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WEIRDING UTOPIA FOR THE ANTHROPOCENE

Hope, Un/Home and the Uncanny in *Annihilation* and *The City We Became*

ABSTRACT

In this paper we argue that Anthropocene conditions call for and are already calling forth weird utopias. The Anthropocene speaks to a fundamental geological shift as humans become the dominant influence on global ecological systems. It also speaks to major cultural transformations as individuals and societies struggle to make sense of living on a new planet. In this context green utopianism cannot speak through projections of a holistically good society into the future, or with reference to ethical and political traditions from what has gone before. It must instead work with and through the end of the world. Only a thoroughly weirded utopianism can help us to understand how our transformed reality might be survivable, and how we can continue to identify and express desires for a better way of living with and in it. Much contemporary utopian theory rejects conventional associations between utopia and happiness or resolution, instead emphasising its disruptive functions and potential to generate estrangement and disquiet. Here we push those strands of utopian theory further to explore expressions of utopian desire in two recent examples of the new weird in speculative fiction: Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*, and N. K. Jemisin's *The City We Became*. Drawing on the work of Peter Kraftl and Susan McManus, we also open up a wider discussion of how ideas of the weird, the uncanny and the unhomely can enrich debates in utopian studies.

KEY WORDS: the weird, utopia, Anthropocene, *Annihilation, The City We Became*

WEIRD TIMES

Weird times call for weird utopias. In this paper we read *Annihilation* (2014) and *The City We Became* (2020) as speculative fictions that are expanding and reworking the utopian imagination for the Anthropocene.[3] Utopia is conventionally understood as being about happiness, resolution and fulfilment—the good place, the confident forward projection of a better society. But most contemporary utopian theory emphasises utopia as a heuristic for questioning the taken-for-grantedness of the way things are, with the function of opening up our sense of how things might be otherwise. In this way utopia can be seen as an inherently disruptive force with the potential to generate ambiguity and disquiet. Utopia refuses the comfort of unreflexively inhabiting our world as it is and instead offers the prospect of finding a new way to feel at home in a transfigured society. It occupies a cognitive and affective space in-between the good place and the no place. It is linked, then, perhaps intrinsically, to the uncomfortable, the uncanny and the unresolved. Here we work with some existing traditions in utopian theorising to emphasise elements that resonate with contemporary debates about the new weird in speculative fiction and criticism.

The era of the Anthropocene speaks of a fundamental geological shift as humans become the dominant influence on global ecological systems. It also speaks to major cultural transformations as individuals and societies struggle to make sense of living on a new planet. The Anthropocene Earth is one fundamentally changed by human activities and extractive capitalism—a damaged atmosphere; landscapes transformed beyond recognition; species loss on an epic scale; socio-economic crisis and disruption. Arun Saldanha argues that "we can call the Anthropocene an inexorably racial regime because modern society has at crucial junctures had to discriminate populations in order to expand itself."[4] The work of Francoise Vergès, Katherine Yusoff, Sylvia Wynter and Laura Pulido emphasises the role of colonization, enslavement, and racial capitalism as "preconditions for the current socioecological

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3   Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014); N.K. Jemisin, *The City We Became* (London: Orbit, 2020).

4   Arun Saldanha, "A date with destiny: Racial capitalism and the beginnings of the Anthropocene," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38, no 1 (2020): 14.

formation, in which human-caused environmental change is global in scope and catastrophic in nature."[5] The Anthropocene era is a reckoning with the deep-rooted causes and consequences of environmental disruption, with the extensive and uneven spread of the climate era's injustices and violence, and shifting knowledges with new and uncomfortable affects. What nature has been and what humans might become are in flux. There is no prospect of returning to normal. It is a rearrangement of realities.

In this context, fictions that offer weird tales, uncanny atmospheres, and inhuman agencies can be read as evocations of a world irretrievably disrupted and distorted by climate change, ecological damage and species loss.[6] Julius Greve and Florian Zappe argue that weird and fantastic fiction "can be read as reflection of the creeping awareness of fundamental ecological and geological crises,"[7] with weird fiction defying categorisation.[8] If there is to be a green utopianism in this context, it cannot speak through projections of a holistically good society into the future, or with reference to ethical or political traditions from what has gone before. It must instead work in the here and now, with and through the end of the world, acknowledging the monsters and ghosts that supposedly rational societies have made, and come up with new arts for living on a damaged planet.[9] In the context of such a metaphysical challenge, only a thoroughly weirded utopianism can help us to understand how our transformed reality might be survivable, and how we can continue to identify and express desires for a better way of living in it.

In this paper we read Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* as a text about how we might survive and adapt through Anthropocene disruptions. We focus

5 Janae Davis, Alex A. Moulton, Levi Van Sant, and Brian Williams, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, … Plantationocene?: A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises," *Geography Compass* 13, no. 5 (2019), 15. See also: Françoise Vergès, "Racial Capitalocene," in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, eds. G. T. Johnson and A. Lubin (London, UK: Verso, 2017); Kathryn Yusoff, A Billion Black Anthropocenes Or None (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, its Overrepresentation–An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review 3*, no. 3 (2013): 257–337; Laura Pulido, "Geographies of race and ethnicity III: Settler colonialism and nonnative people of color," *Progress in Human Geography*, 42, no. 2 (2018): 309–18.

6 See Gerry Canavan, "New Paradigms, After 2001," in *Science Fiction: A Literary History*, ed. Roger Luckhurst (London: British Library Publishing, 2017).

7 Julius Greve & Florian Zappe, "Introduction: Ecologies and Geographies of the Weird and the Fantastic," in *Spaces and Fictions of the Weird and the Fantastic,* eds. Julius Greve and Florian Zappe (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 3.

