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Authority*

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Trailing Climate Crisis Communication Through VanderMeer's *Annihilation* and *Authority*

ABSTRACT:

This article intends to read Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* and *Authority*, the first two installments of his *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014), through the philosophical perspectives of Lee McIntyre, Per Espen Stoknes, and Donna Haraway.

Following the path traced by information throughout the novels, in terms of divulgation, processing, and storytelling, it will become clear how VanderMeer successfully manages to recreate the mechanisms of post-truth climate crisis communication in a setting that perfectly mirrors the transitional nature of our world in current times of crisis, making his depiction even more realistic by allowing the emotive/psychological consequences on humanity to transpire through the text.

VanderMeer's narrative connects readers to climate change reality and shifts perspectives by placing the story within Haraway's Terrapolis and the interconnected realms of her multispecies Chthulucene. These novels exemplify Stoknes' motivating "better stories" for climate action.

KEYWORDS: VanderMeer; post-truth; McIntyre; Stoknes; Haraway; climate crisis.

In 2014, Jeff VanderMeer's eco-sci-fi trilogy *Southern Reach* earned him the title "the Weird Thoreau"¹ from *The New Yorker*, making waves in the literary world. Composed by the novels *Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance*, the trilogy found appreciation beyond that of sci-fi and weird fiction genre aficionados, with its unconventional approach in portraying a scientific expedition into a mutating environment. Set in the US (possibly Florida²), the trilogy revolves around Area X, a mysterious region transformed by an unknown event. Enclosed in a dome, this region is cut off from the world, severing all communications. Remaining faithful to the weird horror genre—VanderMeer's go-to—the novels succeed in illustrating the mechanisms of information disclosure and storytelling in current times of climate crisis, while highlighting at the same time the necessity to move beyond the human/nature divide. Together, the two novels trace a journey towards the acceptance of a multispecies reality: discarding the concept of human exceptionalism, they can be linked to Donna Haraway's philosophy of 'staying with the trouble' that ties the human to the non-human through alternative ways of coexistence that exclude hierarchical or exploitative relationships. In doing so, with their promoting constructive change, VanderMeer's *Annihilation* and *Authority* can be identified as an example of positive storytelling for Per Espen Stoknes.

The first book, *Annihilation*, follows the twelfth³ expedition into Area X's dome through the journal-like perspective of a nameless psychologist. Sent there to study the land and discover its secrets, she is contaminated by the weird environment through fungal spores she inhales while collecting samples. This event opens her eyes to the deception of her team's leader, the psychologist, who, under orders from the Southern Reach facility (the research center),

¹ In his article "60 in 60: #37—Henry David Thoreau's Where I Lived, and What I Lived For (Penguin's Great Ideas)," Jeff VanderMeer concludes that "Thoreau's meditations, philosophical arguments, and explication of the world through the details of its natural spaces makes a powerful argument to contemporary readers in the context of a polluted world already beginning to be punished by the effects of global warming;" which is essentially what VanderMeer manages to do with his Southern Reach trilogy.

² VanderMeer, Jeff. "The Annihilation of Florida: An Overlooked National Tragedy," *Current Affairs*, vol. 35, March-April 2022, 05/18/2022. <<https://www.currentaffairs.org/2022/05/the-annihilation-of-florida-an-overlooked-national-tragedy>>

³ In the first book the reader believes that she is part of the twelfth expedition, but during the course of the second novel of the trilogy it becomes clear, thanks to Control's newly appointed role in the Southern Reach facility, that it is actually the thirty-eighth (VanderMeer, *Authority*, 114).

hypnotizes and influences the entire team so as to make them ‘read’⁴ and perceive the territory a certain way, not allowing them to notice its weirdest and most uncanny aspects. The Tower/Tunnel incident exemplifies this manipulation; the rest of the team views the structure as a tunnel heading underground, while the psychologist describes it as a tower, regardless of its descending structure. Moreover, if the other researchers think its walls are made of stone and shells, for the psychologist those walls have a flesh-like appearance and seem to be moving, as if the structure was breathing. The biologist is to question all she was told prior to her mission, unable to reconcile those facts with her own findings during the exploration. Soon she begins to understand and feel Area X’s consciousness as her own, becoming part of it. In the end, thanks to the contamination, she evolves/adapts into a new state of being she refers to as Ghost Bird.

