Para-texts: Alterity and Infected Reading in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*

Toyah Webb
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
The University of Sydney
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Abstract

This thesis examines Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy* within an ecocritical and deconstructive framework. Published in quick succession in 2014, the trilogy – composed of *Annihilation*, *Authority* and *Acceptance* – traces the shadowy outline of 'Area X', the name given to a mysterious stretch of coast along the Eastern Seaboard. While the official explanation for Area X is an ecological disaster, the reality is much weirder; inside Area X, things *transform*. Drawing predominantly on *Annihilation*, I explore how acts of writing manifest within Area X, as well as how this language 'infects' the narrative tissue of the trilogy itself. By situating writing outside the human body, I argue that *The Southern Reach Trilogy* represents writing – and thus language more broadly – as a distinctly nonhuman alterity.

"What if an infection was a message, a brightness a kind of symphony? As a defence? An odd form on communication?"

– Ghost Bird, *Acceptance*

Preface: Infected Theory

At the beginning of 2020, I picked up *Annihilation,* the first novel in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*. Stuck at home during the initial Covid lockdown, I read it feverishly, desperate for an escape from my daily orbit (bed, desk, kitchen). By April, the pandemic had drastically revised people's everyday lived experience. Here in Sydney, 'have you been infected?', 'how were you infected?', and 'do you think you were infectious?' have become common questions, asked by friends and strangers alike. But despite the word's negative connotations, 'infection' also foregrounds an ecological relation, where the 'human' is no longer grounded in the image of bodily unity, but the very possibility of contamination; in other words, we are always already co-constituted by the nonhuman. Writing about toxicity and notions of ontological subjecthood, Mel Y. Chen asks: "what if the object, which is itself a subject, has been substantively and subjectively altered by [a] toxin?"[1] But what if *language*, itself a kind of subject, has already been altered by infection? Inseparable from the body that brings it into being (the mouth that utters it, the hand that writes it), my language is necessarily inflected by the body's nonhuman subjects, including gut microbes and deadly viruses. This thesis is about what happens when fiction infects us.

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While reading *Annihilation,* I was struck by the novel's preoccupation with biological and linguistic infection. After inhaling the spores of a parasitic fungi, the novel's narrator is 'contaminated' – as is her narrative, which takes the form of written journal entries. It becomes unclear where she ends and the parasite begins, or who is really telling the story. I found myself thinking about what it means to write when infectious and, by extension, what it means to read, think, or 'do' literary theory in a pandemic. In his article "The Critic as Host", J.S Hillis Miller highlights the relationship between deconstructive criticism and parasitism, which threatens the "the obvious or univocal reading" like "a clinging vine, able to live in no other way but by drawing the life sap of its host, cutting off its light and air."[2] This imagery might be insidious, but 'parasitical reading' also means looking past the solid textual surface to its porous entry points, where the critic probes, absorbs, and ingests the text. However, texts themselves are also parasitic; writing

[1] Mel Y. Chen, "Toxic Animacies, Intimate Affections", *GLQ* 17, no. 2-3 (2011): 265-286.
[2] J.S Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host", *Critical Inquiry* 2, no.3 (1976): 440.

gets inside, wriggles around, and transforms us, which makes reading an exercise in co-constitutive contamination.[3] Like a parasitical feedback loop, this textual infection erodes our ability to pretend critical distance (the critic is host, the referent infects its sign). In this sense, my reading of VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy* is doubly infected; I play host, I parasitise its language – we feed off each other. In his article, Hillis Miller also asks: "[i]s a citation an alien parasite within the body of its host, the main text, or is it the other way around, the interpretative text the parasite which surrounds and strangles the citation which is its host?"[4] Surely, the answer is both. But I want to linger on this question. What would a parasitic narratology look like? Does form strangle its content? Or does content parasitise its form? How might such questions begin to account for the unpredictable agency of nonhuman forces in the life cycle of a text? I picked up *The Southern Reach Trilogy* to escape the daily realities of a pandemic, yet these were the questions I found myself asking. I was, as it were, critically infected.

[3] Importantly, parasites are always grounded in the alterity of the other.
[4] Hillis Miller, "Critic as Host", 439.

Introduction: The New Weird?

The fiction of Jeff VanderMeer lurks at the unsettling intersection of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and surrealism – otherwise known as the 'New Weird'. Distinct from the Lovecraftian 'Old Weird' of the twentieth century, the New Weird has been defined by VanderMeer himself as "a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy".[5] Notoriously difficult to define, Weird fiction generally slips between genre's categorical cracks. In his own introduction to the Weird, Roger Luckhurst expresses it eloquently: "I want to acknowledge the difficulty and elusiveness of the weird, a genre that dissolves generic glue, a category that defies categorisation, and that by definition escapes the containment of the act of 'introduction'."[6] I know this from my own experience as a bookseller. At the bookshop where I work in Sydney, Weird fiction is shelved with science fiction and fantasy. However, I would be hesitant to recommend China Miéville's 2010 novel *Kraken* to readers of Robin Hobb – nor would I suggest Michael Cisco to fans of Isaac Asimov. Moreover, when asked to describe a work of Weird fiction, I find myself clutching at similes; I can never quite recount the basic plot of a Miéville novel. The word 'weird' is etymologically derived from the Old English *wyrd* ('fate', 'destiny'), however, Timothy Morton points out that 'weird' also comes from the Old Norse word *urth,* meaning 'twisted in a loop.'[7] Luckhurst draws on this etymology and provides another lexical link, from 'weïrd' to 'weyard': 'wayward'. As he writes, this "waywardness of the weird is also a matter of the slipperiness of form, a refusal to fit narrative or generic expectation."[8] The Weird slips, loops, and darts out of view.

According to Luckhurst, the Weird emerged from the pulp magazines of the 20th century, with the first issue of *Weird Tales* appearing in the United States in 1923.[9] A strange mutation of the Victorian Gothic, *Weird Tales* published some of the first stories by August Derlath and Clark Ashton Smith, as well as H.P Lovecraft's famous Cthulhu stories.[10] However, the term 'New Weird' did not appear until 2003, in an online message board started by the author M. John

[5] Jeff VanderMeer, "The New Weird: It's Alive?", *The New Weird*, edited by Ann VanderMeer and Jeff VanderMeer, (CA: Tachyon Publications, 2008), 31.
[6] Roger Luckhurst, "The weird: a dis/orientation", *Textual Practice* 31, no 6 (2017): 1042.
[7] Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), 5.
[8] Luckhurst, "The weird", 1050.
[9] Luckhurst, "The weird", 1042.
[10] Often referred to as the 'father of the Weird', Lovecraft's 1925 "Supernatural Horror in Literature" had a defining impact on the genre. In this essay, Lovecraft distinguishes the Weird from the Gothic, by proposing that the former is "a literature of cosmic fear." See H.P Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (NY: Dover, 1973), 15.

Harrison: "The New Weird. Who does it? What is it? Is it even anything? Is it even New?"[11] Taking the Old Weird as its starting point, the New Weird torques its perspective, from the cosmic to the earthbound; rather than the unknowable "Old Ones" of Lovecraft's pantheon, the 'monsters' of New Weird fiction are urban-dwelling alterities that unsettle taxonomic boundaries. As Jonathon Turnbull writes, the New Weird is also "curiously oriented to the present, the hybrid, the novel, and is attentive to the corporeal, the ecological, space, and place."[12] Harrison, himself a pioneer of the New Weird, points to China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000) as the defining New Weird novel – the touchstone in the emergence of a new literary form. Featuring a sprawling urban wasteland ruled over by a brutal government, hybrid bird people, and a giant caterpillar that feeds on hallucinogenic drugs, Miéville's 600-page novel catapulted the New Weird into the mainstream, becoming the genre's first commercially successful work.[13] However, labelling a literary movement is always retroactive; although it was 2003 by the time Harrison adopted the term 'New Weird', VanderMeer notes that the shift from the Old Weird had been underway since the mid-nineties, with the work of writers like Michael Cisco, Thomas Ligotti, and VanderMeer himself.[14]

Global Weirding

In 2007, Thomas L. Friedman wrote a short article for the *New York Times*. He had this to say about global warming:

> I prefer the term 'global weirding', coined by Hunter Lovins, co-founder of the Rocky Mountain Institute, because the rise in average global temperature is going to lead to all sorts of crazy things – from hotter heat spells and droughts in some places, to colder cold spells and more violent storms, more intense flooding, forest fires and species loss in other places.[15]

Fourteen years on, Australia is grappling with the environmental devastation of the 2020-2021 bushfires, extreme flooding, and a global pandemic. In other words, things have gotten very weird. Lately, I have found myself repeatedly asking what it means to read, teach, and write about literature while the world burns: how does fiction survive under such apocalyptic pressures? Might

[11] This message board is preserved on Kathryn Cramer's website. See Kathryn Cramer, 'The New Weird, p 1', Kathryn Cramer, last modified, July 23 2007, https://www.kathryncramer.com/kathryn_cramer/the-new-weird-p-1.html.
[12] Jonathon Turnbull, "Weird", *Environmental Humanities* 13, no 1 (2021): 277-278.
[13] See VanderMeer, "The New Weird", 23.
[14] VanderMeer, "The New Weird", 19.
[15] Thomas L. Friedman, "The People We Have Been Waiting For", New York Times, last modified 2 December 2007, Opinion | The People We Have Been Waiting For - The New York Times (nytimes.com).

New Weird fiction offer a blueprint for ongoing survival in the smouldering 'Chthulucene'?[16] In her article "Brave New Weird: Anthropocene Monsters in Jeff VanderMeer's the Southern Reach", Gry Ulstein highlights how Lovecraft's brand of 'cosmic Weird' has influenced contemporary climate discourse.[17] However, Ulstein also points out that conceptualising global warming as a Cthulhu-like entity gets no further than "the paralysis [Weird fiction's] monsters inflict".[18] While eldritch imagery may be useful for thinking with atmospheric and geological forces, the tentacled unknowability of Cthulhu risks eliding the particular effects of global warming. Amitav Ghosh voices a similar concern when he argues that non-mimetic narratives turn the lived experiences of global warming into escapist fantasies for readers, thus diverting attention from the devastating ecological and political realities of climate change.[19] However, as Louise Economides and Laura Shackelford problematise in their introduction to *Surreal Entanglements: Essays on Jeff VanderMeer's Fiction,* "the weirdness of such phenomena may, in fact, be experienced in a more impactful way via non-mimetic artforms."[20] Weird phenomena need weird writing; the New Weird underscores the alterity of nonhuman agencies, without eliding their specific, localised, and embodied effects.

Area X: The Southern Reach Trilogy

Author of twelve novels, a novella, and several collections of non-fiction, Jeff VanderMeer is a key figure in the New Weird. Once named the 'King of Weird Fiction' by *The New Yorker,* VanderMeer is also an authority on the Weird itself, having edited nearly twenty volumes of Weird writing. Although VanderMeer has been associated with the New Weird for over two decades (his 2001 short-story collection *City of Saints and Madmen* is regarded as a New Weird classic), he is best-

[16] I borrow this term from the multispecies theorist Donna Haraway. Like Haraway, I am unsatisfied with the term 'Anthropocene' to describe our current epoch. Etymologically derived from the *Pimoa cthulu* (a tree-dwelling spider), Haraway's term contains an extra 'h', thus distinguishing it from Lovecraft's Cthulhu. See Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
[17] Ulstein cites Timothy Morton, who invokes Cthulhu to capture the existential horror that global warming inflicts. See Gry Ulstein, "Brave New Weird: Anthropocene Monsters in Jeff VanderMeer's the Southern Reach", *Concentric* 43, no 1 (2017): 71-96 and Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World,* (MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
[18] Gry Ulstein, "Brave New Weird", 82.
[19] See Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 27: "There is […] an important difference between the weather events that we are now experiencing and those that occur in surrealist and magical realist novels: improbable though they may be, these events are neither surreal not magical. To the contrary, these highly improbable occurrences are overwhelmingly urgent, astoundingly real […] to treat them 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 the earth, at this time."
[20] Louise Economides and Laura Shackelford, "Weird Ecology: Jeff VanderMeer's Anthropocene Fiction", *Surreal Entanglements: Essays on Jeff VanderMeer's Fiction,* eds. Louise Economides and Laura Shackelford (UK: Routledge, 2021), 3.

known in the literary mainstream for *The Southern Reach Trilogy*.[21] Published in quick succession in 2014, the trilogy – composed of *Annihilation*, *Authority* and *Acceptance* – traces the shadowy outline of 'Area X', the name given to a mysterious stretch of the 'Forgotten Coast'.[22] Created by an unspecified 'event' thirty years earlier, the official explanation for Area X is an ecological disaster. However, the reality is much weirder than this. A government agency, known only as The Southern Reach, has sent eleven exploratory expeditions into Area X, but those who return are plagued by amnesia and an aggressive form of cancer; I provide a brief 'taxonomy' of the trilogy's three interlocking narratives below. When I first began this project, the scholarship on Jeff VanderMeer's writing was limited to a single book, as well as the odd academic article or blogpost.[23] However, I was thrilled when *Surreal Entanglements: Essays on Jeff VanderMeer's Fiction* was published in May 2021, which is the first edited book of scholarship dedicated to VanderMeer's work; my own thinking is greatly indebted to this collection.[24] Articles written by Alison Sperling and Andrew Strombeck have also proved to be theoretical catalysts, particularly Strombeck's "Inhuman Writing in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* Trilogy" and Sperling's "Second Skins: A Body-Ecology of Jeff VanderMeer's *The Southern Reach Trilogy*".[25] Sperling's framing of the trilogy in terms of the body/environment boundary – what she terms a 'body-ecology' – is crucial for thinking through the "new kinds of corporeality" weird contaminations might produce.[26]

i) *Annihilation*

Annihilation follows the twelfth expedition sent into Area X, composed of a psychologist (later revealed to be Gloria, the director of The Southern Reach), an anthropologist, a surveyor, and a biologist. After crossing the 'border' into Area X, the expedition begins to encounter

[21] The trilogy has received critical acclaim, with *Annihilation* winning both the 2014 Shirley Jackson Award and the 2015 Nebula; Paramount Pictures purchased the film rights in 2013 and an adaptation of *Annihilation* was released in 2018, written and directed by Alex Garland (see *Annihilation.* US: Skydance Media, 2018). At the beginning of 2020, VanderMeer also announced that he is working on a fourth instalment called *Absolution* – which, as one Twitter user quips, really "throws a wrench in the whole trilogy thing." Jeff VanderMeer, twitter thread, 12 February 2020, 3: 14 a.m., https://twitter.com/jeffvandermeer/status/1227284650164400129.

[22] In several interviews and articles, VanderMeer has stated that Area X is partly inspired by the geography of Florida, particularly St. Mark's National Wildlife Refuge, which is situated near his home in Tallahassee. See Jeff VanderMeer, "From *Annihilation* to *Acceptance*: A Writer's Surreal Journey", *The Atlantic,* last modified 29 January 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2015/01/from-annihilation-to-acceptance-a-writers-surreal-journey/384884/.

[23] I refer here to Benjamin J. Robertson's *None of This is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer* (MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

[24] Louise Economides and Laura Shackelford, eds., *Surreal Entanglements: Essays on Jeff VanderMeer's Fiction* (UK: Routledge, 2021).

[25] Andrew Strombeck, "Inhuman Writing in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* Trilogy", *Textual Practice* 34, no 8 (2019): 1365-1382; Alison Sperling, "Second Skins: A Body-Ecology of Jeff VanderMeer's *The Southern Reach Trilogy*," *Paradoxa* 28 (2016): 214-238.

