

'Her Brains Are All Over Her Body': Jeff VanderMeer's Avian Weird

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Abstract: Drawing on the thinking of Donna Haraway and other transdisciplinary thinkers, this paper makes the case for an 'avian Weird' by exploring the representation of birds in the New Weird fiction of Jeff VanderMeer. Distinct from the Lovecraftian 'Old Weird' of the twentieth century, the New Weird has been defined by VanderMeer himself as 'a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy' ('The New Weird' 31). However, VanderMeer's oeuvre is also something of a textual aviary, where the avian comes to represent the entangled and monstrous ontologies of the 'Chthulucene'. A substitute for the human-centred 'Anthropocene', Donna Haraway's 'Chthulucene' indexes the fibrous and squishy bits of the world (*Staying with the Trouble*). Like Haraway, I am unsatisfied with the term 'Anthropocene', the planetary effects of which implicate more than only human life-forms: we need new translocal, transspecies, and transbiological ways of thinking. In its chthonic and tentacular etymology, the Chthulucene gestures to the imagery of Weird worlds, as well as the tangled, twiggy body of the nest. What happens when we look at the world through avian eyes? Might these tetrachromats offer a response to Haraway's call to 'see the world in hues of red, green, and ultraviolet'? ('The Promises of Monsters' 295) In VanderMeer's New Weird fiction, avian epistemologies reveal the possibility of monstrous survival in the Chthulucene.

Keywords: New Weird, Chthulucene, avian, speculative fiction, epistemology, alterity

In the Spring of 2021, Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama filled the atrium of a Berlin gallery with pink, polka-dotted tentacles. Some viewers have criticised Gropias Bau's retrospective of Kusama's work for its 'dry, didactic' and 'distant' stance (Weinstock). Yet here in the Antipodes, I can only experience 'A Bouquet of Love I Saw in the Universe' from a distance: I am instantly enamoured by these gargantuan tentacles. Seen from above, the tentacles appear to erupt from an aperture in our universe – a tear in the space-time fabric, a glitch in what is possible. It is as though they come from *elsewhere*, an unsettling and decidedly weird effect. But why are tentacles so unsettling? In a recent Covid 19 press conference, Aotearoa New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern referred to the 'tentacle of Covid 19' (Ardern). Previously described as a 'long tail', the lingering cases of Tāmaki Makaurau's 2021 Delta outbreak have morphed into something more alien. While it was likely intended as a joke, the equation of the tentacle with abject or undesirable lifeforms is ubiquitous. As jellyfish thrive in acidifying oceans, 'the jellification of the sea' is a common theme in climate discourse. We are warned that soon these slimy 'monsters' are all that will survive; without brains, lungs, or stomachs, jellyfish are 'taking over' (Shafy). However, in his talk at the 2013 Socialism Conference, New Weird author China Miéville finds other ways to think the tentacular ('Marxism'). Famous for his own novel about deep-sea monsters (*Kraken*, 2010), Miéville draws on the cephalopodic to explore the ways in which dread is a necessary antecedent to sentience. He discusses a 2009 Australian study of the veined octopus (*Amphioctopus marginatus*), which found that this species was 'carrying around coconut shell halves, assembling them as shelter only when needed' (Finn et. al R1069). While many marine species use shells for protection from predators, these octopi seemed to be carrying the shells in preparation for *possible* use, like an umbrella or bottle opener. Miéville argues that this indexes the octopus' ability to dread and, subsequently, that *all* sentience comes from orienting towards the potentiality of a threat. By thinking with the tentacle, Miéville shows how dread operates as an evolutionary force, catapulting humans out of the cave and into the world of hunter-gathering. But these moments of dread (like Kusama's tentacles) also displace the human: we are in the world, but it is not a world for us. Dread unfurls into the unknown, the nonhuman, and the dizzying depths of the Weird.