8 Roger Luckhurst, "The weird: a dis/orientation," *Textual Practice 31*, no.6 (2017).

9 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015); *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, eds. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Heather Anne Swanson, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2017).

on the *unheimlich* post-nature of Area X and the unsettling possibilities of the posthuman agencies that learn to become-with it. We also read N. K. Jemisin's *The City We Became* as a meditation on the racial and extractive capitalisms that have produced our current predicament. We focus on her narrative of a city coming to organic life through the more-than-human becomings of its diverse avatars. Read side by side, the two speculative texts generate a fruitful consideration of the strange geographies of the Anthropocene and the utopian possibilities they open up. These texts span the urban and the rural, the apparently familiar and the newly strange. In Jemisin's New York City we encounter the violence of what Yusoff calls White Geology,[10] a term that makes legible the contemporary effects of exploitative and extractive colonial practices and contests the whiteness and innocence of the notion of Anthropocene itself, with its undifferentiated notion of "humanity." In *The City We Became* we can read urban gentrification, alt-right neo-fascism and everyday xenophobia as critical to environmental as well as social injustice. VanderMeer's Area X offers post-natural motifs of exploration, nonhuman sentience and civilizational ruin. Both work with tropes of assimilation and otherness, depersonalisation and personification, and the simultaneous pleasure and horror of both the unhomely and the home to explore new possibilities of relation in the Anthropocene.

The Southern Reach trilogy (*Annihilation*, *Authority* and *Acceptance*) is widely noted as a popular and formally representative example of how New Weird fiction examines themes of an uncanny, un/natural environment through moods and affects of horror, awe and surprise.[11] Jemisin's new book (also the first of a projected trilogy) plays with explicitly Lovecraftian tropes to foreground the violence of white supremacy that is both creepy and overt, and to celebrate some supernatural entities and coalitions that can emerge to resist it. Clearly neither text remotely resembles a conventional fictional utopia, not even in its critical form.[12] But nor are they the climate dystopias or post-apocalypses that dominated speculative fiction in the early years of the twenty-first century. They do not stage warnings about what is to come but rather register the disrupted realities and the new possibilities that the Anthropocene has already brought. They do not imagine heroic alliances saving the world or small communities returning to what is left of nature. They invite us instead, in circuitous and ambiguous ways, to consider the different ways of being, becoming and resisting that might emerge through and against technocentrism, racism and social and environmental injustice. Both critique extractive capitalism and the alienated and ruined landscapes

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10   Yusoff, *Abillian Black Anthropocenes.*

11   Alison Sperling, "On not returning home: an introduction," *SFRA Review* 330 (2019); Luckhurst, "The weird"; Canavan, "New Paradigms."

12   Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1986).

it produces, and gesture towards better ways of living with multiple others,- locating forms of life and lively community beyond white patriarchal capitalist rationality and identity. So although both novels are, broadly speaking, ecological visions, they are not, unlike in an earlier era of radically ecocentric narrative utopias, contingent on stable notions of nature, community, political agency, and home.[13] They disrupt and remake those categories in ways that feel new, strange, disturbing–weird.

ANNIHILATION: NEVER GOING HOME

Can new weird fiction be utopian? *Annihilation* invites us to find hope as much as fear in novel and eerie spaces of transfiguration and in the gradual erasure of conventional forms of subjectivity and rationality. The setting of VanderMeer's novel is Area X, an uninhabited coastal site in an unnamed part of the us. It is under military investigation for a recent localized environmental catastrophe and appears to be inexorably expanding.[14] At times Area X is portrayed as a "pristine wilderness," especially compared to the damaged, depleted environments outside it.[15] The birds "sang as they should," "deer took flight"; the scenes are framed by ocean waves and clean fresh air.[16] But the narrative dwells too on spaces and scents of rot, decay and fungus, and presents alien and often frightening animals intruding into otherwise peaceful spaces. A "low moaning" permeates the area.[17] Creaturely intelligences and hybrid beings fade in and out of the narrative. The human characters are depersonalized from the outset. As the exploration of Area X progresses, they are alienated from their companions and from the landscape they traverse. In the end, as the last woman standing, the Biologist becomes estranged from her own biography and memories, burnt from within by a powerful inhuman brightness.

Critics have found a kind of "fatalistic radicalism" and even "new affects of hope" in the Southern Reach.[18] Area X figures an "alternative order," an insistence that we attend to a transfigured reality in the here and now. In this the narrative, as Gry Ulstein points out, refuses the linear temporal frame of prophecy, progress and projection that has framed climate models as well as

13   Lisa Garforth, *Green Utopias: Environmental Hope Before and After the End of Nature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018).

14   VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 94.

15   VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 95, 29.

16   VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 15.

17   VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 5.

18   Aran Ward Sell, "The war on terroir: biology as (unstable) space in Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy," *antae* 5, no. 1 (Feb 2018): 92; Gry Ulstein, "'Through the eyes of Area X': dislocating ecological hope via New Weird spatiality," in *Spaces and Fictions*, 131.

earlier green utopias and dystopias.[19] Instead, the "weirded interstitial alterity" of the Anthropocene crashes into the here and now with all its anomalies and impossibilities.[20] This approach "can productively question spatial categories like environment, nature and wilderness, and thereby challenge readers to resituate their 'normal' way of thinking."[21] The earthly home we thought we inhabited has changed beneath our feet–geologically, representationally, affectively. This makes clear the horrifying consequences of climate change and species loss, and exposes the failure and violence of extractive capitalism. It also exercises what Benjamin Robertson calls a kind of "hopeful terror" which makes room for "a new understanding of what we are or should be."[22]

