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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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