As Miéville suggests, dread can open apertures in thought. Instead of turning our backs to the unknown, what happens when we embrace the new 'monsters' of global warming? Here, I am deeply indebted to Gry Ulstein's concept of 'Anthropocene monsters' (Ulstein). In her article 'Brave New Weird: Anthropocene Monsters in Jeff VanderMeer's *The Southern Reach*', Ulstein takes Bruno Latour's imperative seriously, when he writes that it is our ethical responsibility to 'love the monsters' we have created in the Anthropocene.¹ A scholar of Weird fiction, Ulstein also highlights the links between contemporary climate scholarship and the monstrous imagery found in the work of H.P Lovecraft.² The most influential figure of the 'Weird', Lovecraft's stories employ cosmic horror to confront the limits of human epistemologies; Lovecraft's tentacled Cthulhu is a cosmic entity so vast and unknowable that it overwhelms the human sensorium.³ However, as Ulstein points out, conceptualising global warming as a Cthulhu-like entity gets no further than 'the paralysis [Weird fiction's] monsters inflict' (82). While Weird imagery is useful for thinking with atmospheric and geological forces, the 'unknowability' of Cthulhu risks eliding the particular effects of global warming: tentacles, it seems, are out of touch. But where do we turn to map these effects? What happens when we shift our attention from the sea to the sky? An article recently published by *The Guardian* shows that avian species are already shapeshifting in response to global warming (Horton). One study carried out by Deakin University has found that the beak of the South Australian Mulga parrot is increasing in size, in correlation with summer temperatures, while another recent study from the Australian National University has found that at least half of all physical changes in European bird species since 1960 are a direct result of rising temperatures (McLean et al.). As a bioindicator or 'indicator species' – the name given to an organism used to measure environmental conditions – birds also tell us things about the climate.⁴ Indicator species reveal environmental changes impossible to detect with physical or chemical tests; empirical tests reveal unwanted presence (pollution, toxicity), while indicator species often describe an absence, ontologically immediate and futural. Where tentacles index dread without an antecedent, bioindicators index the futurity our own species extinction. But many of the avian indicators in Australia, such as the endangered Southern Cassowary, are also keystone species, meaning that changes in their behaviour ricochet across entire ecosystems (cassowaries spread

the seeds of over 70 trees with fruit too large for smaller birds to eat – if cassowaries vanish, so do these tree species). With presence increasingly tipping into absence, empiricism reaches a limit: how else could avians help us to think weirdly about the warming world?

Drawing on Ulstein and other transdisciplinary thinkers, my paper makes the case for an ‘avian Weird’ by exploring the representation of birds in the New Weird fiction of Jeff VanderMeer. Described as everything from postmodern to post-apocalyptic, VanderMeer’s fiction is situated in an interstitial zone between horror, science fiction, and surrealism: the space of the New Weird. Distinct from the Lovecraftian ‘Old Weird’ of the twentieth century, the New Weird has been defined by VanderMeer himself as ‘a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy’ (‘The New Weird’). Emerging in the late 1990s with the speculative works of China Miéville and M. John Harrison, the New Weird oozes with a strange assemblage of tentacles, mushrooms, and squid-worshipping cults. Although notoriously slippery to define, features of New Weird fiction include nonmimetic modes of representation and speculative themes, as well as tropes of science fiction and horror. However, VanderMeer’s oeuvre is also something of a textual aviary. Three of his works are named for birds; the 2017 novella *The Strange Bird*, VanderMeer’s most recent novel, *Hummingbird Salamander*, and – while not strictly about birds – *Finch*, the final novel in the *Ambergris* trilogy. Yet the birds that fly through VanderMeer’s fiction trouble the line between bird and nonbird. When an unnamed biologist encounters an owl in his *Southern Reach* trilogy, her scientific training fails to explain its ‘odd behaviour’ (*Acceptance* 168). However, through habitual gestures, bird and human learn how to ‘make kin’. In *Hummingbird Salamander*, the titular bird is marked by its absence, while VanderMeer’s *Borne* novels explore the radical potential of distributed and diffractive epistemologies through the ‘death’ of a transgenic avian. In VanderMeer’s New Weird fiction, it is the avian – rather than the tentacle – that comes to represent entangled and monstrous ontologies. A substitute for the human-centred ‘Anthropocene’, Donna Haraway’s ‘Chthulucene’ indexes the fibrous, squishy bits of the world (*Staying with the Trouble*). Like Haraway, I am unsatisfied with the term ‘Anthropocene’, the planetary effects of which implicate more than only human life-forms: we need new translocal, transspecies, and transbiological ways of thinking. The Chthulucene describes a weird ecology,

in which we are weirdly entangled; it includes us but is also more-than us, loopy and interlaced at every point. In its chthonic and tentacular etymology, the Chthulucene gestures to the imagery of Weird worlds, as well as the tangled, twiggy body of the nest.⁵ What happens when we look at the world through avian eyes? Do these tetrachromats offer a response to Haraway's call elsewhere to 'see the world in hues of red, green, and ultraviolet' ('The Promises' 195)? In VanderMeer's New Weird fiction, the avian opens onto new, kaleidoscopic epistemologies that illuminate the possibility of monstrous survival in the Chthulucene.

