" as well as "different categories of thought" might be necessary in order to seek out "liveable and more inclusive futures" beyond the Anthropocene event (Carstens, "A Posthuman" 121).

The non-linear operations of Area-X's temporality in *Acceptance* causes one of the protagonists, Ghost Bird, to feel as if the region is "not on Earth" (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 186). This speaks to how closely linked time is to our perception of the real. For example, in an encounter with the former assistant director Grace, Control and Ghost Bird find out that she has been living in Area X for "three years" (151) despite the recency of its expansion into the Southern Reach. The realisation here is that "more time had passed in Area X" than on

the other side of the border since its inception (187). The distortion of linear time relates to Derridean hauntology, as infrastructure or systems that might signal progress outside of the region are paralleled by the reality of its rapid decay – like the "remnants of the village" or the "various sedimentary layers" of old journals in the lighthouse (187). Therefore, *Acceptance* accentuates an arbitrary notion of time on two levels – the jumps between different timelines within the novel, and the inconsistency of its passing within Area X itself.

With the opening chapter, the novel continues the trilogy's tendency to defamiliarize. The reader is presented with the event of the 12th expedition's psychologist (and director of the Southern Reach at the time) being discovered by the biologist at the lighthouse. This is a scene the reader has already witnessed in *Annihilation* – through the biologist's journal – but the perspective has now shifted to the director. The repetition is also impacted by what has been revealed about the Southern Reach and Area X in *Authority*, which adds a haunting and uncanny layer to its presence in the first book and its almost spectral return in the final one. As it goes, the director is dying after an encounter with the Crawler and will not be able to see out her quest in Area X, but there is a unexpected sense of relief in this:

> You feel numb and you feel broken, but there's a strange relief mixed in with the regret: to come such a long way, to come to a halt here, without knowing how it will turn out, and yet… to *rest*. To come to rest. Finally. All of your plans back at the Southern Reach, the agonising and constant fear of failure or worse, the price of that… all of it leaking out into the sand beside you in gritty red pearls. (3)

It is necessary to note how the narrative voice has shifted to the second person for the director's timeline in *Acceptance*. The literal move away from using "I" symbolises her growing detachment from her human body and identity during these last few moments in Area X. It is as if she is addressing herself from outside of her body, which represents the trilogy's attempts to decentre the human.

The director's thoughts in the extract embody the New Weird reconsideration of the monstrous: to embrace it as kin rather than rival. She has accepted the reality that she cannot know "how it will turn out" in Area X. This means she will never be able to see the whole of the hyperobject, and there is a "strange relief" in this, to finally "come to rest" without any answers or any control over the landscape. It signifies a realisation that leaving existing human systems behind and succumbing to or becoming-with Area X has always been the only way forward. This can be seen in her reflection on the Southern Reach, and the futility of all of the "plans" and constant "fear of failure or worse" which has been made a mockery of by Area X. The metaphor of these plans "leaking out into the sand" in "gritty red pearls" shows how containing Area X is the lifeblood of the director's work at the Southern Reach, and it is now leaving her body as she changes into something new.

A crucial catalyst to the director's revelation is the encounter with the Crawler that leaves her wounded. In an almost identical manner to the changes experienced by the biologist after contamination in the tower, the director begins to think alongside the environment after it infiltrates the porous boundaries of the skin. She tells herself: "Some communication, some trigger between the wound and the flame that came dancing across the reeds betrayed your sovereignty" (4). Like the biologist, the director observes a "flame" or a brightness, along with the changes, and recognises a communication between the brightness and the site of contamination: the wound on her shoulder. The illuminating nature of brightness, coupled with the burning intensity of a flame, demonstrates the drastic erosion of boundaries as she opens up to the more-than-human world. The image of the flame "dancing across the reeds" in communication with the wound symbolises the vitality of non-human elements as she becomes more aware of them. This newfound connection betrays the idea of human sovereignty over the natural world, as it becomes evident the two are completely entangled.

The acknowledgement of this entanglement is essentially forced by the Crawler's intervention, and it is only in the face of death that the director begins to recognise it as a process of becoming. She realises that "no matter what leaves" as she is dying "something else will remain behind" – that "disappearing into the sky, the earth, the water, is no guarantee of death here" (4). This shows an understanding of the fluid nature of being in Area X, as well as acceptance of the dissolution of a bounded self. While this version of the director might cease to exist, Area X will reassimilate her into the landscape – to disappear into the elements and reappear in non-human forms.

The novel travels backwards before the naming of Area X, and documents the emergence of uncanniness in the region, as well as the conception of the Crawler. It is a familiar journey, when Saul, the lighthouse keeper, notices something "glittering" (24) on the lawn; a white brightness gleaming among the plants which, upon closer inspection, penetrates his thumb. After this interaction, the brightness disappears, and there is "no entry point, no puncture" (25) on the skin. He has absorbed the brightness, and the lack of a visible entry wound further exposes the non-existent barrier of the skin, as a "sliver" (25) enters his thumb with a mere touch. This emphasises the invasive inter-connections of human and nature in Area X, as one of the other major examples of contamination is sensory as well: the biologist's inhalation of spores.

Sperling observes how Saul and the biologist initially experience the brightness as sickness; "a change and a deterioration of systems and functions of the body" (236). There are significant parallels between sickness and the process of transformation here, as the uncanny, mutant nature of Area X is mirrored in its infection of the human body. This reiterates the trans-corporeal notion of a co-constitution between human and environment, as opposed to reducing the relationship to a mere connection. To discuss the presence of sickness in fiction dealing with the environment, Sperling refers to what Heather Houser

terms “ecosickness fiction” in her 2014 book *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S Fiction: Environment and Affect* (18). This revolves around the dissolution of conventional human/nature boundaries, as well as the rhizomatic network of relations that constitute an infection. Much like the contaminations and breaches of boundaries in Area X, sickness is “pervasive across systems” – it is never the result of a “single cause in isolation” but rather stems from “multiple sources, events, and structures” (237). The *Southern Reach* trilogy can be read as ecosickness fiction, as it presents symptoms of sickness to expose the “permeability of the boundaries of the self” and to highlight the co-constitution of human and environment (237).