The Southern Reach trilogy is particularly rich for thinking about weird green utopianism because it explicitly rules out grounding it in the motif of nature as home. An earlier phase of ecotopian novels responded to future projections of systemic ecological crisis and arguments about the limits to growth by urging a return to nature, simplicity and community. Some critics, notably Timothy Morton, have overstated the extent to which speculative ecofictions from the second half of the twentieth century prized the "Edenic local" and romanticised place-based refuges.[23] In fact, naturalised images in many of these texts, for example Ursula K. Le Guin's *Always Coming Home* and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Pacific Edge*, were always complex.[24] These utopias complicate visions of nature as knowable, pastoral, comforting and local with glimpses of unsettling wilderness, capitalist ruin and transhuman subjectivity. It is true, however, that these ecocentric utopias ground hopes for sufficiency and self-realisation in figures, narratives and metaphors of home and depictions of homely spaces. A sense of returning to an ecologically-rooted self, to a family home (biological or chosen), or re-making one's place in a small community frames each narrative. As Peter Kraftl argues, those fictions overtly argue for "a stable return to small-scale production and community life" and evoke "comforting, often ruralised images" of the good life.[25] In their imagined lifeworlds domestic spaces figure large: the messy welcoming communal co-op buildings redesigned by bio-architect

19   Ulstein, "'Through the eyes'," 131.
20   Luckhurst, "The weird," 1057.
21   Ulstein, "'Through the eyes'," 131.
22   Benjamin J. Robertson, "Annihilation and the historicity of horror," *SFRA Review* 330 (Fall 2019): 32, 30.
23   Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 51.
24   Kim Stanley Robinson, *Pacific Edge* (1990; repr., London: HarperCollins, 1995); Ursula K. Le Guin, *Always Coming Home* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1986). On disruptions to the Edenic local in these critical utopian texts, see Garforth, *Green Utopias*, 86–89.
25   Peter Kraftl, "Utopia, performativity and the unhomely," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25 (2007): 122.

Kevin in *Pacific Edge*, the drawings and descriptions of Kesh kitchens, pots and pans that form part of the fictional ethnographic fieldnotes in *Always Coming Home*. Both Le Guin and Robinson explore narratives of human characters learning or re-learning how to feel at home in their specific bi-oregional environment–Kevin's sensuous and spiritual experiences in the hills of El Modeňa;[26] Stone Telling's call of "heya" to the nonhuman people of the Valley in *Always Coming Home.*[27]

By contrast, as Alison Sperling notes, a central motif in *Annihilation* is the Biologist/Ghost Bird's refusal of the return to home, both literally and figuratively. The Biologist is the only member of her expeditionary party who survives a scientific mission to Area X. She does so, the book intimates, by giving up some portion of her human subjectivity and (later in the trilogy) physicality to become a strange new hybrid being. Sperling characterises this, citing Donna J. Haraway, as a productive way of staying with the trouble of Anthropocene disruption–of embracing the new, taking "pleasure or joy" in the unsettling and the weird, staying "in the ruins of the Anthropocene, to see what she will become."[28] VanderMeer's novel positions the Biologist as someone without a real home. In her life before Area X she describes herself as someone who "never goes back,"[29] and once there she reflects that there is "nothing to anchor me outside."[30] Her husband had appeared to return to their home after an earlier mission to Area X, but he remained distant and disconnected and died shortly afterwards of cancer. He "had not come back, not really."[31] In any case the Biologist was not, she drily notes, a "domesticated animal."[32] Her former life had been spent as a transient postdoctoral researcher. Flashes back in the text to her childhood show her alone in temporary and undomesticated spaces: her family literally seem to have lived in a motel for a time. The Biologist and her fellow explorers never make their camp comfortable or lived in. Area X is littered with "rotting," "rusted," and "half-buried" remains of former human habitation.[33] The buildings that provide settings for some of the most disturbing action in *Annihilation* are functional, symbolic and haunted spaces: an inverted tower; a lighthouse.[34]

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26   Robinson, *Pacific Edge*, 90. See also Garforth, *Green Utopias*, 89–91.

27   Le Guin, Always Coming Home, 20, 189. See also Garforth, Green Utopias, 80, 85, 90–91.

28   Sperling, "On not returning home," 24.

29   VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 46.

30   VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 12.

31   VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 58,

32   VanderMeer, *Annihilation*,155.

33   VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 5.

34   The apparent becoming-organic of these buildings, in particular the inverted tower, is flagged from early in the novel when the Biologist experiences its walls as "living tissue" which is "breathing." See VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 41.

The novel then figures a series of unhomely spaces. It is devoid of domestic dwellings, and it rejects metaphors of nature as home. The novel refuses its human subjects the comfort of feeling at home in their environment and suggests that the only hope is to learn how to inhabit landscapes that are unendingly strange and radically disrupted. And yet there is something invigorating, freeing and perhaps utopian about the novel's spaces, affects and events. In part this has to do with the depiction of a familiar world gone to ruin and disorient ingly overlayered with a vital nature. In part, as Alison Sperling argues, it has to do with the Biologist/Ghost Bird's narrative arc, her unsettling and euphoric experience of "becoming-other."[35] An existentially different way of living and being is shown as necessary in the text and it is tightly linked with a kind of joyous change. Its precise contours and content are unknowable—who or what might come after both Area X and our Anthropocene reality is emergent and tentative. VanderMeer's novel suggests though that it is productive to think of alternatives to the degenerated physical and social landscapes not as against, outside or instead of the weird reality that we now inhabit, but through and within it.