As Ulstein shows, the traditional tentacles of the Weird symbolise a cosmic 'unknowing' that ultimately distracts from the realities of climate disaster. By centring atmospherically bound creatures, VanderMeer's avian Weird provides an updated frame of reference for the Chthulucene. Yet VanderMeer's aviary does not exist in a vacuum. From Alfred Hitchcock's adaptation of *The Birds* to contemporary literature, film, and television, birds – with their differential sensory worlds and indexically prehistoric anatomies – are often employed to 'en-Weird' a world.⁶ In Miéville's New Weird novel *Perdido Street Station* (2000), scientist Isaac Dan der Grimnebulin is approached by a garuda (a hybrid avian species) named Yagharek, who is looking for his stolen wings. What ensues is an adventure through the demonic underbelly of 'New Crobuzon', the distinctly urban setting of Miéville's novel. More recently, the novels *Chouette* (2021) by Claire Oshetsky and Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country* (2020) narrativize Weird avian subjectivities. The latter follows Jean Bennett – a foul-mouthed grandmother and aspiring park ranger – as a contagious 'zooflu' sweeps through Australia, leaving those it infects able to 'hear' nonhuman languages. While McKay's novel arguably centres mammalian nonhumans, birds are also there, 'hack[ing] at the sky with their talking wings' (218). Through sudden understanding, the outback's omnipresent birds become radically unfamiliar.⁷ Even Adult Swim's *Rick and Morty*, a science fiction cartoon about a 'mad-scientist' and his grandson, explores themes of transgenic avian identity, most notably through Rick's friend Birdperson. Part man, part bird, and eventually part-machine, Birdperson's friendship brings out an empathy in Rick that is otherwise absent. However, no one does 'avian Weird' quite like Jeff VanderMeer. As a pivotal author of the New Weird and committed conservationist, strange birds wing their way through all aspects of VanderMeer's life. Together

with his wife Ann, VanderMeer has been rewilding their backyard in Tallahassee, Florida for the last four years, which is now teeming with endemic plant and birdlife.⁸ VanderMeer has also acknowledged the influence of Florida's unique ecology and avian life on his writing, particularly his critically acclaimed *Southern Reach* trilogy ('From *Annihilation*'). Published in quick succession in 2014, the trilogy— composed of *Annihilation*, *Authority* and *Acceptance* — traces the shadowy outline of 'Area X', the name given to a mysterious stretch of coast in the United States. Created by an unspecified 'event' thirty years earlier, the official explanation for Area X is an ecological disaster; however, the reality is much weirder. A government agency, known only as The Southern Reach, has sent eleven expeditions into Area X to investigate the alien landscape. Those who return are plagued by amnesia and an aggressive cancer; the expedition members are fuzzy, like a black and white photo blown up and pixelated. *Annihilation* follows the twelfth expedition into Area X. A biologist, the novel's unnamed narrator, is tasked with studying environmental irregularities. But after inhaling the spores of bioluminescent fungus inside a subterranean 'tower', the biologist begins manifesting unusual symptoms, including a fever, chills, and what she can only describe as a 'brightness' (these symptoms culminate in the biologist's eventual transformation into a nonhuman leviathan). Hopelessly entangled with the ecology of Area X, the biologist thus highlights the problematic nature of scientific 'objectivity'; as she records in her journal, '[n]othing that lived and breathed was truly objective' (*Annihilation* 8).

Early in *Annihilation*, the biologist discloses that she is there to discover what happened to her husband. As a medic on the eleventh expedition, '[h]e had been recruited for Area X by a friend' (55). When he returns, her husband is a ghost of his former self, dislocated from his memories and identity:

He did not remember how he had left Area X, did not remember the journey home at all. He had only the vaguest recollection of the expedition itself. There was an odd calm about him, punctured only by moments of remote panic when, in asking him what had happened, he recognized that his amnesia was unnatural. (*Annihilation* 56)

Like those from the expeditions before him, her husband is soon diagnosed with an 'inoperable, systematic cancer' (*Annihilation* 57). The biologist decides to apply for the twelfth expedition, to understand what happened inside Area X that changed him so radically: as a scientist, she needs to *know*. Presented as the contents of the biologist's journal, *Annihilation* ends when the biologist stops writing. However, in *Acceptance* – the final novel of the trilogy – the narrative returns to her journal, where she describes her encounter with an owl. The biologist is now living on an island off the coast of Area X, populated by scrub and wind-swept nettles. Entering a cove on the 'far side of the island', she finds a 'single stunted pine', on a branch of which sits:

the unlikely silhouette of a common horned owl with sharp tufted ears: rust-brown face with white feathers at chin and throat, mottled gray-and-brown body. My loud approach should have alarmed it, but this owl just perched there, surrounded by the cormorants sunning themselves. An unnatural scene, to me, and it brought me up short. (*Acceptance* 167)⁹