Stylistically, the novel’s narration is quick-paced with lush descriptions of Area X’s “pristine wilderness”⁵. It captivates with beauty while unsettling readers due to the narrator’s admitted unreliability⁶. In contrast, the second novel, *Authority*, advances slowly, with the pace eventually becoming frenetic in the final sections (“Hauntings” and “Afterlife”). It is characterized by an information overflow for both the protagonist and the reader. The story follows the day-to-day journey of Control (aka John Rodriguez⁷), former Central agent⁸ and new director of the Southern Reach facility. Tasked with managing the aftermath of the ‘twelfth’ expedition, he mirrors the biologist’s

⁴ During the exploration, the researchers will encounter some organic text on the wall of a mysterious structure that some will see as a tower and others as a tunnel. The text will eventually reveal itself to be a blend of the notes in the abandoned journals of the participants from the previous expeditions, with the consciousness of Area X’s creature—the Crawler.

⁵ Throughout the books the environment of Area X is repeatedly referred to as ‘pristine wilderness,’ especially in the second novel. This pristine wilderness is used as a symbol for the author to emphasize the distance between the human and the non-human.

⁶ “I have not been entirely honest thus far” (VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 57).

⁷ His real name is John Rodriguez, but he calls himself “Control”, a nickname he was given by his grandfather. Considering his path through the novel (always marionetted by external forces—i.e., his mother, the Voice, his grandfather, Grace), the choice to keep that nickname could be read as a hint regarding what he is striving for throughout his life: control. Only at the end of the second book will he go back to referring to himself as John, dropping the façade and accepting the reality of his having been passively manipulated.

⁸ Central is a powerful governmental organization that coordinates operatives against national security threats. It is also in charge of the Southern Reach facility. However, the research center still holds autonomy in the specifics of its operations.

pursuit of Area X's secrets. Amidst the facility's decay, he attempts to navigate overwhelming data, including past expedition accounts, his own insights, and interviews with Ghost Bird.

All around him facts are discovered, hidden, diluted, distorted, and fabricated. Control realizes he can rely on himself only, but this notion falters as he experiences blackouts and memory loss. Gradually, he comprehends his own manipulation: he thus proceeds to unveil the facility and Area X's true nature, abandoning all pretences.

When considering the first two parts of the trilogy together, a comprehensive view of information manipulation emerges within and outside Area X. In the first book, readers witness a psychological manipulation of the biologist on a personal level. Her superiors withhold or fabricate information from past expeditions, while the provided equipment is inadequate despite being described as vital.

We had no cell or satellite phones, no computers, no camcorders, no complex measuring instruments except for those strange black boxes hanging from our belts. (VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 9)

"What do the black boxes measure?" "Nothing. They don't measure anything. It's just a psychological ploy to keep the expedition calm: no red light, no danger." (VanderMeer, *Authority*, 131)

The expedition's leader (the psychologist) employs hypnosis to manipulate the biologist's perception, thus distorting her findings. Additionally, the biologist's contamination blurs her own thoughts and memories with those of the Crawler, erasing any distinction between them.

The second book unveils an expanded manipulation pattern beyond the biologist's scope. Information tampering is systemic and multi-layered: Central hides Southern Reach's activities; the facility withholds information and fabricates evidence from expeditions; employees keep silent in the fear of leaking classified data; the psychologist, Cynthia, uses hypnosis and avoids digitalizing unauthorized evidence from Area X; Control learns he is manipulated even by his own mother.

By studying these two texts simultaneously and following information as a recurring motif throughout the narrative, it becomes possible to establish connections with research dedicated to information and its narration. Overall,

the two novels can be read as a close representation of the climate crisis communication atmosphere, portraying the methods of information manipulation, as well as highlighting the shortcomings of an objective approach in promoting climate action.