"UTOPIA IS NOT AT HOME"[36]

We have suggested that there is a utopian charge to the new weird landscapes of the Southern Reach and the becoming-other of the Biologist/Ghost Bird. But can utopia itself be weird? In working this idea through we extend and interrogate the idea of the unhomely that we have suggested characterises *Annihilation,* in contrast to previous traditions of ecotopian fiction that have centred on nature as a space of phenomenological dwelling and comfort. We build explicit connections between new weird Anthropocene speculation and theories of utopia as process, alienation, and the un/homely. For many contemporary utopian theorists, utopia is about estrangement and open-ended processes of questioning and critique rather than holistic images of the good society. By representing or gesturing towards an/other and better way of living and being, utopia relativizes common sense and defamiliarizes existing social structures.[37] Utopia makes the existing social world, our lived-in reality, contingent and strange. That estrangement can be understood as primarily *cognitive*, as in theories that emphasise the capacity of speculative fiction to introduce a 'novum' that invites the reader to epistemologically and ideologically de- and re-construct their world—as in the work of Darko Suvin, Fredric

35   Sperling, "On not returning home," 24.
36   Kraftl, "Utopia, performativity," 129.
37   Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (1990: repr., Berlin: Peter Lang, 2010).

Jameson and Tom Moylan.[38] Estrangement can also be understood as primarily *affective*, as in theories that emphasise the way utopian desires work in and through everyday emotions and practices to produce a felt orientation to the possibility of things being better.[39]

We might say then that utopia always has something to do with the strange, with an oscillation between what is good and what is unsettling; between what is and what is not (yet). As Peter Kraftl has argued, utopia functions through a tension between comfort and discomfort. Citing Freud and Heidegger, Kraftl explores philosophical and psychoanalytic traditions which emphasise the idea that the homely and the unhomely are not opposites but rather are always implicated in each other.[40] Uncanny effects and affects depend on denying or undermining what is familiar and homely–but in refusing it they simultaneously evoke and even affirm it. Freud's uncanny is about the domestication of the strange. The desire for home may seem to be about the attempt to return to or recapture a comfortable sense of belonging, but can also be painful or discomfiting. Utopia arguably depends on both elements of this tension. Approaching utopia in this way is one of the main legacies of its most influential philosopher, Ernst Bloch. For Bloch the simultaneous possibility and impossibilities of home were a central concern. Home or homeland represents "not . . . the beginning, but . . . the end."[41] To feel at home in the world is not to go back to a simpler state of personal or historical existence but rather depends on the radical transformations that would create a world "without depersonalization and alienation." In Bloch home is fully utopian both as a desired end and a driving, unsettling desire. Above all it is nowhere: "a place and a state in which no one has yet been."[42] As Jack Zipes elaborates, in the Blochian approach *"the real return home or recurrence of the uncanny is*

38   Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1979); Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: the Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005); Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (New York: Methuen, 1986).

39   Kraftl, "Utopia, performativity." See also Ben Anderson, "Becoming and Being Hopeful: Towards a Theory of Affect," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (2006): 733–52; Ben Anderson, "Affective atmospheres," *Emotion, Space, and Society* 2 (2008): 77–81; David M. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect* (Taylor & Francis, 2017).

40   Kraftl, "Utopia, performativity," 135.

41   Bloch uses the term "Heimat." As Zipes explains, this "symbolic term for the home that we have all sensed but have never experienced or known" was appropriated from Nazi discourse and repurposed. Jack Zipes, "Toward the Realisation of Anticipatory Illumination," in *Ernst Bloch: The Pugnacious Philosopher Of Hope* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 32.

42   Ernst Bloch, "Karl Marx and Humanity: The Materiality of Hope," in *On Karl Marx* (New York: Seabury, 1971), 44–45.

a move forward to what has been repressed and never fulfilled."[43] Speaking of the utopian charge of fairy tales, classical and radical, Zipes notes that they involve not a simple return to home but rather its *"reconstitution . . . on a new plane."*[44]

It is in this willingness to truck with the unsettling, to posit home as something strange and new that we have not yet seen, that utopia resists the easy resolution of prediction and projection (the future as more of the same). It is what differentiates the utopian mode from simpler and more compensatory forms of hope or optimism.[45] Utopia is *unsettling*. Unhomeliness, disturbance, even fear, might be better narrative and affective environments for genuine and radical newness than hope, love, comfort. How much of a step further is it to suggest that utopia is or should be weird? What would that mean? Utopia and weirdness meet on the territory of ideas about estrangement and the uncanny, affects related to disruption, and unsettling provocations linked to the confusion of ontologies and categories. We have explored above how the weird might exhibit traces of utopianism or what Ulstein calls a kind of "(dis)-locat[ed] hope."[46] But does utopia resonate with what is distinctive about the *weird*? As a genre of fiction, as Luckhurst observes, the weird tends to elude or breach conventional definition and canonical traditions.[47] But it does repeatedly speak to two elements: feelings of horror and fear; unsettling non-human organisms[48] and supernatural (and superhuman) forces.

Utopianism shares much with the weird as a genre insofar as it is not really (or certainly not essentially) to do with happiness, optimism or comfort, as we have established. Like weird fiction, utopia is about making reality strange. Indeed, thinking about utopianism and weird speculative fiction pushes us to recognise that utopian estrangement is not only *cognitive*, deconstructive and critical,[49] but also affective. It is about unease and *feeling* differently, as well as thinking differently. The possibility of the new, as Kraftl reminds us, invokes fear as well as desire. It may demand navigating horror as well as wonder. In global political contexts where fears circulate relentlessly, as Susan McManus argues, it is vital to consider the ways in

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43   Jack Zipes, "Kitsch, Colportage and the Liberating Potential of Vor-Schein in Fairy Tales," in *Ernst Bloch*, 156 (emphasis in original).

44   Zipes, "Kitsch, Colportage," 156 (emphasis in original).

45   These ideas are explored in Levitas, *Concept* (1990; repr., 2010), Anderson (2006); also in Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011), and Lisa Garforth, "What can we do with utopia? Futurity, realism and the social," in *Social Futures Handbook*, eds. Carlos Lopez Galvin and Emily Spiers (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

46   Ulstein, "'Through the eyes'," 131.

47   Luckhurst, "The weird," 1045.

48   Marijeta Bradić, "Towards a Poetics of Weird Biology: Strange Lives of Nonhuman Organisms in Literature," *Pulse: the Journal of Science and Culture* 6 (2019).