The biologist assumes that the owl is ill or injured. In the days that follow, she continues to explore the cove, where she finds evidence of a previous inhabitant: an expedition uniform, socks, a jacket, strewn across the ground 'as if given up willingly' (*Acceptance* 169). Yet the owl is always there, 'always watching over' her (169). As the biologist narrates, he is '[a]lways a little closer, a little tamer, but never completely tame. It would drop twigs at my feet, at random, more as if through some absentmindedness than on purpose' (*Acceptance* 169-70). In the absence of a shared language, a poetics of gesture emerges; the owl hunts for the biologist and when he dies, she mourns. As human and bird move through each other's Umwelt, she comes to see this bird as the culmination of her husband's possible transformation within Area X: '[w]as this my husband in altered form? Did he recognize me, or was this owl simply responding to the presence of a human being?' (*Acceptance* 170).¹⁰

In the fragmented flashbacks that are woven throughout *Annihilation*, the biologist recalls the nickname given to her by her husband: 'ghost bird'. The appellation is intended to evoke the spectral – she is distant, 'not present enough in his life' (*Annihilation* 109).¹¹ The

biologist's husband thus uses a bird to highlight a gap. Yet in *Acceptance*, this very gap is collapsed through avian alterity. Whether or not this owl *is* her husband, human heteronormative kin structures are reimagined and replaced by multispecies ones. This is what Donna Haraway might call 'making kin', a term that emphasises the intentionality of our entangled relationships with myriad human and nonhuman others. As Haraway articulates in *Staying With the Trouble*, making kin 'as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible' (2).¹² According to Haraway, making kin is 'the thing that we most need to be doing in a world that rips us apart from each other, in a world that has already more than seven and a half billion human beings with very unequal and unjust patterns of suffering and well-being' (Paulson). In VanderMeer's novels, an affective openness to the nonhuman attempts to redress such unjust sufferings. For making kin is also contingent on stories, on histories and narrative: kin's making (its poesis) is subject to the telling. From the Greek *poiein* 'to make', poesis gestures to both creation and poetry, to bringing new stories into being. As Haraway writes, '[i]t matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with' (*Staying with the Trouble* 12). By writing in the speculative mode, VanderMeer – and New Weird fiction more broadly – opens an aperture that allows for such a polyphonic poesis.

In the posthumously published *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida problematizes the ontology of the nonhuman as presented by Western philosophy, 'not by effacing the limit [of the animal], but in multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding and dividing the line' between human and non' (60). Derrida takes issue with the philosophers who have formulated the animal as a 'theorem' – something seen but not seeing (14). In response to this anthropocentric assumption, Derrida transforms Lacan's famous mirror into the eye of the animal, writing that it is not only through the reflection of the self that subjectivity is formed, but through the experience of being *seen* by the animal. He asks – referring to his own cat, who catches him naked one morning – 'cannot this cat also be, deep within her eyes, my primary mirror' (51)? Writing about Derrida's encounter, the animal studies scholar Sherryl Vint draws a line directly from Derrida's cat to speculative fiction, in which we 'find ourselves confronted by the gaze of "absolute alterity", an other who looks back

at us from its own point of view and often one whom we must acknowledge as having power comparable if not identical to our own’ (11).¹³ In *Acceptance*, the biologist describes being ‘looked at’ by the owl, whose differential perspective is made literal (she is earthbound, he sits in a tree):

[i]t would bow at me, a typical owl behaviour, then spend the next hours distant, almost sullen [...]. Other times, on a branch high up, the owl would sway and bob, bob and sway, moving its body from side to side while gripping its perch in the same place. Then look down at me stupidly. (170)

Forced to acknowledge her own alterity, the biologist is plunged into a state of ‘stupidness’ or unknowing: there is an epistemological caesura that the biologist can only qualify through anthropocentric reversal, with a word that means ‘lack of common sense’. This gap evokes Thomas Nagel’s famous assertion that we can never truly ‘know’ what it is like to *be* a bat – not a human thinking *like* a bat, but a bat *being* a bat (439). However, this does not mean that we should assume nonhuman experience is nonsensical. New Weird fiction takes Nagel’s footnote seriously when he writes that, ‘[i]t may be easier than I suppose to transcend inter-species barriers with the aid of the imagination’ (442). While we may never be able to ‘know’ our nonhuman kin, through language, we can try.¹⁴