According to Lee McIntyre's analysis in his book *Post-Truth* (2018), the concept of post-truth can be understood as a type of ideological dominance, where its creators aim to persuade individuals to believe in something regardless of the presence of solid evidence (McIntyre, 18). In such context, emotions hold more significance than facts, playing a central role in how a message is received. McIntyre traces the origins of the post-truth phenomenon back to the 1950s, when the tobacco industry worked to discredit the connection between smoking cigarettes and cancer. Rather than competing against each other to produce a "safer cigarette", these companies joined forces to undermine scientific evidence, fueling doubt by presenting an alternative narrative. This initial instance set the stage for the current proliferation of disinformation, including the spreading of fake news and denial of scientific findings related to climate change (McIntyre, 18). Previously, the fact that human activities were driving the climate crisis was well known and acknowledged.⁹ However, oil corporations adopted a similar approach to their tobacco industry predecessors, casting doubt on scientific findings and successfully instilling skepticism within the public. The author stresses the importance of recognizing that disinformation is not random, but rather a deliberate manipulative action led by individuals who have vested interests, typically financial, political, or ideological. The strategy involves identifying and funding "experts" who support their desired narrative, persuading the media to present multiple perspectives and allowing the fabricated alternative story to circulate through PR stunts and political maneuvers. These efforts generate an atmosphere of deep confusion that becomes fertile ground for questioning scientific data.

This is exactly what happens with information in VanderMeer's *Annihilation* and *Authority*. Firstly, expedition participants are hand-picked, valued not for their competences but rather for their capacity to be manipulated and influenced, on the basis of their beliefs and attitudes. In both novels, readers

⁹ So much so that, in 2000, the idea of a geological epoch called the "Anthropocene" was introduced because of the recognized extent of human activity's influence on the environment.

witness the interviews Cynthia (the psychologist and former director) has with prospect expedition participants. While in the first book the reader experiences them through the biologist's perspective, the second novel holds the transcripts that include the psychologist's own thoughts on the candidates.

In the note, [...] the director called the surveyor "someone with a strong sense of reality, a good, bracing foil to the others." The linguist discarded in the border prep area she called "useful but not essential; possibly a dangerous addition, a sympathetic but narrow character who might deflect attention." Sympathetic to whom? Deflect attention from what? And was this deflection desirable or ...? The anthropologist was referred to by her first name, [...] "Hildi will be on board, will understand." He stared at that note for a while. On board with what? Understand what? [...] The note on the biologist was the most extensive and caused Control to vibrate with additional questions. [...] Not a very good biologist. In a traditional sense. Empathic more toward environments than people. Forgets the reasons she went, who is paying her salary. But becomes embedded to an extraordinary extent. Would know Area X better than I do from almost the first moment sets foot there. Experience with similar settings. Self-sufficient. Unburdened. Connection through her husband. What would she be in Area X? A signal? A flare? Or invisible? Exploit [?]. (VanderMeer, Authority, 156-57)

After reading her notes, Control immediately has the feeling that "the director had been casting a play or movie" and that those could be "notes for actors" (156-57) rather than evaluations of researchers for a delicate mission. This causes skepticism regarding the legitimacy of the expedition and brings into question the true motives behind it, having him wonder if it was all just a ruse.

Secondly, just as cherry-picking information is the *modus operandi* of communication in a post-truth predicament, the same can be found in VanderMeer's novels: only facts that are deemed essential to fulfill Central's or the research center's goals are shared, while everything else is either redacted or discarded.

Before the twelfth expedition starts, researchers possess limited information about Area X. They know it is a transitional environment where biology has been corrupted, and their mission is to unravel its mysteries to "defeat the corruption" and safeguard humanity from its looming threat. Remarkably, they are not even provided with specific details about the tools

they will be equipped with¹⁰. To bolster their sense of purpose, the researchers are fed with a captivatingly fabricated narrative about the first expedition, consisting of tales of bravery and resilience designed to inspire the current team (167). This strategy of enforcing a false narrative shares similarities with the “deliberate”¹¹ use of fake news, as described by McIntyre, concocted to influence public opinion towards climate change denial and similar political agendas (McIntyre, 73). However, in VanderMeer’s scenario, the biologist stands out as an anomaly among her fellow expedition experts. Her motivation for venturing into Area X differs from others because her husband had been part of the previous expedition. The psychologist’s interview notes reveal that she was chosen precisely for her inability to maintain an objective perspective in her research, and because of the director’s curiosity about her potential accomplishments in Area X’s hostile environment.

