The Anthropocene and The Absence of Fixed Narration Structures: The Semiotics of Narration in Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*

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Abstract

In Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation,* the way the Anthropocenic set of circumstances is narrated could not be easily explained away through giving precedence to either materialist or structuralist narratologists. In this sense, neither the materiality of the environment nor the arbitrary categories and models of structuralists such as Greimas could determine the ultimate narratological scheme with which one could make sense out of such set of circumstances. Only through modifying the extant narratological categories and models and exposing their arbitrariness via indicating their incapability to contain the formidable materiality of the environment, one could reach a workable semiotic framework for devising a narrative out of the anthropocenic set of circumstances. Reaching this framework would be the present study's research objective. As its findings, the study recognizes that such a framework would not give the agency of devising narration to either non-human/environmental or human entities in the anthropocene, and at the same time will be the result of the uneasy, yet workable, coupling of these entities. This framework would also acknowledge the uncontainable nature of the environment in the anthropocene, and turn both human and non-human entities into mere actants that have no particular motivation. The study uses the modified narratological models of Algirdas Greimas and Amitav Gosh proposed by critics like Hanes Bergthaller, Marco Caracciolo and Jean Paul Petitimbert to reach this semiotic framework.

Keywords: anthropocene, annihilation, narrative, narration, semiotic, sender, receiver, object

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1. Introduction

While the term Anthropocene had been used by the biologist Eugene Stoermer, it entered the academic nomenclature when Paul Crutzen, the Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist, declared in 2000 that "the Holocene, the relatively stable and mild geological epoch in which human life had flourished for 11,700 years, was coming to an end, and that we needed a new name for a new epoch" (Vermeulen, 2020, p. 3). In the Anthropocene, Crutzen believes, human action has expanded its impact on the whole planet and its chemical and geological processes.

Although a superficial reading of the Anthropocene may sound like that Crutzen wishes to present a thoroughly humanized earth, this is not the case; in the Anthropocene, the earth is not under human control. Different manifestations of the Anthropocene are neither linear nor localized, neither reversible nor containable. For example, developments like population increases, intensive farming, and the unlocking of energy resources could make our circumstances better, but they have set off "ecological and chemical processes that interlock with one another in ways that destabilize the earth system as a whole" (Vermeulen, 2020, p. 10). Humans as the seemingly exclusive agent of this ominous 'interlocking' are incapable of predicting its repercussions, and in turn, could not be the sole narration agents of the things which they could not even fathom.

2. Literature Review

Critics such as Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, and Timothy Morton give almost an absolute kind of agency – even when it comes to the narration – to the environment.[1] In "Unnatural Narratology and Weird Realism in Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*", Jon Hegglund (2020) summarizes the overall stance of such thinkers as follows:

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[1]Among the most vocal proponents of this critical stance are Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, who maintain that narratives should not be understood as human-made semiotic artifacts, but rather as co-originated with the agentic narratives of matter. Matter itself, they argue, has narrative agency, embodying its own narratives in the minds of human agents and in the very structure of its own self-constructive forces (Bergthaller, 2017, p. 3). One could see such materialist readings of narrative-making capability of non-human entities in critical models such as Karen Barad's agential realism, Jane Bennett's vital materialism, Donna Haraway's material semiotics, and the various versions of actor-network theory advanced by authors such as Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, or John Law.

[Such critics] argued for an ontological model of nature that emphasizes its entangled, hybrid, and self-organizing aspects, in turn bringing the embodied human subject down from the lofty perch of Cartesian separation from the world. They questioned nature on a fundamental level, insisting that the material world is neither a purely ideological nor culturally variable construct. Nature is no longer a pure, idealized Other to a normative human Self but is rather composed of endlessly complex material interactions. (p.p. 28-9)

For these critics, the formidable agency of the environment in the Anthropocene takes away any level of agency that humankind could have on his gauging, indexing, and comprehension tools, including the available narration skills with which his understanding of the environment is facilitated. They maintain their belief in the narrative agency of matter and speak of the storied matter, arguing that "the world's material phenomena are knots in a vast network of [non-human] agencies, which can be read and interpreted as forming narratives, and stories. … Today's environment is capable of producing its own narratives" (James & Morel, 2020, p.p. 3-4).