Houser explains how the uncertainty around the origins of an illness can have an “affective power” in a narrative, due to the ability of the unknown and the incomprehensible to elicit dread and fear (16). To elaborate on this, she provides an example with the character of Carol White, who suffers from what appears to be Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MSC) in the 1995 film *Safe*, written and directed by Todd Haynes. There is a distinct lack of causality or explanation for the ill-health Carol experiences throughout the film. She consults doctors and even undergoes psychotherapy, but is unsuccessful in finding the cause of her symptoms. When asked about this apparent illness, she responds, “I know it’s not normal, but I can’t help it” (Haynes). Similarly, after his altercation with the brightness in *Acceptance*, Saul is diagnosed with an “atypical cold” and prescribed “useless medicine” by a perplexed doctor (VanderMeer 198). He cannot seem to articulate his ailments accurately to the doctor or his partner Charlie – all he knows is he does not “feel right” and that it is not “a sickness in the normal way, not what the doctor had diagnosed, but something hiding inside, waiting for its moment” (198). The idea of Saul and Carol’s sicknesses as visibly abnormal, but without any explicit cause or cure, matches the bewilderment that surrounds times of environmental change and crisis in the era of the Anthropocene.

The only traceable connection with both Saul and Carol's conditions is the one between their bodies and their immediate environments. Carol becomes sensitive to the post-industrial toxicity of her everyday life – pollution, chemicals, and artificial additives are all prominent in *Safe*. Saul is affected by the uncanny changes in the nature that surrounds him and his inherent entanglement with it. His paranoia of "something hiding inside" is indicative of not only his own becoming more-than-human, but also the transformation of the coastline into Area X. This is how ecosickness narratives – whether text or film – can display the imbrication of human and nature; they present environmental changes simultaneously with changes in the body. In both Haynes' film and the *Southern Reach* trilogy, "ecological and somatic damage" is presented through the deployment of "narrative affect" (Houser 16). If affects are understood as precognitive and "body-based" (17), then Carol and Saul's corporeal response to their infections – and their inability to process and express what is happening to them – exposes the affective nature of sickness in these narratives.

Sperling describes how Saul's unsuccessful visit to the doctor's office demonstrates "the layers of relations" involved with ecological sickness (239). This highlights the elusiveness of origins, as well as the dynamic and fluid nature of environmental conditions, as reflected in the body. It leads to the realisation that "without grappling with Area X, the manifestation of sickness in the body will remain elusive" (240). Comparatively, despite Carol's frustration in finding the exact source of her ailments, the plot of the film still appears to "revolve around tenacious searches for the lines that will connect environmental toxification to human illness" (Houser 16). The rhizomatic layers of relations that constitute a contamination in Area X, in this case, are similar to the transversal lines that contribute to an environmental illness. This relates to how hyperobject events like global climate change, filtered through the idea of a human/non-human co-constitution, can demand attention to the

more-than-human world. In true New Weird fashion, without turning towards that which is perceived as monstrous and embracing it, there can be no way forward for humanity.

Francesca Ferrando (2016) echoes this in her encouragement of a "post-anthropocentric shift" in the "perception of the human" as a response to the damage of the Anthropocene ("The Party" 160). This shift is only possible by acknowledging the "actual state of things" – as the lack of a boundary between human and non-human means that by ignoring environmental degradation, we are also effectively "compromising our own futures" (160). These ideas are crucial to a post-anthropocentric reading of *Acceptance*, as each narrative timeline finds a character gradually losing contempt for Area X. From this viewpoint, the region's advancing border and transformative effect on humans functions as a kind of science-fictional reprieve from our current trajectory. This is supported by what Ghost Bird sees on her way through a wormhole into Area X: "… the terrible blackened ruins of vast cities and enormous breached ships, lit by the roaring red and orange of fires that did nothing but cast shadow and obscure the distant view of mewling things that crawled and hopped through the ash" (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 37).

Ghost Bird's vision can be read as an apocalyptic premonition of the consequences for the planet if humanity were to continue on its anthropocentric path without the intervention of Area X. The author conjures an atmosphere of destruction and decay that has become synonymous with apocalyptic sf – "blackened ruins", "breached ships" and "ash" are examples of imagery that would not be out of place in the ruinous landscapes of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* or Russel Hoban's *Riddley Walker*. The vision also creates an interesting juxtaposition between the brightness in Area X and the "roaring red and orange fires" in the imaginary landscape. The brightness indicates becoming, and manifests corporeally and affectively as both infection and "hyperattunement" to the more-than-human world (Sperling 238). As seen with the biologist in *Annihilation*, the world appears to open

up, as the brightness illuminates and heightens her sensory response to Area X. The fires – symptoms of potential apocalyptic ruin – fail to bring brightness, and rather cast a "shadow" to "obscure" the helpless "mewling things" crawling through the ash. In both situations, the reader is presented with an element of light, and the latter example is evidently more regressive than the former.

VanderMeer's depiction of a potential bleak future without Area X shows the trilogy's agreement with the idea of a post-anthropocentric turn. This is an inherently posthuman idea, as Ferrando notes in her 2019 book *Philosophical Posthumanism*: "The posthuman destabilises the limits and symbolic borders posed by the notion of the human" (5). The decentring of the human and consequent deconstruction of binaries like human/non-human has been a prominent theme in this discussion of the *Southern Reach* trilogy. One of the ways it is presented in *Acceptance* is through the more-than-human perspective of Ghost Bird, as opposed to the bewilderment and paranoia expressed by a human character like Control. As established before, Ghost Bird is an uncanny alien copy, or doppelgänger, of the biologist, created by Area X – through the Crawler's contamination – and sent back across the border after the biologist is successfully assimilated into the landscape. Ulstein explains how, in this way, Ghost Bird becomes the "ultimate emissary" of Area X and the most "important mediator" for VanderMeer, as he is able to present an "acutely *non*-human" viewpoint to the reader (87).