49   As in Suvin's model; see Suvin, *Metamorphoses.*

which fear and anxiety can perhaps be "harnessed for critical ends, such as the enhancement of potentially transformative agency."[50] Drawing on Ernst Bloch,[51] Lauren Berlant[52] and Ann Cvetkovich,[53] McManus argues that it is too simplistic in our current moment to think about utopia in terms of pitting the supposedly subversive potentials of hope against a culture of fear that renders subjects only "complicit and governable."[54] Instead she proposes a new politics of affect centred around the fruitful possibilities of ambivalence and especially the prospects for depathologising negative affects. Fear and horror, then, after Cvetkovich, might be a "resource for political action rather than its antithesis."[55]

McManus's arguments draw out some ideas already implicit in Bloch whereby we might think of horror and fear in terms of their potential for intruding into and interfering with what is supposedly normal, civilized and settled. As it functions to disturb and upset us, horror can bring oppressive and unjust social relations to epistemological, political and affective attention. For Bloch, the civilizing or socializing process is always about accommodating the individual subject to a hard place. It always involves the breaking down or breaking in of a human being born with the desire to live fully and freely.[56] At the societal scale, civilization involves for Bloch the rational transformation of the material world into something inhumane via processes of reification, commodification and instrumentalization. In literature at least, utopian resistance often takes the form of the projection of an alternative civilization, a re-socialisation, or pockets of collective struggle. But the weird suggests another route. The weird temporarily or permanently displaces civilization and the social to explore human confrontations with otherworldly or supernatural forces. In this confrontation, the weird offers two things to utopia. Firstly it enables a way of thinking the ecological "good" without recourse to the idyllic local, the pastoral or to nature as home. In Timothy Morton's terms, the weird suggests our unavoidable relation with the unhomely cosmological mesh of an expanding universe.[57] Secondly it invokes the nonhuman, transhuman and posthuman agencies that are such a vital part of the (idea of) the Anthropocene. The weird can push us past binaries of nature and society, object and subject, towards a recognition of networked and hybrid entities and selves that are both, as Jane

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50   Susan McManus, "Hope, Fear, and the Politics of Affective Agency," *Theory & Event* 14, no. 4 (2011), https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.2011.0060.

51   Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 3, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, Paul Knight (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1986).

52   Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

53   Ann Cvetkovich, "Public Feelings," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (2007): 459–68.

54   McManus, "Hope, fear."

55   Cvetkovich, "Public Feelings," 460.

56   Zipes, "Kitsch, Colportage," 169. See also Bloch, *Principle*, 928.

57   Morton, *The Ecological Thought.*

Bennett has explored, unnerving and enchanting.[58] The disrupted ontologies of the Anthropocene invite a weird utopia. Anticipatory and hopeful possibilities are within rather than outside its disjointed realities. In *The City We Became*, that weird reality is a living New York City. Those anticipatory and hopeful possibilities are embodied in the coming together and becoming superhuman of ordinary people fighting back against white supremacist heteronormative patriarchal capitalist society.

THE CITY WE BECAME: FIGHTING FOR HOME

> The speculative element of [the book] is simply that the cities talk and have a spokesperson or spokesvoice for lack of a better description, and that an individual human being can embody a city or city's power, I think that's the only speculative piece. Well that plus a vaguely Cthulhu-like monster from beyond. And who's to say that's not real too?[59]

In *The City We Became* (*TCWB*) N. K. Jemisin grapples with the complexity, harm and hopefulness of the city and its residents. In this section, we explore the ways in which "the city" as protagonist(s) allows for an exploration of different and weird forms of being, becoming and resisting that emerge through and against technocentrism, racism and social and environmental injustice.

All cities are inherently strange and ever-changing, and the urban fabric(s), rhythms and memories are central to the potential power of the human avatars of New York and its boroughs that Jemisin depicts in *TCWB*. As James Kneale notes, geographers' insistence on a relational understanding of place is also integral to notions of the weird; "networks, meshes, webs: the weird is made up of connections."[60] Urban scholars have long found the city a source of liberation, alienation and violent racial injustice; we can turn to Georg Simmel 1903's "The Metropolisand Mental Life,"[61] and W. E. B. Du Bois' "The Souls of Black Folks" of the same year.[62] Organic and bodily metaphors for the city, often mobilised by urban scholars following Simmel and the Chicago

58   Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

59   David Niamon and N. K. Jemisin, "Between Covers: N. K. Jemisin Interview," November 9, 2020, on *Tin House*, podcast, MP3 audio, 00:09:50, https://tinhouse.com/podcast/n-k-jemisin-the-city-we-became/.

60   James Kneale, "'Indifference Would Be Such a Relief': Race and Weird Geography in Victor LaValle and Matt Ruff's Dialogues with H.P. Lovecraft," in *Spaces and Fictions*, eds. Greve and Zappe, 96.

61   Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *The Urban Sociology Reader,* eds. Jan Lin and Christopher Mele (1903; repr., London: Routledge, 2012), 37–45.

62   W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903; repr., Oxford University Press, 2008.

School to give power to racist and classist notions of "pathologies" in relation to alienation produced by urban life, are subverted and critically reappropriated by Jemisin in *TCWB*.[63] While urban studies has been dominated by themes of regeneration, cleanliness, "smart cities" and demolition-led production of green space, there are other rich threads of scholarship which embrace the surreal, phantasmagoric, complexity and multiplicity of urban rhythms.[64] Jemisin introduces us to a "mille-feuille of worlds," where "cities traverse the layers"[65] and as such plays with the possibility of multiple New Yorks—"there are lots of them"[66]—which opens up the potential for otherworldly encounters.