In the second section of *Authority*, “Rites”, Control states that “sometimes you [have] to keep things from people just so they [won’t] do the first thing that [comes] into their heads” (VanderMeer, *Authority*, 85). He says this when he notices an ant crawling on the back of a woman’s neck and decides to remove the insect without alerting her, for she would kill it if she knew of its presence. If on the one hand this situation can be read as proof of Control’s respect for life, regardless of its shape, on the other, one could compare it to a declaration of his approval of the secretive and manipulatory operations carried out by Central and the Southern Reach facility. Control is in fact remarkably familiar with their way of ‘running things’ (he even knows of the mental conditioning—although he is not aware of the extent of that used on him). His passive acceptance and inaction in front of such corrupt mechanisms, regardless of his being (secretly) opposed to them, can be read as a symbol of cognitive dissonance. The same cognitive dissonance felt by those who, despite being well informed of the present globally critical situation of the present, avoid taking action to face the climate crisis, remaining stuck in their own denial. The Norwegian psychologist Per Espen Stoknes, in his *What We Think About When We Try Not To Think About Global Warming* (2015), discusses how to approach

¹⁰ They were given black boxes that beeped when danger was near, but they were not told what the devices measured.

¹¹ As McIntyre specifies, “it is the intention to mislead—rather than the mere falsehood of its content—that makes fake news fake” (McIntyre, 73). In this sense, they are different from mere lies.

people to achieve maximum engagement in climate action, identifying ‘five Ds’ (Distance, Doom, Dissonance, Denial, iDentity) as the causes of inaction, and ‘five Ss’ (Social, Support, Simpler actions, Signals, better Stories) as solutions to them. He defines cognitive dissonance as a “situation in which there are conflicting feelings, thoughts, and behaviors [...] an uncomfortable inner tension [that] only dissolves when one or another of the components changes and harmony is restored” (Stoknes, 91).

He describes denial as the act of remaining silent and pretending to be unaware, avoiding the fear and guilt that would come from acknowledging that information (116). This attitude causes an “inner splitting;” it is like ‘leading a double life’ (41); quite a fitting image for Control, given his covert past.

After multiple expeditions and a massive data collection, the researchers were plunged into confusion instead of achieving clarity—naming each mission with repetitive and progressive codes, like X.11.D, X.11.J, X.11.K, X.12.A, which only added to the climate of uncertainty and skepticism. Episodes like the one that sees Control compare the science division to a cabinet of curiosities full of barely touched and dated evidence (VanderMeer, Authority, 125), or the one that has the biologist stumbling upon a neglected pile of decaying research journals during the twelfth expedition, highlight the irrelevance of scientific evidence in the facility’s eyes, consequently bringing into question the true motives behind the expeditions themselves. This whole attitude towards scientific evidence—treating it as if completely irrelevant—might be read as a symbol for the detachment between scientists and “ordinary people” (Stoknes, 85) as illustrated in Stoknes’ text. In the context of climate crisis-related facts, there is little consideration for their social impact. Facts are shared as ‘dry’ knowledge in academic papers, for “a narrow academic target audience” (84), without engaging the reader. As a result, the information becomes irrelevant as it fails to evoke a reaction. Another passage that emphasizes this idea is the following:

“Incomplete data,” Whitby said. “Too incomplete to be sure. But most returnees tell us they just don’t think to bring them back. They don’t believe it’s important, or don’t feel the need to. Feeling is the important part. You lose the need or impetus to divulge, to communicate, a bit like astronauts lose muscle mass. Most of the journals seem to turn up in the lighthouse anyway, though. It hasn’t been a priority for a while, but when we did ask later expeditions to retrieve them, usually they

didn't even try. You lose the impetus or something else intercedes, becomes more crucial and you don't even realize it. Until it's too late." (VanderMeer, *Authority*, 66)

The lost 'impetus' Whitby speaks of is the lost social potential that Stoknes addresses. The image of the pile of journals that end up in the lighthouse suggests that they are deemed important by someone in Area X, someone that is "reading them for the Southern Reach" (60).