Ghost Bird is introduced to the reader in *Authority*, but she is presented entirely from Control's viewpoint, and from within the walls of the Southern Reach. This period is described as a kind of "purgatory" where her awareness of "*who* she was" is made "oblique" (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 30). This unease in terms of identity and belonging appears to be directly related to the human codes and systems perpetuated by the Southern Reach. Furthermore, her non-human perspective is presented in the perception of existence across

the border as purgatory – as this is not too dissimilar from human concerns around Area X. It is further emphasised by a drastic shift once she comes back:

> But only when they had burst through into Area X had she truly gained the upper hand on her unease, her purposelessness… something had *turned on*, or had come back, and raging against her own death, she had exulted in the sensation of the sea, welcomed having to fight her way to the surface… as a sort of proof that she was not the biologist, that she was some new thing that could, wanting to survive, cast out her fear of drowning as belonging to another. (31)

This excerpt highlights the contrasts between Ghost Bird's relationship with Area X in *Acceptance*, and Control's relationship with his environment in *Authority*. As I mention in my previous chapter, the latter novel revolves around Control's struggles to obtain any form of authority at the Southern Reach offices, his failure to control and restrict Area X's infiltration, and the loss of his sense of self under hypnotic suggestion. Ghost Bird's experience as soon as she enters Area X is the complete opposite, as she gains "the upper hand" on the feelings of displacement that emerged on the other side. This newfound sovereignty is a direct consequence of her co-constitution with Area X – where she was created – which is demonstrated by the realisation something had "turned on" or "come back" that was not there before she entered the region.

An aspect that creates a significant juxtaposition of Control and Ghost Bird's experiences is the perception of drowning, which is a prominent motif in *Authority*. The recurring dream of falling helplessly into dark waters and drowning among "ocean behomoths" (*Authority* 3) is one that symbolises Control's lack of power over his body and the environment he is employed to manage. The dream is jarring for Control and is a constant harbinger of his limitations. Conversely, Ghost Bird relishes being engulfed in the sea – she is described as having "exulted" in its "sensation" – as she makes her way to the surface, to

Area X. Her non-humanness is amplified by this feeling acting as "proof" that she is not the biologist, but rather "something new" – as this fear of drowning and lack of control is implied to be an inherently human trait.

This is how Ghost Bird's distinctly non-human, or more-than-human, point of view highlights VanderMeer's posthuman stance. Ghost Bird's sovereignty and self-assurance in Area X exposes the all-too-human limitations of other characters like Control and Grace. It can be seen, for example, in her frustration with Control as she realises he "couldn't feel what she felt" in Area X (*Acceptance* 32). This leads her to ask him: "You've never walked through an ecosystem that wasn't compromised or dysfunctional, have you?" (32). This criticism, while directed at Control, is a more general bewilderment at human contempt and mistrust for the environment, as well as a stark reminder of the absence of anthropogenic damage in Area X. Ulstein observes how Control and Grace are the only humans Ghost Bird has a chance to relate to, and how she "mentally criticises" (87) them for grasping at "such banal answers because of a lack of imagination, because human beings couldn't even put themselves in the mind of a cormorant or an owl or a whale or a bumblebee" (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 190). The use of "even" here displays her exasperation with the limited worldview of her human companions, and their inability to break out of conventional patterns and inherent anthropocentrism.

VanderMeer has said in an interview: "When you think about the complexity of our natural world – plants using quantum mechanics for photosynthesis, for example – a smartphone begins to look like a pretty dumb object" (Michel). This quote encapsulates Ghost Bird's thinking, as the complexity of Area X's more-than-human components are met with "banal answers" due to Control and Grace's inability to wrap their heads around it. In this way, the inner workings of an enhanced organic region like Area X makes a mockery of the supposed progress of human-made technology. Ghost Bird's thoughts also imply that she

can put herself in the mind of these non-human animals, which represents a heightened capacity for "empathy or connectedness with other organisms" (Ulstein 87) that appears to be missing in most of the human characters.

With the more-than-human perspective she provides, Ghost Bird can be read as a uniquely New Weird character, as she brings the reader closer to coming to terms with the uncanny. As Ulstein notes, Ghost Bird's perception of Area X's nature is "in a position to *evolve* the reader's relationship with the monstrous" and take it to a new level (88). This development is cultivated across the three novels, as Ghost Bird's reaction to the Crawler in *Acceptance* makes significant progress from the biologist's reaction in *Annihilation*. Due to her affinity for transitional environments and dismissal of anthropocentrism – as discussed in chapter one – the biologist is a human character that shows the most will to understand the complexity of the world around her. However, as quoted before, she still feels it is "beyond the limits" of her senses or her knowledge to comprehend the Crawler's existence, despite the belief she is "in the presence of some kind of living creature" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 179). Ghost Bird, armed with the remnants of the biologist's memories, encounters and perceives the Crawler in a different light: "There was none of the remembered distortion, no throwing back of her own fears or desires. It simply lay revealed before her, so immense, so shockingly concrete" (*Acceptance* 284).

The biologist appears to be just on the periphery of comprehending the material existence of the Crawler, which is confirmed by her recognition of it as an organism despite its bewildering shapeshifting form. There is a sense of mistrust and doubt though, with the suspicion that the Crawler might be extracting "impressions of itself" from her mind and "projecting them back" as a "form of camouflage" (*Annihilation* 179). This is an automatic response; a consequence of her intrinsic human nature – despite her dismissal of anthropocentrism – and thus can be read with the same criticism Ghost Bird reserved for

Control (that his imagination remained tainted by all-too-human constructions and feelings). Ghost Bird is free of these unmistakeably human cognitive restraints and perceives the Crawler without any of the "distortion" that is filtered through the "fears or desires" of the biologist in the earlier encounter. Through Ghost Bird, VanderMeer is able to bring the reader closer to the weight of the unknown, or the imperceptible, as the Crawler is revealed "simply" – as "immense" and "concrete" matter, as opposed to a completely inconceivable monster. In this way, the Crawler "loses some if its horror" through the point of view of a character that is closer to it than the previous human protagonists (Ulstein 88).

With his presentation of Ghost Bird's experiences in Area X, and the development of the perception of rhizomatic assemblages like the Crawler, VanderMeer cultivates a particularly post-humanist, post-anthropocentric, and post-dualist point of view in *Acceptance*. Ferrando identifies post-humanism as "the understanding of the plurality of the human experience" where "the human is not recognised as one but as many" (*Philosophical* 54). As an offshoot of this position, post-anthropocentrism is about "decentring the human in relation to the non-human", while post-dualism is aware that "dualism has been employed as a rigid way to define identity, based on a closed notion of the self" (54). These three components are paramount to a definition for the umbrella term of posthumanism and, therefore, they draw a distinct connection between posthumanist philosophy and the *Southern Reach* trilogy. The prefix 'post' in all three components indicate a move forward; a reconsideration of both the notion of the human and the distribution of agency in relation to the more-than-human. This makes posthumanism a significant vantage point when considering possible renewal beyond the Anthropocene crisis.