Next to these materialist thinkers of the Anthropocene, we have critics such as Hannes Bergthaller who believe that narration "always involves the projection of human preferences and values onto a world that, in and of itself, is indifferent to them, that is not story-like and therefore, in a very basic sense, un-narratable" (Bergthaller, 2017, p. 3). This 'projection of human preferences' upon the environment gives the narration agency to human agents and characters and perpetuates the conventional structuralist and narratologist thinkers who believe a series of arbitrary constructs would assist us to get our most tangential and meager understanding of un-narratable things such as the unpredictable behavior of the environment in the Anthropocene.

3. Methodology

Considering these two critical camps, the present study proposes that the narration agency does not belong to either human or non-human agents exclusively in the anthropocenic set of circumstances, and the only way to have a narration/narrative out of such set of circumstances is to acknowledge the brunt of unpredictable agency of the environment on the stability of mankind's arbitrary structures.

Such a set of circumstances is masterfully depicted in Jeff VanderMeer's

Annihilation. Published in 2014, the novel speaks of the occurrence of an Event: "About thirty-two years ago, along a remote southern stretch known by some as the forgotten coast, an Event had occurred that began to transform the landscape and simultaneously caused an invisible border or wall to appear" (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 35). Following the overnight appearance of the border, inexplicable occurrences start to transpire in this bordered-off region, which is called Area X by a clandestine agency named Southern Reach Agency. This agency starts sending groups of experts into the affected area; an area which is a seemingly pristine and lush region of coastline separated from the rest of the United States by an invisible border. Life in Area X is not merely wild, it is positively weird: on top of black bears, coyotes, and huge aquatic reptiles, there is also an undetermined "low, powerful moaning at dusk" (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 5), and the crew later stumbles upon "a vast biological entity that might or might not be terrestrial" (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 90). The status of this entity, which will later be called the Crawler, is deeply uncertain. Due to the occurrence of the Event – which is implied to be triggered as the result of human encounter with the environment – Area X becomes the epitome of the unpredictable environment in the anthropocene, which undermines the autonomy of humans in this epoch.

In order to present its workable scheme of narration out of the anthropocenic set of circumstances – and consequently acknowledge the absence of the fixity and exclusivity of human and non-human agents in devising narratives in the anthropocene – the study first emphasizes in "the agency of non-human entities in the anthropocene: Formidable yet narratologically maimed" that environmental materiality of Area X could not have any direct and identifiable narration agency even though it affects the arbitrary narration structures with whose help characters get to understand their surrounding in the anthropocenic circumstances. In "the agency of non-human entities in the anthropocene: Semiotically containable through de-anthropomorphizing extant narrative models", the study sees how the environment and its irrepresentable agency in the anthropocene could be depicted through arbitrary yet heavily changed and impacted narrative structures which are at our disposal. In "the agency of human entities in the anthropocene: Entangled between the semiotic regimes of programming, manipulation and adjustment", a series of other heavily impacted and changed narratologically-informed semiotic strategies are introduced for identifying the status and agency of human agents while they try to either preserve or let go of their autonomy and narratological agency in their confrontation with the novel's anthropocenic set of circumstances.