Yet writing about nonhuman others (avian, fungal, bacterial, animal) always runs into the same question: how do we represent their alterity in language? How might New Weird fiction hold its apertures open? Claiming that language is ‘arbitrary’ merely justifies anthropocentric discourses: the nonhuman is mute, while myriad others are condensed into a single ‘Unknown’. But this mode of thinking has no place in the Chthulucene – our damp, fibrous, and entangled world. In her essay ‘Life of a Sundew, Sundew of a Life’, the writer Pantea Armanfar problematizes such anthropocentric discourses. When writing about the sundew, she uses a • grapheme to displace mimetic representation. Armanfar both questions its ontology and imagines its (differential) otherness without slipping into the normative designations assigned to the sundew. As she writes, ‘[t]he human is neither the conductor nor the observer but is in a dynamic relation with the act of seeking’. The use of the non-lingual

grapheme also causes each expression it predicates to grow unstable, thus highlighting the contingent relation between beings and attributes. Armanfar asks how we represent the otherness of our nonhuman kin and proposes 'representational multiplicity' as a way into reciprocal structures of relationality. In a recent article, Richie Nimmo proposes the term 'intimacy at a distance', in which 'animals are both like and unlike, present yet always partially absent, familiar yet unknowable, near to us yet far away' (26, 30). Anthropocentrism risks negating alterity altogether by appealing to similarities; Nimmo's term holds these two ontological modes (distance, closeness) in tension, thus making space for the multiplicity of nonhuman experience. The biologist represents this tension when she writes:

During the day, the owl would sun himself [on the branch] before falling into a sleep that sometimes was accompanied by a low and nasal snore. During the night, I would fall asleep on the landing and above me hear, so faint, the whisper as his wings caressed the air on his flight to the forest to seek prey. (171)

While the anaphora of 'during' draws an implicit comparison between the biologist and the owl, the air glancing off his wings erases the somnolent anthropocentrism of the previous line: embodiment is shared, but not equivalent. The biologist's ability to see the owl as simultaneously human and nonhuman performs a delicate negotiation that recognises the owl as kin, without eliding his avian alterity.

Within an anthropocentric worldview, the Weird alterity of the nonhuman (including but not limited to tentacles, fungi, and deep-sea sponges) is divided into neat taxonomic groups, based on organic morphology and binomial nomenclature. Such methods of classification simultaneously obfuscate difference through a process of homogenization, while necessarily defining species based on characteristics that are 'visible' to the human observer (the word 'species' is etymologically derived from the Latin *specere*, 'to look'). Classification thus emphasises ocularcentric modes of knowing, based on both how something looks and the act of looking itself. In this double-sight, looking creates a methodological gap between observer and observed. Yet VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy challenges such ocularcentricity. When the

owl dies, the biologist finds his corpse in the forest. But after thirty years of living-together, she cannot bring herself to take samples:

My microscope had long since been abandoned in a corner of the lighthouse grounds, overtaken by mold, half buried there by the simple passage of years. I had no heart to take samples, to discover what I already knew: that, in the end, there was nothing a microscope could tell me about the owl that I had not learned from my many years of close interactions and observation. (*Acceptance* 180-81)

The biologist's grief creates, as Haraway puts it, 'a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying' – a Chthulucene kinship not undone in death (*Staying with the Trouble* 39). The owl's death also solidifies the biologist's conviction that her methodology is 'useless' inside Area X (*Annihilation* 193). With a microscope, 'the world' is mediated by a prosthetic eye; while it allows us to see things that are too small to be seen with the naked eye, such looking is also myopic. The lens of the microscope excludes that which is not under glass, so that the world is reduced to a sum of its parts. Yet in *Acceptance*, 'close interactions' eclipse 'scientific knowing'. These close interactions take the form of habitual gestures, which produce mutual trust over time. Hunting, gathering, collecting twigs, and nesting are avian-human gestures that weave together knowledges and meaning. Eventually, the biologist experiences a subjective orientation: myopia gives way to a kaleidoscopic and multispecies looking.

But *Acceptance* is not the only novel of VanderMeer's to explore the possibilities of avian sight. His most recent novel, *Hummingbird Salamander*, follows Jane (a pseudonym) as she is drawn into a world of animal smuggling and eco-terrorism. The novel begins when 'Jane' is given an anonymous note that leads to a storage facility and a taxidermy hummingbird: the rare (and fictional) *Selastrephes griffin*. This hummingbird initiates the novel's narrative, by entangling Jane in the life of the enigmatic eco-activist Silvina Vilicampa. Facts about the *Selastrephes griffin* are also woven throughout the novel, simultaneously interrupting the narrative and creating textual nests in the codical architecture:

S. Griffin uses its bill as a crochet hook to incorporate light-weight lichen, moss, and downy plant material into a hammock for her young. Nests are attached to the needles

with cobwebs. One or two uniformly white eggs are incubated in the nest for several weeks. The female coats each egg with bacteria-rich fluid she excretes, which protects her brood from harmful diseases that can colonize the young as they emerge from the eggs. (*Hummingbird* 62)

Notably, these ‘nests’ reinscribe the *Selastrephes griffin*’s absence from the novel – the only corporeal materialisation of this species is the lifeless taxidermy that serves as an index of their impending extinction. Yet the climax of the novel is perhaps the most relevant to this interspecies interrogation: an experimental drug that would allow humans to ‘see’ like a hummingbird – to optically experience the world through avian eyes, ‘to see colours no human can see’ (*Hummingbird* 301). For Silvina, this is the only way to mitigate human-driven species extinction. As she writes, ‘[w]e must change to see the world change’ (*Hummingbird* 301). As in *The Southern Reach* trilogy, avian death invites the human into an act of empathetic, multispecies looking. Instead of falling into Anthropocene pessimism, Silvina inhabits the Chthulucene. And like Haraway, Silvina knows that ‘[r]enewed generative flourishing cannot grow from myths of immortality or failure to become-with the dead and extinct’ (*Staying with the Trouble* 101). Silvina’s mourning – her hyper-awareness of species extinction – thus becomes a transformative catalyst that reveals the possibility of radical avian alterity.

Set in a dystopian city colonized by ‘the Company’, the titular character of VanderMeer’s 2017 novel *Borne* is a polymorphic being: a small ‘emerald green’ blob found entangled in the fur of Mord, a flying bear engineered by the Company (*Borne* 6). Rescued by Rachel, Borne quickly grows in size, transforming into a vase-like creature with tentacles. However, he (Rachel’s seemingly arbitrary choice of pronoun for Borne) soon learns how to speak and physically mimic human behaviour. The tension of the novel arises from the ways in which Borne both conforms to and resists Rachel’s loving anthropomorphism, as he ‘amplifies rather than simplifies the affective possibilities’ of relationships with nonhuman kin (Gormley 68). By inhabiting identity in myriad diffuse and weird ways, Borne’s alterity forces Rachel to reconsider her own ontological given-ness. The narrative of *Borne* also challenges the ‘elsewhere’ of liberal humanism. Before Rachel arrived in the city, she lived ‘elsewhere’ – an island we are told has been erased by ‘rising seas’ (*Borne* 48). Later in the novel, Rachel reminisces about this

‘elsewhere’ and recounts her memory of visiting a restaurant with her parents. She tells us that alongside the ‘silverware and bone-white napkins’, were ‘little biotech creatures that looked like fluffy baby birds mixed with the adorable hamsters’ (169-170). Rachel recalls that her mother ‘loved the biotech, wondered where it came from; something so advanced had to come from a place that had security, that could feed and house people. Biotech, she had come to believe, created a trail—became a kind of clue as to where might be safe’ (*Borne* 170). For Rachel’s mother, biotech becomes a symbol of an ‘imagined elsewhere’ where the seas are not rising (‘The Promises’ 295). Following the biotech trail, Rachel and her family eventually cross the threshold into this technological future, only for her parents to be murdered, in the very dystopian city where Borne and Rachel now live. The promise of safety is met with brutality: it turns out that there is no ‘elsewhere’, only the reality of global warming, war, and bio-engineered monsters. In *Borne*, we are always right *here*.¹⁵

Nested in Borne and Rachel’s world, *The Strange Bird* re-presents VanderMeer’s earlier novel (*Borne*) through the eyes of the biotech itself. By re-presenting the narrative of *Borne* through the tetrachromat-eyes of the Strange Bird, a different perspective on the ‘dystopian’ city materialises. Created in a laboratory, the eponymous protagonist of the novella is a bird that is ‘not strictly avian’ (*The Strange Bird* 9). The novella follows the Strange Bird as she flies over the ruined city, looking for ‘a place where there might be others of her kind’ (7). When the Strange Bird is captured by the Magician, a sadistic bioengineer and the antagonist of *Borne*, her wings are taken and she is turned into a garment, specifically the Magician’s cloak – an event depicted in the narrative of *Borne*.¹⁶ The narrative of the earlier novel is thus retold by the bird-turned-cloak in a dizzying reorientation of perspective. The Strange Bird does not die in the conventional sense, but – perhaps like the biologist’s husband – becomes something else. Towards the end of the novella, Wick (Rachel and Borne’s brooding companion), discovers the Strange Bird (now cloak) and analyses her biological composition:

Too much human in it. Very complex. Nervous system modified. Can still see those places. Neurons redistributed, not just in what was the head, but in the *feathers*, which are a hybrid, contain cephalopod. That is why she can still think – her brains are all over her body. I don’t know if the Magician knew that. (*The Strange Bird* 95)

Paying tribute to the original 'monsters' of the Weird, VanderMeer evokes the cephalopod – a move that is undoubtedly tentacular in form. Cephalopods contain a neuron cluster in each tentacle, which cumulatively comprise 70% of the total nervous system. These function as eight small, roving 'brains' that communicate with the central cortex: for an octopus, thought is distributed. The feathers of the Strange Bird perform this distributed knowing, as external appendages that both expand her phenomenological Umwelt and embody the form of the novella itself. Like VanderMeer's other works, *The Strange Bird* reveals the ability of our nonhuman kin to think from multiple places at once. Instead of a cosmic 'elsewhere', VanderMeer's Chthulucene 'monsters' inhabit a shifting multiplicity of tetrachromatic 'heres'.

However, the Strange Bird is not merely 'biotech', but a hybrid that includes the human. Having been healed, cloned, and set free by Wick, the Strange Bird (or a version the Strange Bird) follows an internal compass, which leads her to another bird – her once-human lover, Sanji.¹⁷ As rebellious former-employees of the Company, it transpires that the two women turned themselves into birds in order to disperse 'genetic material' in the wake of their flight, to reseed a barren world (*The Strange Bird* 85-6). At the edge of a dying planet, they sing:

And the beautiful bird broke into song and although it was not a song any bird would recognize, the Strange Bird could understand it and whatever remained of Sanji inside of her recognized it and responded, and the two birds sang one to the other, the dead communicating to the dead in that intimate language. (*The Strange Bird* 97)

In the final sentence of the novella, song arises from their overlapping differences, which map the contours of the Strange Bird's hybrid 'here'. Hers is a generative monstrosity, or what Ullstein might call an 'emancipatory catalyst for starting to think in weird terms' (94). I am reminded of Thom van Dooren's lively extinction stories, which trace 'avian entanglements' on the edge of species extinction (4). As Dooren writes, '[l]ife and death do not take place in isolation from others; they are thoroughly relational affairs for fleshy, mortal creatures. And so it is, in the worlds of birds – woven into relationships with a diverse array of other species, including humans' (4). In other words, when birds vanish (a single cassowary), so does

everything else (70 tree species). The philosopher Ray Brassier has also written that species extinction indexes a thought beyond the possibility of thought. Yet for the avian others in VanderMeer’s fiction, this thought goes sideways and unfurls. Together with Sanji, the Strange Bird takes responsibility for the myriad others driven towards the edge of extinction, shapeshifting so that others might have the chance to. Death opens onto new possibilities and, somewhat paradoxically, presents a roadmap for survival in the Chthulucene.

After years of living with the owl off the coast of Area X and resisting the ‘brightness’ inside her, the biologist finally gives into her own transmutation. Ghost Bird (the biologist’s doppelgänger) later confronts this radically nonhuman – and transdimensional – leviathan:

It had many, many glowing eyes that were also like flowers or sea anemones spread open, the blossoming of many eyes – normal, parietal, simple – all across its body, a living constellation ripped from the night sky. [...] In the multiplicity of her regard, Ghost Bird saw what they saw. She saw herself, standing there, looking down. She saw that the biologist now existed across locations and landscapes, those other horizons gathering in a blurred and rising wave. (*Acceptance* 195-6)

As she accepts her own alterity, the biologist’s attentive observations condense into form – a ‘constellation’ of sight that exhibits the ‘breathtaking possibilities’ of transformation within the Chthulucene.¹⁸ The biologist’s star-like eyes come to represent the glimmering apertures that New Weird fiction opens, evoking the radical possibilities of representational multiplicity. As VanderMeer’s fiction makes clear, the Chthulucene calls for a subjective reorientation – for monstrous multiplicities, for tetrachromatic epistemologies. Amidst accumulating ecodisasters and mass extinction, our status as the deictic marker around which all life is oriented must be torqued. Even as I write this, winter is not winter; outside my window in Antipodean Tāmaki Makaurau, fourteen Tūi drank nectar from the flowers of a *prunus campanulata* – a tree that does not usually bloom until late Spring. Will this endemic species shapeshift in response to rising temperatures, or will their song die out? Jeff VanderMeer’s avian Weird attempts to think beyond the limit of extinction, by reimagining the monsters of traditional Weird fiction as feathered tetrachromats. An owl, a hummingbird, singing avian biotech: all offer new ways of living, dying, and seeing the world together – a multispecies parallax that does not elide the alterity of the nonhuman.