[26] Sperling, "Second Skins", 232.

inexplicable phenomena: distant moans in the night, a midden of rotting paper, a subterranean 'tower' absent from all maps, and their own doppelgängers. Importantly, none of the expedition members make it out of Area X – at least, not within the frame of *Annihilation*'s narrative: the anthropologist is murdered by the psychologist, the surveyor in an altercation with the biologist, while the psychologist dies after 'jumping' from the lighthouse. Instructed to keep journals within Area X, the novel is presented as the diary of the unnamed biologist, who doubles as *Annihilation*'s narrator. She writes that she is there to discover what happened to her husband, a medic on the previous expedition. Yet *Annihilation* really documents her attempt – and failure – to map empirical knowledge onto Area X; even under the scrutiny of her microscope, this new terrain remains an enigma, a mutating site that resists all definition. Early in the narrative, the biologist accidentally inhales the spores of a bioluminescent fungal 'writing' and begins manifesting strange symptoms, including a fever, chills, and what she can only describe as a 'brightness'. This material, nonhuman language initiates a parasitic takeover, eventually culminating in the biologist's transformation into a monstrous leviathan (although this is not revealed until *Acceptance*). Hopelessly entangled with the ecology of Area X, the biologist thus represents the complexity of scientific 'objectivity'. The novel ends after the biologist's encounter with the 'Crawler', a name she gives to the creature the expedition discovers in the enigmatic 'tower'. Still alive, but grappling with the effects of this encounter and her infection, the biologist writes that she is "not returning home."[27]

ii) *Authority*

Unlike *Annihilation*, *Authority* takes place within The Southern Reach headquarters. The narrative follows John 'Control' Rodriguez, the acting director of The Southern Reach in Gloria's absence – who, as the reader knows, is lying dead at the base of Area X's lighthouse. Tasked with overseeing the containment of Area X, it turns out that Control knows very little about what goes on within The Southern Reach. Forced to report to his superiors at the even more mysterious 'Central', he soon realises that the only way to do his job is to abandon protocol. Yet this is made difficult by Grace (assistant director and friend of Gloria's), James Lowry (sole survivor of the eleventh expedition and one of Central's agents) and the Southern Reach scientists, who seem reluctant to get too close to their subject of study. Among these scientists is Whitby Allen, who begins acting strangely after admitting that a plant retrieved from Area X flowered in the lab. Observing Whitby's increasingly odd behaviour, Control decides to investigate and discovers his "special room" – an attic space accessed through the janitor's closet, the walls of which are

[27] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 193.

dominated by a "phantasmagoria of grotesque monsters with human faces" painted in splotchy oils.[28] This moment pre-empts the novel's climax, when a suddenly not-so-dead Gloria crosses the border, bringing Area X with her. However, the most important character in *Authority* – and arguably, the entire trilogy – is Ghost Bird. Toward the end of *Annihilation* (it is impossible to write about a single instalment of the trilogy in a vacuum), the biologist discovers her late husband's expedition journal; according to this record, he had seen his 'doppelgänger' inside Area X. *Authority* begins with Control interviewing the biologist, who has just been discovered in an empty lot, with no memory of how she crossed back over Area X's border; she also insists that she is called 'Ghost Bird'. As the trilogy progresses, it becomes clear that Ghost Bird really *is* Ghost Bird, and not the biologist at all.

iii) *Acceptance*

Acceptance is structured as three interwoven narratives that shift between perspectives and temporalities: those of Control and Ghost Bird in the present, Gloria in the immediate past, and Saul Evans – the Forgotten Coast's lighthouse keeper – in the years leading up to the 'creation' of Area X. In his timeline, Saul befriends nine-year-old Gloria, who lives on coast. Besides Gloria, he is often visited by Henry and Suzanne, two members of the mysterious 'Séance & Science Brigade'. According to Saul, Henry and Suzanne carry out a series of experiments on the lighthouse's beacon, but this is never made explicit. However, while cleaning the grounds one day, Saul is drawn to something "glittering" in the grass; he reaches for it and feels a "sliver enter his thumb".[29] Saul soon begins experiencing a mystery infection, which results in fevers, frightening visions, and his eventual transformation into the 'Crawler'. *Acceptance*'s second timeline follows Gloria before, during, and after her appointment to director of The Southern Reach, a career motivated by her personal connection to the Forgotten Coast: geographically, Area X is all the remains of her home. Gloria's narrative concludes as she is preparing to depart for the twelfth expedition, disguised as the psychologist. In *Acceptance*'s 'present' timeline, Control, Ghost Bird, and Grace (assistant director of The Southern Reach) explore Area X, which has now consumed The Southern Reach headquarters. There, Grace discovers the biologist's journal, which extends the narrative of *Annihilation*; it is revealed that the biologist lived in Area X for thirty years, before 'giving in' to her infection. When Ghost Bird encounters the biologist, she finds their likeness vanished. Instead of

[28] Jeff VanderMeer, *Authority* (UK: Fourth Estate, 2015), 271; 273.
[29] Jeff VanderMeer, *Acceptance* (UK: Fourth Estate, 2015), 25.

her doppelgänger, Ghost Bird comes eye-to-eye with a trans-dimensional leviathan – the biologist, transformed.

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However, this thesis is not 'about' *The Southern Reach Trilogy*. I do not discuss the plot sequentially or elaborate on how each character functions within the narrative – in fact, I limit my writing on character to the relationship between *Annihilation*'s autodiegetic narrator (the biologist) and her doppelgänger (Ghost Bird). Nor does my reading engage closely with secondary authorial materials, such as interviews and biography. This methodological choice stems from my desire to foreground the nonhuman agency of language, which means considering 'the text' as something agentively distinct from its author. Instead, I employ a close-reading methodology to develop a broader critical argument, influenced by the thinking of Gérard Genette, Vicki Kirby, Elana Gomel, Michel de Certeau, and Jacques Derrida; I am interested in how VanderMeer's trilogy both prompts and responds to my initial questions about infection, parasites, language, and narrative. I circle back to my earlier question: what would an 'infected' or parasitic narratology look like? Can the New Weird's emphasis on non-mimetic literary forms accurately represent the 'weirdness' of contagion? How might VanderMeer's trilogy be read as an allegory for reading itself?[30] I have chosen to structure my thesis in meshed, overlapping sections, rather than self-contained chapters; I feel uneasy torquing my thesis into chapters, when the thesis – like VanderMeer's trilogy itself – eschews resolution and taxonomical categorisation. Moreover, I firmly believe that the reading experience should reflect the experience of writing as much as possible (i.e., the excitement of discovery, frustration, uncertainty, and critical contamination). I have attempted to sketch the theoretical framework of each enmeshed section below, without pre-empting my own writerly discoveries.

In the first section, I explore the 'strange loops' of *Annihilation*'s form to reveal the inherent tensions of first-person narrative. I draw on Gérard Genette's theory of 'paratext' to consider how Area X affects the biologist's narrative; I argue that the alterity of Area X contaminates the textual surface of the novel itself. According to Vicki Kirby, alterity "is intrinsic, an expression of the intra-ontology of Being itself": alterity is not what happens on the other side of 'self' and 'other' but is always already entangled in identity, thus decentring and destabilizing the notion of

[30] To answer these questions, I have chosen to focus primarily on *Annihilation*, which makes the entangled connections between the body, contagion, and language explicit.

ontological totality.[31] The next section considers how language represents nonhuman alterity, particularly in scientific discourse and literary theory. I suggest that traditional mimetic representation reaches a limit in the face of alterity. However, while alterity might nuzzle up against the limits of language, it also complicates, multiplies, and rearranges this limit. In 'Weird Writing', I turn to the representation of language in the trilogy – specifically a nonhuman fungal script that threatens the onto-epistemologies that privilege human sign systems – and ask what it means to theorise an ontologically nonhuman language. The section '(S)porous Bodies, Ideational Infections' explores the effects that this fungal language has on the biologist's body after she inhales its spores; I propose that her distinctly 'languaged' contamination reflects how narrative content infects its form. Yet this fungal script does more than merely infect the biologist – it also produces a doppelgänger to productively reimagine difference. Ghost Bird emerges as the *effect* of language, or what I consider an attempt by language to represent its own alterity: writing becomes contiguous with, rather than contingent on, the human body. My final section takes the idea of nonhuman writing seriously, by considering the alterity of the trilogy's narrative more broadly. Who, or what, is *really* writing when we write? How does nonhuman language disturb the very discourse used to theorise it?

[31] Vicki Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies* (NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 36.

Strange Loops

The Southern Reach Trilogy evades all attempts at narratological analysis: it turns, recedes, and darts from view. In what follows, I try to theorise the trilogy's formal loops and whorls, by asking what happens when alterity infects the novel form. Before entering Area X, the expedition members are instructed to keep a journal, as recounted by the biologist in *Annihilation*'s opening pages:

> It was expected simply that we would keep a record, like this one, in a journal like this one: lightweight but nearly indestructible, with waterproof paper, a flexible black-and-white cover, and the blue horizontal lines for writing and the red line to the left to mark the margin.[32]

The narrative of *Annihilation* is immediately presented as the contents of the biologist's journal – a structural innovation that injects her retrospective narrative with fictional authority.[33] Yet as Elana Gomel points out, retrospective narration – and arguably, all first-person narration – "always involves a gap between the [absent] self that acts and the [present] self that recollects and tells a story."[34] Writing about the trilogy in her article "Becoming Instrument: Thinking with Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* and Timothy Morton's Hyperobjects", Kaisa Kortekaillo refers to this as a "twofold move of intimate engagement and cognitive estrangement", a phrase that draws attention to the slippage between the apparent transparency of the novel's form and opacity of its self-metonymization.[35] As I hope to demonstrate, the notion that the journal survives as an objective testament to 'humanness' (the trace of the languaged human within an alien ecosystem), is complicated by the biologist's ontological instability within the ecology she purports to record. From the outset, *Annihilation*'s content troubles the conventions of its form, to highlight the alterity lurking within the apparent cohesion of first-person narrative.

The description of the biologist's journal also highlights writing's artifice. The "blue horizontal lines for writing and the red line to the left to mark the margin" emphasise the act of writing (marking), which is itself contingent on the body of the 'writing-I'. In the diary form, it is

[32] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 8.
[33] The biologist's retrospective narration also enters the journal into the logic of the archive, where it survives as evidence. However, this logic performs a tautological loop: it is true because she was there, but only 'true' based on the self-sustaining logic of testimony, which amplifies the archive's instability as a textual form.
[34] Elana Gomel refers to this effect as 'the ontological abyss.' See Elana Gomel, *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism: Beyond the Golden Rule* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 105.
[35] Kaisa Kortekaillo, "Becoming-Instrument: Thinking with Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* and Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects",* in *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture,* edited by Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen and Essi Varis (UK: Routledge, 2019), 62.

this 'writing-I' that brings the written subject into being, so that the narrator is always implicated in the narrative they are telling: 'self' and text are co-constituted. However, Kortekaillo – here echoing Gomel's observation regarding first-person narration – points out a tension in *Annihilation*'s version of the diary form. As she writes, "the report-like tone of the [biologist's] account asserts a distance between the readers and the fictional mind of the biologist: the reader is repeatedly reminded of the artifice of writing that mediates the biologist's experience – and, perhaps, also of the fictionality of the novel itself."[36] Yet it is important to note that this attention to writerly artifice does not make *Annihilation* traditionally meta-fictive; it does not point beyond its edges, but always to the fictional world it describes. While the novel is reminiscent of the 'embedded narratives' used in 19th century Gothic fiction (e.g., *The Turn of the Screw* or *Wuthering Heights*), *Annihilation* differs from these earlier novels due to the absence of a visible framing device within the novel – nor are there any 'diary signifiers', like dates or proper names.[37] Instead, the journal is sutured so perfectly onto the narrative tissue that the point of connection between the two becomes invisible.[38] I wonder: where does the biologist's journal end and the novel begin? Is it only the book's paratext that separates the two?

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In his influential book *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation,* Gérard Genette provides a theoretical framework for analysing and interpreting a text's 'paratext'. Genette defines a paratext as the "undefined zone" between text and 'off-text' that shapes the meaning and interpretation of a literary work, including but not limited to: page numbers, book covers, epigraphs, blurbs, titles, and endnotes; simply, the paratext (from the Greek prefix *para*) is everything 'around' or 'next to' the text.[39] Yet in a paratextual footnote, Genette also cites Hillis Miller to emphasise the porosity of this encounter: "a thing in 'para' […] is not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line between inside and out. It is the boundary itself, the screen which is a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside."[40] For Genette, the paratext is not only the textual material that "enables a book to become a book", but also the social forces that influence its production and

[36] Kortekaillo, "Becoming-instrument", 64.
[37] See Gérard Genette: "…the journal, authentic or fictive, whose rhythm is marked, theoretically, only by dates." *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation,* translated by Jane E. Lewin (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 296.
[38] Mieke Bal argues that some texts contain 'embedded fabulas' with frames situated outside the primary narrative, thus presenting the embedded fabula *as* the primary narrative – in this case, the biologist's journal (Mark Currie has elsewhere referred to this as a '1:1 narrative'). Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
[39] Genette, *Paratexts*, 2.
[40] Genette, *Paratexts,* 1., footnote 2.

reception. Genette draws a distinction between the *peritext* (the paratext located within a book) and the *epitext* (the paratextual features located outside a book, such as media interviews, marketing material, or author-editor correspondence). While paratext lacks a clear boundary, the *epitext* also lacks external limits: it is "the fringe of the fringe, [which] gradually disappears into, among author things, the totality of the authorial discourse."[41] But any authorial discourse is contingent on the authorial body. Does Genette's *epitext* then extend to the body that writes the text – the phenomenological environment that the body dwells in? Do the porous membranes between body, world, and writing form a paratextual relationship? And if the writing body becomes part of a text's paratext, what about the body's *para*sites?

Influenced by the work of Merleau-Ponty, Sara Ahmed has highlighted the ways in which 'unfamiliar impressions' reshape the body's surface as it moves through the world. She writes that "the 'here' of bodily dwelling is […] what takes the body outside of itself, as it is affected and shaped by its surroundings: the skin that seems to contain the body is also where the atmosphere creates an impression."[42] For Ahmed, the body's surroundings thus become a 'second skin', or a trace left by the atmospheric undulations of the world. Dwelling is always relational and shaped by what the body is not, which could be called its 'phenomenological paratext'. Here, I wish to invoke another feedback loop, between the skin and the codical surface of the page. Somatic literate technologies (e.g., handwriting, the articulation of phonemes) necessarily form a link between the languaged subject and the skin of the page, which functions as an affective hinge between body and text. When the biologist is 'infected' by Area X, so is her language – and subsequently, her journal. Such speculative paratextual loops complicate *Annihilation's* first-person diary form: if *all* language is contingent on the body, the biologist's journal simultaneously reproduces Area X and is produced by the 'epitextual' ecology it seeks to record. The contents of her journal, and thus *Annihilation* itself, are always already co-constituted by Area X-as-*epitext*, as phenomenological paratext. Writing becomes a bio-manifestation within a wider ecology that – like a text and its paratext – emphasises the recursive feedback loop between body and environment.[43] Kortekaillo articulates this succinctly when she writes, "*by being impressed by her environments,* [the biologist] *becomes their expression.*"[44]

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[41] Genette, *Paratexts*, 346.

[42] See Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 9.; In "Second Skins", Alison Sperling also highlights the novels' 'obsession' with skin: boundaries, borders, membranes, and thresholds – even the walls of the tower are described by the biologist as "living tissue" (Sperling, "Second Skins," 226; VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 41). For Sperling, it is the skin ("porous and vulnerable in both directions") that acts as a mediator between the human and Area X. See 217-218.

[43] Dunja M. Mohr also calls this "the inseparability of social and biophysical ecological relationships." See "Tentacular Narrative Webs: Unthinking Humans in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* Trilogy", in *Surreal Entanglements*: *Essays on Jeff VanderMeer's Fiction*, edited by Louise Economides and Laura Shackelford (UK: Routledge, 2021), 171.

[44] Kortekaillo, "Becoming-instrument", 70. Emphasis in original.

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Entangled with the strange ecology of Area X, the biologist's journal can no longer be called an objective record. More than merely complicating the first-person form, Area X makes it impossible, by destabilizing the notion of the autonomous (unentangled) writer. In his article "Inhuman Writing in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*", Andrew Strombeck takes this reasoning to its logical apex, by positioning Area X as the 'author' of the trilogy. Drawing attention to the proliferation of texts within Area X (besides the expedition's journals, there are letters, documents, government reports, and letters, not to mention the bioluminescent fungal writing) Strombeck suggests that Area X 'writes' itself into being. While I wish to complicate Strombeck's argument later in my thesis, Area X undisputedly produces a textual trail, which is both index *of* and indexed *by* its own ecology. Strombeck also draws on Bruno Latour's notion of 'circulating reference', which highlights the ways in which texts are always a negotiation between a human author and the site of their investigations.[45] In *Pandora's Hope*, Latour describes the myriad texts that scientists produce in their engagement with a site: reports, notes, field recordings, etchings, and calculations. As Strombeck glosses:

> For Latour, texts and the world relate not in terms of correspondence between words and world nor in terms of a gap between words and world. Instead, Latour offers what he calls 'circulating reference', whereby texts become meaningful only when set alongside the world, and vice versa.[46]

As Strombeck points out, any 'objective report' is always already a collaboration between text and site, where the text inscribes the absence of its own origin; like the connective membrane between body and world, writing's subject parasitises the very morphology used to describe it.

In *Acceptance,* it is revealed that, in a sense, the expedition journals *were* generated by Area X. Strombeck notes that the journals paradoxically "appear in Area X at the moment that Area X appears":[47]

> In the section of *Acceptance* that narrates Saul's story, he returns to the lighthouse as Area X is taking shape and finds 'what looked like notebooks that now rose from the watch room, a great

[45] Strombeck, "Inhuman Writing", 1367.
[46] Strombeck, "Inhuman Writing", 1367.; Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope,* (MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 24.
[47] Strombeck, "Inhuman Writing", 1374.

> behemoth, a dishevelled library of shadow and reflection […] a record that he did not understand because it did not yet exist'.[48]

By implication, the texts that proliferate within Area X are inextricable from the textual body of *Annihilation* itself. As a text 'of' Area X, the biologist's journal thus shapes a narrative that is simultaneously shaped by the subject of its narration. As she writes, "[s]lowly the history of exploring Area X could be said to be turning into Area X."[49] However, the biologist also knows that scientific objectivity is an illusion at best:

> We had also been ordered not to share our journal entries with one another. Too much shared information could skew our observations, our superiors believed. But I knew from experience how hopeless this pursuit, this attempt to weed out bias, was. Nothing that lived and breathed was truly objective […].[50]

In a seemingly contradictory statement, the biologist claims that it is her own empirical experience that reveals the impossibility of true objectivity; as a biologist, she understands that ecology is relational and enmeshed, or as Morton puts it, a "radically open form without centre or edge."[51] Yet if neither the subject of scientific observation nor the means used to record it are discrete entities – but rather, there is always phenomenological feedback between the two – how does science accurately represent reality? Where are the edges of definition?