Only in the chapter "Gambit" of *Authority* does Control realize the mental suggestion he faced and discover that Cynthia (the former director) is still alive. This prompts him to confront Grace (the assistant director), the only one who did not believe in the former director's death. She reveals that all missions were only attempts to "make Area X react" (260-62).

Two thousand white rabbits herded toward an invisible door. A plant that didn't want to die. Impossible video footage. More theories than there were fish in the sea. Was his house in order? (VanderMeer, *Authority*, 212)

In VanderMeer, the 'state of confusion' is not used directly to discredit scientific facts; rather, it masks the true nature of a set of operations. Hoping to "overload" the system with their bodies (55), the experts in the research groups are just as relevant as the white rabbits pushed into Area X. It was thus crucial for the center to instill in its employees a powerful sense of prideful purpose in its employees, so that, even if confronted with the truth, they could still believe in the 'mission.'

McIntyre states that, in times of post-truth, belief is no longer just about facts and evidence, but it is connected to people's identity, values, and trust. Accepting something as true or false positions the individual in society—using the metaphor he uses—it places them on a "team" (McIntyre, 77). This connection to identity—or rather iDentity—is also found in Stoknes' text when he speaks about the barriers to climate action.

We look for information that confirms our existing values and notions and filter away what challenges them. [...] Cultural identity overrides the facts. If new information requires us to change our selves, then the information is likely to lose. We experience resistance to calls for change in self-identity. (Stoknes, 117)

In Area X, the narrative traces a very clear ontological dividing line between humans and non-humans: employees are pushed towards believing in the narratives imposed on them because the 'line' between them and the 'enemy'

(the ‘other’ in Area X) is well defined and fueled by fear and distance¹². Especially in *Annihilation*, the occlusion that is placed upon members of the research team can be read as ‘forcibly placing all of them on the facility’s team’ (on humanity’s team). The following excerpts are a fitting example of the manipulation taking place in Area X and in the Southern Reach facility.

she 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. (VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 34)

This demonstrates the power of manipulation through words and authority. The psychologist’s seemingly innocuous statement triggers a drastic response in the surveyor and anthropologist, indicating that they had been “preprogrammed to enter a hypnotic state.” It highlights how easily individuals can be influenced and controlled through carefully chosen phrases, emphasizing the post-truth aspect of deliberately shaping perceptions.

Her demeanor more assertive than just a moment before, the psychologist said, “You will retain a memory of having discussed several options about the tunnel. You will find that you ultimately agreed with me about the best course of action, and that you felt quite confident about this course of action. You will experience a sensation of calm whenever you think about this decision, and you will remain calm once back inside the tunnel, although you will react to any stimuli as per your training. You will not take undue risks. (VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 35)

This portion shows the intentional dissemination of disinformation. The psychologist forces false memories and beliefs on the team members, manipulating their thoughts and emotions to align with her own agenda. The emphasis on feeling calm and confident in a decision they never truly made reinforces the post-truth nature of distorting reality to control and influence others.

¹² Even the ‘trivial’ episode that sees Control wear a full hazmat suit to enter the science division (the place holding all evidence gathered on Area X) – despite the air being “pure” and the room having never “shown any irregularities” (VanderMeer, *Authority*, 125) – is an example of the barrier that the facility wants to erect between human and non-human in the mind of its employees.

