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Ruby Niemann

The Living Word: Textuality and the End in the *MaddAddam* and *Southern Reach* Trilogies

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.—Hebrews 4:12

Over his untasteable apology for a cup of coffee, listening to this synopsis of things in general, Stephen stared at nothing in particular. He could hear, of course, all kinds of words changing colour like those crabs about Ringsend in the morning, burrowing quickly into all colours of different sorts of the same sand where they had a home somewhere beneath or seemed to.—James Joyce, *Ulysses*

Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between the written word and the world beyond humankind in two apocalyptic trilogies: Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (*Oryx and Crake* [2003], *The Year of the Flood* [2009] and *MaddAddam* [2013]) and Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* series (*Annihilation*, *Authority* and *Acceptance* [2014]). In these two examples of Anthropocene literature, the end of Man and the end of the Word are neither wholly separate nor entirely constitutive of one another. Both trilogies explore the ways in which a chaotic, lively, a-human apocalypticism is described both by and through language and, more specifically, human and nonhuman textualities. In this paper, I describe how Atwood and VanderMeer's visions of Anthropocene afterlives decouple writing from human agency and, in doing so, provide ways of envisioning survival after the end of worlds.

In both the *MaddAddam* and the *Southern Reach* trilogies, the written word itself becomes a unique link between the human and nonhuman,

the living and nonliving (either dead or never what the biological sciences would class as 'alive'), raising questions about communication, intention, and a postapocalyptic semiotics of the Anthropocene epoch. Both Vander-Meer and Atwood detach meaning-making from the concept of writing in a way that, rather than creating purely unintelligible text-acts, turns the written word into something more than a mere conveyer of meaning or even a creator of communal understanding. Language, which has always (or at least since Babel) functioned on some level to constitute an in- and out-group, in these texts forms either a barrier or a conduit between the pre- and post-apocalyptic.

"Where Lies the Strangling Fruit that Came from the Hand of the Sinner": Other-than-Human Eschatology and an Ecosemiotics of Collapse in the Southern Reach Trilogy

The three books of the *Southern Reach* trilogy follow the interactions different characters have with the location/phenomenon known as Area X. This region was once a stretch of sparsely populated coast (by context, presumably in Florida, although this is never made explicit)[1], known colloquially as the 'forgotten coast'. The region that later becomes Area X was once host to a handful of residents and abandoned houses scattered between the small village on the coast and the mostly-abandoned island that sits within sight of the forgotten coast, as well as two lighthouses (one on the mainland, functional, and one on 'failure island', defunct). At some point, thirty-five years before the start of the trilogy, an unknown presence creates a barrier between this stretch of coast and the rest of the world. Inside this barrier, things are no longer as they once were.

The trilogy begins with *Annihilation*, which follows a team of four nameless women (names being something that "belonged to where we had come from, not who we were while embedded in Area X" [Vander-Meer 2014a, 9]) as they begin their expedition into Area X. Immediately upon introducing you into this world, VanderMeer decouples the discursive speech-act of 'names' from the people who now enter Area X, indicating a disjunction between the thing being named and the thing itself; a theme that carries throughout the text i.e.to name something in Area X is to not necessarily know it at all.

The novel is narrated by the biologist, whose now-deceased husband was a member of a previous expedition. In order to enter into Area X, the biologist and her companions are hypnotised by the leader of the

1 In a blog post on environmental critique VanderMeer describes his realisation that "the Gulf Oil Spill had created Area X" (https://environmentalcritique.wordpress.com/2016/07/07/hauntings-in-the-anthropocene/).

expedition: the psychologist. This hypnotism acts as the first act of linguistic control, a theme that continues throughout the text. Characters are unknowingly programmed to respond to certain phrases and commands, the wording of which do not necessarily have an obvious link to their intended outcome. As with the names of the expedition members, the importance of the discursive speech act is not tied to the *meaning* of it but rather that it is said at all.

Once across the border, there is another act of linguistic confusion—a 'geological anomaly' is found near base camp. A circular installation made up mostly of a spiral staircase and rock walls, penetrates the ground. The psychologist calls this, seemingly logically, a tunnel, but the biologist insists with increasing determination on calling it a 'tower'. Once she, along with the anthropologist and the surveyor, enters the tower, the biologist discovers a repeating series of pseudo-biblical text scrawled in organic, living matter across the walls. This writing is both a literal and metaphorical element of the lexical reality of Area X, threading its way through the three novels of the *Southern Reach* trilogy.

The three novels are made up of a shifting network of texts produced by and between humans and nonhumans (Area X and its various expressions): "[t]he first novel is a journal, the second novel a lab, the third novel an ethnography" (Strombeck 2019, 15). These three different forms of writing begin with the most personal (a journal is written by one person, about their experiences, for, nominally, an audience of one) before moving to a form that is somewhat larger in scope but with a still limited focus and potential readership, until finally broadening into the description and study of a culture or society as a whole.

VanderMeer's trilogy imagines language "as something intimately tied to, and sometimes generated by, the world itself" (Strombeck 5). While the structuralist ordering of language sees the relationship between text and world as a unidirectional one whereby text *produces* world, the *Southern Reach* trilogy reverses this; as Andrew Strombeck argues, Area X is, in many ways, the author of both the Southern Reach and the *Southern Reach Trilogy*, most clearly seen in the ways that the world of Area X produces text. However, the very nature of the text produced by Area X is to resist intelligibility, as can be seen through the clearest example of nonhuman writing in the trilogy: the Crawler's sermon.