As established previously, one of the ways the trilogy expresses the plurality of human existence is through a series of science-fictional becomings. While Ghost Bird is part of this, due to Area X's compulsion "to assimilate and to mimic" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation*

190), the final novel also reveals the outcome of the biologist's transformation into something more-than-human. The biologist – "in all her glory and monstrosity" (*Acceptance* 193) – is described as possessing a "vast bulk" (194) that impinges on the affective sensorium. The transformed biologist carries with it a smell of "thick brine and oil and some sharp, crushed herb" as well as a sound "as if wind and sea had been smashed together and in the aftershock there reverberated that same sonorous moan" (194). This is from the perspective of Ghost Bird's already heightened senses and is perceived as "a communication or communion" – highlighting the biologist and Ghost Bird's ability to affect and be affected on a level that transcends language.

The nature of the smell and sound of the new non-human biologist is distinctly earthy, symbolising its assimilation into the landscape. To elaborate, the choices of inherently natural properties like "brine", "oil", and "herb" to describe its smell, and the description of its sound like the aftershock of a collision between "wind and sea" highlight its core values as linked to the environment. In similar fashion to the Crawler, the immense and weighty corporeality of the biologist is stressed in this description. Words like "thick", "crushed", and "smashed" all play a part in creating the image of an organism with distinct and concrete matter. It is enhanced by the "sonorous moan" that reverberates as it approaches, likened to an aftershock which is usually associated with destructive events like earthquakes. While these descriptions may add to the monstrosity of the biologist's transformation, it is tempered by Ghost Bird's empathetic eye:

> Nothing monstrous existed here – only beauty, only the glory of good design, of intricate planning, from the lungs that allowed this creature to live on land or at sea, to the huge gill slits hinted at along the sides, shut tightly now, but which would open to breathe deeply of seawater when the biologist once again headed for the ocean… An animal, an organism that had never existed before or that might belong to an alien

> ecology. That could transition not just from land to water but from one remote *place* to another, with no need for a door in a border. (196)

Through a more-than-human lens, Ghost Bird is able to move past the monstrous exterior of her doppelgänger, the biologist, to recognise the beauty of its creation, and the advancement of Area X's mechanics. In particular, the biologist's ability to exist on "land or sea" due to improved lungs and hidden gills on its side, a duality that exposes the limitations of its former human self. Ghost Bird acknowledges the biologist as something completely new – an "organism that had never existed before" or belonging to an "alien ecology" – but does not fear it or seek to tame it. In this way, this perception of the biologist is another example of how VanderMeer tries to undomesticate and free the potential of the sublime. Furthermore, with her mention of a "door in a border", Ghost Bird is referring to the border that is meant to separate Area X from the Southern Reach and the rest of the world. The biologist's (and Ghost Bird's, by extension) existence exposes the redundancy of the door and border, as Area X's alien ecology and the biologist's original human nature are unavoidably enmeshed.

The ideas of becoming more-than-human and communicating on an affective level can once again be linked to the work of Deleuze and Guattari, specifically their concept of the Body without Organs – often referred to as the BwO. The term is adapted from Antonin Artaud's 1947 play *To Have Done With the Judgement of God*. In the final few lines of the play it is written: "When you will have made him a body without organs, then you will have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him to his true freedom" (Artaud). This is a key part of Deleuze and Guattari's ontology, as their vision of a dynamic and fluid existence does not require the intervention of an innate and discrete human identity established by fixed codes. While the BwO is not a literal body without organs, the organs symbolise organisation, fixed processes, and responses – and Deleuze and Guattari are in

pursuit of non-organised and non-stratified bodies. As they remind us: "The BwO is opposed not to the organs but to that organisation of the organs called organism" (*A Thousand* 184). In other words, the BwO is a critique of the rigid systems that "organise and bind us" as it "suggests the possibility of openings and spaces for the creation of new modes of experience" (Message 32). This notion of human identity is one that is constantly evolving and becoming, and it is the catalyst for an exploration of how to make yourself a BwO – "whether textual or physical, actual or imagined" (Carstens, *Uncovering* 53) – as seen in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

Deleuze and Guattari deploy a fictional lecture by Arthur Conan Doyle's character Professor Challenger, where he claims the Earth – "the Deterritorialised, the Glacial, the giant Molecule" – is a BwO (*A Thousand* 45). This is the planet in its original state, "permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities" (45). The focus of Challenger's lecture, however, are the processes of stratification that ultimately impede this flow. The strata organise unformed matter by "imprisoning intensities" or "locking singularities into systems of resonance and redundancy" (45). These are the rigid codes the BwO seeks to break free from. Therefore, if Earth is a BwO, it is constantly attempting to flee and become "destratified, decoded, and deterritorialised" (45). The emergence of a region like Area X would be synonymous with the Earth's resistance to stratification. To add to this, Deleuze and Guattari's choice to use Challenger for the lecture is a significant detail. In Doyle's works, he is depicted as "a rational, scientific man at the dawn of a new century, confident of his superiority over nature" (Pindar and Sutton 1). The irony of a man like Challenger explaining the Earth's urge to deterritorialise highlights the lack of human control over the natural world.

The concept of the BwO builds on Deleuze and Guattari's existing concepts of the rhizome and becoming, which are both discussed in chapter one. This can be seen in their confirmation that you can "never reach" the BwO – "you are forever attaining it, it is a limit"

(*A Thousand* 174). This encapsulates their rejection of the supposedly fixed categories that make up the human, as well as the importance they place on the rhizomatic connections that constitute continuous processes of becoming. If the BwO is the ultimate goal in destabilising rigid systems and fixed borders, it can be said that by depicting Area X's reformation of the human body into something new, VanderMeer is experimenting with the concept of the BwO. Finn Janning (2021) claims the BwO is "a way of truly exploring what we are capable of" by breaking free from the "predefined norms of how we should, ought, or must live" (57). It allows an example of New Weird fiction, like the *Southern Reach* trilogy, to experiment and blur the boundaries between human and non-human, through its conception of uncanny hybrids. The reader's understanding of a bounded self is challenged by the intervention of Area X's transformative non-human nature, and the rhizomatic connections that create the Crawler and the new biologist.