In the novel New Yorkers *become* their boroughs to fight against a bioluminescent deep-sea organism. This "alien beauty . . . meant for some other environment, some other aether," functions as a "contaminant" in New York.[67] In her first encounter with R'lyeh (the monster) in the toilet stall of her art centre, Bronca (the Bronx) sees "an indistinct geometric shape that seems to be . . . pulsating irregularly . . . as if the stall is not a stall, but a tunnel, burrowed into the plumbing and lathing and somehow terminating *elsewhere.*"[68] The creature is sometimes embodied in a Woman in White, or R'lyeh, and also manifests as feathery tentacular entities growing on, out, and within the city. In playing with the "genocidal fever-dream"[69] of the Cthulhu Mythos, Jemisin takes what the so-called 'founding father' of Weird fiction, H. P. Lovecraft, saw as scary and inhuman, and makes it a source of power.[70] Frequently figuring his black and migrant neighbours as monsters and contagions, embodying his own racist fears in dehumanising others, Lovecraft (see especially his notoriously racist short story *The Horror at Red Hook*) responded to the increasingly

63   Vincenzo Ruggiero, "Fear and change in the city," *City* 7, no.1 (2003): 50.

64   See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Steve Pile, *Real Cities: Modernity, Space and the Phantasmagorias of City Life* (London: Sage, 2005); AbdouMaliq Simone, *Improvised Lives: Rhythms of Endurance in an Urban South* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018); Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartography of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

65   Jemisin, *The City,* 166.

66   Jemisin, *The City,* 164.

67   Jemisin, *The City,* 46.

68   Jemisin, *The City,* 125–26 (emphasis in original).

69   Out of the Woods Collective, "Cthulhu plays no role for me," in *Hope Against Hope: Writings on Ecological Crisis* (New York: Common Notions, 2020).

70   Jemisin has said that she is engaging with Lovecraft's "perception of the scariness of the diversity of New York and the complexity of New York—he found that terrifying, and he used it as the basis of horror. I find it fascinating, and I wanted to use it as the basis of power." In David Niamon, "Between the Covers: N. K. Jemisin Interview," November 9, 2020, on *Tin House*, podcast, MP3 audio, 01:37:38, https://tinhouse.com/podcast/n-k-jemisin-the-city-we-became/.

diverse Brooklyn of the 1920s with visceral horror.[71] Around the same time, Du Bois was experimenting with "speculative" sociological methods[72] in his short science fiction story "The Comet."[73] The story narrates a post-apocalyptic scene in which Jim, the last living man, experiences New York anew, walking in the streets of Manhattan without fear as a black person only "because the world is dead."[74] While Lovecraft's stories act out a so-called "restoration of social order" against apparently inhuman forces, Du Bois's science fiction reveals the "visceral violence" of patriarchal white supremacy that at the end of "The Comet" restores the "world" and the hatred that is its "substrate" involves.[75]

This *substrate* of hatred is threaded through *TCWB*, where the Lovecraftian monster detests all that the city represents and is, and seeks to replace it with a smooth homogeneity. The violence of whiteness embodied in the figure of the Woman in White/R'lyeh is present from an early scene in the book, where Manny (Manhattan) has an encounter with the monster near Inwood Park tulip tree, where Manhattan Island was purchased "for trinkets and beads in 1626," a place which causes Manny's skin to "prickle all over."[76] At the Shorakkpoch rock, named for the village that was displaced, Manny feels "strange and palpable energies"[77] and R'lyeh initially takes the form of a short white woman filming Manny and his companion on her cellphone, threatening to call the cops. This scene mirrors a recent incident in Central Park where a white woman called the police on a black birdwatcher. There is a long history of white women in public space being willing to deploy a dangerous force in relation to racist fears, as Jemisin has noted in a recent interview.[78] The Central Park scene illustrates the many layers of exploitation upon which the city is founded. In the preface of *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* Yusoff writes that the book is a "redress to the White Geology of the Anthropocene" and she is "particularly grateful for the courageous analytical and political poetic work of N. K. Jemisin's bringing together of race and geology across the rifts

71 H.P. Lovecraft, "The Horror at Red Hook," in *The Dreams in the Witch House and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S. T. Joshi (1927; repr., London: Penguin, 2004), 116–37.

72 Ruha Benjamin, "Racial fictions, biological facts: Expanding the sociological imagination through speculative methods," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 2, no. 2 (2016): 1–28. See also Les Back and Maggie Tate, "For a Sociological Reconstruction: W. E .B. Du Bois, Stuart Hall and Segregated Sociology," *Sociological Research Online* 20, no. 3 (2015): 15.

73 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater* (1920; repr., London: Verso, 2016).

74 Saidiya Hartman, "The end of white supremacy, an American romance," *BOMB magazine* (2020), https://bombmagazine.org/articles/the-end-of-white-supremacy-an-american-romance/.