Representing Alterity

In 1758, Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus published the tenth edition of his book, *Systema Naturae*.[52] In this publication, Linnaeus introduced binomial nomenclature for animals, which he had already begun to do for plants in 1753. Binomial nomenclature is a two-term system for naming species: the first term designates the species' *genus*, while the second term identifies the species. But embedded in the word 'nomenclature' are the Latin words *nomen* ('name') and *calare* ('to call'); nomenclature thus suggests a distinctly Cartesian model of Being, where 'I think therefore I am' becomes 'I name therefore I know'. Yet when Being is contingent on naming and

[48] Strombeck, "Inhuman Writing", 1374.
[49] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 112.
[50] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 8.
[51] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 22.
[52] Specifically, the first volume of the tenth edition. Carl Linnaeus, *Systema Naturae per regna tria naturae: secundum classes, ordines, genera, species, cum characteribus, differentiis, synonymis, locis*, Vol.1, 10th ed (Uppsala: 1758).

naming on knowing, naming subsequently destroys the other. As Emmanuel Levinas articulates, "[t]he idea of being with which philosophers interpret the irreducible otherness of the non-I is thus cut to the measure of the same", which in this case, is 'Man'.[53] Writing about how the violence of naming manifests in nature writing, ecocritic Kate Rigby draws on Hegel's observation that "the biblical prerogative bestowed on the mythical first man of imposing names of his own choosing on the rest of creation 'annihilated' his Edenic earth others by substituting for the particularity of their embodied being something ideational that could exist […] in their absence."[54] Although Rigby points out the 'positive' value of this absence (which produces language), she also highlights how naming elides differential particularities. Reduced to an ontology of sameness, alterity vanishes.[55]

But modern science also reveals the inability of scientific objectivity to name, know, and categorize nonhuman alterity. In 1913, Neils Bohr proposed his atomic model, in which electrons orbit the nucleus of an atom; instead of a stable entity, the atom was reimagined as a dynamic composition of interacting elements. Karen Barad notes that this was a radical challenge to Enlightenment epistemology, because "Bohr rejected the atomistic metaphysics that takes 'things' as ontologically basic entities".[56] His atomic model paved the way for quantum physics, which posits that subatomic particles do not have inherently determined edges, but vibrate, flow, swerve, and oscillate in a lattice of interconnectivity: everything is entangled at the quantum level. Then in 1927, Werner Heisenberg developed his famous uncertainty principle, which states that the position and momentum of a quantum particle can never be 'known' simultaneously. However, as Barad writes, this indeterminacy of position and momentum is "only meaningful as a material arrangement involving moveable parts", when in fact, subatomic particles defy a worldview that posits edges and boundaries between things.[57] Barad coins the term 'intra-action' to replace 'interaction', a nominalisation contingent on bounded bodies. Instead, intra-action "signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" that emerge from (rather than precede) their intra-action.[58] For Barad, agency no longer necessitates a bounded body, which becomes porous under

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[53] Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, edited by Mark C. Taylor (IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 346. Levinas is here drawing on Protagoras' famous assertion that 'man is the measure of all things'.

[54] Kate Ribgy, "Writing After Nature", in *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader,* edited by Ken Hiltner (NY: Routledge, 2015), 360.; G.W.F Hegel, *Jenaer Systemtwürfe,* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1975), 288.

[55] Within an anthropocentric worldview, the alterity of the nonhuman is also divided into neat taxonomic groups, based on organic morphology (an organism's physical structure) and binomial nomenclature. Such methods of classification simultaneously obfuscate difference through a process of homogenization, while necessarily defining species based on characteristics that are 'visible' to the human observer.

[56] Karen Barad, "Posthuman Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no.3 (2003): 813.

[57] Barad, "Posthuman Performativity," 814.

[58] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 33.

the microscope; being shifts from the singular to a weird multiplicity – impossible to untangle and unmeasurable with the tools of conventional epistemology.

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As the biologist navigates the uncanny terrain of Area X, she gathers a series of scientific samples. Two of these samples come from within the 'tower', the first from the bioluminescent words on the 'tower' wall. The second sample is taken from glass vials filled with a viscous slime discovered beside the body of the anthropologist, who is found dead inside the 'tower' after vanishing from the base camp. This organic residue presents the biologist with a chance to study Area X under a microscope, the epistemological tool of her trade. Yet instead of offering clues or insights into Area X, the samples tell "a series of cryptic jokes" and seem to "actively resist interpretation".[59] As the biologist studies the second sample, she observes the following:

> I found no cells in the sample, just a solid amber surface with bubbles in it. At the time, I interpreted this as a contaminated sample or evidence that this organism decomposed quickly. Another thought came to me too late to test: that, having absorbed the organism's spores, I was causing a reaction in the sample.[60]

Already infected by the ecology of Area X, the biologist realises that there is no longer an ontological gap between the subject and object of observation: she is, in Vilém Flusser and Louis Bec's words, "immersed in the world and conditioned by the world" and therefore unable to identify the caesura between self and other.[61] Just as the biologist's language is affected by the wider ecology of Area X, so is her ability to observe phenomena from a safe distance. Moreover, upon realising that her methodologies and microscope are "useless" inside Area X, the biologist is forced to rely on her singular (and compromised) standpoint, thereby challenging Latour's assertion that "[s]cientists never *stand* in their standpoint".[62] Without her microscope, the biologist's body becomes her only instrument, one that has already been infiltrated by its subject of observation. This feedback loop between the biologist and Area X evokes a burning question:

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[59] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 71.
[60] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 71-72.
[61] Vilém Flusser and Louis Bec, *Vampyrotheuthis Infernalis*: *A Treatise, with a Report by the Institut Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste,* translated by Rodrigo Maltez Novaes (MN: Minnesota University Press, 2012), 37.
[62] See Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 66: "…to say that a scientist 'occupies a standpoint' is never very useful, since she will immediately move to another through the application of an instrument. Scientists never *stand* in their standpoint". Emphasis in original.

if 'knowing' is always already entangled with its referent, how do we represent an independently existing reality?

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In his famous essay, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense" (1873), Friedrich Nietzsche highlights the artifice of language and the self-referential nature of truth. While rationalism is installed in the syntax of expository prose, it also materialises within the metaphors that a shared language relies on. In other words, philosophical and scientific 'truth' is represented in language, which is always already a non-truth, or 'lie'. When using language, we must agree on the meaning indexed by this doubled-metaphoricity; truths only consume relative frameworks, a contradiction inherent to language. As Nietzsche writes, "every concept originates by means of equating what is unequal."[63] Describing reality in language means *re*-presenting a metaphor – a doubly mediated copy, a mimetic echo. From the Greek *μιμεῖσθαι* ('to imitate, represent'), mimesis describes the imitative representation of the world in art and literature. Yet understandings of mimesis diverged early in the Western canon; while the Platonic conception of mimesis presupposes that art – like language – is a mere shadow of reality, for Aristotle, mimetic art is a self-contained heterocosm that re-presents a simulation of lived experience.[64] Furthermore, Platonic mimesis depends on an 'original' and is therefore incomplete (mimesis necessitates a negation or 'lack'), whereas Aristotle's definition appears to privilege the generative possibilities of representation. However, Aristotle also writes that mimesis must possess its own "internal unity."[65] Drawing on a passage from *Poetics*, Matthew Potolsky demonstrates how Aristotle's conception of artistic beauty hinges on this sense of completeness:

> a very small animal organism cannot be beautiful; for the view of it is confused, the object being seen in an almost imperceptible moment of time. Nor again can one of vast size be beautiful; for as the eye cannot take it all in at once, the unity and sense of the whole is lost for the spectator.[66]

[63] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense" in *On Truth and Untruth: Selected Writings*, translated by Taylor Carman (NY: Harper Perennial, 2010), 28. *The Southern Reach Trilogy* is similarly suspicious of language, often troubling the significations of concrete nouns. For example, in *Authority*, Control observes that "placing trust in a word like *border* had been a mistake, a trap. A slow unravelling of terms not recognised until too late", see *Authority,* 66. Later in the novel, it becomes clear that the ideational connotations of 'border' project a false sense of stability onto Area X.

[64] For more on this, see Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 5.

[65] Matthew Potolsky, *Mimesis* (NY: Routledge, 2006), 39; Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by Malcolm Heath (UK: Penguin Books, 1996), 31.

[66] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 31. See Potolsky, *Mimesis*, 40.

For Aristotle, mimesis is thus contingent on an epistemological violence, where beauty depends on unity, as well as the (human) spectator's ability to apprehend it.[67] As Potolsky writes, "[r]ather than seeking to reproduce the world as it is, [Aristotle's] mimesis 'matches' our innate or conventional ways of 'knowing the world'."[68] Like the lie of language, mimetic representation thus assumes a subject-object binary, with human utterance demarcating an 'inside' from an illusory 'outside' – a caesura that elides what escapes apprehension. But this caesura is where the New Weird lurks, complicating and thickening the limit. Here, we must learn how to listen – to attend to alterity and attempt a stammering translation into a completely foreign tongue.

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The Southern Reach Trilogy is oozing with alterities, including fungal bodies, parasites, and doppelgängers. These alterities flourish in Area X, decentring discourses that privilege human onto-epistemologies.[69] Although Stephen Halliwell and Bo Pettersson point out that no work can be truly 'anti-mimetic', *Annihilation* stretches mimesis to its limits.[70] Grappling with the irreducible alterity of Area X, the biologist becomes dependent on speculative and poetic signifiers to represent reality. From the moment she enters Area X, the biologist's language is studded with repetitions of 'like', 'kind of', 'seemed', 'resembled', and 'as if'; when she cannot describe something as it *is*, she reaches for what it is *like*. Early in *Annihilation*, the biologist describes the expedition's encounter with a wild boar:

> Its features were somehow contorted, as if the beast was dealing with an extreme of inner torment. Nothing about its muzzle or broad, long face looked at all extraordinary, and yet I had the startling impression of some *presence* in the way its gaze seemed turned inward and its head wilfully pulled

[67] In saying this, Stephen Halliwell is right to point out that "nowhere in the poetics does Aristotle offer a (stipulative) definition of mimesis." See Halliwell, "Aristotelian Mimesis between Theory and Practice" in *Rethinking Mimesis: Concepts and Practices of Literary Representation*, edited by Saija Isomaa, Sari Kivistö, Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Sanna Nyqvist, Merja Polvinen and Riikka Rossi (UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), 5.
[68] Potolsky, *Mimesis,* 97.
[69] In her essay "Life of a Sundew, Sundew of a Life", writer Pantea Armanfar problematizes such anthropocentric discourses. Armanfar uses a • grapheme to refer to the sundew, thus displacing mimetic representation to imagine the sundew's differential ontology without slipping into the normative designations assigned to it. The use of the non-lingual grapheme also causes each expression it predicates to grow unstable, which highlights the contingent relation between beings and attributes. Instead, Armanfar proposes representational multiplicity as a way into reciprocal structures of relationality. "Life of a Sundew, Sundew of a Life", last modified 12 March 2020, Life of a Sundew or Sundew of a Life – Plumwood Mountain.
[70] See Halliwell's *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002) and Bo Pettersson, "Beyond Anti-Mimetic Models: A Critique of Unnatural Narratology," in *Rethinking Mimesis*. Pettersson points out that there *is* room for imagination in Aristotle's conception of mimesis: "[c]entral to [Aristotle's] view of mimesis in *Poetics* is the notion that 'the poet's function is to describe, not just the thing that happened, but a kind of thing that might happen'. […] Mimesis centrally includes a creative, imaginative aspect as well as an imitative one", 83.

> to the left as if there were an invisible bridle. A kind of electricity sparked in its eyes that I could not credit as real.[71]

The biologist's language is mediated by 'some's, 'seeming's, and similes, while concrete nouns are eroded by abstract qualifications – even the similes are opaque. In a 'transparent' simile, the vehicle points back to what is compared, and the poetic formula forms a closed loop (*x* is like *x*). Yet in the biologist's similes, the vehicle is textually present, but conceptually absent; the 'inner torment' that manifests as a contortion is imagined, the bridle is 'invisible', and the reality of the 'kind of electricity' is immediately undermined in the relative clause. While mimesis seeks actualization, or the re-presentation of a sign in lingual space, the biologist's 'as if's refuse structure: what follows 'as if' never manifests, but gestures to a spectral multiplicity. In this sense, the representation is always incomplete and thus evades mimetic unity.

The speculative adverb 'perhaps' also proliferates in *Annihilation*, appearing a total of 79 times (with another 99 and 71 occurrences in *Authority* and *Acceptance* respectively). In order to enter Area X, the expedition must cross the 'border' under hypnosis, pitched blind into the unknown. The biologist narrates her experience of emerging from this haze:

> We had been told not to look back upon arrival, but I snuck a glance anyway, while the psychologist's attention was elsewhere. I don't know quite what I saw. It was hazy, indistinct, and already far behind us—perhaps a gate, perhaps a trick of the eye. Just a sudden impression of a fizzing block of light, fast fading.[72]

With this repetition of 'perhaps', the biologist's doubt becomes a door (quite literally) that opens onto the 'fizzing' possibilities of Area X. In distinctly opaque language, images blur and lose their edges: knowing is unmoored and set adrift in a cloud of polyvalence, potentiality, and 'perhaps'. There are also Derridean shades to this 'perhaps', which appears at the start of his famous paper "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences". Speaking at 'The Languages of Criticism and Sciences of Man' symposium at Johns Hopkins University, Derrida begins:

> Perhaps something has occurred in the history of the concept of structure that could be called an 'event', if this loaded word did not entail a meaning which it is precisely the function of structural – or structuralist – thought to reduce or to suspect. But let me use the term "event" anyway,

[71] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 16-17.
[72] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 11.

> employing it with caution and as if in quotation marks. In this sense, this event will have the exterior form of a rupture and a redoubling.[73]

Derrida went on to introduce a paradox into the heart of philosophical Structuralism (a method of analysis in which knowledge is arrayed in a self-governing system of relationships), by arguing that the 'structurality of structure' has no centre, because the centre depends on other centres to define it. Instead, Derrida reimagines structure as a chain or lattice, where the fixed centre recedes *ad infinitum*. Suddenly the 'centre' of the structure is necessarily elsewhere – just out of reach, always alien and elusive.[74] What materialises are shadows and spectres, or the potentiality of *non*-structure. With his enigmatic 'perhaps', Derrida holds the space between articulation and 'knowing' in tension: he is not here to state, but to speculate. And speculation always happens in the *para*-thetical.[75]

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From the Greek *μεταφορά* ('to transfer'), metaphor makes meaning through substitution: the implications of *x* are transferred to *y*, which subsequently holds the idea of *x* inside it. X is the placeholder of metaphor par excellence, a blank slate upon which images can be projected. In his mathematical treatise *La Géométrie*, Descartes chose *x*, along with *y* and *z*, to symbolise unknown values (this is not to be confused with Kant's later 'transcendental object', where 'X' represents what is beyond our representational abilities). Descartes use of *x* is thus metaphorical: it is a present, rather than absent, value. Yet *x* also indexes the necessary mediation of metaphor; relationally speaking, *y* is connected to a *z* via an *x*. In this configuration, *x* is no longer the metaphor itself but the space between the tenor and vehicle. Whether *x* functions as a substitute or as a mediating sign, metaphor negates through assertion: something *is* based on what it is *not* (*x* signs not-*x*). As simile accumulates through likeness, metaphor strips away. However, metaphor is also dependent on a conception of ontological stability – which Paul de Man refers to as the "inference of identity and totality […] constitutive of metaphor" – as well as an assumption that 'is' *is*.[76] Metaphoric substitution assumes defined boundaries between referents and thus

[73] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", in *Writing and Difference* (UK: Routledge, 2001), 351.
[74] See Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play", 352.
[75] Read, parenthetical.
[76] Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 14.

reproduces epistemic violence. But, as I hope to show, *y* and *z* perform no more than a "contingent association" in the world of Area X.[77]

Inside Area X's inverted 'tower' lurks a creature that the biologist refers to as 'the Crawler'. A composite of slime, orbital organs, and what appear to be human cells, the Crawler lies at the topographical centre of the novel.[78] At first there are only traces of the Crawler's presence: a golden residue "shot through with red flakes like dried blood" on the stairs of the 'tower' (despite her scientific background, the biologist cannot identify its composition or source).[79] There are also unusual shapes embedded in this viscous slime, a "flurry of indentations" inside oval shapes, which – to the biologist – resemble "the marks left by cilia":

> About ten inches outside of these tracks, encircling them, were two lines. This irregular double circle undulated out and then in again, almost like the hem of a skirt. Beyond this "hem" were faint indicators of further "waves", as of some force emanating from a central body that had left a mark. It resembled most closely the lines left in sand as the surf recedes during low tide. Except that something had blurred the lines and made them fuzzy, like charcoal drawings.[80]

Yet even this simile is hesitant: the circle only 'almost' undulates like the 'hem of a skirt'. The quote marks that frame the second repetition of 'hem' subsequently transform the simile into a metaphor (likeness becomes substitution), thus signalling the biologist's awareness that the comparison is inadequate. Her next attempt at description ('lines left in the sand'), is immediately complicated by a further simile: 'fuzzy lines' of charcoal that obscure the previous resemblance. It turns out that neither direct equivalence (metaphoric substitution) nor layered resemblances (simile) can capture the alien substance in language, which contingently orbits its subject.

When the biologist eventually encounters the Crawler near the base of the 'tower', her descriptions become increasingly frantic, still failing to pin their referent in place:

> …the Crawler kept changing at a lightening pace, as if to mock my ability to comprehend it. It was a figure within a series of refracted panes of glass. It was a series of layers in the shape of an archway. It was a great sluglike monster ringed by satellites of even odder creatures. It was a glistening star.[81]

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[77] De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, 15.
[78] As noted in introduction to this thesis, *Acceptance* provides an opaque aetiology for the Crawler. After pricking his finger on a strange 'thorn', Saul (the lighthouse keeper) is struck by a fever and troubling visions. The novel implies that 'the Crawler' is the culmination of Saul's 'infection' and that he somehow summons Area X into existence. However, this is never made explicit.
[79] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 53.
[80] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 53-54.
[81] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 176.