In the mode of organisation expressed by the BwO, the body can be described as "uncontained matter" or a "collection of heterogenous parts" (Message 34). This relates to the description of the Crawler and the biologist as expansive, untamed organisms – with a sense of power similar to the ocean behemoths in Control's recurring dream, where he can "feel the havoc of their passage" (VanderMeer, *Authority* 3). It can also be seen in the illustration of their features, or parts. The Crawler is depicted as having a "bell-shaped body" with a strange texture "like ice when it has frozen from flowing water" – as well as having "no discernible face" (*Acceptance* 284). The biologist is compared to a "mountain" with "green-and-white stars of barnacles on its back" and "many, many glowing eyes" like "flowers or sea anemones spread open" (195). In both cases, there is the presence of undeniably unique features, confirming Area X's disregard for set codes in the conception of these hybrids. However, VanderMeer continues to use excessively natural imagery in his comparisons, which emphasises their entanglement with the environment as an integral factor.

Deleuze and Guattari write that "a BwO is made in such a way that it can be occupied, populated only by intensities. Only intensities pass and circulate" (*A Thousand* 177). This means once the BwO is emptied of conventional systems and organisation[7], it is only left with "intensities" – which operate like affects, on a prepersonal and precognitive level. If the new biologist is read in terms of the BwO, the purely affective non-verbal communication it has with Ghost Bird can be clarified. As it is written, "there passed between the two something wordless but deep… there was connection, there was *recognition*" outside their "shared memories" (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 196). This interaction being "wordless but deep" relates to the intensities that may pass through the BwO. It is significant to note how this kind of connection can be fostered without the intervention of language. In this way, language becomes one of the human constructs that loses its potency in Area X. This can be traced back to the biologist's original contamination in *Annihilation* – where there is a communication between her human body and the spores left by the Crawler. The spores are forming words but the biologist cannot seem to comprehend them, and the communication is solely taking place at the level of affect.

As Control eventually realises, "nothing about language, about communication, could bridge the divide between human beings and Area X" (311). The specific kind of communication he is referring to is the "linguistic category marking the human" (Carroll, "*The Terror*" 81) and not the more-than-human experience demonstrated by Ghost Bird and the biologist. With this, Control – the protagonist most linked to "reinscribing the power" (81) of capitalist institutions over the environment – makes a final commitment to

[7] While the BwO is in pursuit of "the unformed, unorganised, non-stratified body" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand* 43), it needs to maintain a certain amount of organisation to succeed. As Deleuze and Guattari write: "There are several ways of botching the BwO… If you free it with too violent an action, if you blow apart the strata without taking precautions, then instead of drawing the plane [of immanence/consistency] you will be killed, plunged into a black hole, or even dragged toward catastrophe" (160). The new biologist, Ghost Bird, and the Crawler's shared recognition and connection back to their previous forms can be said to represent this balance.

abandoning any ideas of human exceptionalism. Instead of dying in Area X, he decides to go towards the brightness:

> He sniffed the air, felt under his paws the burning and heat, the intensity. This was all that was left to him, and he would not now die on the steps; he would not suffer that final defeat. John Rodriguez elongated down the final stairs, jumped into the light. (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 312)

Control has opened himself up to becoming-with Area X, which can be seen in how his sensory connection to it develops in this excerpt. He sniffs the air, and feels the "burning and heat, the intensity" of the ground beneath him. The mention of his "paws" already embodies a move away from the notion of humanness. The intensity signifies an affective weight and he realises that, in the abandonment of binary thought, it is "all that was left to him" – the BwO is in motion. This is confirmed by his decision not to die, but to rather let go of control – in name and identity – as John Rodriguez "jumped into the light". VanderMeer makes a strong claim here about the possibility of a future on Earth without extinction – where there can be renewal beyond apocalypse. As Carroll observes, Control's surrender is the novel's "most hopeful assertion of humanity's ability to change" in response to the Anthropocene ("*The Terror*" 81).

This is not VanderMeer creating the possibility of a clean slate for humanity, or an attempt by him to let humanism off the hook for the irreparable damage its ontologies, epistemologies, and ethics wrought during the industrial and post-industrial eras. It is the suggestion of an alternative path; an admission that humans are not, nor have ever been, the masters of our own fate. Whether our future remains hopeful or is already blighted by inevitable ruin is a fate that remains uncertain. In this way, the final actions of characters like Control do not necessarily evoke the conventional triumphant climax where "they save the human race" but rather suggests "they are able to understand and accept a world that is

profoundly *not* under human control" (82). This indeterminacy is vital to a reading of the *Southern Reach* trilogy as an Anthropocene text; an exploration of what it could mean to come to terms with hyperobjects and to seek new forms of being, thinking, and doing within a more-than-human world caught up in bewildering processes of change and undergoing multiple levels of crisis. In this way, making yourself a BwO is about "having the courage to take a step into the unknown" (Janning 63), as you leave behind predefined categories that do not seem to be working anymore. This is how a concept like the BwO can be exceedingly helpful, as it provides an exploratory platform or protocol for experimentation – "for the new kind of subjects we have already become" (Braidotti, *Nomadic* 53).

According to Ferrando, new materialism delves into "the ontological aspects" of the posthuman (*Philosophical* 158). Both new materialism and the posthuman share a renewed engagement with matter and its dynamic fluency. Instead of something fixed or static, new materialisms "perceive matter as an ongoing process of materialisation" (159). As with the posthuman, this is inclusive of all forms of matter and provides a sense of vitality to non-human bodies, and their capacity to enter into assemblages with humans. As established before, this is a key part of the 'vibrant materialism' explored by theorists like Jane Bennett. Bennett who writes: "If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimised, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated" (13). This shared more-than-human materiality breaks down traditional dualisms to distribute agency amongst living and non-living things.

A post-dualist, post-humanist new materialist concept that helps to navigate the divide between the living and the inert is Elizabeth A. Povinelli's notion of *geontological* power, or geontopower, as introduced in her 2016 book *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*. Geontopower differs from French philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, as it doesn't operate through the "governance of life and the tactics of death" but is rather "a set of

discourse, affects, and tactics" used to reassess the relationship of, or the distinction between, life and nonlife (Povinelli 17). Povinelli insists on the term *geontology* (and cognates like geontopower) in order to emphasise the contrasting components of nonlife (*geos*) and being (ontology) (17). Geontopower provides nonlife with more agency in the realm of human existence. As Povinelli puts it, the human is only "one element" in the larger set of "not merely animal life but all life as opposed to the state of original and radical nonlife" (22). The idea of an original state of nonlife has to be considered, not only because life began from nonlife, but due to the emergence of events like anthropogenic climate change, which threaten to return the planet to an original lifelessness. This would take us back to a time before the life and death of individuals and species, to "a time of the geos, of soullessness" (22). With this newfound possibility, the relationship between the lively and the inert becomes increasingly significant.