The most obviously organic example of Area X's inhuman writing is the ambiguously religious text that the biologist finds growing on the walls of the underground tower that provides one of the unstable landmarks of Area X, along with the lighthouse and the island. The writing first appears as "dimly sparkling green vines progressing down into the darkness" that

"resolve[s] further" into "words, in cursive, the letters raised about six inches off the wall" (VanderMeer 2014a, 23). The words are themselves "a miniature ecosystem" made up of "what would have looked to the layperson like rich green fernlike moss but in fact was probably a type of fungi or other eukaryotic organism" that teems with creatures that are "translucent and shaped like tiny hands" (VanderMeer 2014a, 24). This strange little fungus-forest spells out the semi-intelligible sermon that flows throughout the trilogy:

> Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead to share with the worms that gather in the darkness and surround the world with the power of their lives while from the dim-lit halls of other places forms that never could be writhe for the impatience of the few who have never seen or been seen (VanderMeer 2014a, 46–47).

This cyclical, never-ending, verdant scrawl is the work of a creature that the biologist refers to only as 'the crawler'. As the reader later learns, this creature is the last remnants of lighthouse keeper Saul Evans who becomes a kind of 'patient zero' for Area X. 'The crawler' moves endlessly down through the tower, leaving the fungus-sermon on the walls. The words come to Saul, who had been a preacher before becoming the lighthouse keeper, after he is pricked by a strange plant in the lighthouse garden, making them "a hybrid of human and inhuman expression"; Area X writing itself through the language Saul knows how to use best (Strombeck 2019, 7).

Benjamin Robertson, in his definitive monograph on the works of VanderMeer, describes the way that his novels "reject conventional notions of textuality by affirming the capacities of such textuality to create a world whose existence depends entirely on textual descriptions of it" (2018, 78). The textual materiality of Area X and the *Southern Reach* trilogy itself resist a textual intelligibility. Robertson writes that "Area X is not text, nor is it amenable to editing or even reading by a human who has understood the nature of his textual condition" (2018, 116) because, as per Robertson's argument, to be textual is to be legible. I would argue, though, that in the *Southern Reach* trilogy, Area X represents an apocalypse of legibility that is not *distinct* from its textuality. Area X writes; we know this as it produces text. What it does not produce is *meaning*. Robertson himself writes that "[i]f Area X fails to be a postapocalyptic landscape, it is only the case because Area X refuses the logic of before and after implicit in the prefix 'post-' and obviates any notion of apocalypse" (2018, 144). Area X

and the new weird more broadly represent a destabilising event, an apocalypse of legibility that springs from the new weird inheritance of post-structuralist thought. The New Weird is, in many ways, the Anthropocene writing itself (as the Crawler's scrawl is Area X writing itself through Saul); a mode that "recognizes the criticality of science fiction no longer works and that horror is the only response to this situation" (Robertson 2018, 31). Area X is an apocalypse of meaning that is, in many ways, the only logical response of *textual* beings to a post-structuralist, post-disaster world.

In the second book, *Authority*, the reader follows Control (or John Rodriguez), a third-generation intelligence officer, son of a spy mother and an artist father. After spending his adolescence in a town near Area X, he returns as the new director of the Southern Reach facility, tasked with finding out what happened to the previous director after she entered Area X as the psychologist. What starts out as a fact-finding mission becomes convoluted the more involved Control becomes. He discovers he is being manipulated by James Lowry, the supposed sole survivor of the first expedition who, Control discovers, in fact, most probably died on the expedition. Whatever came back seems increasingly twisted and wrong. Yet the more Control tries to grasp onto meaning in Area X and its associated territories, the more it slips through his fingers. Here, also, we see the continuation of the theme of linguistic programming—Control discovers he has been hypnotised by the hero of the first expedition, who is in fact most likely a defective copy of the original. Control is therefore under the control of this failed expression of Area X itself, using a scattershot approach to neurolinguistic programming.

After spending months in Area X after the collapse of the 'border' watched over by the Southern Reach, Control comes to realise that "nothing about language, about communication, could bridge the divide between human beings and Area X" (VanderMeer 2014c, 311), he "bridges the gap by abandoning the linguistic category marking the human, and merging with Area X," which "represents the novel's most hopeful assertion of humanity's ability to change in response to the challenges posed by phenomena such as climate change" (Carroll 2016, 81). It is important, though, that in a book that is as much about the process of textual production as it is about the narrative this text produces, the text quoted above is, crucially, *not the end of the book*. *Acceptance* is made up of several different intersecting narratives: alternating chapters entitled 'The Director' (which takes place in the period leading up to and including *Annihilation*); 'The Lighthouse Keeper' (which takes place right before Area X takes over the forgotten coast); and 'Ghost Bird' and 'Control' (which both take place after the events of *Authority*, told from the perspective of whatever has

replaced the biologist and Control, respectively). Chronologically, then, Control's leap into the light is close to the end of the narrative, but both the book and the story continues for a little while longer. The book ends, in fact, with words that are directly produced by Gloria (or the director, or the psychologist) who is both *from* and *of* the region that predated Area X. Gloria is a member of the Indigenous tribe that lived on 'the forgotten coast' long before European or extra-terrestrial colonisation made the area increasingly strange. After Area X takes over, she leaves, only to return as an adult, entangling herself with the new realities of her former home.