The biologist's metaphors (a shattered mirror, an arch, a planetary monster, a star) flash and fizzle out in the "blinding" brightness of alterity.[82] However, the biologist's failure to describe the Crawler is not completely fraught. While her accumulative metaphors risk obscuring the Crawler's otherness (which exceeds direct equivalence) their paratactic relationship forms a composite with no centre. Rather than pure substitution, the biologist's description begins to resemble what De Man calls "relational metonymic contact."[83] Metonymy acknowledges the relational nature of meaning in a way that more accurately represents the intra-active nature of matter: nothing can be seen all at once because there is no 'all' at all. The Crawler is a series of glass panes, a 'series of layers', through which an approximation of its form is refracted – a metonymic assemblage that evades mimetic unity. The anaphoric repetition of 'it' also signs the differential otherness of the Crawler; a pronominal satellite, 'it' carries no inherent meaning of its own but is contingent on the signs around it ('it' swallows the predicate).

As agency slides from the human to the nonhuman 'it', representation gets *weird*:

> It so overwhelmed my ability to comprehend shapes within it that I forced myself to switch from sight, to focus at first on reports from other senses. The sound that came to me now was like a crescendo of ice or ice crystals shattering to form an unearthly noise that I had mistaken earlier for buzzing, and which began to take on an intense melody and rhythm that filled my brain. […] The vibration had a texture and a weight, and with it came a burning smell, as of late fall leaves or like some vast and distant engine close to overheating. The taste on my tongue was like brine set ablaze.[84]

Trapped at the bottom of the 'tower' with the Crawler, the biologist is overwhelmed by sound and light, as "a rising sense of heat and weight and a kind of licking, lapping wetness" seems to

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[82] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 176. Elvia Wilk has also drawn attention to the parallels between the biologist's attempt to represent the unknowable and the rhetoric of Judeo-Christian mysticism (See Elvia Wilk, "The Word Made Fresh: Mystical Encounter and the New Weird Divine", *e-flux Journal*, last modified June 2018, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/92/205298/the-word-made-fresh-mystical-encounter-and-the-new-weird-divine/). Although the principal concerns of mysticism – the aporetic 'unknowability' of a divine God – seem far removed from the alterity of Area X, Wilk underscores the paradox that permeates both mystical texts and the biologist's journal: how does language represent what is strictly 'unrepresentable' in language? In the mystical tradition, the mystic is the medium that 'receives' a message (a bodily *x* of mediation). It is only through direct experience that one may 'know' the divine, which leads some mystics to pose 'unknowing', or the annihilation of the thinking self, as the paradoxical answer to divine 'knowing'. This negative theology (the '*via negativa*') attempts to arrive at God through negation, or what God is *not*. As Wilk writes: "apophasis, the *via negativa*, is an all-out confrontation with linguistic futility in the presence of the unknowable. Its rhetorical counterpart is cataphasis, the *via positiva*: the strategy of endlessly asserting what a subject is, in order to arrive there through sheer (perhaps infinite) accumulation."

[83] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 14.

[84] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 176.

transform the "thick light […] into the sea itself".[85] The biologist finds herself choking in the very sea that had, a moment ago, been the metonymic vehicle of her own salty simile: 'brine' has become a material, ocean of language.[86] Rather than a referential system predicated on the human subject, representation itself becomes agentive and distinctly *non*human. The sea of language enters the biologist's body from the outside, flooding her insides and recomposing her, 'mote by mote':

> A raging waterfall crashed down on my mind, but the water was comprised of fingers, a hundred fingers, probing and pressing down into the skin of my neck, and then punching up through the bone of the back of my skull and into my brain […] I smelled a burning within my own head and there came a moment when I screamed, my skull crushed to dust and reassembled, mote by mote.[87]

But what happens when language is no longer contingent on the human body – when it is figured as an ontological being in its own right? What happens when (to misquote Yeats) the dance dances the dancer?[88]

Weird Writing

So far, I have suggested that the biologist's journal is 'epitextually' co-constituted by Area X and thus becomes a bio-manifestation of a wider ecology: her language (that is, her writing) is inextricable from its purported object of study. Reference circulates, loops, contaminates, and parasitises. Here my argument aligns closely with that of Strombeck, who proposes that the 'proliferation' of texts produced by Area X function as an authorial force in the trilogy. However, Strombeck goes further, arguing that Area X is also the embedded 'author' of the trilogy: "the novels position Area X as the 'author' of the series, an omniscient force that generates character arcs, arranges imagery, and changes the setting. Area X generates a massive amount of both human bureaucratic effort and human aesthetic production."[89] While I find Strombeck's argument

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[85] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 180.
[86] She writes: "[a]s I began to choke, I realized that the light *had* become a sea." VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 180.
[87] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 181.
[88] How can we know the dancer from the dance?" William Butler Yeats, "Among the School Children", *Poetry Foundation,* last modified 2022, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43293/among-school-children.
[89] Strombeck, "Inhuman Writing," 1379. See also 1379-1380: "[Area X changes the biologist into Ghost Bird; it moves plants, mice, and cell phones around in Authority […] it generates the debate about tower/tunnel that courses through *Annihilation* and *Authority*; it causes Grace to spend three years in Area X before meeting up with Ghost Bird and Control in *Acceptance*. The narrative itself points to Area X as its author in a number of ways. I've already mentioned that the journals that pile up in the lighthouse have been there from the very beginning (Saul encounters them immediately after Area X descends); one of those journals, written by the biologist, forms the bulk of *Annihilation's* narrative. Since Lowry has been infected by Area X, and is likely a copy sent back from the area, much of the narrative machinery driving *Authority* is also directly traceable to Area X. The temporal shifts of

compelling (I also intend to show that *The Southern Reach Trilogy* is not a solely 'human-authored' text) he risks subsuming the generative potential of 'inhuman writing' *within* the trilogy under the "inhuman vastness" of Area X.[90] I am interested in how the trilogy represents nonhuman writing.[91] How does this ontologically nonhuman writing represent itself? Is language always already nonhuman? In this section, I attempt to answer such questions, by focusing on the bioluminescent writing that the biologist discovers inside the 'tower'. I will address its materiality, as well as how this materiality complicates notions of writing, reading, and critical analysis.

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In the first chapter of *Annihilation,* the expedition encounters the 'tower', which they initially refer to as the 'tunnel' or 'typographical anomaly'. However, for the biologist, it is always 'the tower'.[92] Plunging into the earth, the 'tower' serves as an earth-bound anchor around which the action of *Annihilation* pivots; the biologist imagines the 'tower' as the subterranean mirror of the lighthouse on the coast. This doubled architecture haunts the trilogy, providing narrative scaffolding and landmarks for the books' characters and readers. However, the 'tower' also evokes the epistemological and referential uncertainties that *The Southern Reach Trilogy* interrogates. The first sentence of the trilogy begins with a relative clause that immediately undermines its referent: "[t]he tower, which was not supposed to be there…" [93] The biologist elaborates on this puzzling statement on page six, writing that the expedition "did not expect to find anything" where the 'tower' lies, based on both the maps that they had brought with them and the "water-stained, pine-dust smeared documents" the previous expedition had left behind.[94] The expedition's maps thus reveal an inconsistency between their data and the topography of Area X, which results in an epistemological rupture. The biologist observes this rupture and compares it to the ease with which the expedition 'accepts' the lighthouse (the 'tower's architectural twin): "[w]e assumed that the structure in question was a lighthouse because the map showed a lighthouse at that location and because everyone immediately recognized what a lighthouse should look like.[95] Yet the absence of the 'tower' from the expedition's maps unmoors them from any epistemological point of reference. As Latour points out, topographical maps allow the supreme indexical marker – the

Acceptance are revealed to be simultaneous: it's also the case, then, that the narrative machinery of that novel is driven by Area X itself."

[90] Strombeck, "Inhuman Writing",1367.

[91] Note that where Strombeck uses an 'in' prefix, I prefer 'non'.

[92] See VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 18-19.

[93] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 3.

[94] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 6.

[95] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 24.

human finger – to orient the body in space, or at least the representation of space.[96] Without an index to index (a 'tower' to point to on the map), the omniscient 'god-trick' of science is doubly disembodied.[97]

But the 'tower' also threatens to undermine the foundations of Enlightenment onto-epistemologies in its symbolic relation to an inverted spire. In *Tentacles Longer Than Night*, philosopher Eugene Thacker identifies a thread running between Dante's conception of Hell in *The Divine Comedy*, the 'body politic' of the fifteenth century, and the Catholic cathedral:

> [a]s a whole, the *Inferno* is a huge, cavernous structure often depicted as an inverted cone, each circle spiralling down to the center, the lowest point of Hell, where Satan sits, melancholy and frozen. The apex of Hell is nearly an inversion of the apex of a cathedral (which symbolizes, in turn, the theological 'body' of the congregation, and which, in turn, configures the body as the 'temple' of the soul).[98]

While the cathedral presents a structure that reaches toward God, Dante's Hell is a structure that descends toward Satan: the 'theological body of the congregation' is stood on its head. As Thacker points out, it was during the fifteenth century that the anatomical human body was "analogized […] with the body of the Church" and therefore, the state.[99] By depicting Hell as an inverted cathedral spire, Dante poses a challenge to the doctrines of the Catholic Church, which viewed the human – made in the image and likeness of God – as transcendental and ontologically nearest God (bar angels) in the 'great chain of being'. *Annihilation*'s 'tower' evokes such inverted architecture, emphasised by the biologist's refusal to refer to it as a tunnel: "[a]t first, I saw it only as a tower. I don't know why the word *tower* came to me, given that it tunnelled into the ground."[100]

After discovering the inverted 'tower', the members of the twelfth expedition disagree on whether they should descend, or continue to explore Area X; the anthropologist thinks they should "gather data" from further afield, while the surveyor and psychologist think that they should rule out the 'tower' as "something invasive or threatening."[101] During this debate, the other members of the expedition refer to the 'tower' as 'the tunnel', which the biologist silently corrects:

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[96] See Latour, *Pandora's Hope*, 65: "[u]nless it is pointed in anger as a prelude to a fist, the extension of the index finger always signals an access to reality." I would also argue that this disjuncture between the representation of space (surface) and the fact of the tower's existence (depth) foreshadows the relationship between language and 'meaning', which the trilogy seeks to complicate.
[97] See Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies* 14, no.3 (1988): 575-599.
[98] Eugene Thacker, *Tentacles Longer Than Night* (UK: Zone Books, 2015), 27.
[99] Thacker, "Tentacles", 36.
[100] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 6.
[101] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 13.

> "I must admit to feeling a great deal of unease at the moment, but I am unsure whether it is because of the effect of the overall environment or the presence of the tunnel. Personally, I would like to rule out the tunnel."
> *Tower.*[102]

But why does the biologist insist on calling the 'tower' a tower? Even she acknowledges that her insistence on this term is strange, marking it as "the first irrational thought" she has within Area X.[103] While the italics may simply emphasise her frustration at the expedition's refusal to see 'the topographical anomaly' as anything but a tunnel, they also interrupt the text – a ghostly voice that creates uncertainty and tension within the biologist's narrative 'I'. Strombeck notes this effect and suggests that the term provides "an inhuman grounding of text to referent".[104] More than merely challenging anthropocentric epistemologies, perhaps 'tower' materialises as truly alien terminology.

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The biologist, surveyor, and anthropologist enter the 'tower' the following morning, descending a "stairwell curved steeply downward".[105] Inside, they discover what appear to be "green vines" on the walls:

> At about shoulder height, perhaps five feet high, clinging to the inner wall of the tower, I saw what I first took to be dimly sparkling green vines progressing down into the darkness. […] Then, as I stared, the "vines" resolved further, and I saw that they were words, in cursive, the letters raised about six inches off the wall.[106]

Drawing closer, the biologist is surprised to discover that she can read the words. Introducing the haunting refrain that echoes throughout the trilogy, the biologist recites the words aloud before they disappear into the darkness: *"Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead to share with the worms that…"*[107] Yet although the biologist can read the

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[102] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 14.
[103] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 7.
[104] Strombeck, "Inhuman Writing", 1373. Dunja Mohr also puts it succinctly when she writes that the tower "unhinges the scientists as its materiality destabilizes etymology". See Mohr, "Tentacular Narrative Webs", 180.
[105] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 22.
[106] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 23.
[107] Initially manifesting on the 'tower' walls, the words also appear on the back-wall of a cupboard in The Southern Reach headquarters, in the ceiling space above the janitor's closet, in Gloria's bedroom, and on the pages of Saul's journal in *Acceptance.*

words, she cannot work out who wrote them, or how. Noticing an almost imperceptible swaying, she leans closer "like someone […] tricked into thinking that words should be read."[108] This movement – a bodily leaning toward language – initiates a process that will culminate in the biologist's eventual transformation inside Area X. Upon further inspection, the biologist discovers that the letters, "connected by their cursive script, were made from what would have looked to the layperson like rich green fernlike moss but in fact was probably a type of fungi or other eukaryotic organism".[109] Suddenly, "[t]riggered by a disturbance in the flow of air", one of these letteristic organisms opens, spewing out a stream of "golden spores".[110] The biologist pulls back, but not before she feels the spores enter her nasal cavity; a few pages later, the biologist refers to this as her 'contamination', immediately sensing that she has been infected by and through the writing.

Prompted by the surveyor, the biologist remembers her vocation. Rather than trying to understand the meaning of the words, she realises that she should approach them as she would any organism:

> *What are they made of.*
>
> I hadn't even thought of this, though I should have; I was still trying to parse the lingual meaning, had not transitioned to the idea of taking a physical sample. But what relief at the question! Because it helped me fight the compulsion to keep reading, to descend into the greater darkness and keep descending until I had read all there was to read. Already those initial phrases were infiltrating my mind in unexpected ways, finding fertile ground.[111]

By shifting her focus from what the words 'mean' to their performative and material qualities, the biologist detaches language from its referential properties; language is reimagined as organism, where matter takes precedence over meaning. By focusing on the material ontology of the writing, the biologist also resists the "compulsion" to keep reading – to 'descend into the greater darkness'.[112] The biologist senses that if she were to keep "reading the words", she might not be able to resist the possibly endless descent into the belly of Area X.[113] Through the fungal writing, *Annihilation* seems to offer up an allegory for reading, albeit a very weird one: here, reading – or at least the desire for meaning – is presented as a trap. I am inevitably reminded of Derrida's *différance*,

[108] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 25.
[109] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 24.
[110] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 24.
[111] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 24.
[112] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 24. The repetition of the word 'descend' emphasises the topology of the words, which follow the subterranean spiral of the 'tower' itself.
[113] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 27.

where meaning only appears retroactively through a process of deferral. For Derrida, a word can never 'mean' in isolation, but depends on other words to form structures of relational signification. This deferral (a challenge to both the binary interplay of Saussure's signifier-signified and Peirce's triadic relationship between sign, object, and interpretant) creates meaning *through* difference: there is no space between signs, only overlapping relationalities predicated on otherness. In her book *Quantum Anthropologies*, Vicki Kirby argues that the full implications of deconstruction have yet to be unravelled. Kirby returns to Derrida's famous assertion, '*Il n' y a pas de hors-texte*' ('there is no outside text'), to show how current deconstructive gestures, often restricted to issues of representation within a text, reproduce the very binaries they seek to challenge. Kirby subsequently problematizes the 'linguistic turn', which sees the complexities of the world reduced to the "conundrums of language."[114] Although the linguistic turn may attempt to collapse the distance between human and non, it ultimately privileges anthropocentric sign-systems over what they purport to represent: the self-referentiality of language becomes "the constitutive self-enclosure of culture."[115] However, this was never Derrida's intention. As Kirby points out, deconstruction "cannot be an operational instrument of determination […] because the entire scene or system is actively involved in its own decipherment."[116] For Kirby, language does not belong to the human 'realm of culture' but "exceeds its enclosure within linguistics."[117]

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By resisting the lure of 'lingual meaning', the biologist symbolically resists the endless deferral of an enclosed sign-system, which is itself dependent on anthropocentric epistemologies. Instead, she approaches language as an organism that exceeds the human. However, reimagining language as ontologically independent of human utterance raises questions. As Kirby asks:

> If we place 'the human' under erasure in much the same way as we do 'language', such that the subject in question itself is now 'language itself', then how can language fail to represent itself if re-presentation is what language is/does?[118]

In other words, how does language represent alterity when language *itself* becomes the alterity in question? Kirby seeks to present a new ontology of language, where it is not a "second-order" system of representation, but "an ontological energy through which the world makes itself

[114] Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies*, 3.
[115] Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies,* 3.
[116] Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies*, 7; 8.
[117] Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies*, 13.
[118] Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies,* 46.

known."[119] This radical framing language is also underscored in *Annihilation* by the conspicuous absence of the twelfth expedition's linguist. Like the expeditions before them, their party originally included a linguist, who – as the psychologist puts it – had "second thoughts" before crossing the border.[120] Reflecting on this, the biologist is relieved that it was not one of the other members who deserted. As she explains, the "linguist seemed at the time most expendable" of the expedition's combined skill set.[121] Now, without a linguist, the biologist has no choice but to analyse the words as she would any other organism. The words form a text that, as another linguist observes in *Authority*, functions as a "conduit" for something more than abstract referentiality.[122]