As Rose does with shimmer, Povinelli explores her thoughts on geontopower through Aboriginal Dreamtime stories in which life emerges out of and depends on nonlife. From this perspective, the continuity of living depends on hybridised life/nonlife atemporal ancestors, like the fossilised *durlgmö* snake or the Manganese formation of Two Women Sitting Down. Another prominent example of this is the story of Tjipel – discussed in Povinelli's chapter "The Normativity of Creeks" – which she learns from an Aboriginal woman named Ruby Yilngi. Tjipel is a teenaged girl that travels down to a coastal creek dressed in boy's clothes and equipped with hunting implements (139). After a fight with an old man – which he wins – Tjipel becomes the creek. As Povinelli says, "… she doesn't remain there by the creek. She is the creek" (139). In this way, she divides two coastal points, marks the boundaries between two languages and social groups, and joins the region to other regions up and down the coast (140). This reinforces the Aboriginal Dreamtime perspective that humans are not just in the landscape, but part of the landscape in which living and non-living forces intermingle. It also

highlights how Povinelli connects an Aboriginal story like this to geontopower. Unlike under the terms and conditions of biopower, Tjipel's birth and death do not elicit any "compelling questions" (140). The questions people ask about her involve her directionality, orientation, and connections (141). What direction is she moving? Where does she begin and end? Povinelli claims Tjipel's transformations – from an adolescent girl, to a young man, and then to a creek – do not kill her. Instead, they allow her to "persist" in different forms that merge the living and non-living (142). Tjipel complicates any clear distinction between life and nonlife. She causes a non-human, supposedly inert body like a creek to be perceived as possessing some kind of more-than-human cognition, or even an impersonal affective power or haecceity. This links with the events of the *Southern Reach* trilogy, as the landscape of Area X shows a similar level of cognition or haecceity. The novels' human characters are unavoidably changed by it, become something else in relation to it, and are irreparably transformed because of it.

Paraphrasing Deleuze, Povinelli writes that "concepts open understanding to what is all around us but not in our field of vision" (16). This relates to how a concept like geontopower can illuminate the non-human cognition seen in Aboriginal Dreamtime and in VanderMeer's novels – an idea conventional humanist preconceptions would struggle to let in. To further aid this understanding, Povinelli introduces three spectral geontological figures – the Desert, the Animist, and the Virus. The Desert represents "all things perceived and conceived as denuded of life" and, therefore, maintains the dualism of life and nonlife (33). By holding on to this distinction, it embodies the concern that life is constantly threatened by "the creeping, desiccating sands" of nonlife (33). The Animist, on the other hand, is in complete opposition – implying that the Desert, or the inert, cannot exist. This is due to its belief that all forms of existence, including nonlife, contain "a vital animating, affecting

force" (35). The Virus destabilises this defined relationship between the Desert and the Animist, as Povinelli explains:

> The Virus is the figure for that which seeks to disrupt the current arrangements of Life and Nonlife by claiming that it is a difference that makes no difference *not because* all is alive, vital, potent, nor because all is inert, replicative, unmoving… Because the division of Life and Nonlife does not define or contain the Virus… (36).

This means the Virus is not governed within the confines of life and nonlife but is able to intervene between the Desert and the Animist to force a confrontation. It also implies neither have boundaries secure enough to resist the Virus and, in turn, it disturbs the characteristics of both. This shows that while the Animist is associated with "vitality" and the Desert is associated with the "inert", the Virus "encompasses both life and nonlife, or somehow mediates between them (Cooper).

These geontological figurations can be applied to further comprehend the transformations seen in Area X. The region appears to be a peculiar amalgamation of the Desert and the Animist, described recurringly as a pristine wilderness untainted by the hands of humanity – but possessing an uncanny and undeniably vital nature. This is the intervention of the Virus – the splinter that enters Saul's thumb, or the spores inhaled by the biologist, that present as a viral infection and start the process of becoming. The Virus, in the context of Area X, works to bridge the gap between human and non-human by travelling transversally and creating symbiotic assemblages. Therefore, due to its "semiotic mobility" (Cooper), the Virus breaks through the borders of lively and inert, to illuminate the hyperobjects that exist on the periphery. As *Acceptance* tracks the changes in Saul's body, a young Gloria asks him, "Why are you different?" and he eventually has no choice but to admit: "I don't really understand it, but I'm seeing things in the corner of my eye" (VanderMeer 99). Due to the intervention of the Virus, the Animist and the Desert are interlinked. Saul is beginning to

accept the network of relations that constitute his existence, even if they will only ever be visible in the corner of his eye.

Conclusion

Near the end of *Acceptance*, the rapid acceleration of Area X's growth has led to the realisation that it will eventually consume the entirety of the world. As an Area X native, Ghost Bird contemplates how its "limitless" (189) natural properties are fundamentally different from the degraded systems and processes of the human-damaged world it is supplanting. She also observes how the comprehension of these properties are completely beyond the grasp of human(ist) modes of reasoning, and speculates on how, if the "outside world" still existed, its only viable response would be to send "radio-wave messages into space" in a vain attempt to seek assistance from "other intelligent life in the universe" (189). Such pleas for help, constricted by the narrow parameters of what humans could recognise as "intelligent life", would obviously be of no use. Throughout the trilogy it becomes clear that that humans struggle to recognise, let alone communicate with other kinds of intelligence. The same inadequacy and misrecognition that have inhibited conventional human(ist) communication and knowledge-making systems from apprehending the agency of non-human terrestrial lifeforms forecloses any possibility of it recognising, or adequately responding, to the arrival of a hyperobject like Area X. To Ghost Bird, the idea that humanity would be persisting with their usual round of "banal answers" (190) in the face of an urgent life-threatening event shows how "bound" and limited they are "by their own view of consciousness" (189). This awareness of the fatal shortcomings of the humanist conceit in the face of the Anthropocene event forms the crux of the *Southern Reach* novels, which trouble the anthropocentric worldview and its limiting idea of the bounded human self.