The proposed structures in the study's second and third parts attest that while one could not dispense with narrative structures in representing the most irrepresentable and unfathomable concepts and emergences such as Area X, one should make these arbitrary structures more open and flexible for addressing the impacts of agency of non-human agents like Area X upon human constructs in representing and narrating anthropocenic circumstances and emergences like Area X and its strange inhabitants like the Crawler.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Agency of Non-human Entities in the Anthropocene: Formidable yet Narratologically Maimed

Hannes Bergthaller (2017) rightly believes that natural processes in the environment could not present themselves in the form of a narrative but as an open-ended, unbroken series of occurrences (p. 6). It is we who impose beginnings and endings upon the environment although the environment could sway us to devise and narrativize our arbitrary beginnings and endings in particular ways. In the anthropocenic set of circumstances, this swaying, although very vehement, could not bestow a particular narrative agency to the environment as the key non-human entity. The incapability of the environment in producing narratives should not be interpreted as being amorphous or featureless, yielding to whatever order humans' arbitrary symbol-making would impose on it. The environment contains a surfeit of features, but "lacks inherently binding criteria of narrative relevance" (Bergthaller, 2017, 6). The production of narrative meaning reduces the overwhelming complexity of the environment; the kind of reduction which is anthropogenic, and could not come from even a cognizant environment with the agency.

In *Annihilation,* Area X is an omniscient force that produces character arcs, arranges imagery, and changes the setting. As Andrew Strombeck (2019) believes "Area X generates a massive amount of both human bureaucratic effort and human aesthetic production" (p. 16). Area X shapes the modality of expedition members' enterprises; it moves plants, mice, and cell phones around in the novel; and it causes strange symbioses between humans, animals, and the aspects of the environment. It is even believed that Area X has allegedly authored a number of complied journals that have been piled up in a strange lighthouse, and this area's

strange inhabitant, the Crawler, could write words on the wall of a mysterious tower in the novel. These journals and words, despite showing a high level of agency of non-human entities in the novel, do not result in the generation of narrative structures. Some of the generated words by the Crawler (which/whom could be regarded as the representative of the environment) are as follows:

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 writhing for the impatience of the few who have never seen or been seen. (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 21)

While these words are vaguely biblical and evocative of Area X itself, they have no clear narratological referents. The reason for this narratological non-referentiality is that no human has written these words. These words "are read as if an inhuman entity has read one's mind and generated them out of the raw material it finds there" (Strombeck, 2019, p. 7). These words show the impossibility of Area X generating narratives even when it (and its representative, the Crawler) produces words since as Bergthaller (2017) believes, "narratives present events in terms of a bounded, temporal sequence of goal-oriented actions linked by a linear causal chain" (p. 9); the kind of 'chain' which could not be recognized in these haphazard words. Due to the absence of any referent, fixed subject and affiliate for these words, we must understand that there is no narratable connection or logic between these words, and therefore, one could not anthropomorphize Area X's mysterious creature by ascribing human beings' natural tendency towards generating – and explaining things through – narrative structures.

Considering the irrepresentable and un-narratable nature of the words produced by the non-human entities such as Area X and its representative the Crawler, some critics believe these words should be considered as constitutive elements of an epic narrative. Amitav Gosh argues for the re-inauguration of epic narratives "that will be required in order to come to terms with climate change; he invokes a genre which predates the modern differentiation of specialist discourses" (Bergthaller, 2017, p. 3). The un-narratable nature of these words is coupled with the way the very words could infect human beings in a formidable and disturbing manner. When the novel's protagonist, the biologist, gets close to the words, she inhales spores from them that infect her consciousness. That is why she says, "An

organism was writing living words along the interior walls of the tower. … The whole ecosystems had been born and now flourished among the words" (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 90). Gosh believes that if one wishes to make sense of such strange encounters with a sentient non-human-being, and acquire the most meager level of comprehension out of its irrepresentable words and utterances, one should dispense with putting these words and utterances in the differentiated 'modern specialist discourses', and look for an epic-like narrative structure in which the narrative restrictions of novel writing do not exist. He believes that these beings are capable of producing epic-like and more traditional narratives:

In most traditional forms of narrative, one finds a completely matter-of-fact acceptance of the agency of nonhuman beings of many kinds, such as is characteristic of the Indian epics. The novel, by contrast, is deeply implicated in the anthropocentric myopia which came to dominate modern Western thought in the wake of Reformation and Enlightenment. From its inception, the novel defined itself in opposition to traditional forms of story-telling, which had always delighted in the un-heard of and the unlikely, […] leaping blithely from one exceptional event to another, freely mixing the cosmic and the mundane. The novel, by contrast, bound itself to strictures of narrative probability that reflected both the emergent world view of the natural sciences and the placid, self-assured rationalism of the rising bourgeoisie which constituted its primary audience. (Bergthaller, 2017, p. 2)

If one utilizes Gosh's ideas, one sees in the Crawler's sentient, irrepresentable words – the words which have no referentiality whatsoever – the inklings of an epic-like narrative; a narrative which does not care for the most rudimentary 'strictures of probability', and allows 'mixing' and symbioses between the most exceptional and disparate things according to Gosh's rendition. However, Bergthaller (2017) believes that even in epic narratives, one sees anthropomorphic selection which either includes or excludes materials from the act of narration; the kind of selection that is blatantly absent in the Crawler's haphazard words. Bergthaller (2017) continues:

While the criteria by which epic determines what to include and what to exclude from the story are undoubtedly very different from those which obtain in a typical modern novel, they could hardly be said to be any less selective. And just as with the novel, the

epic's principles of selection do not reflect the agentic capacities of nonhuman beings, but rather the practical concerns of the particular society from which it originated. Narrative cannot be grounded in some sort of narrative property intrinsic to the natural world; it is a distinctly human artifact that encodes the values of particular human communities. (Bergthaller, 2017, p. 7)

In *Annihilation*, the produced words – and their strange biological impact on the character – are so non-referential, random, and non-selective that no anthropomorphic 'agentic' property could be attributed to them, and as a result, they could not be regarded as the constitutive elements of a narrative structure; one of the key structures among the 'human artifacts'. The Crawler's words do not result in a narrative, and at the same time, they even make gleaning any sense of referentiality out of them impossible. As Strombeck (2019) comments such non-referential features of the Crawler's words "deepen readers' cognitive estrangement from Area X by further detaching language from its referential properties" (p. 7). This 'deepening of the cognitive estrangement' is reflected through these words, and their impotent nature to guide characters to make sense of the very place in which these words emerge in the novel. While the Director calls this structure a tunnel, the biologist wants to call it a tower, but after the sentient words take their effect, the biologist understands that looking forward to identifying the most rudimentary narrative element – when it pertains to the indexical relationship between words such as tower and tunnel and actual landscapes in Area X – is impossible in the novel's world.

The tower/tunnel debate serves as a granular example of the problem that VanderMeer pursues throughout the trilogy: could either the characters or the Area X itself espouse a narrative structure that would bespeak the history of this area? Or is "the history of exploring Area X could slowly be said to be turning into Area X?" (VanderMeer, 2014, pp. 111–12) Pieter Vermeulen (2020) believes these questions pertain to the subject of agency: "The theme of writing brings into relief the agency of nonhuman actors; if we define agency as the capacity to have an impact, to leave traces for others to read, then it makes sense to figure agency as, precisely, a form of writing" (p. 25). What they do not attest to is the agency of non-human entities such as Area X and the Crawler in devising narratives with at least some meager level of probability, referentiality, and anthropomorphic selection.

After acknowledging the fact that non-human entities such as Area X and Crawler could not exercise their formidable writing agency and cognizance in devising narratives (either in the form of modern or epic narratives) with the most rudimentary necessities of probability, referentiality and anthropomorphic selection, the study turns to the ways one could read such entities through available arbitrary narrative structures. These structures should be heavily altered and negotiated to become tangentially suitable for addressing the agentic and narratological status of such entities in the anthropocene.