The letter that closes out the trilogy is ostensibly written 'outside' of Area X, but it is impossible to say with any certainty where Area X ends and where the 'real' world begins and this is certainly true for the Southern Reach facility that sits just outside the numinous border. Therefore, while the letter that closes the trilogy—from the director to the lighthouse keeper—is not produced by Area X as directly as the words the Crawler that was once Saul Evans scrawls on the walls of the tower, it is still a production *of* Area X indirectly. So, while Control "abandon[s] the linguistic category marking the human" (Carroll 2016, 81), the hope that the *Southern Reach* trilogy presupposes rests not (or not only) with the ability to 'overcome' the strictures of language. While Ghost Bird's narrative closure involves her leaving the tunnel safe in the knowledge that "[t]he words were behind them" and that the tunnel "was just a place they were walking out of" (VanderMeer 2014c, 327), the book itself continues on, not leaving the words behind until the director (the *author* of the twelfth expedition) writes her final words to Saul Evans (the 'hand' that Area X writes with to re/produce itself through text). As the director herself thinks, with the letter, "like the script on the walls of the tower… [t]he words aren't important but what's channelled through them is" (VanderMeer 2014c, 333). Contra to the underlying principle of semiotics, which focuses on how meaning is created through language and therefore categorises language as the structural conveyance of meaning, VanderMeer's narrative suggests that ultimately the *content* and *meaning* of language is less important than the production of language itself. This is congruent with the larger themes of the trilogy: that the search for meaning and certainty is an ultimately failed project. Area X resists interpretation from all angles—it destroys scientific equipment—yet also resists occult interpretations of its origins.

The reader learns more about this destructive opacity through the final instalments of the biologist's account, where she discovers fragments of records from an organisation called S&SB. The reader knows, thanks

to histories provided by both Control and Saul Evans, that S&SB is the 'Séance & Science Brigade'. This group was a supposedly informal organisation "dedicated to applying 'empirical reality to paranormal phenomenon,'" (VanderMeer 2014b, 37) centred around the Event that created the barrier around Area X and the strange phenomena occurring inside of it. This information is not available to the biologist, however, and she never puts the pieces together. After reaching the island (called 'Failure Island' by Saul), which itself holds shifting and ambiguous significance throughout the trilogy, the biologist finds evidence of S&SB in the form of damaged equipment and scraps of documentation that escaped being burned prior to the apparition of Area X. Without any knowledge of what S&SB could stand for she starts calling them "the Seeker & Surveillance Bandits," (VanderMeer 2014c, 173) failing to get a single word right. She tries to piece together "weathered (often unreadable) papers and photographs, and even a few recordings that croaked out incomprehensible too-slow words" (VanderMeer 2014c, 174). This is reminiscent of how most information related to Area X—both that which occurs in-novel and, often, the novels themselves—is conveyed. It is not entirely absent. It is maddeningly close to comprehensible, like writing glimpsed in a dream; one *should* be able to make sense of it, at some point there *has* been meaning to it (one assumes) but this meaning is now only available in incomprehensible snatches. The more one learns about Area X the further one gets from understanding it. The usual kinds of evidence—writing, photographs, videos—in fact obscure the 'meaning' of Area X further.

Language and meaning exist in an uneasy relationship throughout the Southern Reach trilogy. When Control first starts as the interim director at the Southern Reach facility, he begins his research into the most recent expedition and he counts the amount of words spoken by the members of the expedition: "4,623 words…7,154 words…and the all-time champion, the linguist who had backed out at the last second, coming in at 12,743 words of replies" (VanderMeer 2014b, 17). This is then compared to "the biologist and her terse 753 words" (Ibid). Control is captivated by this so-called "self-control" (Ibid). Appropriately for a section titled 'Incantations', Control begins to feel that "[t]he ghost was right there, in the transcripts since her return, moving through the text. Things that showed themselves in the empty spaces, making Control unwilling to say her words aloud for fear that somehow he did not really understand the undercurrents and hidden references" (VanderMeer 2014b, 17).

Having failed to master Area X through understanding, he compulsively attempts to circumvent this fear by asserting mastery over the ambiguous speech-acts of the biologist by asserting mastery over her

speech through the act of counting. *Authority* is partially about a failed bid for authority over the Southern Reach and, by extension, over Area X. It is also worth noting that the root of 'authority' is the same as that of 'author' (from the Latin 'auctor', meaning originator or promotor). The struggle for authority in the Southern Reach is the struggle for who can be said to be the *author* of Area X, or perhaps more cogently the *translator* of Area X (although anyone familiar with translation studies knows that there is more than a little of the author in the role of the translator). The candidates are numerous. There's Control and his meaningless files; the missing Director who has a childhood connection to the forgotten coast and is obsessively trying to learn what has happened to her childhood home. There is Whitby, a Southern Reach employee who has been 'infected' by Area X and now collects pages for an increasingly esoteric thesis on the 'terroir' (the environmental makeup of a region that affects the things grown there) of Area X. Lowry, the supposed survivor of the first expedition, now controls Control from Central (the shadowy organisation that controls both Control and, loosely, the Southern Reach) using neurolinguistic programming (hypnotism). These people provide fragments of Area X through their written expression but ultimately none of them are the author nor the authority. That honour goes to Area X alone.