VanderMeer's conception of Area X, therefore, can be read as the protocol of an experiment; the building of a conceptual BwO to explore new ways of thinking, being, and doing. It is a response to the author's own lack of definite answers when faced with the menacing intrusion of hyperobjects like climate change and mass extinction – the arrival of a

world on the brink of drastic and inconceivable change. In the context of the novel, Area X does not signify a concrete and specific alternative path forward. The future of Area X remains unknown, and there is no telling where it could be going or whether its transformations will succeed. This indeterminacy can be seen in the final part of the biologist's journal, incorporated in *Acceptance*, where she comes across a particular hybrid that is not as awe-inspiring as some of the region's other creations. She writes: "… it looked like a mistake, a misfire by an Area X that had assimilated so much so beautifully and so seamlessly" (162). In its capacity to make mistakes Area X displays all of the wild complexity of organic life; it is anything but reductive and goal orientated. Rather, it is a convoluted experimental assemblage – a defamiliarizing zone journeying across thresholds of becoming, to explore and discover forms of existence that exceed the narrow confines of conventional binary norms.

Area X's effect on readers, or the main impression it generates, is that anthropocentrism is at odds with the indeterminacy and radical possibilities of life and nonlife. This is communicated through the multiple depictions of more-than-human becomings that take place in the zone of Area X. In the process, what is revealed is the inherent entanglement of bodies, things, and objects, as well as the urgent necessity of new forms of thinking and communicating. As Ghost Bird ponders, through the author's use of free indirect speech:

> What if an infection was a message, a brightness a kind of symphony? As a defence? An odd form of communication? If so, the message had not been received, the message buried in the transformation itself… Did she want to ally herself to such a lack, and did she have a choice? (189-190).

To return to Sperling's discussion of how the novels' transformations are presented as symptoms of sickness, this confirms they are signified by an "infection" and a subsequent

"brightness". Due to the inefficacy of traditional lines of communication, Ghost Bird is considering the process of transformation (or becoming) as Area X's own "odd form of communication" or even a "defence" against the dangers of anthropocentrism. The idea that this message has not been received, or is "buried" somewhere in the assemblages themselves, is in response to Control's fears of Area X as a kind of human culling – as he tells Grace: "… it just wants to kill us all" (188). In this case, Control's dread is steeped in binary thinking; the human and non-human have to be in clear opposition. He cannot look beyond the self-preservation of human exceptionalism to comprehend the message Ghost Bird – a character free of human constructs – has identified.

The message is ultimately related to the inextricable trans-corporeality of existence; the more-than-human nature of human bodies and minds. Ghost Bird mentions how the brightness can be seen as "a kind of symphony". To reiterate, the brightness is the signifier of becoming – a corporeal response to the imbrication of human and environment. A symphony is defined as a "consonance of sounds" in music or a "harmony of colours" in a painting ("Symphony"). In terms of music, it is often associated with multiple parts and movements coming together to create an assemblage. This is a fitting comparison as regards the transversal networks of relations that animate Area X and the dissolution of boundaries inside its zone. As Ghost Bird recognises, even though she does not want to "ally herself to such a lack" – the rigidity of Control's worldview – she might not have a choice. The emergence of Area X has also given the human no choice but to abandon standard cultural constructs about nature and, therefore, to engage in a trans-corporeal symphony of becoming. This is exemplified by the transversal rhizomatic perspective proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, and the posthuman and new materialist ideas of theorists that have followed them.

As outlined by Carstens and Bozalek's notion of the Shadowcene, the vast and shadowy nature of hyperobjects like the Anthropocene expose "the complex and decidedly

uncanny cross-weaves of vulnerability and culpability that exist between us and other species" (10). In order to engage with this properly, humans need to let go of the idea that, as Povinelli writes, "we can change" and yet remain "the same, even more of what we already are" (29). A crucial step forward, as recognised in the *Southern Reach* trilogy, would be to recognise the agency of non-human interlocuters; to accept and embrace the reality of more-than-human entanglements and the inevitability of change. This idea is essential to Haraway's recasting of the Anthropocene as the Chthulucene. While the Anthropocene and Capitalocene concepts make a necessary acknowledgement of human-induced damage and exploitation, Haraway perceives them as limited by the notions that humans are "the only important actors" (*Staying* 55). In her naming of the Chthulucene, "the order is reknitted" – human beings are decentred and presented as "with and of the earth" (55). If all lifeforms – humans and non-humans alike – are faced with the pressing apocalyptic threat of environmental crisis, then the new ways of thinking and being we seek must incorporate a multispecies, post-anthropocentric outlook. As Haraway writes:

> To think-with is to stay with the natural-cultural multispecies trouble on earth. There are no guarantees, no arrow of time, no Law of History or Science or Nature in such struggles. There is only the relentlessly contingent sf worlding of living and dying, of becoming-with and unbecoming-with, of sympoiesis, and so, just possibly, of multispecies flourishing on earth. [We] need to change the story, to learn somehow to narrate—to think—outside the prick tale of Humans in History, when the knowledge of how to murder each other—and along with each other, uncountable multitudes of the living earth—is not scarce. Think we must; we must think. That means, simply, we must change the story; the story must change. (40)

In this extract, Haraway points out the need to embrace the fact that the current crisis impacts all Earthly life. In this case, the rigidly constructed and reductive human-centric laws of

science and history no longer apply; our survival depends on more-than-human world making. The "contingent sf worlding" of Area X is, therefore, in keeping with Haraway's philosophy of the Chthulucene. This, as well as other instances of new materialist and Deleuze-Guattarian concepts I have explored throughout, illustrates how theories and ideas can be made to work as protagonists in sf. The real protagonist and transformative catalyst of the *Southern Reach* trilogy, of course, is the monstrous, rhizomatic, trans-corporeal, geontological zone of Area X.