Notes

¹ See Latour's article, 'Love Your Monsters: Why We Must Care for Our Technologies as We Do Our Children', *Love Your Monsters: Postenvironmentalism and the Anthropocene*, edited by Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, Breakthrough Institute, 2011, pp. 30-46.

² Particularly Timothy Morton's writing on global warming as a 'hyperobject' that cannot be 'grasped' in its entirety. See Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minnesota University Press, 2013.

³ However, Lovecraft's narratives of 'otherness' also arise from his own white supremacy. For a discussion of the ethical responsibilities this entails for Weird writers and readers, see Alison Sperling, 'Acknowledgement Is Not Enough: Coming to Terms With Lovecraft's Horrors', Los Angeles Review of Books, accessed 11 Apr. 2021, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/acknowledgment-not-enough-coming-terms-lovecrafts-horrors/>.

⁴ It is worth pointing out that Twitter borrows from the avian, where snippets of environmental news manifest as chirping birdsong. Moreover, in an Australian context, birds are everywhere. With about 830 species (New South Wales alone has almost as many parrot species as Asia and Africa combined), Country is a cacophony of birdsong.

⁵ For Haraway, 'tentacularity is about life lived along lines' – spider-legs, fungal tendrils, roots, sticks. See *Staying with the Trouble* 32.

⁶ In Auckland's first Covid-19 lockdown, I was also struck by the plethora of bird-related jokes on my social media feed: 'lockdowns are the only chance the government has to change the batteries in pigeons'; B.I.R.D as an (impossible) anagram for 'government drone'. I interpreted this not as paranoia, but a reaction to environmental defamiliarization. Suddenly, people were paying much closer attention to creatures that are otherwise part of urban architecture – insects, furry companions, birds.

⁷ Tessa Laird has proposed the term 'zoognosis' as a way to understand nonhuman communication in McKay's novel. See 'Zoognosis: When Animal Knowledges Go Viral. Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country*, Contagion, Becoming-Animal, and the Politics of Predation', *Animal Studies Journal*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2021, pp. 30-56.

⁸ VanderMeer has documented this project on his website: see 'The Yard', *Jeff VanderMeer* <https://www.jeffvandermeer.com/yard/>, accessed 10 Feb. 2021.

⁹ References to avian subjects as 'it' are quoted from the original. I am torn between changing them and preserving authorial intention.

¹⁰ The biologist's shift of pronoun from 'it' to 'him' linguistically underscores their developing multispecies kinship.

¹¹ Although, as Louise Economides and Laura Shackelford note in their introduction to *Surreal Entanglements*, 'ghost bird' also gestures to species extinction and Chthulucene ghosts. 'Weird Ecology: VanderMeer's Anthropocene Fiction' 7.

¹² Haraway herself draws on the pigeon as an example of multispecies flourishing (*Staying with the Trouble*; 'Tentacular Thinking'). Pigeons (alongside ibis and screeching cockatoos) populate the urban landscape; they gather in Victoria Park, occupy my roof and perch on the wires that connect us, intersecting with the flows of Capital.

¹³ Vint notes that Derrida 'is careful to stress' that his cat is 'this irreplaceable living being' and not 'the exemplar of a species called 'cat,' even less so of an 'animal' genus or kingdom', 10; 9. More recently, see Sune Borkfelt's introduction in *Otherness: Essays and Studies* 5.2, 'Thinking Through Animal Alterities'. Echoing Vint, he writes that '[i]n our attempts to know the "animal" [...] lies an attempt to know ourselves – both because the nonhuman animal is the Other that can mirror the human self and because, paradoxically, it is also a part of that self' (2).

¹⁴ The word 'try' takes me back to 'tentacle', from the Latin 'tentare': 'to feel', 'to lure', 'to try'.

¹⁵ See Louise Economides 37.

¹⁶ See VanderMeer: 'In this story, a strange bird with beautiful plumage had found its way to the city. A very strange bird that had come from far away. It flew around, lost and disoriented, trying to figure out the city. Where it was, exactly. What it was supposed to do [...] Then the Magician killed the biotech and used it for parts' (*Borne*, 208-209). This moment in the narrative is also reminiscent of Yagharek's experience in *Perdido Street Station*.

¹⁷ There is a notably queer dimension to the *Borne* novels. In 'Home on the Strange', Economides observes that the 'nuclear family' in *Borne* are post-nuclear – figuratively and literally – in their 'transspecies kinship arrangement', while humans and nonhumans are 'queerly entangled' in *The Strange Bird* (34).

¹⁸ See Arwen Spicer 51.

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