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Of course, the world is teeming with nonhuman messages: bats echo-locate, fossils transmute time into mineral durability, and tree-rings reveal the swell of ancient rain. According to Kirby's formulation, human language is merely one aspect of this "general and generative field of expressivity, one that includes bird song, bee-dance and the intricate patterns of a spider's-web, as well as the physical matter on which eco-systems depend."[123] Language is, in many ways, always already part of the system that transcribes it, just as the biologist's journal is inextricable from the world she attempts to record. There is no binary between 'nature' and 'culture', no gap between the act of writing and what is written: meaning erases itself at the moment it appears. 'Biosemiotics' is an umbrella term for the various scientific fields that recognise signification to be biological, rather than strictly referential. Since the discovery of genetic code in 1961, scientists such as Thomas Sebeok and Jakob von Uexküll, have drawn attention to the ways nature employs its own sign systems. As they argue, organic codes reveal that the act of coding exists in all single-cell

[119] Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies,* 133. There are parallels here between Kirby's thinking and the musings of Elizabeth Grosz in *Becoming Undone* (NC: Duke University Press, 2011). Like Kirby, Grosz wonders whether it is possible for us to understand language differently, "beyond and outside the limits of the human", 14. She asks: "[w]hat would a theory of language be like that understood language in its full resonance as trace, as the material and incorporeal incision that marks and hides its own movement, a trace that in no way privileges the voice or speech?", 14. Grosz also evokes Derrida to speculate about the nonhuman potential of language. By returning language to the spectral trace that 'hides its own movement', Grosz allows language to 'speak' itself. When the trace is erased, so is the original caesura that demarcates the event of language as an expression of the world. Similarly, the writing in the 'tower' manifests without a known source. As it spirals down the walls it forms a track that obscures its origin, that marks and hides its movement: it becomes 'arche-writing'. From the Greek *ἀρχή* ('origin'), Derrida's term arche-writing refers to an originary language that exists in the absence of any human enunciation, author, or reader. It is the alterity that infects sameness, the condition of *différance*'s 'differential play', and thus the stuff of language as such.
[120] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 9.
[121] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 9.
[122] VanderMeer, *Authority,* 106.
[123] Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies,* 41. Kirby has also referred to this 'field of expressivity' as a "biological grammar", 73.

organisms and that, therefore, "all cells are semiotic systems".[124] However, biosemioticians are careful to draw a line between semiotics and 'language', which is a strictly symbolic system. As Marcello Barbieri explains, biosemiotics broadly adheres to a triadic understanding of semiosis: "[t]he origin of organic semiosis and the origin of interpretation were separated by three billion years of cellular evolution, because interpretation is dependent on internal models of the world, and probably evolved only in animals."[125] In other words, there is a clearly demarcated difference between context-free produced codes, such as DNA sequences, and context-dependent 'learned' codes.[126] 'Code biosemiotics', championed by Barbieri, emphasises the productive context-free nature of semiotics, which elides the need for 'meaning' from the semiotic equation. Such biosemiotic scripts may offer an answer to Kirby's earlier question: biosemiosis does not *fail* to represent, but rather, makes reified re-presentation second order to the *act* of representing itself.

Arguably, signs become 'language' when their relation to the world is symbolic (e.g., a grapheme's relation to a phonetic utterance), which subsequently produces communities of mutual comprehension. When the biologist first encounters the fungal writing in the 'tower', she is 'surprised' to find that she "can understand the language the words [are] written in".[127] Therefore, although the words evade resolved 'meaning' (the biologist never reaches the end of the 'sentence') they must possess a symbolic – rather than iconographic or indexical – relation to what they 'represent'. In the 1940s, the mathematician John Von Neumann developed his theory of self-replicating automata, inspired by evolutionary models. Neumann showed that any self-replicating system capable of open-ended evolution "must necessarily contain a description of itself, and such a description must be categorically different from the construction it controls."[128] Importantly, the description of a system "cannot coincide with the system itself", but must represent, or 'stand for', the material components, and thus possess a symbolic relation.[129] While Von Neumann's theory – actualised with his 'universal conductor' machine – has far-reaching implications for computing, it also provides a conceptual schema for biosemioticians like Howard Pattee, who argues that this "dependence on symbol structures […] is the essence of life".[130] By applying Von Neumann's theory to the separation of genotype (description) and phenotype (system), Pattee formulates a

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[124] Marcello Barbieri, "A Short History of Biosemiotics," *Biosemiotics* 2 (2009): 239.

[125] Barbieri, "A Short History of Biosemiotics", 239.

[126] Although Judith Roof has noted that the metaphor of 'DNA as text' risks producing a "continued sense of human control and agency over genetic processes". See Judith Roof, *The Poetics of DNA* (MN: Minnesota University Press, 2007), 28.

[127] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 23.

[128] Barbieri, "A Short History of Biosemiotics", 223. See John Von Neumann, *Theory of Self-Reproducing Automata* (IL: University of Illinois Press, 1966).

[129] Barbieri, "A Short History of Biosemiotics", 223.

[130] Howard Pattee, "Laws and constraints, symbols and languages", *Towards a Theoretical Biology 4,* edited by C.H Waddington (UK: University of Edinburgh Press*,* 1972), 248.

biological 'language' in which cells dream their own actualisation. In the 'tower', there is similarly no gap between language and the act of representation: it is about what the writing *does*, not what it signifies. As an organic manifestation of Kirby's 'alterity in itself', the fungal writing enacts a particular blend of the material and the semiotic – the (s)porous membrane between 'word' and 'world'.[131]

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But what *are* the words made of? Upon closer examination, the biologist discovers that the letters are not moss, but small fungi. Ranging from moulds to mushrooms, members of the fungi kingdom pose challenges to taxonomic classification. As Linnaeus put it in 1751, "the order of Fungi is still Chaos, a scandal of art, no botanist knowing what is a Species and what is a Variety".[132] Although scientists have a much better understanding of fungi than they did in the 18th century, these weird organisms still evade easy categorization. As eukaryotes, fungi are closely related, but distinct from, plants and animals. Like plants, fungi often grow in soil and have rigid cell walls; however, unlike plants, fungi are unable to photosynthesise and must absorb nutrition externally like animals.[133] Fungi also reproduce through cycles of parasitism and distribution, which poses a challenge to taxonomic systems that equate identity with ontological totality (i.e., a self-same identity). The mycologist Merlin Sheldrake has pointed out that "[w]ithin the mycelium [the fruiting body] of a single fungal 'individual' there can exist multiple genomes. Within the DNA extracted from a single pinch of [mycelial] dust, there might be tens of thousands of unique genetic signatures" (fungi are necessarily polyvalent in their signifying capacity).[134] Fungal hyphae also draw fungi into symbiotic mutualisms; as the hyphae absorb essential nutrients, they transport the vital products of photosynthesis between trees. A 'single' fungus is therefore – like the writing in the

[131] *Annihilation*'s emphasis on the writing's materiality decentres normative interpretive frameworks, thus figuring it as an expression of nonhuman agency. In her influential book *Vibrant Matter,* Jane Bennett attempts to elide the rigid boundaries between objects and subjects, by providing the term 'actant' as a "substitute word for what in a more subject-centered vocabulary are called agents", 9. The term 'actant' reimagines objects as members of a network, a worldview that highlights the vibrancy of all matter – the 'vital materiality' that haunts bodies, both human and nonhuman. Reading the writing in the 'tower' as a languaged expression of Area X offers a way to read – quite literally – across distributed and vibrant ontologies. See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

[132] Carl Linnaeus, quoted in Merlin Sheldrake, *Entangled Life* (NY: Penguin Books, 2020), 208.

[133] Ben Woodard also notes that fungal bodies are "hardly bodies at all, as they stretch the conceptual limits of their own bodies as well as destroy and decay the purported solidity of other bodies", 29. Ontologically interstitial, fungi predominantly live in damp dark places, where they feed on decomposing organic matter. Drawn to decay, fungi complicate the divide between "life as bound and life as creeping", or bounded life from oozing non-life, 38. See Ben Woodard, *Slime Dynamics* (UK: Zero Books, 2012).

[134] Sheldrake, *Entangled Life,* 208.

'tower' – only an expression of a much larger organism.[135] However, there is a fine line between symbiotic relationships and parasitic ones. Fungal life propagates itself through the transmission of airborne spores, which germinate and become hyphae, sometimes inside a host body.[136] This dependence on a host for survival turns the fungus into a parasite. From the Greek *πάρα*, 'beside', and *σίτος*, 'food', parasitism is a matter of ingestion – or in the biologist's case, inhalation.

In her journal, the biologist notes that it would "require a separate mission, another day" to transcribe the fungal writing in its entirety, referring to it as a "continuous, never-ending sentence".[137] Yet while parts of this never ending sentence ("…*to share with the worms that gather in the darkness and surround the world with the power of their lives*") are scattered throughout the trilogy, it is *always* in fragments, never a whole: the writing seems to slide past a gap in the narrative fabric, only displaying one segment at a time.[138] The theorist Sean Braune has evoked the tapeworm to represent his notion of the 'transject', an ontological category that unsettles subject-object binaries.[139] As Braune points out, a tapeworm "is not singular, but a process: it is a lifeform that lives within its own lifecycle" (itself dependent upon a host).[140] But a tapeworm's existence is also contingent on its own segmented body; each segment – technically, 'proglottid' – produces eggs, which are deposited into the intestine of the host. Weirdly (and I admit that this is all very weird), interlocking segments are also the means of the fungal writing's 'transmission'. Although she resists, the biologist's inability to derive meaning from the words in the 'tower' is what compels her to 'keep descending', keep reading, and ultimately keep inhaling parasitic spores. Inspired by Michel Serres, Braune reimagines parasites, as well as the infections produced by parasites, as "creative agents".[141] Taking both thinkers seriously, I propose that the fungal writing represents a 'para-semiotics' that exists *πάρα* ('beside'), or contiguous with, human utterance.[142] Remembering that the biologist's journal is an expression of the phenomenological-paratextual relation within Area X reveals how the fungal writing worms beneath the codical surface of *Annihilation*, twisting the biologist's graphemes into dendritic dimensions and co-producing the text. As Braune writes,

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[135] The 'tower' itself is also a subterranean world that evokes the 'invisible worlds' of fungi – the fruiting body of a fungus is only the tip of the iceberg.
[136] For example, the fugal parasites *entomophthora* and *Ophiocordyceps*. *Entomophthora* is a genus of fungi that infects the bodies of winged insects, while *ophiocordyceps* 'hypnotises' ants in order to propagate itself.
[137] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 47.
[138] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 47.
[139] Sean Braune, *Language Parasites: On Phorontology* (CA: Punctum Books, 2017), 99; 61.
[140] Braune, *Language Parasites,* 98.
[141] Braune, *Language Parasites*, 103. Also see Michel Serres: "[t]he parasite invents something new. Since he does not eat like everyone else, he builds a new logic. He crosses the exchange, makes it into a diagonal." Michel Serres, *The Parasite,* translated by Lawrence R. Schehr (MN: Minnesota University Press, 2007), 35.
[142] Not to be confused with J. L Austin's notion of 'parasitic speech acts'. See J.L Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

"the Author is not dead (as she or he is for Barthes), but only infected and controlled by a parasitic intelligence."[143]

(S)porous Bodies, Ideational Infections

Junji Ito's cult-classic horror manga *Uzumaki* is an instructive analogue for how an ideational form like language might become a physical manifestation in the body.[144] First appearing as a weekly serial in *Big Comic Spirits*, Ito's manga presents a series of interlocking narratives set in Kurouzu-cho, a fictional village in Japan. The residents of Kurouzu-cho are slowly infected by a supernatural 'spiral curse', which results in an obsession with spiral forms (e.g., the smoke from a cremation, the grooves of a pottery wheel, the human cochlea). However, each spiral contagion quickly shifts from an ideational obsession to what Eugene Thacker calls an 'objective manifestation'. The first character to be infected by 'the Spiral' is Mr. Saito, who begins 'collecting' spirals; when his wife throws away his ceramic spiral collection, he becomes uncharacteristically abusive.[145] Eventually, as Thacker describes, Saito transforms:

> In a final, desperate attempt to achieve this mystical union with the spiral, Saito's body itself undergoes a spiral-metamorphosis. His eyes swirl around in opposite directions (so he can see the whole world as a spiral…), his tongue twists inward like a spiral, and his entire body twists and curls itself into a giant, fleshy spiral.[146]

The spiral thus stitches between the ideational and the corporeal, bringing the two so close together that their sutures are invisible – the symbol and its expression are two sides of a single surface. To quote Thacker's eloquent analysis once more:

> [T]hroughout the *Uzumaki* series, the spiral is more than just a pattern in nature – it is also equivalent to the idea of the *spiral* itself. That is, the abstract symbol and the concrete manifestation are inseparable, to the point that the outer world of the spiral's manifestation can 'infect' or spread into the ideational world of the spiral as an idea.[147]

[143] Braune, *Language Parasites,* 90.
[144] Junji Ito, *Uzumaki,* translated by Yuji Oniki (CA: Viz Media, 2010).
[145] Ito, "The Spiral Obsession: Part One" in *Uzumaki*, unpaginated.
[146] Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet* (UK: Zone Books, 2011), 78.
[147] Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet*, 80.

Like Ito's spiral, the biosemiotic writing in the 'tower' is both an 'abstract symbol' and a 'concrete manifestation': language stitches between the symbolic, the bodily, and back again. In what follows, I focus on the biologist's transformation within Area X, as her body is infected and 'transcoded' at the molecular level.[148] As *Annihilation*'s narrative progresses, the novel's emphasis shifts from alterity beyond the human, to the human *as* an alterity; the biologist is 'de- and re-territorialized' by language, eventually becoming an alterity to herself.[149] But spiralling, I return to parasites. How does the distinctly parasitic writing in the 'tower' affect the biologist's body? What happens to narrative when the host body vanishes?

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After transcribing one of the textual fragments from within the 'tower', the biologist writes that the words "infected" the expedition's syntax.[150] A few pages later, she begins to refer to her heightened senses as "my infection", attributing this to her inhalation of the spores.[151] Before long, the biologist starts recording physical symptoms, which begin as a low-grade fever and "sinus difficulties" – soon she feels faint and "light-headed."[152] However, the biologist also observes a sensation that she can only describe as a 'brightness':

> I can describe it no other way. Internally, there was a *brightness* in me, a kind of prickling energy and anticipation that pushed hard against my lack of sleep. Was this part of the change? But even so, it didn't matter – I had no way to combat what might be happening to me.[153]

The 'brightness' is given an agency that seems to 'push' from the inside, situated *in* yet separate *from* the biologist's body, thus muddying the distinction between inside and outside. The biologist's

[148] See Laura Shackelford, "Strange Matters: More-than-Human Entanglements and Topographical Spacetimes" in *Surreal Entanglements*, 130.
[149] I borrow this term from Deleuze and Guattari, who use it in their oft-cited 'plateau' concerning the orchid and wasp. They note that an orchid uses a complex sexual mimicry to attract its pollinators: a flower that looks like a female wasp will attract a male wasp by "reproducing its image in a signifying fashion", 11. However, the two philosophers stress that the relationship between the orchid and wasp is not imitative, but productive – a de- and re-territorialization of both flower and insect into a new configuration; as soon as likeness is produced it vanishes, thus producing "nothing other than itself", 262. The wasp becomes part of the orchid's reproductive apparatus, while the orchid becomes part of the wasp's sexual Umwelt. As they write, this is "not imitation at all but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp", 11. See Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, translated by Brian Massumi (UK: Bloomsbury, 2004).
[150] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 47. I am still interested in what these 'infections' mean for narrative form. I want to know what happens when syntax gets infected – when language mutates at the morphological level.
[151] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 58.
[152] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 150.
[153] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 83.

final sentence also presents a syntactic configuration that alienates the writing self ('I') from the body ('me'). In other words, the biologist's body becomes the object of her scientific observation. Alison Sperling has noted *The Southern Reach Trilogy*'s motifs of sickness, infection, and contamination (in *Acceptance*, Saul's 'infection' also manifests as a delirious fever, followed by chills and the sensation that something is crawling under his skin).[154] Sperling reads these motifs of illness as indicative of a type of 'ecosickness' that seeps through the body's permeable membrane. However, inside Area X, infection does more than merely make its host sick – it *rewrites* them.[155]

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Area X is populated by bodies entangled in the process of their own infection, often caught in a midpoint between human and non. Even the dead continue to transform in Area X, so that death is not the teleological 'end' of life as such, but only a limit. When the biologist discovers the body of the anthropologist slumped against the wall of the 'tower', "a torrent of green ash" spills out of the latter's mouth, and her hands, "palms up in her lap, [have] no skin left on them, only a kind of gauzy filament".[156] Then, when the biologist finds the dying psychologist at the base of the lighthouse, she notices that her shoulder feels 'spongy'. Cutting away the psychologist's shirt, she discovers a similar green fuzz: "[t]he sponginess of her shoulder had bothered me, and I saw I'd had good reason to be concerned. From her collarbone down to her elbow, her arm had been colonized by a fibrous green-gold fuzziness, which gave off a faint glow."[157] Upon first entering Area X, the expedition is haunted by "a low, powerful moaning at dusk"; although unsettling at first, the moaning eventually becomes 'familiar' to the biologist, both a landmark and lullaby.[158] However, one night, the biologist realises that she has ventured too close to the source of the

[154] VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 197-198.
[155] VanderMeer's fiction often features language 'rewriting' bodies. In his short story "This World is Full of Monsters", the unnamed protagonist is infected and transcoded by a 'story-creature'. The story-creature 'infects' the protagonist and induces a sleep that lasts one-hundred years. When the man awakes, he finds that his body has undergone a metamorphosis – his eyes replaced by an insect-like cluster. Over time, he also learns that the story-creature has created a doppelgänger (a 'brother') in his image to spread a contagious 'anti-story': "[e]verywhere across my neighborhood, my country, and the world, this residue accumulated, extended silvery filaments across the bottom of people's shoes, across their palms and foreheads and elbows and the backs of their knees while asleep or awake […] And with each new filament extended, more people spread the anti-story until eventually it was just *the story* not the anti-story and there had never been an anti-story at all, or any other story to rule the Earth." It is worth noting the many similarities between "This World" and *Annihilation*: transformative filaments, a doppelgänger, and an emphasis on nonhuman language. In its mycelial imagery, "This World is Full of Monsters" reads as a precursor to Area X – the 'anti-story' opens (s)porous apertures to imagine human embodiment as something weirdly nonhuman. See Jeff VanderMeer, "This World is Full of Monsters", *Tor,* last modified 8 November 2017, This World Is Full of Monsters | Tor.com.
[156] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 62.
[157] VanderMeer, *Annihilation.* 132.
[158] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 5; See 74.

moans, and that a creature is moving through the reeds beside her. Up close, she notes that the moans are "more guttural, filled with confused anguish and rage […] so utterly human and inhuman".[159] Attempting to escape without notice, the biologist steps slowly through the swamp, when something nudges against her boot and flops over:

> I aimed my flashlight at the ground – and leapt back, gasping. Incredibly, a human face seemed to be rising out of the earth. But when after a moment nothing further happened, I shone my light on it again and saw it was a kind of tan mask made of skin, half-transparent […]. A wide face, with a hint of pockmarks across the left cheek. The eyes were blank, sightless, staring.[160]

Her flashlight alights on a "trail of skin-like detritus", left over from a "kind of moulting".[161] She deduces that the moaning creature is – or was once – human.