75 Hartman, "The end."

76 Jemisin, *The City*, 58.

77 Jemisin, *The City*, 59.

78 David Niamon, "Between the Covers: N. K. Jemisin Interview," November 9, 2020, on *Tin House*, podcast, MP3 audio, 01:37:38, https://tinhouse.com/podcast/n-k-jemisin-the-city-we-became/

of broken earths."[79] In *TCWB*, we suggest that Jemisin is redressing the whiteness of Weird (and New Weird, arguably) fiction, by explicitly taking aim at the legacies of Lovecraft and the threads tying racist speculative fiction to the alt-right's penetration of all levels of cultural production, from social media trolls, memes to "high art." This places the book in dialogue with other recent fiction (*Ballad of Black Tom* and *Lovecraft Country*) that challenge Lovecraft's racism by turning his "weird geography inside out."[80]

In every crucial scene of the novel, we encounter the multiple geological layers of the city, painful histories explicitly centering the inhuman white supremacist origins and entanglements of the Anthropocene, and the layers of exploitation that constitute New York. Through the protagonists' intimacy with their localities, Jemisin shows us what was there before. She shares the stories of those who remember the city before the erasures of gentrification and horrors of financial capitalism (Brooklyn) and even longer memories of the city before white settler colonialism (Bronx); those who practice everyday solidarity as a means of survival (Queens); those who are unsure of their identity (Manhattan) and those who are defensively fearful of outsiders (Staten Island). Through the histories of the different boroughs, Jemisin explores the afterlives of geology and of indigenous dispossession of land and sovereignty. Yusoff argues that geology is a mode of accumulation on the one hand, and of dispossession on the other.[81] Through the different boroughs, Jemisin thinks *with* the Anthropocene's former lives of inscription, taking Yusoff's formulation of geological life and personifying it, bringing the city to life to fight back against a monster that takes many forms and is infecting the city and its citizens without most people even noticing.

Resisting this many-formed monster requires different strategies. Through intertwining the personal and urban transformations that take place, Jemisin explores the possibilities for creative and imaginative (re)invention the city offers.[82] *Becoming* in the city is a source of strength, where different socialities and solidarities can be forged: Manny reflects that "becoming whatever we are is changing us . . . [is] remaking us, but in different ways."[83] The avatars embody and become their home boroughs whilst retaining distinct subjectivities, selves and relationships. The novel dwells on each character's somatic and affectively charged moment of becoming-Borough as an uncanny transformation. In becoming Manhattan, Manny experiences "peculiar shifts in which the world doubles," where "in the other, weirder New York,

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79   Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, xi.

80   Kneale, "Indifference," 100. Victor LaValle, *Ballad of Black Tom* (New York: Tor, 2016), Matt Ruff, *Lovecraft Country* (New York: Tor, 2016).

81   Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes*, 3.

82   Jenny Robinson, "Inventions and Interventions: Transforming Cities—an Introduction," *Urban Studies* 43, no. 2 (2006): 255.

83   Jemisin, *The City*, 133.

his perspective is suddenly wider, higher. Macro scale instead of micro."[84] These shifts resonate with the heterogeneity inherent to all cities. The way that urban residents are transformed with and through attachments to each other and the city itself is expressed in a multiplicity of ways and is a source of power in *TCWB*. Brooklyn slips "into and out of the vernacular like changing purses, effortless and with ever-perfect fit" and tells Manhattan "there ain't no one way to be a part of this city," and that it "takes most people a year, at least, to really feel the city's call."[85] That is not to say that *TCWB* is a celebration of cosmopolitan conviviality.[86] The distinctive and distributed agency of each of the avatars demonstrates the ambiguities, tensions and difficulty of coming together and collective mobilisation under white supremacist patriarchal neoliberal capitalism.

The main avatar, New York, is a homeless man with a fairy-tale like quality: a young, plucky protagonist who seems to have left home and who after a heroic fight falls into a deep sleep which requires a ritual awakening. All the avatars have an ambiguous relationship with the city as home and there are insurmountable differences between the boroughs. Manny is leaving home to refuse a feeling of estrangement; Bronca and Brooklyn have built and rebuilt local institutions, reclaimed historic buildings from disrepair and against the threats of displacement; and Aislyn seems unable to leave her home borough. This ambivalent and visceral relationship to the city, alongside everyday urban encounters, the connections that are rendered visible through them (both precarious and rooted) as well as intergenerational knowledge, is crucial to each New Yorker who becomes their borough. Rebecca Evans notes that "representing the hearts of their respective boroughs, each member of the team bolsters Jemisin's crucial claim regarding those to whom New York *truly* belongs, and those who truly belong to it."[87] The personification of each of the boroughs is described as taking place in and through *connection* rather than separation–with families biological, forged and chosen, long-standing and fleeting. Key spaces of becoming and locating strength in connection are often domestic: the apartment in Queens, Brooklyn's brownstones, and Bronca's art centre where people not only work but live and sleep. We also see how home can be a trap, fortifying resistance to change and becoming a space of retreat in Aislyn's case. Fighting against R'lyeh means coming together, outside of the home, just as in the summer

84   Jemisin, *The City,* 85.

85   Jemisin, *The City,* 85.

86   Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (London, New York: Routledge, 2004).

87   Rebecca Evans, "Embodying New York: On N. K. Jemisin's The City We Became," *Los Angeles Review of Books,* July 30, 2020, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/ embodying-new-york-on-n-k-jemisins-the-city-we-became/.

2020 in New York, the George Floyd uprisings "reconstructed an outside of the home as they enacted an outside of capitalist social relations."[88]

Central to New York's resistance to the Lovecraftian Cthulhu-like infection of the city is the decision and *choice* to stick around, come out, and fight back. As Brooklyn tells Manny: "Everybody's got a choice. Whatever weird-ass shit is happening, it's related to the city, so the obvious way to cut it all off is to leave."[89] In choosing to stay and fight, the borough-protagonists are making an ambivalent choice to join a collective struggle; "Manny isn't sure it's safe to think of the city as an ally. Nor is it safe to assume himself to be one of the good guys."[90] If the book argues for the importance of forming alliances between the boroughs, it also highlights the necessity of temporary or fleeting moments of solidarity, which are central to the main battles of the novel. It seems that some New Yorkers (who are not the embodiment of the boroughs) have an attunement to the city that means that they see/feel the weirdness and the tentacles, a "city-vision" that Brooklyn calls a "need-to-know weirdness only."[91] This attunement means that different New Yorkers can come to the assistance of the boroughs at crucial moments.