You will continue to see a structure that is made of coquina and stone. You will trust your colleagues completely and feel a continued sense of fellowship with them. When you emerge from the structure, any time you see a bird in flight it will trigger a strong feeling that you are doing the right thing, that you are in the right place. When I snap my fingers, you will have no memory of this conversation, but will follow my directives. You will feel very tired, and you will want to retire to your tents to get a good night's sleep before tomorrow's activities. You will not dream. You will not have nightmares." (VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 35)

This last part of the dialogue shows the moment in which the dividing line between the human and the 'other' is traced. The psychologist implants specific beliefs and responses in the team members, distorting their reality and reinforcing their trust in her authority. She forces them to unsee the liveliness of the environment surrounding them, while reinforcing their sense of trust and righteousness towards the team. The erasure of their memory of the conversation and the control over their emotions and actions reflect the post-truth dynamic of deliberately altering perceptions and suppressing critical thinking. All employees are therefore precluded from engaging with the non-human in Area X by being made unable to even detect its presence. The compulsion is enforced with the excuse of preventing the explorers from being traumatized by the horrors of Area X (VanderMeer, *Authority*, 136). The hypnosis does nothing but tamper with gathered evidence and isolate those upon which it is used. It contributes to unleashing the previously mentioned confusion, protecting the status quo of the facility and the narrative that has Area X and the center as opposite factions in a conflict. This situation can be considered as a mirror of our real climate crisis when comparing it with the 'blocking' efforts of powerful politics and corporations that aim to discredit the imminence of the current climate emergency, hindering counteractive actions. Overall, this quote highlights the profound influence of post-truth tactics and the dissemination of disinformation. The psychologist's use of authority, manipulation of thoughts and emotions, and the creation of false narratives, all contribute to ushering in a 'divided' world where truth is distorted, and individuals are guided by fabricated beliefs and notions.

In McIntyre's opinion, the only way to overcome post-truth manipulation is understanding its mechanism. Both the biologist and Control will only manage to overcome the compulsion, uncover the deception, and 'solve Area X's mystery' by engaging in a relationship with the non-human, also altering their

identities. The biologist accidentally inhales fungal spores that fuse her own consciousness with that of Area X, thus compromising her scientific objectivity. Throughout *Annihilation* she repeatedly affirms that scientists are “trained to observe natural phenomena and the results of human activity” (VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 70), implying the necessity of a distance to be kept from what they observe. Her perspective tested by a pair of otters that were watching her ‘back,’ “threaten[ing] to disrupt the act of repression that objectivity require[d]” (Carroll, 77). Only through the contamination by Area X will the biologist open her eyes to the lies of her superiors, as well as to the futility of maintaining an objective point of view towards something that concerns one so intimately. Her identity will change altogether: from the end of the first novel onwards, she will no longer identify with the biologist and will become Ghost Bird, effectively declaring herself as part of the entity she was employed to study (and defeat).

Control’s ‘awakening’ takes a different course. He is not contaminated as the biologist, but his ‘enlightenment’ is brought by his own investigation, in which evidence does not seem to lead anywhere until his mother tells him that Area X has already infiltrated the facility: the compound has been acting as its incubator. Pushed by Whitby to approach his research as if studying a terroir, he will finally ‘see the full picture’ merging the human and non-human planes.

Terroir is a “wine term” introduced in *Authority* by Whitby and which indicates “the specific characteristics of a place—the geography, geology, and climate” (VanderMeer, *Authority*, 130). Siobhan Carroll explains how the word indicates a land that is controlled and colonized, but in VanderMeer’s novels the opposite happens: Area X and the “environmental knowledge” (Carroll, 80) it holds have extended to the world outside its border. There is therefore no longer a distinction between the area and the research facility, between the “in” and “out” of the border: they are the same. VanderMeer’s fiction is the tale of a “system [that is] being altered by climate change, in ways that in turn fundamentally alter the identities—human and non-human—tied to place” (Carroll, 81).

Both the biologist/Ghost Bird and Control manage to overcome the human/other dichotomy, as well as the nature - culture/society chiasm, inscribing themselves in the ‘equation’ they are trying to solve. Their paths could be read as journeys of environmental awakening, in which they manage

to overcome Stoknes' obstacles by questioning their own ontological status and extricating themselves from the stagnant and toxic social/communication patterns McIntyre explains.