The 'moaning creature' reappears in *Acceptance,* during a scene that the biologist narrates in her re-discovered journal (read, and thus mediated, by her doppelgänger Ghost Bird): "I shone my flashlight on the creature's head, that small pink oval backed by the too-thick neck. As the moulting mask I'd found during my prior encounter suggested, it had the face of the psychologist from my husband's expedition."[162] The biologist also observes that "its eyes had a white film over them" that tells her that the moaning creature is blind.[163] Arwen Spicer has drawn attention to the marked difference between this psychologist's "failed assimilation" to Area X and the biologist's own metamorphoses, which is also narrated in *Acceptance*.[164] After years of living off the coast of Area X and resisting the 'brightness' inside her, the biologist finally gives into her infection, transforming into a hulking leviathan. Ghost Bird later confronts this radically nonhuman version of the biologist:

> The great slope of its wideness was spread out before Ghost Bird, the edges wavery, blurred, sliding off into some other place. The mountain that was the biologist came up almost to the windowsill, so close she could have jumped down onto what served as its back. The suggestion of a flat, broad head plunging directly into torso. The suggestion, far to the east, already overshooting the lighthouse, of a vast curve and curl of the mouth, and the flanks carved by dark ridges like a whale's, and the dried seaweed, the kelp, that clung there, and the overwhelming ocean smell that came with it. […] It had

[159] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 139.
[160] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 140.
[161] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 140.
[162] VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 161-162.
[163] VanderMeer, *Acceptance,* 162.
[164] Arwen Spicer, "Acceptance and Continuation: Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy and Hope in The Anthropocene", in *Surreal Entanglements*, 51.

> many, many glowing eyes that were also like flowers or sea anemones spread open, the blossoming of many eyes – normal, parietal, simple – all across its body, a living constellation ripped from the night sky.[165]

As Spicer notes, the biologist is "the antithesis of the eleventh expedition's psychologist. He is blind; she embodies hyper-sight, covered with a diversity of eyes".[166] The biologist rematerializes as a living 'constellation', embodying the breathtaking possibilities of our co-constitutive alterity.

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In *Becoming Undone*, Elizabeth Grosz corrects the assumption that evolution is 'stable' and teleological. Grosz writes that for Darwin, the differences between species is one of 'degree, not kind': our species-being is a non-teleological continuum, rather than an assemblage of bounded entities. Grosz also leans on the work of Henri Bergson, for whom "life is the excess within matter that seeks to extend matter beyond itself."[167] Bergson contends that life is an open-ended dynamism contained in a porous boundary, which extends and elaborates matter through continual invention; importantly, it is not subjects, objects, or 'things' that become, but the latent virtualities within them. For Grosz, this generative becoming is the very "operation of self-differentiation, the elaboration of a difference within a thing, a quality, or a system that emerges or actualizes in duration."[168] Our 'being' is thus a dynamic elaboration that simultaneously indexes what has been (the watery origins of all life) and what is yet to come. Timothy Morton has recently drawn on this thinking, by evoking the ever-slippery 'X':

> Darwin argues that at every step of evolution there is mutation. Things don't evolve teleologically. […] Stop the tape of evolution at any point and you will find a species, shadowed by some X-power. […] The fish is indeed dangerous: *ontologically* dangerous. Dangerous to the fish who thinks that they have "I am exactly this fish" inscribed all the way through every part of their structure.[169]

Morton's (somewhat simple) point is that 'we' can never be self-identical – that there is always a spectral double looking over our shoulder.[170] For Morton, X is not transcendent, but a contingent, bodily expression. By implication, we can never be 'one', because one-plus-X is impossible to

[165] VanderMeer, *Acceptance,* 195.
[166] Spicer, "Acceptance and Continuation", 51.
[167] Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, 28.
[168] Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, 43.
[169] Timothy Morton, *Humankind* (UK: Verso Books, 2019), 76.
[170] Morton, *Humankind,* 77.

calculate when X is a prefiguration of its own becoming. We are corporeally open, tenuous, and unstable, an *arrivant* who never arrives.[171] But what happens when this *arrivant* – the 'strange stranger' – arrives?

When the biologist tries to "parse" the fungal writing, the words are simultaneously 'parsing' her.[172] In the 'tower', language does something very weird: it goes sideways, producing a strange stranger who *does* arrive. As well as initiating the biologist's transformation, the fungal writing (here acting more like a virus than a parasitic fungus) makes a *copy*. A virus replicates by inserting its genetic material into that of its host, essentially 'hijacking' the cells they infect. When the body needs to make a protein, it transcribes a piece of its own DNA to make a Messenger RNA (mRNA). The mRNA contains the instructions for creating a particular protein, as well as a 'cap' which communicates that it is ready to be converted into the protein, hence the epithet 'Messenger'. Viruses steal this cap (a process referred to as 'cap snatching'), thus tricking the cell into making viral proteins with the own cell's machinery. As the cell transcribes these alien commands, the body is implicated in its own infection. Deleuze and Guattari write that "[w]e form a rhizome with our viruses" – we become-*with* them.[173] In a complex 'becoming' that wavers between parasite, virus, and human ontologies, the biologist's molecular text is rendered 'other' to itself. The biologist's infection transcodes the stable script that signs 'biologist' and initiates a mysterious chromosomal rearrangement: Ghost Bird, the biologist's doppelgänger, materialises as if plucked from the deconstructive trace and made flesh. The biologist's body thus becomes a 'para-site' of competing texts.

Doppelgängers

In "The Terror and The Terroir: The Ecological Uncanny in New Weird Exploration Narratives", Siobhan Carroll draws on the Freudian imagery of *The Southern Reach Trilogy* to evoke what she terms 'the ecological uncanny'. As she writes, "[t]he ecological uncanny is an aesthetic form routinely deployed in the New Weird, a speculative sub-genre characterized in its early years as a renewed engagement with 'the unheimlich.'"[174] Carroll goes on to read the biologist as a type

[171] For Derrida, the *arrivant* shimmers with all the possibility of a 'perhaps': What is going to come, *perhaps*, is not only this or that; it is at last the thought of the *perhaps,* the *perhaps* itself. The *arrivant* will arrive *perhaps,* for one must never be sure when it comes to *arrivance*; but the *arrivant* could be the *perhaps* itself, the unheard-of, totally new experience of the perhaps". See Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (UK: Verso Books, 2020), 29.
[172] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 24.
[173] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 11.
[174] Siobhan Carroll, "The Terror and the Terroir: The Ecological Uncanny in New Weird Exploration Narratives," *Paradoxa* 28 (2016): 68.

of 'revenant', reincarnated "both as an alien creature and as a human doppelgänger called Ghost Bird".[175] Writing in the same volume of *Paradoxa*, Alison Sperling also chooses to describe Ghost Bird's materialisation as a "haunting".[176] Yet while spectral in name, Ghost Bird is a corporeal presence in her own right (as Carroll somewhat paradoxically notes, Area X "is a wilderness *alive* with doppelgängers").[177] After 'infecting' the biologist, the fungal writing translates her body into the vernacular of Area X, by *re*-presenting her as a doppelgänger. Area X's fungal writing thus performs a nonhuman – or 'alien' – mimesis that subverts traditional mimetic paradigms: the message *is* the expression. In what follows, I am indebted to Elana Gomel, whose article "The Contagion of Posthumanity: Alien Infestation and the Paradox of Subjectivity" lurks behind my reading of the trilogy. Gomel draws on alien infestation narratives to ask whether the "standard tools" of mimetic representation can "cope with an alien subjectivity located in a human body, that is, lacking the external, corporeal signs by which nonhumans are ordinarily marked".[178] While *The Southern Reach Trilogy* is not strictly an alien infestation narrative, Gomel's attentiveness to the feedback loop between contagion and narrative subjectivity is compelling. How might 'alien' mimesis represent a nonhuman subjectivity that is contiguous with, but not contingent upon, the human?

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Among the midden of rotting journals in the lighthouse, the biologist discovers the account kept by her husband on the eleventh expedition. Fighting the urge to throw his journal "back on the pile", she takes it with her, but does not read it until later in *Annihilation*.[179] The biologist finally turns to her husband's journal at a crucial point in the narrative: samples taken from moss and a dead fox reveal themselves to be "composed of modified human cells," proving to her hypothesis that transformations are taking place inside Area X "in a "deeply unnatural way."[180] Paradoxically, it is this scientific "proof" that finally allows the biologist to accept the strangeness of Area X, as a "perverse sense of relief" overtakes her.[181] "Washed over" by the brightness, the biologist's 'I' – already a paratextual palimpsest – "opens" like the pages of her

[175] Carroll, "The Terror and the Terroir", 77.
[176] Sperling, "Second Skins", 215.
[177] Carroll, "The Terror and the Terroir," 76.
[178] Gomel, *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism,* 95.
[179] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 118.
[180] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 159-160.
[181] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 160.

husband's journal.[182] Discovering that her samples only tell part of the story, she transcribes her husband's words in her own journal:

> …during the night, [my husband] saw a ghastly procession heading into the Tower: seven of the eight members of the eleventh expedition, including a doppelganger of my husband and the surveyor. 'And there before me, *myself*. I walked so stiffly. I had such a blank look on my face. It was so clearly not me…and yet it was me. A kind of shock froze both me and the surveyor. We did not try to stop them. Somehow it seemed impossible to stop *ourselves* – and I won't lie, we were terrified. We could do nothing but watch until they descended.[183]

From the German *Gänger* (literally, 'walker'), the doppelgänger is the reification of the uncanny par excellence. First coined by the German writer Jean Paul in his three-volume novel *Siebenkäs*, the doppelgänger emerged as a literary trope to explore the 'duality' of psychic experience in gothic and nineteenth century fiction. For example, *The Devil's Elixirs* by E.T.A Hoffman (whose work is quoted at length by Freud in "The Uncanny") follows a guilty Capuchin monk called Medardus, who is plagued by visions of an evil twin.[184] Mark Currie also draws on the Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as an example of the 'Gothic double', where "man's multifarious polity of denizens" are held together by the very act of self-narration that they threaten to rupture.[185] More recently, Eran Dorfman has made a distinction between the 'negative' and 'positive' double, the latter of which "manifests as a material representation of the Self" – a clone, rather than a spectre or psychological hallucination.[186]

The words 'stiffly' and 'blank' in the biologist's transcription also bring to mind the zombie-doppelgänger of horror and science fiction. Jack Finney's 1954 classic *The Body Snatchers* tells the story of Mill Valley in California, which has been 'invaded' by seedpods from outer space. These space-pods duplicate the town's citizens while they sleep, replacing them with unfeeling, conformist 'zombies', who look just like the town's citizens and share their memories. Gomel invokes *The Body Snatchers* to begin her article, "Alien Infestation and the Poetics of Subjectivity", which she introduces with the following thought-experiment: "[i]magine that one day you wake up to discover your nearest and dearest supplanted by perfect copies. The copies are physically

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[182] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 160. Kaisa Kortekaillo also points out that her husband's journal becomes a metonym for his (now absent) body: "[t]he journal of the biologist's husband carries the traces of his actual, familiar body…" See Kortekaillo, "Becoming-instrument", 69.

[183] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 165.

[184] See E.T.A Hoffmann, *The Devil's Elixirs*, translated by Ronald Taylor (UK: Alma Books, 2018).

[185] Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 120. This type of doppelgänger often 'walks' into a narrative to disrupt the unity of the narrative itself, a gothic precursor to the unreliable narrator of postmodernism.

[186] Eran Dorfman, *Double Trouble: The Doppelgänger from Romanticism to Postmodernism* (UK: Routledge, 2020), 19.

indistinguishable from the originals but also profoundly alien, harbouring unfathomable and hostile minds."[187] Yet Gomel could just as easily have drawn on *Annihilation.* Partway through the novel, the biologist recalls her husband's 'return' from Area X. Lying in bed one night, she hears someone in the kitchen:

> Armed with a baseball bat, I left the bedroom and turned on all the lights in the house. I found my husband next to the refrigerator, still dressed in his expedition clothes, drinking milk until it flowed down his chin and neck. […] I was speechless. I could only stare at him as if he were a mirage and if I moved or said anything he would dissipate into nothing, or less that nothing.[188]

Although the biologist does not know it yet, the husband who drinks milk in the kitchen is not the husband who departed for Area X. But as time passes, the biologist observes that there is something decidedly 'off' about her husband: he is 'distant', his memories are incomplete, and when they make love, the biologist feels as though he is looking at her "through a kind of fog."[189] However, unlike the pod people in *The Body Snatchers*, her husband has not been 'replaced', but *doubled*. Rather than a loss of identity, his doppelgänger represents a surplus of self: where there was one, there are now two.

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Following her own return from Area X, the biologist is detained by The Southern Reach. *Authority* is narrated by John "Control" Rodriguez, who has been appointed as the new director of the shadowy government agency. The opening pages of the novel follow Control as he arrives for his first day at The Southern Reach. There, the 'survivors' of the twelfth expedition are being held in quarantine. The biologist is now seen from the outside and is no longer the 'I' who writes. Instead, the novel is written in the third person, predominantly focalised through Control. He narrates the strange conditions of the biologist's return:

> The surveyor had been found at her house, sitting in a chair on the back patio. The anthropologist had been found by her husband, knocking on the backdoor of his medical practice. The biologist had been found in an overgrown lot several blocks from her house, staring at a crumbling brick

[187] Elana Gomel, "Alien Infestation and the Poetics of Subjectivity", *Science Fiction Studies* 39, no. 2 (2012): 177.
[188] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 56.
[189] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 57

> wall. Just like the members of the prior expedition, none of them had any recollection of how they had made their way back across the invisible border, out of Area X.[190]

However, if both the anthropologist and surveyor were killed in Area X – the anthropologist by the psychologist, and the surveyor by the biologist herself – who, or what, has returned? While the reader cannot yet be certain that the woman to whom Control refers is *not* the biologist, the revelation of her transformation in *Acceptance*, as well as the final line of *Annihilation* ("I am not returning home"), implies that the biologist has not left Area X.[191] The only 'logical' explanation is that – like her husband before her – 'the biologist' is not, in fact, the biologist but her doppelgänger. Unlike her husband's double (who is only glimpsed from a distance), the biologist's double is described in detail: she has "dark, thick eyebrows", green eyes, a crooked nose, and "high cheekbones."[192] This change of perspective is disorienting – until this moment in the trilogy, the reader has had no visual reference for the biologist; her image materialises *only* through her *re*-presentation, seen through Control's eyes. After a long silence, the doppelgänger asks Control to call her Ghost Bird.[193]Although this name recalls a nickname given to the biologist by her husband, the appellation is also intended to separate Ghost Bird from the biologist: though they look alike and appear to share memories, they are not one in the same. But Ghost Bird cannot be the telos of the biologist's infection, which manifests in the latter's transformation into the starry-eyed leviathan. What, then, is the purpose of this strange doubling? Why transform the biologist, only to reproduce her in the image of the same?