There are many historical battles that are referenced in *TCWB*, intertwining New York's rich history of social and political struggle with the contemporary fight against R'lyeh: in the midst of one battle Bronca reflects that "even if she's gotten old and 'respectable' she is still Bronca from the brickyards, Bronca the scourge of Stonewall, Bronca who faced down armed police alongside her brothers and sisters in AIM."[92] In an important encounter, R'lyeh is embodied in the form of "interdimensional art critic Dr. White," who visits Bronca's workplace, the Bronx Art Center, with a collective of white men's rights activists, ostensibly legitimate in that they are also from the Bronx, called the Alt-Artistes.[93] They present a painting called *Dangerous Mental Machines*–an explicit allusion to Lovecraft–to Bronca, who argues: "I could see it if you were trying to turn a mirror on Lovecraft. Show how twisted his fears and hatreds were. But this painting reinforces them. This shows you New York as he saw it, the chickenshit little fuck, walking down the street and imagining that every other human being he met *wasn't* human."[94] Echoing the "shut down LD50" campaign, and numerous other contemporary

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88   Hannah Black, "GO OUTSIDE: Hannah Black's Year in Review," *Artforum International,* December 1, 2020, https://www.artforum.com/print/202009/hannah-black-s-year-in-review-84376.

89   Jemisin, *The City,* 132.

90   Jemisin, *The City,* 131.

91   Jemisin, *The City,* 130.

92   Jemisin, *The City,* 125.

93   Jemisin, *The City,* 147.

94   Jemisin, *The City,* 148–49 (emphasis in original).

examples of fascism in the contemporary art world,[95] Jemisin brings contemporary anti-fascism into this weird New York, showing the ways the city and its residents can come alive to reclaim it from the clutches of "the Enemy." Brooklyn, a long-term community activist, "believes that only people who actually love New York, versus those merely occupying and exploiting it, should dictate what it is and becomes," and as such "becoming a borough is just the literalisation of something she's always done, so she's okay with it."[96] This notion of "becoming a borough" as a weird or fantastical transformation has never seemed so literal as in 2020, where boroughs have been temporarily reclaimed from the police, and where as Hannah Black notes, "after the riots, before the winter, the city was like a creature in between exoskeletons. It turned out everything could happen outside."[97]

WEIRDING UTOPIA FOR THE ANTHROPOCENE

Both books are products of our uncertain and unseemly Anthropocene age and of a tradition of using the weird and fantastic to break with an oppressive or damaged reality and return to it imbued with the possibility of making things different. In this they share the "fantastic power of fairy tales," using the uncanny to "provide a conduit into social reality."[98] *Annihilation* asks what counts as (human) survival.[99] Perhaps so too does *The City We Became*, but only the latter is explicit in terms of where hopefulness can be found. Both deal with notions of irreparable change; with entities and subjects that are in the process of "becoming-other."[100] *Annihilation* is ambivalent in relation to transformation and what it might entail: the cause of Area X, the nature of its uncanny existence and the forces it exerts remain unknown. *TCWB* is more certain about locating the enemies, how to fight for the city's survival and change for the better. *Annihilation* suggests an ontological utopianism of open-ended process, the unfolding of a mutation or line of flight. As the title of the third novel in VanderMeer's trilogy (*Acceptance*) suggests it gestures towards a kind of radical acceptance, opening out towards new intra-relationships with a wondrous universe, the components of which cannot be securely identified. *TCWB* suggests a cautiously hopeful political utopianism of collective contestation and material struggle against forces that must be

95   See "SHUT DOWN LD50 GALLERY," accessed December 4, 2020, https://shutdownld50.tumblr.com/.

96   Jemisin, *The City,* 215.

97   Black, "Go Outside."

98   George Jean cited in Zipes, "Kitsch, Colportage," 152.

99   Sophia Booth Magnone, "Human Contamination: The Infectious Border Crossings of Jeff VanderMeer's Area X," *Somastosphere* 6 (2017).

100   Sperling, "On not going home," 23.

known and named: it is clear about the violence of Whiteness and neoliberal capitalism, it names its monsters and fights them.

Crucial to the utopian charge of both books is a play of tensions between home and the unhomely, comfort and discomfort, connection and separation, place and space, security and alterity. In neither text does horror or hope reside exclusively on one or other side of the equation. Utopianism plays in-between. It is through disruptions of landscapes and categories that these texts produce weird and unsettling affects. Motifs of infection are central to this disruption in both texts. In *Annihilation* the Biologist is infected epistemologically and organically by Area X. She is ambivalent to her situation, wondering what will be lost, open to what infection will bring: "I was unlucky–or was I lucky?"[101] In *TCWB* the citizens and the urban fabric of New York are undergoing an infection which seems only visible to some: "why couldn't anyone else see it?"[102] Gentrified downtown shops sprout otherworldly tentacles; the alien Area X is more like the real Anthropocene world than the 'natural' landscape outside it. These infections, disruptions and contagions are not fully contained or resolved in either book. There are no images of a better future nature in *Annihilation*; fighting off the infection does not result in a redeemed city in *TCWB*. But weird disruptions unleash a utopian charge by revealing the necessity of both living with and confronting eco-social ruin, environmental injustice, white supremacy and capitalist exploitation. We have shown in this paper some key ways in which utopia has always been said to work on and through estrangement effects and affects that are uncanny. We have brought this relationship into explicit focus and explored it through two recent works of speculative fiction which are refreshing the formal powers of the literary utopia and expanding the substantive focus of utopian critique in the age of the Anthropocene. Luckhurst emphasises that a hallmark of the weird is its refusal of the closure and the return home implied in the idea of the uncanny.[103] We can see here the value of this unnerving openness to Anthropocene utopianism. ▣

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101   VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 17.
102   Jemisin, *The City,* 39.
103   Luckhurst, "The weird," 1052.

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