The author(ity) of the *Southern Reach* trilogy complicates without necessarily contradicting Roland Barthes's famous thesis on the death of the author. Like Barthes's 'writer', Control "can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them" (1977, 146). However, unlike Barthes's 'modern scriptor' who "traces a field without origin—or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins," (1977, 146) the 'field without origin' that Control aims to trace is, in fact, participating in the act of writing *itself* as an act of inscribing meaning *outside* of but inherently alongside questions of authority. In the *Southern Reach* trilogy, the author is not dead, the author is everywhere. The tools it uses to write are themselves impossibly, sometimes grotesquely, alive i.e. Control, the biologist, the lighthouse keeper, and even the director herself. Barthes argues that "[o]nce the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile" because "[t]o give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (1997, 147). While it would be useless to pretend this is a space to relitigate the claims of an essay that is almost forty years old and has been critiqued to death at this point (please excuse the pun), I would argue that the use of speech and text acts in the *Southern Reach* trilogy indicate

that the struggle for authorial control and therefore authority over the text that is Area X indicates that there exists at the heart of this trilogy an argument that to give a text an author is not the end of the text and the hunt for meaning within it, but only the beginning of said text. Area X is, in many ways, an entity that represents the apocalyptic annihilation of authorship and of genre, a destabilising presence within the new weird that "is a nonattitude, a nonrelation, a means of identifying the measureless gap between the human with its knowledge practices and the weird planet without a capacity to be known" (Robertson 2018, 134–135).

The apocalypse of authorship can be explored via Barthes's 'Author-God' as a projection of mastery. Barthes writes that "[i]n the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning" (1977, 147). In the trilogy as a whole, but in *Authority* especially, this attempt at *disentangling* is a constant project. Control finds the words written by what was formerly the lighthouse keeper scrawled in the director's office cupboard. Upon finding this screed Control assumes that "the wall beyond the door was covered in a dark design," before realising that "someone had obliterated it with a series of odd sentences written with a remarkably thick black pen" (VanderMeer 2014b, 96) that Control reflexively first thinks (before abandoning the idea) is "the director's psychotic ode to the plant in her drawer," (VanderMeer 2014b, 97) which links a vegetal piece of Area X with the writing that Area X inspires.

This plant (apparently undying, with a mummified mouse in roots, brought back across the border after Whitby and the director's secret trip) is further associated with difficult-to-parse language when Control attempts to read "the sedimentary layers [of notes] that had existed under the plant and mouse," which "proved the most difficult to separate out" (VanderMeer 2014b, 155). The writerly properties of plants are a theme in both the *Southern Reach* and the *MaddAddam* trilogies, creating a nonhuman scriptor that sits in authorial opposition to the human writers.

The difficulty to separate the notes under the plant is both literal and symbolic, as "[s]ome pages were brittle and thin, and the scraps of paper and ragged collages of leaves had a tendency to stick together, while being infiltrated and bound more tightly by the remains of translucent roots touched by lines of crimson left behind by the plant" (VanderMeer 2014b, 155). This plant—an emissary of Area X—has literally 'infiltrated' the director's attempt at asserting her authority over Area X through

writing. Control's project becomes one of disentangling rather than deciphering.

In his writing on the 'author-god', Barthes goes on to argue that "by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (And to the world as text)" this refusal of meaning "liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases — reason, science, law" (1977, 147). It is interesting to consider this in light of the clearly religiously-inspired 'meaningless' text that forms the heart of the *Southern Reach* trilogy's theme of the resistance of text to interpretation. It could be said that the progenitor of the text, the lighthouse keeper, ultimately supports this assertion as he himself 'refused God' by leaving his calling as a preacher and his father's church to move to the forgotten coast. But by making this claim, I am already deconstructing Barthes's anti-theological project; I am assigning an authorial link between this 'meaningless' text and the hands (or perhaps cilia) that wrote it. Area X itself resists "God and his hypostases — reason, science, law," (1997, 147) but it also resists and undermines esoteric attempts to understand the phenomena that occur on the forgotten coast. There is no understandable reason — scientific, religious, supernatural — behind Area X. Area X exists to resist legibility.

By distinguishing between the author (or scriptor) and the act of writing, the *Southern Reach* trilogy (and, as I will explore later, the *MaddAddam* trilogy) reinscribes authority as meaning again. To have the ability to both create and parse meaningful text is to have authority over that text and the world that text institutes and conversely, to preclude others from being able to parse this meaning *disempowers* them, leaving them at the mercy of a force beyond their control. Frequently, characters in the *Southern Reach* trilogy realise that Area X (or whatever created it) is *not* thoughtless or unknowable, but rather that they (the human or almost-human characters) are not capable of recognising the level at which Area X makes decisions and that, in turn, Area X does not recognise them as sentient beings. To know or understand Area X (if that is even possible) is to no longer be able to articulate oneself in a way that makes sense to humans.