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When the biologist transcribes the excerpt from her husband's journal, one sentence stands out: "It was so clearly not me…and yet it was me."[194] Because the biologist never meets her doppelgänger – and Ghost Bird does not encounter the biologist after the latter's transformation – her husband's journal provides the only instance of ocular overlap, where the 'I' encounters the 'not-I'. His assertion that his double is 'not him yet was him' echoes that of Mr. Golyadkin in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Double*. Upon glimpsing his own doppelgänger, Golyadkin expresses that he was "a different Mr. Golyadkin, completely different, and yet at the same time one who

[190] VanderMeer, *Authority*, 6.
[191] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 195. Of course, this turns out to be the case, as revealed in *Acceptance.*
[192] VanderMeer, *Authority*, 19.
[193] VanderMeer, *Authority,* 21. 'Ghostbird' refers to an elusive nocturnal parrot – the connotation is that the biologist is spectral and distant – "not present enough" in her husband's life. See VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 109.
[194] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 165.

perfectly resembled the first."[195] Both here and in *Annihilation*, 'yet' functions as a lingual mediation that holds the self apart from its double, lest the two slip and become one. While seeing entangles the husband with his own representation, language functions as the caesura that articulates difference. This is emphasised by the husband's use of an ellipsis, which situates a 'me' on either side of an experiential gap – a clear demarcation between the languaged husband and the silent doppelgänger. Yet when Ghost Bird speaks, the caesura between 'self' and 'other' comes unstuck. As Control is unable to distinguish between the copy and the original, Ghost Bird textually 'replaces' the biologist (who remains in Area X), thus inhabiting what was previously the latter's role in the narrative. When Control asks Ghost Bird about Area X, she says: "*I* told the others. It was a pristine wilderness."[196] However, as a product of Area X, Ghost Bird presents, in Gomel's words, "a narratological quandary"; her necessarily nonhuman subjectivity is simultaneously contiguous with, yet radically other to, the biologist's own, thus undermining the embodied 'discourse' that has called it into being.[197] But the biologist's transformation within Area X also *erases* the likeness between her and Ghost Bird, so that the doppelgänger is no longer contingent on its counterpart: the mimetic likeness between the two vanishes.[198] In the following section, I attempt to show how this dynamic between Ghost Bird and the biologist becomes a metaphor for literary production itself.

'Mimesemiosis'

In Area X, nonhuman language expresses its own alterity. By re-presenting the biologist's body in its own image, the fungal writing performs a strange 'mimesis' (the imitative representation of a world through language). Yet what happens to mimesis when the world that language represents is language itself? If that which is represented *in* language is also the effect *of* language, can it ever be truly mimetic? Moreover, if Ghost Bird is an expression of the language that has already 'infected' the biologist and transcoded her DNA, Ghost Bird – as a mimetic expression of the fungal writing – mimics nothing other than the writing itself. The body becomes an expression of nonhuman language at the same instant it is represented by it, and the caesura that demarcates difference is rendered indistinguishable from the condition of its appearance. The line between the biologist and Ghost Bird is erased as the condition of their difference obscures itself *in*

[195] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Double*, translated by Hugh Aplin (UK: Alma Books, 2016), 59.
[196] VanderMeer, *Authority*, 21 (my emphasis).
[197] Gomel, *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism*, 97.
[198] As bodies change within Area X, the doppelgänger is no longer similar *to* its embodied antecedent, but "just similar". See Roger Caillois and John Shepley, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," *October* 31 (1984): 30.

difference. My earlier claim that the biologist 'becomes a para-site of competing texts' now takes on a new meaning. While the prefix *para* means 'beside', it can also be translated as 'issuing from' or 'equivalent to'. As double obliquely 'issuing from', yet also 'equivalent to' the biologist, Ghost Bird becomes a *para*-site – an embodiment of the parasitic difference lurking in repetition, and therefore, all representation (pushed to the limit, mimesis slides into alterity). I propose the neologism 'mimesemiosis' to describe this process; I am unsatisfied with the word 'mimesis', the Greek root of which gestures to imitation, rather than productive difference. 'Mimesemiosis' evokes the generative biosemiosis of the fungal language, while also attempting to distinguish a strictly nonhuman 'mimesis'. The lexical doubling of 'mimesemiosis' also signifies the alterity necessarily contained within all mimesis (always in process, never self-identical), while the three bilabials create a sonic doubling-back, a loopy utterance that displaces the arrival of meaning. Nonhuman mimesis requires a terminological shift.

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Yet a parasite also enters its host to reproduce itself: this would make Ghost Bird the fungal writing's means of signification – a corporeal language that functions as the 'final' stage in a parasitic life cycle. While the nonhuman writing in the 'tower' represents nothing other than itself, and thus does not represent as such, Area X's doppelgängers still *signify*, if the 'conveyance of meaning' is understood as an act of transmission. In *Authority*, it is revealed that the psychologist of the twelfth expedition is in fact Gloria, the director of Southern Reach (Control discovers this during a conversation with Cheney, a scientist working for the Southern Reach). It turns out that, having secretly entered Area X prior to the eleventh expedition, Gloria has *already* inhaled the fungal spores. She returns from this secret reconnaissance mission not as a doppelgänger, but as an agent of transmission, who reproduces the fungal words and 'infects' the organization's headquarters.[199] Gloria's excursion is retold in *Acceptance*, as part of the novel's interlocking narrative. Upon enlisting Allen Whitby – another Southern Reach scientist – to accompany her, the pair enter Area X and arrive at the lighthouse.[200] However, in a disconcerting passage narrated in the second person, Gloria realises that Whitby has "wandered" off:

> But soon you realised that he'd gone up the lighthouse stairs, headed for the very top. There came the sounds of fighting and the splintering of wood. One voice rising above the other, both curiously similar,

[199] Control finds segments of the fungal text scrawled on the walls of Gloria's bedroom and office. See 253-4; 90.
[200] See VanderMeer *Acceptance,* 135-138.

> and how could there be a second voice at all? So you followed fast, and as you climbed, there was both a doubling and a dissonance […] the lighthouse had become lost or *diminished*, not just undone by time, but contracting, like the spiralling fossil of a shell, leading you to a place no longer familiar. Erasing, with each step, what you thought you knew. At the top, you discovered Whitby down in the watch room panting like an animal, his clothes torn and blood on his hands […] No one else was there, just Whitby with an impossible story of encountering his doppelgänger, False Whitby…[201]

Inverting the biologist's descent into the 'tower' in *Annihilation,* Gloria's ascent erases everything she knows about Area X. While Whitby's story sounds 'impossible' to the director, after returning from Area X she cannot help speculating: if Whitby's story *were* true, which Whitby 'won'?[202] What would it mean for The Southern Reach if it were the "False Whitby" who crossed back over the border?

Control assumes Gloria's position when she fails to return from the twelfth expedition, where she is posing as the psychologist. However, near the conclusion of *Authority*, she rematerializes. At this point in the novel, Area X has infiltrated The Southern Reach; the walls of the agency's corridors are "soft" and breathe like those inside the 'tower', while Whitby – or False Whitby? – has transformed into "something boneless", reminiscent of the moaning creature that the biologist encounters in the swamp.[203] 'Gloria' reappears at *Authority*'s climax, bringing the border of Area X with her. From the agency's cafeteria, Control watches the beginning of the "end of everything":

> For the director trailed plumes of emerald dust and behind her the nature of the world was changing, filling with a brightness, the rain losing its depth, its darkness. The thickness of the layers of the rain getting lost, taken away, no longer there. The border was coming to the Southern Reach.[204]

In her emerald dust cloud, Gloria absorbs The Southern Reach into the very border it has been guarding. Yet knowing that Gloria died beneath the lighthouse means that this must be her doppelgänger – an embodied expression of the fungal writing. The sporous process that begins as an infection reaches its apex: in the end, 'Area X' represents nothing at all, because suddenly, Area X is *everywhere* – there is no 'outside-text'.[205] As The Southern Reach is subsumed, the proverbial rug is pulled out from under the feet of Anthropos. Mimesis and biosemiosis converge in a

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[201] VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 136.
[202] VanderMeer, *Acceptance,* 138.
[203] VanderMeer, *Authority,* 290; 276.
[204] VanderMeer, *Authority,* 295.
[205] See Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory,* 52: "[*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*] does not mean there is nothing outside the text as most commentators have taken it. It is closer to 'there is no outside-text'. Derrida does not mean that reality does not exist except as an illusion foisted on us by language, but that it is not possible to distinguish categorically between what is within and what is outside."

generative mimesemiosis that decentres referential language, dispersing it in a 'plume' of emerald dust.

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But here a swerve is necessary, like light glancing off a mirror. Although mimetic representation ultimately fails to describe Area X, I would now like to invoke reflection. The enigmatic lighthouse looms over the narrative of *Annihilation* and *Authority* – the site of multiple deaths, visions, and discoveries. However, its most striking features are not revealed until *Acceptance*, part of which is set prior to the appearance of Area X. The novel introduces Suzanne and Henry, two "recruits" of the enigmatic Séance and Science Brigade (S&SB), who pay visits to Saul the lighthouse keeper so that they can carry out experiments on the lighthouse's beacon.[206] At this point in the narrative, it is unclear what exactly they hope to discover during their investigations, but an allusion to the Forgotten Coast's history sets the tone: "[Saul] knew the history of the coast here, the way that distance and silence magnified the mundane. How into those spaces and the fog and the empty line of the beach thoughts could turn to the uncanny and begin to create a story out of nothing."[207] Saul observes that during their most recent visit, Suzanne and Henry were preoccupied with "something called 'necromantic doubling', which had to do with building a room of mirrors and darkness" – in fact, Henry seems to think that the lighthouse lens may act as such a mirror.[208] Focalised through Saul's perspective, this conversation is dismissed as mere superstition. However, I would argue that this is a pivotal scene, underscoring the importance of doubling and mirrors in *The Southern Reach Trilogy*. For while the lighthouse's beacon is a mirror-like surface, it is also mirrored by a twin: opposite the Forgotten Coast lies 'Failure Island', with its own, secondary lighthouse. The relationship between these two structures and their beacons becomes an obsession for Henry and Suzanne, who suspect that their twinned 'mirrors' are connected somehow.[209] Pseudoscience, conspiracies, light, mirrors: what do they have to do with mimesemiosis?

The sudden shift in emphasis from scientific discourse to the occult is jarring; I cannot help reading the S&SB as – to quote Aran Ward Sell – an attempt to "explain away" the weirdness

[206] Saul notes that members of the S&SB travel in pairs, to "have their séance and their science both." VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 13-14.
[207] VanderMeer, *Acceptance,* 14.
[208] VanderMeer, *Acceptance,* 14.
[209] VanderMeer, *Acceptance,* 64.

of Area X.[210] However, rather than get stuck in the tricky logic of causation, I would like to dwell on *Acceptance*'s metonymic mirrors for a moment. Like the biologist's microscope, the lighthouse's mirror-like lens sheds light on the generative difference crucial to mimesemiosis.[211] In his famous study *The Double*, psychoanalyst Otto Rank draws attention to the recurring motif of mirrors in doppelgänger narratives; he points out that 'appearing' is the condition of the doppelgänger (who both appears and appears *similar to*).[212] Mirrors are a symbol of this phenomenon, where apparent sameness reveals difference. I am also reminded of Jacques Lacan's 'mirror-stage', his term for the decisive factor in the ontological construction of subjectivity. Lacan writes that a 6–18-month-old baby is able to recognize their own reflection and in doing so, identify their external self. In other words, it is the mirror image of bodily unity that anchors the 'I' in reality.[213] Yet this reflection is only a *representation* of the 'I' and thus also 'other': as the 'I' takes on "the armour of an alienating identity," alterity becomes the condition of a 'coherent' identity.[214] Ghost Bird is *not* a mirror-image, but a representation made flesh. In this sense, she more closely evokes what Laura Shackelford has described as an "optics of diffraction."[215] Writing about *The Southern Reach Trilogy*, Shackelford applies Barad's theory of agential realism to Area X, resulting in a diffractive and intra-active reading of the novels. By understanding the trilogy as a "thought-experiment" in diffractive ontologies, Shackelford asks the reader "to question what Barad insightfully describes as a narcissist 'optics of reflection' […] and to move toward the post-humanist, non-correlationist, relational ontology and its multi-agential 'optics of diffraction.'"[216] Both particle and wave, diffraction defies the 'either/or' of exclusive disjuncture and privileges interference, rather than reflection, reproduction, or reification. Writing about the relationship between diffraction and the trilogy's doppelgängers, Shackleford notes that being "genetically transcoded hybrids, Ghost Bird and the biologist emerge as unique diffraction or interference patterns."[217] As the representational effect of alterity, mimesemiosis cannot be glimpsed by looking in a mirror.

Irrational Thoughts

[210] See Aran Ward Sell, "The War on Terroir: Biology as (unstable) Space in Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy", *antae* 5, no. 1 (2018): 97.
[211] The mirror ('*mirror mirror*') might also be the speculative object par excellence.
[212] See Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study,* translated by Harry Tucker Jr. (NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1971).
[213] In a way, this is also how fiction works. See Gomel, who writes that fictional texts are "discursive templates through which we actualize ourselves." Understood in this way, fiction becomes a specular surface through which the subject interpellates themselves in the process of reading. Gomel, "Alien Infestation and the Poetics of Subjectivity", 192.
[214] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: a selection*, translated by Alan Sheridan (UK: Taylor & Francis, 2001), 3.
[215] Shackelford, "Strange Matters", 133.
[216] Shackelford, "Strange Matters", 133. See also Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway,* 84-85.
[217] Shackelford, "Strange Matters", 130.

When the biologist initially encounters the 'tower', she is struck by her odd terminological choice and marks this as the first "irrational thought" she has within Area X:

> At first, only I saw it as a tower. I don't know why the word tower came to me, given that it tunneled into the ground. I could as easily have considered it a bunker or a submerged building. Yet as soon as I saw the staircase, I remembered the lighthouse on the coast and had a sudden vision of the last expedition drifting off, one by one, and sometime thereafter the ground shifting in a uniform and preplanned way to leave the lighthouse standing where it had always been but depositing this underground part of it inland. I saw this in vast and intricate detail as we all stood there, and, looking back, I mark it as the first irrational thought I had once we had reached our destination.[218]

The phrase 'irrational thought' occurs six more times in the trilogy. Derived from the Latin noun *ratiō*, 'irrational' signifies something that is beyond reason, without ground, and epistemologically 'elsewhere'. While the only appropriate lexicon for Area X is one that decentres reason, these 'irrational thoughts' also manifest when characters are confronted directly by the fungal language of Area X.[219] In *Authority,* Control experiences an irrational thought just after he has discovered a transcription of the fungal words in Gloria's house; in *Acceptance*, Saul is startled awake by a fever dream about a disembodied language.[220] Like the biologist's atemporal glimpse of the tower's apparent 'creation', these irrational thoughts are accompanied by visions that the characters cannot place. I would now like to return to my earlier speculation that the word 'tower' may be a kind of alien terminology – that the language seems 'irrational' because it is not the biologist's own. Later in *Annihilation*, the biologist's lowercase 'tower' suddenly becomes 'Tower' with a capital T:

> Were the words a form of symbiotic or parasitic communication between the Crawler and the Tower? Either the Crawler was an *emissary* of the Tower or the Crawler had originally existed independent from it and come into its orbit later. But without the damned missing sample of the Tower wall, I couldn't really begin to guess.[221]

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[218] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 6-7.
[219] *Annihilation* (single use, quoted above); *Authority*, 217; in *Acceptance*, the phrase occurs twice on page 71 and then again on 123, 193, 303.
[220] See *Authority* 217 and *Acceptance* 303.
[221] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 91.

In the preceding pages, the biologist has just articulated that she is, paradoxically, "no longer the biologist."[222] Sophia Booth Magone has proposed that this articulation is a sign of the biologist's acquiescence to the "brightness" – a manifestation of her 'contamination' within Area X.[223] The orthographical switch from 't' to 'T' would thus signal the *decisive* moment that the biologist stops resisting and is overcome by her infection, thus embracing the new ways of knowing Area X offers her (reminiscent of the 'T-cells', or *T lymphocytes*, that are central to the human immune system, T may also sign the biologist's waning immunity).[224] But like Ghost Bird, the capital 'T' elides the condition of its own appearing. Already infected, 'T' fastens the biologist to Area X with an invisible stitch, simultaneously revealing and obscuring the points at which their subjectivities converge.