4.2. The Agency of Non-human Entities in the Anthropocene: Semiotically Containable through Extant yet De-anthropomorphized Narrative Models

Even while proposing his conceptualization of "Fantastic Materiality" of Area X in *Annihilation,* Benjamin Robertson (2018), one of the key commentators on VanderMeer's corpora, maintains that Area X could not be conceptualized as an entity which is "floating free of history, narrative structures, and as a true metaphysics or transcendental concept" (p. 14). He believes that human being's extant contexts and narrative structures are the only means with which the strangeness of the environment in the Anthropocene could be approached. Our approach should alter – and negotiate with – the narrative structures with which we construct our normal material rendition of the environment, and result in what Robertson (2018) believes to be a fantastic kind of materiality. It is hoped that this kind of materiality **"**might….reveal our own world's true materiality by providing us with much-needed difference against which to measure the sameness of our own lives" (p. 38).

Since the fantastic materiality of the environment in the Anthropocene foils normal materiality, the very structures with which we narrate normal environmental developments could be employed – with a series of nuanced differences and contingencies – to talk about the environment in the Anthropocene. The altered structures should be capable of acknowledging the vastness and agency of the environment, and present a kind of semiotics which "engages with the unique semiotic challenges of the Anthropocene – problems of scale, chronology, and subjectivity epitomized by the environment in the Anthropocene" (Alksnis, 2018, p. 185). Miranda Alksnis believes that a communal semiosis which acknowledges that inhabiting denizens of an environment such as Area X are its narratological agents and interpreters could

materialize this engagement. Such a communal semiosis – which would emerge out of negotiations with the extant narratological structures – would attest that "we are inside the vastness [of the environment], and necessarily compose the only instrument that can perceive this vastness" (Alksnis, 2018, p. 185); the kind of perception which would be lacking, but would be the only means with which we could respond to the unthinkable and uncontainable vastness and challenges of 'scale, chronology and subjectivity' of the environment in the Anthropocene.

The present study believes that the nuanced alterations in Algirdas Julien Greimas' actantial model of narrative could be a good start for positioning the issue of the environment within narrative structures in the Anthropocene. Initially, Greimas modifies Vladimir Propp's model and through conceptualizing actants, tends to make Propp's model more practical and compact. Through this structuralist viewing of Propp's model, Greimas presents a more facilitated application of this model (Ashrafi et al., 2016, p. 37). Furthermore, through referring himself to Ferdinand Saussure's terminology, he emphasizes that each narrative structure is like a parole which helps us identify the overarching langue governing the narrative structure and other structures like it (Azar et al., 2014, p. 20).

Greimas' original model "does away with character as an inherently mimetic concept and prefers to talk about actants – a term that emphasizes the structural link between character and narrative-advancing actions" (Caracciolo, 2018, p. 175). This link, Marco Caracciolo believes, keeps Greimas' model away from any anthropomorphic inklings, and turns it into an apt narratological model for addressing the environmental and non-human developments in the anthropocene. As mentioned earlier, Greimas' schemata are successful in distancing the actant from the human. These schemata suggest that "a material object or an abstract entity such as liberalism or capitalism can be actants in narrative, just like human characters. Human subjectivity and identity are here relegated to a matter of discourse – a surface manifestation that does not reach into the deep actantial level of formal relations" (Caracciolo, 2018, p. 177). Caracciolo (2018) summarizes Greimas' actantial model like this:

Greimas distinguishes between actants and actors, the former being an abstract function comparable to subject and object in grammar, the latter being the instantiation of those roles in what we would informally call the characters of a narrative. Greimas

envisages two possible elementary schemata of actantial organization: subject → object, and sender → object → receiver. In the first, a subject acts upon an object, whereas in the second a subject (the sender) transmits an object to the receiver. These roles are instantiated in countless ways by narrative: for instance, the object transmitted in the second schema may be something material (a sword, a letter, an inheritance) or something intangible (knowledge, a tale). (p. 176)