As I move into discussing Atwood's exploration of language after the end of humanity (or at least human mastery), I want to pause here to ask the question implied by the title of this paper: do the novels of the *Southern Reach* trilogy constitute apocalyptic fiction? Are they dystopian? Do they, ultimately, constitute an exploration of 'the end' and if they do, how is this 'end' presented? I argue, as Robertson does, that these texts

operate in an apocalyptic mode *from a human perspective*, but that by necessity the 'new weird' seeks to look beyond this limited perspective. In Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending*, he writes that "the paradigms of apocalypse continue to lie under our ways of making sense of the world" (1967, 28). It is the idea of apocalypse — this promise of a proverbial ending — that makes humanity legible to itself. This is the purpose for my return to post-structuralism as a way to understand the supposed apocalypses in these novels. If the apocalypse is the symbolic, structural ground by which our own lives are made legible to ourselves, then it can also be theorised that the ways in which this sense of legibility is deliberately withheld in the *Southern Reach* trilogy (making their claims to 'post-apocalyptic' uncertain, as Robertson notes), then VanderMeer's approach to an illegible yet textual linguistic apocalyptic mien that nevertheless refuses the concrete legibility of an apocalypse withholds the sense of an ending that offers a comforting structure to both apocalyptic narratives and human lives. Moving into the *MaddAddam* trilogy I look at how Atwood's exploration of language functions as a commentary on 'the end', and how the post-structuralist and deconstructionist ways of reading the apocalypse offer arresting approaches towards a legible, cohesive understanding of apocalyptic thought.

Death and the Mnemotechnic Archive of Language in the *MaddAddam* Trilogy

Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy is, like the *Southern Reach* trilogy, not a single cohesive exploration of one character or story across three books. Similar to VanderMeer's novels, Atwood's trilogy breaks cohesive structure, with each book being narrated in a different way. The first book, *Oryx and Crake*, is the most straightforward novel of the three. Like *Annihilation*, it is the single perspective of a character who finds themself alone in a much-changed and unfamiliar landscape that is, if not hostile to humans, then entirely indifferent to them. Jimmy, now Snowman in the present-tense of the novel, is the unscientific ('word person') son of two genius geneticists in a near-future bio-dystopia where society is rigidly divided along class lines that are defined by proximity to the scientific corporations ('corps') that run North American society through their genetic manipulation of human, animals, and plants.

The *MaddAddam* trilogy follows the experiences of several characters after a genetically engineered pandemic annihilates the majority of the population. In the first novel, Jimmy (who takes to calling himself Snow-

man after the pandemic) is a useless humanities major who believes himself to be the last genetically 'pure' human. He has been left in charge of the genetically modified human-animal hybrids called the Crakers, named for the man who both created them and unleashed the world-ending virus: Jimmy's best friend Crake.

Jimmy is a young man with an affinity for words in a society that is both careless of the utilisation of wordcraft while, at the same time, fundamentally reliant on words to promote and exploit the scientific creations turned out by the Corps, foregrounding the "recombinative nature of language, and implicitly [relating] it to the highly recombinant technoscience of the novel" (Cooke 2006, 118). Jimmy believes in the value of words, telling himself "[h]ang on to the words […] the odd words, the old words, the rare ones […;] [w]hen they're gone out of his head, these words, they'll be gone everywhere, forever" (Atwood 2003, 68). To Jimmy, the disappearance of these words is equivalent to the disappearance of himself as an individual and the supposedly-extinct species he represents: humankind. However, the words he is hanging on to—"*Valance. Norn. Serendipity. Pibroch. Lubricious*" (Ibid)—are removed from any context or meaning. It is not the *content* of the words that matters to Jimmy, it is their *existence*, and the way that they prove his *own* continued existence.

Language and death are linked throughout the *MaddAddam* trilogy in a similar way. Both the text and the characters within it mark the death of most of the human race—as well as the loss of the cultural forms attendant to it—with an obsessive archiving and reproduction of language. Jimmy ties his own personhood and the final remnants of his almost extinct civilisation to the continuation of these words, turning them (and by extension himself) into a memorial. This is an early indication of a theme that appears throughout the trilogy: the relationship between the written word (or the lack of it) and survival. In this world, language is an essential marker of acceptance into various groups (each group has its own jargon, codes, texts). Language in the *MaddAddam* trilogy is connected to the way that "[t]he human species, Atwood suggests, distinguishes itself from other life forms through storytelling" (Keck 2018, 37). When Zeb is about to die on a mountain, "[i]mminent death threatens him with the loss of language and storytelling and, therefore, the ability to distinguish his self from the living matter that surrounds him (Keck 2018, 37). "Soon," Zeb thinks to himself, "he'd be overgrown, one with the moss" (Atwood 2014, 80). Language is essential to forestalling 'the end', either of the self or of the world.

In book two, *The Year of the Flood*, the textual structure of trilogy begins to fragment further. The novel is told from the perspective of two women from an eco-religious sect known as the God's Gardeners. Toby is a woman from the 'Pleeblands' (non-Corp suburbs that are home to the people who are the end-consumers of the products the Corps make). She joins the Gardeners after both of her parents die and she is faced with the prospect of being murdered by her abusive boss at the burger stand where she works. Toby recounts the splintering of the God's Gardeners into two sects — the Gardeners and the bio-hacking eco-terrorist organisation 'MaddAddam', led by her romantic interest Zeb. The second half of the narrative is told from the perspective of Ren, a young exotic dancer who had been a God's Gardener alongside Toby when she was a child. Both Ren and Toby recall their lives leading up to the plague (known as 'the Waterless Flood' amongst Gardeners) from their isolated strongholds: Toby in an abandoned health spa; Ren in the 'clean room' of the strip club she works at, having luckily been quarantined there at the time of the outbreak due to an unrelated potential exposure to an STI. In a seemingly minor distinction that becomes important later, Ren's narrative is written in first person while Toby's is written in third.