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Returning to Elana Gomel's 'narratological quandary', I propose that *The Southern Reach Trilogy* repeatedly infects the 'standard tools of representation' to cope with an alien subjectivity that – at least initially – lacks "the external, corporeal signs by which nonhumans are ordinarily marked" in speculative literature.[225] The nonhuman alterity of Area X can *only* be represented through the syntax and morphology of the narrative voices that describe it, just as Ghost Bird speaks with the biologist's tongue and obscures the caesura that marks their difference: there is a 'disturbance' within their discourse (they who exist *as* discourse, as textual expression) – an expression I borrow from Michel de Certeau.[226] Using possession as an example of such a disturbance, where the possessed subject presents themselves as "the statement of something that is fundamentally other", de Certeau shows how the possessed (or in Area X, contaminated) subject paradoxically speaks in a voice that is both theirs and not-theirs – a false 'I'.[227] However, naming

[222] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 89.
[223] See Sophia Booth Magone, "Human Contamination: The Infectious Border Crossings of Jeff VanderMeer's Area X", *Somatosphere: Science, Medicine, and Anthropology,* last modified 6 July 2017, http://somatosphere.net/2017/human-contamination-the-infectious-border-crossings-of-jeff-vandermeers-area-x.html/?format=pdf.
[224] For more on this see VanderMeer, *Authority* 90-95. Although Ghost Bird asks Control to call her by this name, he is unable to separate the two and continues to refer to Ghost Bird as 'the biologist'. However, this changes on page ninety-five, where he suddenly conceives of her as Ghost Bird. Notably, this switch occurs after Control has first encountered, and thus been ideationally 'infected' by, the fungal writing on the back wall of a cupboard in his office. Like the 'tower', Ghost Bird is part of Area X; Control cannot truly perceive her or name her until he has been exposed. Importantly, Control and Ghost Bird are discussing the 'tower' when this appellative switch occurs. In fact, the first time Control refers to Ghost Bird *as* Ghost Bird is immediately after he observes that by "making the tower-pit more real in his imagination, he was also making it more real in fact", 95. It is as though even *thinking* about the 'tower' invites contamination.
[225] Gomel, *Science Fiction, Alien Encounters, and the Ethics of Posthumanism,* 95.
[226] Michel de Certeau, "Discourse Disturbed", in *The Writing of History*, translated by Tom Conley (NY: Columbia University Press, 1988), 244.
[227] de Certeau, "Discourse Disturbed", 247.

this false 'I' is impossible, as this would disappear it within the very discourse it disturbs. As de Certeau writes:

> [naming] aims at restoring the postulate of all language, that is, a stable relation between the interlocutor, 'I', and a social signifier, the proper name. At stake here is the connection of an enunciation with a statement; in other words, the contract that the clause […] I = a (proper) name, expresses between the subject and language.[228]

Possessed, contaminated, disturbed. Here, it is crucial to remember that there is no 'contract' between the biologist and language to begin with – she has no proper name. In the absence of a name, 'the biologist' is always already a present-absent figure: alterity puts itself "in her place".[229]

When the biologist is infected and transformed by the fungal script, her language becomes contingent on a body that is no longer strictly 'human'. The expression 'I am X' – where X stands in for a proper name and is therefore substantive – is replaced by 'I am *x*', where *x* is unnameable and only indexes itself. Like *Annihilation*'s narratological form, the equivalence is always already unstable. However, this complicated equation only speaks to a 'primary order' of nonhuman language – a nonhuman *transcription* that is dependent on a subject internal to the narrative (i.e., the nonhuman language is still mediated by a human narrator). What happens when the content of the fungal writing *interrupts* the text, seemingly arising from a subject that is neither character nor narrator and thus external to the narrative? The first appearance of the fungal words (*"Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead to share with the worms that…"*) are doubly transcribed: the biologist reads the words aloud to the anthropologist and records what she read in her journal.[230] Yet two pages after this, the words 'interrupt' the narrative, immediately after the biologist has inhaled the spores:

> My voice must have seemed calmer than my actual thoughts because there was no hesitation in their response. No hint in their tone of having seen the spores erupt into my face. I had been so close. The spores had been so tiny, so insignificant. *I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead.*[231]

While the final sentence could be explained away as a kind of shuddering recollection, the abruptness with which the words appear, as well as their typographical otherness, hints at something stranger. The italic font demarcates the sentence from the preceding text, revealing a

[228] de Certeau, "Discourse Disturbed", 256.
[229] de Certeau, "Discourse Disturbed", 250.
[230] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 23.
[231] VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 25.

second order of text that breaks with the biologist's transcribing 'I'. The repetition of 'I' emphasises this effect: the 'I' in the final sentence is not the same as the biologist's 'I' in the earlier sentence. Moreover, unlike the first appearance of the fungal words, which are introduced with a colon ("I read from the beginning, aloud:"), this sentence is without introduction, revealing a subjectivity *other* to that of the already infected biologist. Is this another 'para-site'? A para-semiotic expression that does not issue from the text, but sits *beside* it?

Reading across the trilogy, the fungal writing paradoxically anticipates itself; in *Acceptance*, Saul's language is interrupted by a nonhuman script before his 'lighthouse' becomes the 'tower' and so, logically, before the fungal writing appears on its walls. Set temporally prior to the narrative of *Annihilation*, the following episode – which occurs after one of Saul's delirious fever dreams – marks the first appearance of the fungal writing in the trilogy. In the dream, Saul sees "the fiery green-gold of words on the wall, being wrought before his eyes by an invisible scribe", yet simultaneously 'knows' that the words come "from him":

> When he woke up, he was sitting in a chair outside the lighthouse, with no idea how he'd gotten there. The words still lived inside him, a sermon now coming out whether he wanted it to or not. Whether it would destroy him or not. *Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead to share with the worms.*[232]

Saul, formerly a preacher, attributes these words to a subconscious 'sermon', locating a fissure in the words' provenance: they are both *of* him, yet *outside* him – like the biologist's first irrational thought. The italics and lack of introductory grammar also demarcate the words from the focalised third person narrative, so that the deictic centre of the narrative is suddenly unmoored. This sudden shift in (or lack of) focalisation is what makes these moments of textual 'interruption' distinct from mere transcription. While the nonhuman 'I' in 'Tower' is invisibly sutured to the biologist's language, these italicised words flit across the codical surface like a 'dark twin'; the unfocalized language cannot be attributed to a specific 'subject of enunciation' and thus seems to rise from the text itself.[233]

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[232] VanderMeer, *Acceptance,* 107.

[233] Such textual 'interruptions' also occur elsewhere in VanderMeer's oeuvre. In *Shriek: An Afterword*, the second novel in VanderMeer's *Ambergris* trilogy, Duncan's sister Janice discovers his manuscript for a commissioned history of the city Ambergris. Written after Duncan (the novel's protagonist) has been infiltrated by fungi and begun to transform, the manuscript is composed of a polyphony of voices. These textual interruptions distort and embellish Duncan's record, 'taking over' from the primary writerly subjectivity. As Janice describes, "Sirin [Duncan's editor] had let me read some of the manuscript in his office. It was riddled through with strange symbols, strange characters. […] It rambled. It made sense only in spurts. I felt, reading it, that several different people had collaborated to write it, only two or three of whom were sane or had consulted with the other writers", 532. While it is doubtful whether these 'people' are really people given Duncan's partially-fungal ontology, Janice's recollection

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In *Unspeakable Sentences*, Ann Banfield warns readers against assuming that a voice not attributed to a character must belong to the narrator.[234] I would like to indulge Banfield's line of inquiry and propose that a voice not attributed to the *narrator* does not necessarily belong to the author, but rather a (parasitic) textual subjectivity. Coined by the medievalist A.C Spearing in his book *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics*, the term 'textual subjectivity' refers to how subjectivities are encoded within a text. By this, Spearing "does not mean how [texts] express or represent individual subjectivities, but how subjectivity is encoded in them as a textual phenomenon".[235] Put simply, the subjectivity of an individual is not necessarily the same as the dispersed subjectivity woven into the fabric of a text. In *The Southern Reach Trilogy* – a work so concerned with how language infects and infects the body – the absence of focalisation suggests that the fungal words *are* themselves a subjectivity, situated outside the very narrative they parasitise. While the fungal script manifests as a nonhuman subjectivity in the trilogy's narrative, it also materialises as a second order of text ontologically *beside* the narrative: a textually double *para-site*. By actively interrupting and restructuring the narrative, representation is subordinated to a distinctly nonhuman poesis.

X: Infection, Hypnosis, and Critical Parasites

In a suitably weird way, this thesis also has a subjectivity of its own. At the start of this project, I thought I knew what I was writing about – namely, critical reading in a pandemic. As I wrote, I naturally made discoveries that diverged from my main argument and wormed their way into the footnotes. Reading over 'my' draft, I found that the footnotes were sketching a very different argument: in the textual periphery lurked another voice, aslant.[236] Arguably this is how

constructs a text full of tensions and authorial interjections at odds with Duncan's singular subjectivity. Jeff VanderMeer, *Ambergris: City of Saints and Madmen, Shriek: An Afterword, and Finch*. NY: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2020.

[234] Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences*: *Narrative and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (UK: Routledge, 1982), 189.

[235] A.C Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (UK: University of Oxford Press, 2015), 1; Spearing also positions his argument in opposition to the 'narrator theory of narrative', which presupposes "that a human consciousness comes first, and narrative comes afterwards." See Spearing, *Textual Subjectivity,* 20.

[236] I am thinking of Roland Barthes here, who writes (characteristically referring to himself in the third person): "On the one hand, what he says about the large objects of knowledge (cinema, language, society) is never memorable: the treatise (the article *on* something) is a kind of enormous falling off. Whatever pertinence there happens to be comes only in the margins, the interpolations, the parentheses, *aslant*: it is the subject's voice *off,* as we say, off-camera, off-microphone, off-stage." See Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (UK: Vintage, 2020), 77.

any research project works, however, the disjuncture between what 'I' was writing in the body of my thesis and the segmented endnotes revealed another para-text. Like the pages of the biologist's journal, nonhuman writing infiltrated my attempts to theorise it. Yet while all attempts to theorise *The Southern Reach Trilogy* inevitably bifurcate into more questions, a few nag at me like a disembodied moan in the distance: why theorise a nonhuman subjectivity at all? What is at stake when we read writing that decentres the human voice? Is summoning an ontologically nonhuman language the only way to sever language from anthropocentric onto-epistemologies? While I am a firm believer in letting the text speak for itself, the implications of the trilogy's formal innovations reach far beyond its edges. For this reason, I finally invoke the author.

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According to Jeff VanderMeer, he conceived of *The Southern Reach Trilogy* following dental surgery, overcome "with anger and grief over the BP Gulf Oil Spill".[237] Considered to be the largest marine oil spill in history, the 2010 Deepwater Horizon spill leaked approximately 210 million gallons of petroleum into the Gulf of Mexico. Feverish after having his wisdom teeth extracted, VanderMeer's anxieties about the spill – which occurred not far from his home in Florida – manifested as a 'dark dream' (words made of fungus, an inverted 'tower', the Crawler).[238] As Sophia Booth Magone has observed, the trilogy is thus "born at the crossroads of environmental devastation and personal illness: oil infiltrates the gulf as *Streptococcus* infiltrates [VanderMeer's] own immune system. Two forms of contamination converge in a feverish bout of writerly inspiration."[239] This 'dark dream' also evokes the para-sitic 'dark twin' lurking beside *The Southern Reach Trilogy* – what critic Yves Citton might call a "form of Alien wisdom […] speaking through the text, well above and beyond the mere intent of its all-too-human-author".[240] Oil, fungi, alien wisdom: when we read attentively, nonhuman subjectivities reveal how fiction is always already co-constituted by the world it attempts to describe. In *Ecosickness in Contemporary US Fiction: Environment and Affect*, Heather Houser proposes 'ecosickness fiction' as a type of narrative work in which "humans and the more-than-human world do not only interact but […] are co-

[237] VanderMeer, "From *Annihilation* to *Acceptance*", *The Atlantic*, last modified 29 January 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2015/01/from-annihilation-to-acceptance-a-writers-surreal-journey/384884/.
[238] See VanderMeer, "From *Annihilation* to *Acceptance*", *The Atlantic*, last modified 29 January 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2015/01/from-annihilation-to-acceptance-a-writers-surreal-journey/384884/.
[239] Booth Magone, "Human Contamination", unpaginated.
[240] Yves Citton, "Fictional Attachments and Literary Weavings in the Anthropocene", *New Literary History* 47, no.2-3 (2016): 322.

constitutive", revealing both the conceptual and material porosity of the "body-environment boundary".[241] VanderMeer's feverish narrative foregrounds contamination, which confuses the ontological distinction between subject and object, or self and other. According to Houser, ecosickness narratives also refute "causality as a motivating logic" because contamination (read, alterity) is everywhere.[242] In our times of accumulating ecocrises and global pandemics, we are arguably beyond structures of cause and effect that presuppose a tidy narrative. Instead, we stand at a Weird crossroads of parasites, viruses, and oil slicks that cannot be reduced to 'cause'. This calls for a system of representation that both indexes and obfuscates its origin – a language that precedes its first articulation, an alterity that dreams itself.

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Like environmental toxins extracted from the sea floor, fiction gets under our skin. But it might also be thought of as a kind of hypnosis. From the Greek *ὕπνος* ('sleep'), hypnosis is a recurring motif in VanderMeer's trilogy, with both *Annihilation* and *Authority* taking their titles from the hypnotic commands used to manipulate Southern Reach employees. In *Annihilation,* Gloria administers these commands, which she uses to expediate decisions, diffuse tension, and ultimately control the other expedition members. However, after inhaling the fungal spores, the biologist realises that she is 'immune' to the psychologist's hypnosis:

> Then [the psychologist] abruptly stood and said three words: "*Consolidation of authority."* Immediately the surveyor and the anthropologist beside me went slack, their eyes unfocused. I was shocked, but I mimicked them, hoping that the psychologist had not noticed the lag. I felt no compulsion whatsoever, but clearly we had been preprogrammed to enter a hypnotic state in response to those words, uttered by the psychologist.[243]

Like a glitch in the Matrix, the fungal words undermine the psychologist's command to reveal linguistic artifice hiding in plain sight – they show the biologist how language is working and, for a moment, undermine the fictional world of Area X itself. For if the biologist has suddenly 'woken up', what is to say that the reader is not sleeping too? As readers, we give ourselves over to words; each act of reading is a suspension of belief that allows our own world to fall away. However, while imagining is crucial for ongoing survival, *The Southern Reach Trilogy* also hints that we should be

[241] Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S Fiction* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2014), 3.
[242] Houser, *Ecosickness*, 6.
[243] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 32.

wary of readerly escapism when the world is burning around us – that reading uncritically risks missing what it *is* exactly that representation does. Like the biologist, we must look for the specificities of each languaged relation, rather than letting ourselves be carried away by the hypnotic rhythms of meaning.

Towards the end of *Annihilation*, the biologist encounters the dying psychologist, who "had jumped or been pushed from the top of the lighthouse".[244] Yet when the biologist approaches to help, the psychologist repeatedly cries out: "'Annihilation!' she shrieked at me, flailing in confusion. '*Annihilation! Annihilation!*' The word seemed more meaningless the more she repeated it, like the cry of a bird with a broken wing."[245] After the psychologist's death, the biologist searches through her pockets and happens upon a journal, much like the biologist's own. Inside, she finds a list of command words, with the entry for 'Annihilation' listing "help induce immediate suicide."[246] The novel thus shares its five-syllable title with a hypnotic call to self-destruction. Perhaps the biologist is immune to these commands *because* there is no 'self' to destroy – the psychologist's command word becoming increasingly meaningless as it is confronted with the absence of a unified 'self': hypnosis halts at the *x* of parasitic contamination. Paradoxically, it is the biologist's infection that renders her immune to structures of control. Instead of sending the biologist 'under', the hypnotic commands have the opposite effect. They jolt her awake like an alarm bell. For the reader, '*Annihilation*!' also becomes a call to wake up *inside* the dream, operating as a textual hinge between the fictional world of Area X and our own. *The Southern Reach Trilogy* presents critical reading as an act of lucid dreaming, where we are swept up in the artifice, but see its binary code too.

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VanderMeer's trilogy thus foregrounds the impossibility of critical distance. In *Annihilation,* the biologist's journal is an effect of the very environment it attempts to represent; in *Authority*, an embodied expression of the fungal writing transcodes the 'outside-text', creating a distinctly languaged para-text that evokes the narratological structure of the previous novel. Then, in *Acceptance*, Ghost Bird (herself an expression of nonhuman text) fully inhabits the biologist's 'I': her voice is rendered indistinguishable from the condition of its appearance – contiguous with, but not dependent on, the biologist. Eventually, Area X subsumes its own border, so that 'text' is *everywhere.* Moreover, when the biologist's narrative 'I' is infected by nonhuman language, so is the reader, who has been invited to inhabit her subjectivity through the first-person form. Without

[244] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 123.
[245] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 124.
[246] VanderMeer, *Annihilation,* 135.

critical distance, things get analytically sticky – again, I find myself contaminated. I find that there is no metalanguage with which to describe *The Southern Reach Trilogy*, which is fitting, given that the trilogy is ultimately concerned with erasing the caesura between representation and representing. Put simply, linguistic metalanguage shows how language creates a world. But this same metalanguage creates the structures of language, a phenomenon that Derrida calls a "repetition and a redoubling of structuralism's basic insight".[247] Drawing on Derrida's observation, Mark Currie notes that the implications of this redoubling are also twofold, because criticism is "acutely aware of its own textuality, or its own inability to stand outside language and narrative".[248] *The Southern Reach Trilogy*'s narrative of infection thus upholds "an instability which excludes the possibility of textual closure" – but this only mimics the way we use language to talk about language, which is always inf(l)ected by its subject.[249]

Without critical distance, mimetic unity is also impossible – and without mimesis, the specular surface of representation is stripped away. When the biologist reappears part-way through *Acceptance,* it is as a sloping mountain, a wave, a hulking leviathan, a constellation of "glowing eyes" like sea-anemones".[250] Like the Crawler, the biologist's transformed body draws an excess of meaning into its orbit, where language obscures its referent. Yet Ghost Bird finds an aperture, another version of her own eyes, "staring up at her":

> In the multiplicity of her regard, Ghost Bird saw what they saw. She saw herself, standing there, looking down. She saw that the biologist now existed across locations and landscapes, those other horizons gathering in a blurred and rising wave. There passed between the two something wordless and deep […] She might be observing an incarnation of herself she could not quite comprehend, and yet…there was connection, there was *recognition.*[251]

Here, the difference between a narrative and its reading collapse altogether. While Ghost bird sees herself in the biologist's star-like eyes, this reflection is not a reification but a generative moment of mimesemiosis. As their gazes intersect, there is a necessary displacement predicated on difference, a mutual recognition that does not elide alterity – whether a 'strange stranger' or a single glottis of a parasitic text. Authors of the New Weird know that our ongoing earthly survival requires radical transformation and strange transmutations; despite years of research, humans are

[247] Jacques Derrida, quoted in Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory,* 48.
[248] Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory,* 49. Currie also points out that "[t]he main characteristic of the inside/outside model [i.e., criticism and subject of its analysis] is that nobody knows which is which. The opposition of form and content implies that form is external, yet in another sense the form of a work is within it while its content is often something which is pointed to outside the work", 51.
[249] Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory,* 25.
[250] VanderMeer, *Acceptance*, 195.
[251] VanderMeer, *Acceptance,* 196.

still unequipped for thinking nonhuman subjectivity without the mediation of the imagination. However, while we may never be able to accurately represent alterity, *The Southern Reach Trilogy* encourages us to try. Like the biologist's glowing eyes, 'I' is an aperture that difference rushes to fill.

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