The insistence on linking the will to think beyond humanistic concerns, and the urgent necessity of changing the story, highlights Haraway's view of thinking and storytelling as inherently intertwined. The potential for sf narratives to be a vehicle for necessary and urgent change is embodied by the late sf author and feminist thinker Ursula K. Le Guin. In her 1986 essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction", Le Guin explains her sf as being driven by a need to move away from the inherently anthropocentric "killer story" that has too often been used to tell the tale of humans in history (3). This is the story of hunting and killing, the burning of forests, the taming of the wild, the forward march of civilisation, perpetuated by the dominant versions of history – a story that has bred the conventional linear narrative of heroism, where a central human hero (almost always male) overcomes all obstacles to win at any cost. With a sense of urgency, she writes that "we've all let ourselves become part of the killer story, and so we may get finished along with it" (3). It is crucial that we change the story. Le Guin proposes a shift to "the life story" – where the "shape of the novel" is not a spear, but a container, as a "book holds words" and "words hold things" that bear meanings (3). Like a bag holding items with multiple transversal lineages and destinations, the life story decentres the idea of a hero, it is non-linear and boundless, and "its purpose is neither resolution nor stasis but continuing process" (4).

The New Weird, as a subgenre of sf, pushes conventional boundaries to subvert the traditional killer story and to encourage new ways of thinking. Le Guin speaks to the capacity speculative genres have for this renewed engagement when she writes:

> If, however, one avoids the linear, progressive, Time's-(killing)-arrow mode of the Techno-Heroic, and redefines technology and science as primarily cultural carrier bag rather than weapon of domination, one pleasant side effect is that science fiction can be seen as a far less rigid, narrow field, not necessarily Promethean … [but rather] a strange realism [to suit] a strange reality. (4)

To Le Guin, a key element to achieving this less rigid version of sf is the redefinition of humanity's techno-scientific vision of progress. No longer can technology be viewed as a "weapon of domination" to gain sovereignty over nature, but rather part of the "carrier bag" that enriches the multiple threads of a story. The work of a New Weird author like VanderMeer embodies this theory of fiction. His *Southern Reach* trilogy disrupts the inherited notions of human exceptionalism and techno-scientific security with its emphasis on the elusiveness of hyperobjects, the fallibility of technological mastery, and the uncanny reality of messy more-than-human entanglements.

Le Guin ventures that, with this reassessment, sf becomes a "less a mythological genre than a realistic one" (4). From this perspective, could the representation of a world in the throes of environmental crisis in supernatural terms ultimately uphold damaging mythological binaries? This is what Ghosh appears to argue when he writes of events like climate change being inadequately represented in fiction – contending that to treat extreme weather events "as magical or surreal would be to rob them of precisely the quality that makes them so urgently compelling – which is that they are actually happening on this earth, at this time" (27). Although this sense of compelling urgency is precisely what is needed, Ghosh's complete dismissal of the "magical or surreal" is at odds with Le Guin's carrier bag

theory, in which realism is simply one ingredient, along with the spectral and uncanny. The rejection of these elements not only appears to discredit the potency of Le Guin's own fantastical fiction, but also the wildly speculative fantasies of Anthropocene texts such as N.K Jemison's *Broken Earth* trilogy and the uncanny hauntings of New Weird Anthropocene fictions like the *Southern Reach*.

In these texts, the magical and surreal are mobilised to enact radical journeys across thresholds of becoming. Area-X is, for all intents and purposes, an undomesticated version of the mysterious and ineffable more-than-human sublime, in which quotidian and extraordinary affects are made to wrestle one another in order to craft the protocols of an experiment in becoming. What is, however, dismissed from these narratives are the mythological frameworks of anthropocentric humanism and the certain outcomes of humanist progress stories. Instead, the destabilising, menacing, and shadowy reality of the Anthropocene hyperobject is made to drive a reassessment of the "Techno-Heroic" myths of traditional sf. Part of shifting problematic storytelling practices, as I have argued throughout, involves invoking menacing affects and uncanny becomings and, in doing so, asking new questions about "what formations" we need to keep in existence and what formations will "need extinguishing?" (Povinelli 28).

Morton writes: "Hyperobjects envelop us, yet they are so massively distributed in time that they seem to taper off, like a long street stretched into the distance" (55). To continue the simile, the street has no clear beginning or ending, and we are faced with the "strange familiarity" (55) of being caught in the middle, without any means to perceive the whole of it. The Anthropocene signifies an urgent apocalyptic threat to life on Earth, but it is also a hyperobject, which means any attempts to apprehend and tame it are essentially futile. Humans clearly cannot continue on the same self-destructive path, but veering off it will mean coming to terms with vast, spectral, and irrevocable anthropogenic impacts. Grappling

for new perspectives inevitably requires being at ease with discomfort. As I have explored alongside new materialist and posthuman thinkers, accepting new ontological, epistemological, and ethical perspectives requires an appreciation of transversal interconnections, as well as a recognition of open-ended and continuous processes of becoming and unbecoming. These realisations are paramount from Braidotti's point of view: "Posthuman subjectivity reshapes the identity of humanistic practices, by stressing heteronomy and multi-faceted relationality, instead of autonomy and self-referential disciplinary purity" (*The Posthuman* 145).

VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy, as an emissary of New Weird sf, provides useful conceptual frameworks for exploring the uncanny dissolution of comforting anthropocentric frameworks and their "self-referential" purities. In terms of space, the subject matter of each novel in succession appears to mirror this eerie destabilisation. *Annihilation* positions the biologist and the reader right in the middle of the ghostly, more-than-human world of Area X, before *Authority* presents the infiltration of this spectrality into the human-controlled space of Southern Reach. As close reading reveals, *Acceptance* displays the explicit co-constitution of both worlds (the human and the otherworldly more-than-human), while simultaneously revealing the rhizomatic network of connections and disconnections that pierce the smooth space of anthropocentric certainty. The trilogy can be read as Anthropocene sf at its most acute due to its unflinching emphasis on the inadequacy of humanistic practices in comprehending the weird nature of hyperobjects. The recognition of the inefficacy of the proverbial killer story of human dominance against the unstoppable force of more-than-human agency causes a surrender, an acceptance, and even an embrace of a post-anthropocentric existence.

That we must become something else, and urgently, is unquestionable but, as the *Southern Reach* novels aptly demonstrate, there is no fixed outcome or guarantee of the shape

or success of our endeavours. Only one thing is certain, we will need to mobilise new storytelling practices that help us recognise more-than-human relations and sympoietic possibilities for renewal in ways that normative modes of noticing have dulled into paralysis. As Guattari (2002) observes: we can no longer afford to “cover our eyes” or “forbid ourselves to think about the turbulent passage of our times”, nor can we continue to shunt “our future onto an opaque horizon”, which is already “heavy with thick clouds and miasmas” (“Remaking”).

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