The third novel, *MaddAddam*, fractures further. The frame narrative is told (once again in third person) from Toby's perspective, interposed with fables of the pre-apocalypse that she tells the Crakers: a task that originally fell to Jimmy, who is now in a coma due to his infected foot. These stories are mostly harvested from MaddAddamite Zeb's life. Zeb tells Toby raw versions of his life during their nights together and, in a Scheherazade-like series of story-filtrations, Toby repackages them to be appropriate for the Crakers. At the end of the book, the frame narrative expands further. It becomes the story of Blackbeard, a young Craker boy whom Toby teaches to read. This changes the reader's understanding of the trilogy as a whole; suddenly one wonders if all the third-person narratives (both Toby's in *Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam*, as well as all of Jimmy's in *Oryx and Crake*) are recordings or suppositions made by Blackbeard after their deaths. Ren's first-person narrative gives her an agency and presence over her own narrative that is not afforded to Toby or Jimmy, who are both dead by the time the trilogy closes on Blackbeard's speech to his fellow Crakers. This stylistic choice foregrounds the agential importance of speech and text acts in the trilogy and the implications of authorial power and *ownership* over these acts.

Modes and methods of communication — particularly written language — become an important way of exploring personhood, identity, and flawed notions of individuality. Alan Stoekl, commenting on Maurice

Blanchot's theory of language, writes that "the word institutes the object, the world, and in that very act it annihilates it, and along with it the author of the word" (2006, 48). This makes language and the movement towards symbolic intelligibility always-already an act of mutually assured destruction of the self/other (48). As in the *Southern Reach* trilogy, the *MaddAddam* trilogy indicates an essential violence in the attempt at mastery implied by the use of symbolic language to convey meaning.

It must be noted that when I use 'symbolic language' I am referring both to the higher-order language of symbolism and also written words (literally symbols used to convey language). Although the Crakers are capable of speech from the beginning of the trilogy, their adaptation of written language is symbolically similar to the development of spoken language. In view of the revelation that at least part of the narrative of *MaddAddam* is "the Story of Toby" that is written into a book by Blackbeard, it can be assumed there is a link between the spoken word and the written word as markers of symbolic thinking (Atwood *MaddAddam,* 474). The march towards symbolic intelligibility for the Crakers is positioned as a fall from grace and it is their access to words that marks the original breach — not only between the Crakers and animals — but also the breach between the Crakers and their goddess Oryx.

Snowman tells the Crakers a kind of original sin myth whereby:

> the Children of Oryx [non-human, non-Craker animals] hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. Actually she laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, and the other one full of words. But the egg full of words hatched first, and the Children of Crake had already been created by then, and they'd eaten up all the words because they were hungry, and so there were no words left over when the second egg hatched out. And that is why the animals can't talk.
>
> (Atwood 2003, 110)

There is no direct reproof in Snowman's story. The Crakers are not, at least directly, expelled from paradise because of their hunger for words (as Adam and Eve were for their hunger for knowledge). They *were*, however, expelled from ParadIce (ParadIce being the name of Crake's research laboratory where the Crakers were developed) and thus forever separated from Oryx, who cannot communicate with either Snowman or the Crakers.

In Snowman's mythology, it is only Crake who can semi-directly communicate with the Crakers through Snowman's watch. But in Snowman's hallucinatory world, Oryx (or Snowman's version of Oryx) communicates with him, while Crake is terminally silent. While the reader knows both

Oryx and Crake are equally dead, Snowman's relationship to them in their deaths is distinctly different. The act of 'lingophagy' on behalf of the Crakers leaves Oryx herself silenced as they consume all the words and leave none for her. Snowman, thus, passes on a cold rebuke from the Crakers' beloved teacher mother, i.e. the conveyer of the very thing that makes them more human than not; a rebuke that Snowman surely feels is aimed at himself. In Snowman's cosmology, that the Crakers can speak at all ultimately cleaves them from God, making the original sin not the desire for knowledge but rather the desire for intelligibility. As in the *Southern Reach* trilogy, there is something about the use of language for communication, and intelligibility specifically, that in some way degrades or lessens the very thing that one is attempting to describe (or master).

To understand why this should be one must explore the use and importance of language in the *MaddAddam* trilogy. The fluid and changing experience of human and non-human persons is explored in the *MaddAddam* trilogy through what Grayson Cooke calls the 'technics' of language. Cooke points to the outlandish use of language in advertising for the Corps that filters down to become part of the common language: words like 'pleeblands', animal names like 'pigoons', 'rakunk' (racoon skunk) and 'snat' (snake rat), as well as company names like 'OrganInc' (a play on 'organic' and what OrganInc is: an incorporated company that makes organs). Cooke writes that "the brand names and hybrid animals [Atwood] has dreamt up are indicative of the performative function of much biotechnological rhetoric (2006, 119)."