In her determination to stick to an objective approach for her analysis of Area X, the biologist embodies the stubbornness, or rather the hubris, of humanity that willingly attempts to detach itself from Anthropocene issues despite being inscribed in them; it represents a refusal of the "human role in environmental change" and an obstacle to "humanity's ability to address environmental crisis" (77). Stoknes calls this phenomenon "distance", i.e. that feeling that causes humans to perceive climate change as something remote, not immediately visible, that does not hit "me or my kin" (Stoknes, 115). His use of the term "kin" refers to genealogy, biology, and ancestry. However, Donna Haraway proposes an alternative meaning for 'making kin' in her work *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016). She explains making kin as creating "inventive connections" (Haraway, 1), eventually proposing cooperation between humans and non-humans. She criticizes both the Anthropocene and Capitalocene for their cynicism, defeatism, and for making confident predictions that are seemingly bound to become true. Instead, she presents her readers with the concept of the Chthulucene, a time characterized by ongoing stories and practices involving multiple species coming together. In this era, the world is still uncertain, and there is potential for change and growth. She emphasizes that humans are not the sole significant participants in this narrative (55-56). In her text she explains methods of making kin through String Figures (SF)¹³. Inspired by Navajo string games, these figures represent creative ways of building and sharing a 'web' of stories and thoughts across species, building communities based on collaboration, on response-ability (the ability to respond and react), with the aim to move past 'us vs. them' narratives. These figures are made of tentacular thoughts, that surpass the limits of human perception by being non-anthropomorphic and not mainly visual: they feel and try (31). Haraway proposes a blueprint for a multispecies eco-justice, based on shared storytelling. In VanderMeer, the pile of abandoned and decaying journals found by the biologist in *Annihilation* could be read as a representation of her theory.

¹³ SF stands for multiple concepts: science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far.

The journals and other materials formed a moldering pile about twelve feet high and sixteen feet wide that in places near the bottom had clearly turned to compost, the paper rotting away. Beetles and silverfish tended to those archives, and tiny black cockroaches with always moving antennae. Toward the base, and spilling out at the edges, I saw the remains of photographs and dozens of ruined cassette tapes mixed in with the mulch of pages. There, too, I saw evidence of rats. I would have to lower myself down into the midden by means of the ladder nailed to the lip of the trapdoor and trudge through a collapsing garbage hill of disintegrating pulp to uncover anything at all. The scene obliquely embodied the scrap of writing I had encountered on the Tower wall: ... the seeds of the dead to share with the worms that gather in the darkness and surround the world with the power of their lives. (VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 113)

Firstly, a journal is something extremely personal, in which people pour their thoughts and feelings: each one of those stacked up notebooks therefore equals to an identity. Analyzing their contents, the biologist recognizes excerpts of the writings on the Tower/Tunnell's walls¹⁴, highlighting their hybrid origin and identifying them as the outcome of the former researchers' recounts, united to Area X's consciousness, as if the written traces of the explorers had been 'uploaded' to it and they had become one. Those journals are acts of 'remembrance' and 'com-memoration' (Haraway, 2016, 24) as they are proof of a shared existence. Each journal is a tentacular narration that starts as something human about the non-human, and then becomes something more. This ontological concept resembles that of the Children of Compost: in telling the story of the Camilles, Haraway presents the image of a "baby", an "infant" (133-34)—which, for the 'human not-yet-Chthulucene-bound reader, is a very familiar 'human' image—and gradually proceeds to accompany her readers through the definition of the 'humustity' of her compost children, ultimately addressing their sympoietic biology.¹⁵ Furthermore, the pile is a place, an

¹⁴ "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 ..." (VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 25).

¹⁵ Sympoiesis, opposite of autopoiesis, means "making-with." It describes the 'entanglements' of critter existence. "Critters interpenetrate one another, loop around and through one another, eat each another, get indigestion, and partially digest and partially assimilate one another, and thereby establish sympoietic arrangements that are otherwise known as cells, organisms, and ecological assemblages." (Haraway, 2016, 58) Camilles are children with both human and non-human attributes (the non-human attributes come from an endangered species) that build symbiotic relationships with other species. They represent a way of making kin that foregoes ancestry and genealogy, an idea of rehabilitating the world in Communities of Compost, with humans living in symbiosis with other species—syms—and others that do not—no syms.

ecosystem; alive, diverse, storied. It represents the compost Haraway speaks of the act of sympoiesis, her Terrapolis.