These technics of language become earmarks of hybridity and nascent personhood in the later books of the *MaddAddam* trilogy but they also indicate a loss of some kind of extra-humanist understanding of both self and world. There is evidence that as the Crakers acquire written language from Toby they become more and more inured to the singing that is at the heart of their culture. This singing is "beyond the human level, or below it. As if crystals are singing…like ferns unscrolling—something old, carboniferous, but at the same time newborn, fragrant, verdant," linking (as Atwood often does) sensations of deep history with a contemporaneousness that looks towards the future, as well as connecting this pre-human level of communication with nonhuman scriptors like plants (Atwood 2003, 122). This singing is so beyond language that to acquire writing, a concrete symbolic expression of human language, destroys the ability to experience the singing fully. Storytelling and writing makes the Crakers "more like human beings" and in doing so, codifies their access to the supra-human communication of singing into a ritualistic way of closing their storytelling ceremonies (Bowen 2017, 697).

The reader first sees Snowman having an adverse reaction to the singing because "[i]t reduces him, forces too many unwanted emotions upon him" (Atwood 2003, 122–123). Although all the humans have similar responses, initially none of the Crakers do; the singing is just what Crakers do. Later, after Blackbeard learns to read and takes over the role of storyteller from Toby, he asks his fellow Crakers "please don't sing yet" (Atwood 2014, 468) as if irritated. His speech—and the trilogy—ends with "now we will sing" (Atwood 2014, 474). This implies that the singing has become codified and ritualised, no longer a free expression of emotion. Developing the written word—and particularly the ritualised word—has lessened the ability to communicate or create *beyond* language.

In VanderMeer's trilogy, to attempt to grasp Area X enough to describe it is to misunderstand it, to lessen the complexity of the event that is Area X and reduce it to something as simple as what words can convey. In the *MaddAddam* trilogy, as the Crakers can access the written word (a mark of both the human and the humanist) they lose an essential beyond-humanness; become something other than themselves. If the messages the Crawler scrawls on the walls of the tower in *Annihilation* are the living word, then the words Blackbeard commits to his book using a scavenged ballpoint pen are dead, remaining so even when Blackbeard later repeats them orally to his audience.

There are two concepts at work here, then, depending on where you stand. From the perspective of the human race, Blackbeard's acquisition of written language is a triumph: the linguistic architecture of the human race will continue on and, with it, some part of ourselves will continue into the future; the outcome Jimmy longed for. But seen from the inhuman or a-human perspective, the Area X perspective that privileges a chaotic, vibrant, and unknowable future, Blackbeard's commitment to the written word is a tragedy.

Atwood's trilogy continuously draws a negative correlation between religion (and/or spirituality) and the permanent or semi-permanent use of text. The God's Gardeners are forbidden from writing anything down permanently, only using erasable slates. After leaving the Gardeners, Ren remembers being told "[*b*]*eware of words. Be careful what you write. Leave no trails*" (Atwood 2011, 7). Their reasoning is manifold. It makes sense that a group formed of dubious legality (which was working against the interests of the Corps) would not want to leave behind written evidence. The Gardener leadership themselves say that writing is dangerous "because your enemies could trace you through it, and hunt you down, and use your words to condemn you" (Atwood 2011, 7).

The concept of the trace or the ability to be traced has multiple meanings. In the Derridean sense, "[t]he trace, where the relationship with the other is marked, articulates its possibility in the entire field of the entity" (1976, 47). The trace "is the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent presence" indicating, like the spectre, the mark of that which is there yet not there (Spivak 1976, xvii). To leave a trace is to leave a sign of oneself even through one's own absence. To be traced is to have this absence marked. To be traced IS to have had form, to be able to prove one's existence and therefore one's own self. Like the etchings left in the chemical make-up of soil by super-accumulators, including kudzu and pennycress; to leave a trace is to have been *there*, to have been an active agent in the process of something becoming something else. The language of plants also speaks clearly and loudly in the *MaddAddam* trilogy: either the imagery of the "ferns unscrolling" as the Crakers sing (Atwood 2003, 122) or the cursive handwriting of twisting vines rewriting the urban landscape after the plague. These vines — kudzu — interestingly, will ultimately serve the same function that Area X accelerates, as kudzu is a phytoremediator that is particularly useful for removing lead from soil. In Mel Chin's 1991 conceptual artwork *Revival Field* the artist planted a variety of 'superaccumulators' in the Pig's Eye Landfill Site, Minnesota. Chin, when discussing this work, "relates the operation of plants to more traditional operations of art on metal and stone, such as casting, carving, and reduction — the removal of materials in order to make a shape" (Fuller and Goriunova 2019, 111). In scriptorial terms, kudzu acts like an etching, like acid on a metal plate to create a typeface.

The traces of humans left in the geological record make up the body of evidence for the Anthropocene. We might read the geological record as writing into stone with "the presence of an absence: the mark of the here-no-longer that nevertheless remains" where "the trace haunts the present not with an absence that ruptures presence, but with a presence that negates negation" (Luciano 2017, 100). One of the things that is so horrifying to humans in both the *Southern Reach* and *MaddAddam* trilogies is how quickly the traces of human endeavour are effaced or obliterated. In the case of Area X, on a chemical level, as whatever has happened to the forgotten coast has also purified the ground of any traces of the pollution of the last two hundred years i.e. clean air, clean water, no heavy metals contaminating the soil.

Marks left in the lithic record, like fossils, "are traces: lithic ghosts incapable of disappearing; material echoes of past life; forms that, by refusing to vanish into the abyss of time, prevent time from becoming merely abyssal" (ibid). The environmental signatures of the Anthropocene

(nuclear material, plastics, concrete buildings) are a kind of halo fossil of the human, the geological traces of the human epoch that are not traces of the absence of flesh but are nevertheless "lithic ghosts incapable of disappearing; material echoes" of ourselves (ibid). To leave no trace is to live lightly on the Earth; to not scrawl your name in the stone book of history, to not leave your dead words in a field to be vulturized, in a practice not dissimilar to that done by Jimmy's artist girlfriend Amanda, also a former God's Gardener. Amanda's artistic practice involves taking "a truckload of large dead-animal parts to vacant fields or the parking lots of abandoned factories and [arranging] them in the shapes of words, wait[ing] until the vultures had descended and were tearing them apart, then photograph[ing] the whole scene from a helicopter" (Atwood 2003, 287). It is, in fact, the exact opposite of 'the living word'. This act of writing is salient in discussions of language and traces in the Anthropocene as Amanda's art becomes a kind of primal communication between the Earth and those with the ability to read, using the medium of dead (increasingly extinct) animals. Is it not possible, and indeed perhaps imperative, for us to read the unimaginably vast numbers of dying species as a form of communication that, while less direct, is no less loud? The language of eating and being eaten seen both in Amanda's vulturizing project and the hasty scrawl of kudzu underscores the link between continued survival and language in the *MaddAddam* trilogy. Crucially, however, it is a language that is made to be decomposed. The living word is what indicates potential survival on a *planetary* level, as opposed to the personhood-species level indicated by the survival of the scriptor-writer.

Conclusion

In the *Southern Reach* and *MaddAddam* trilogies, both VanderMeer and Atwood approach textuality and apocalypticism from a perspective that decouples meaning from text in a way that makes the utility and meaning of language ambiguous and yet undeniably crucial. In *The Southern Reach* trilogy, it is not the *meaning* of a text that is important but that the text exists at all. In a similar way, the symbolism of language and text in the *MaddAddam* trilogy prioritises not the content of language but the *form* that it takes; quite literally, how the letters are shaped and how communication is formed. Language is a living (and dying) thing in both trilogies, becoming not simply an extension of the person writing but rather a thing with its own aims, means, and modes of self-replication. In both the *Southern Reach* and the *MaddAddam* trilogy, language (particularly

written language) at times seems to be something that is in *opposition* to the human characters that, in the standard order of things, would be the ones to both make use of it and indeed to create it. Both VanderMeer and Atwood connect these new ways of using language and writing (the agency it implies, the recombinative power of language unshackled from its reliance on human communication) to a posthuman future, one which from the perspective of humanity looks a lot like the end of the (at least our) world. However, what it implies is, in fact, a world of limitless beyond-human possibilities. This does not make it any less terrifying.

In apocalyptic narratives the continuance of narrative and language (and, in the case of the *MaddAddam* trilogy, specifically the continuation of *writing*) implies a level of hope for human survival. And, in a sense, this reckless evolution in the living word does imply hope. But, as Franz Kafka is reported to have once said, there is "plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope — but not for us" (Barnouw 1988, 187). Gerry Canavan, in an article on Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy that takes this Kafka quote as its title, argues that in the future of *Oryx and Crake* "[t]here is no hope for liberal individualist consumers living the pseudo-utopia of late capitalism" and that "[t]o the extent that Crake's murderous, Frankensteinian actions do indeed usher in a kind of utopia, then, we must understand that it is not a Utopia for *us* — not for us the way we now are, the way we now live" (2012, 154). In the *Southern Reach* trilogy, this point is ever more firmly emphasised; after all, Area X is a utopia of a sort. The air is clean, the water is pure, the effects of industrialisation have faded away. The biologist, at least, finds some level of pseudo-religious ecstasy in inching closer towards becoming-nonhuman but at the same time holding it back for as long as possible, using a combination of the written word and more direct methods such as self-harm. There are echoes of the lives of saints in the biologist's final missives, allowing herself to get close to the glory of what she calls the 'brightness' that will eventually burn her humanity away, but using pain and deprivation (like fasting, or a hair shirt) to hold herself back from approaching that final, nonhuman edge. Both VanderMeer and Atwood present readers with what is ultimately a non/posthuman utopia that, understandably, fills the humans perceiving it with fear and confusion. These new landscapes are not actively *hostile* to the humans who enter them they simply do not care about us. This is represented in part through acts of living and dying textuality such as the micro-ecosystem script on the tower walls, and Amanda's vulturized word-sculptures, or even the microbial etchings of kudzu. These are acts of communication that are not wholly removed from human hands (and, in the case of Amanda's art project, are instigated by human hands) but

they are nevertheless not entirely within the purview of humans when it comes to creating meaning through them. Nonhuman or collaborative other-than-human textuality represents a continuance beyond the end, but in the same way as Hebrews 4:12 describes the living word of God as "piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow," the living words of the *Southern Reach* and *MaddAddam* trilogies cleave meaning from language, signifier from signified, the writing hand from its own wrist, human from language and from the domain they once presumed to rule. The utopian post-apocalypse of the living word offers potential, survival, but no salvation—there is, again, hope—but not for us.

Ruby Niemann recently received her doctorate in English Literature from the University of Adelaide with a dissertation on Anthropocene theory in the recent works of Margaret Atwood. Most recently her work appeared in *Adapting Margaret Atwood: The Handmaid's Tale and Beyond*, edited by Shannon Wells-Lassagne and Fiona McMahon. Her essay on viral and nuclear adaptation was recently awarded the Contemporary Women's Writing Essay prize.

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