Terrapolis is a fictional integral equation, a speculative fabulation. Terrapolis is n-dimensional niche space for multispecies becoming-with. Terrapolis is open, worldly, indeterminate, and polytemporal. Terrapolis is a chimera of materials, languages, histories. Terrapolis is for companion species, cum panis, with bread, at table together—not “posthuman” but “com-post.” Terrapolis is in place; Terrapolis makes space for unexpected companions. Terrapolis is an equation for guman, for humus, for soil, for ongoing risky infection, for epidemics of promising trouble, for permaculture. Terrapolis is the SF game of response-ability. Companion species are engaged in the old art of terraforming; they are the players in the SF equation that describes Terrapolis. (Haraway, 11-12)

This description applies not only to the journal/compost pile, but to the entirety of Area X. In the introduction to her book, she states that “staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (1). This same scenario is expressed throughout VanderMeer’s two novels (and entirety of the trilogy). Area X, while spoken of in present terms, is ‘polytemporal’. It is an ‘infectuous’ ‘chimera’ in its continuous ontological terraforming transformation, in which a ‘game of string figures’ is ‘played’ between all the companion species that cross paths in it, rendering it a fertile land for new multispecies storytelling. *Annihilation* and *Authority* reflect Haraway’s ideas on identity and meet Stoknes’s criteria for effective storytelling – personal, vivid, and dramatic. This makes them powerful examples of “ecological restoration” stories that motivate climate action. However, while he intends ‘restoration’ as the returning of a ‘wilderness’ that “swings back” from “the extinction cliff” (187), in VanderMeer the word should be intended as ‘replacement’ of a structure, or rather, of a mind construct: that of human exceptionalism. It is interesting to note that while other scholars might view VanderMeer’s works as tales of destruction and devastation in which “nothing comes back” rather than of ‘regeneration,’ the element of the human “reconsideration of itself” is ever present (Deurwaarder, 2018).

Annihilation and *Authority* mix the extreme realism of contemporary ecological concerns with the weird and the whimsical, creating a model that transcends literary categorization altogether. VanderMeer’s success is measured

on the basis of the layered meanings of his narrative. Firstly, he creates Area X as a territory in transition, going through instabilities comparable to those present in our own world, transitioning and mutating because of the human-made crisis afflicting our world. Then, as demonstrated through McIntyre and Stoknes's theories, the novels hold a perfect duplicate of the fact-divulgement mechanisms of post-truth communication characteristic of the climate crisis (disinformation through fake news and science denialism)¹⁶. Moreover, he allows the turmoil of the psychological atmosphere of 'life in times of climate crisis' to transpire, familiarizing readers with the same feelings that hinder engagement in climate action. By emphasizing the importance of subjectivity and emotion in perception and then giving voice to the non-human in every human (managing to forgo human exceptionalism), he succeeds in inscribing his story in Haraway's Chthulucene, ultimately reframing and providing a "new [way] of envisioning climate change, bring[ing] the message all the way to our own doorstep, feet, and lungs" (Stoknes, 82). Importantly, the mental distance between humans and the crisis is gradually removed.

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¹⁶ An example of disinformation through fake news and science denialism could be seen in the 2009 'email leak', which saw thousands of emails from the Climatic Research Unit, at the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom, leaked online and used by climate skeptics as 'evidence' that scientists were manipulating climate data to make global warming seem more threatening. These emails were edited and taken out of context, creating false narratives and beliefs that were fueled and spread by the media. This caused public confusion and mistrust regarding the validity of climate change research. Even though the investigations conducted by the interested university and by the Parliament itself found non proof of data manipulation, still, the damage was done. 'Climategate,' as this event was named, illustrates how disinformation campaigns can exploit information to cast doubt on the validity of scientific research. Just like in VanderMeer's two novels, for Climategate, an intentionally misinformative narrative was constructed and spread, manipulating public perception on climate change (just like the Southern Reach facility did for Area X).

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