Considering this model, one could find the relationship between Area X, the knowledge that could be attained out of its workings, and the dispatched expeditions of scientists to this area as the kind of relationship that could exist between a Sender – Sender being Area X – an Object – Object being the attainable knowledge out of this area – and a Receiver – Receiver(s) being the members of the dispatched expeditions. Ares X is a sender who is in stark opposition with "the caring motherly figure that popular culture has by and large adopted to depict her", and therefore should be regarded as "a terrible and horrendously threatening sort of sender" (Petitimbert, 2017, p. 5).[1] This 'threatening figure' is anything but a figure of harmony, and is not capable of rendering a clear-cut body of knowledge (object) to human beings (receivers). After applying Caracciolo's contingency on Greimas's model (that figures such as Area X could not have any particular anthropomorphic motivation or intentionality in materializing their threats against mankind[2]), it becomes feasible to regard Area X as an actant, a formidable sender, which could not be prodded to react by meager human efforts. Furthermore, this formidable sender does not have the least anthropomorphic inkling of an actant to become selective while forming the impetuses with which characters could be swayed to produce a particular kind of account or narrative out of its development. As one of the main characters reflects, she "felt that if she could make Area X react, then she would somehow throw it off course. Even though we didn't know what course it was on" (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 262). The

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[1] The present study would not pursue the part of Jean Paul Petitimbert's article entitled "Anthropocenic Park: Humans and Non-Humans in Socio-Semiotic Interaction" in which he resembles the environment in the anthropocene to an angry, revengeful Gaia / Sender since such a reading would give Area X an anthropomorphic agency and motivation, and would fail to address its uncontainable, non-human agency.

[2] See Marco Caracciolo's five narrative strategies that de-anthropomorphize character while revealing the constitutive interdependency of human subjects and nonhuman objects in "Notes for an econarratological theory of character."

rendered object – the knowledge the novel's characters could attain concerning this area – out of the workings of this formidable sender does not bear promising and well-articulated outcomes since it does not come from a sender devising a particular narratological selective scheme for the receivers to work on. As mentioned, even the members of the scientific expedition fail to evoke a motivated reaction from Area X. This failure attests its indifferent inertia and lack of concern for characters' anthropogenic interventions. Knowing this fact, the biologist, the novel's protagonist, summarizes the Southern Reach Agency's desperate attempts to evoke any kind of motivated response or reaction from Area X as follows: "Feed Area X but do not antagonize it, and perhaps someone will, through luck or mere repetition, hit upon some explanation, some solution, before the world becomes Area X" (VanderMeer, 2014, pp. 120-121). This 'explanation' could not be achieved since Area X avoids registering any meaningful impact (object) by human beings (receivers). Even if it registers an impact, the novels' characters (receivers) are incapable of recognizing these impacts since they do not have the means to read and contain such an impact. Regarding Area X's defiance to register any meaningful anthropogenic impact, Robertson (2018) comments:

> Area X defies every attempt to provoke it into providing feedback meaningful to human beings. Human beings die in, and because of, Area X. They are affected by Area X. However, they never understand what has been done to them, or even if their provocations are the cause of what has been done to them. They are affected by Area X without affecting it because whatever effect they have on it cannot be registered as such. (p. 133)

Area X as the formidable sender in the novel has even the capacity to manipulate the minds of those who come into contact with it. This manipulation is done due to no particular objective or goal: "That landscape was impinging on them now. The temperature dipped and rose violently. There were rumblings deep underground that manifested as slight tremors. The sun came to them with a greenish tinge as if somehow the border were distorting our vision" (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 164). Through such "actantial mediation of Area X" as the sender, "the nonhuman infiltrates both the story world and the characters' psychology as the novel's receivers" (Caracciolo, 2018, p. 184), and would be in accordance of the communal semiotic narrative model out of the extant narrative models in our

disposal for approaching non-human entities in the Anthropocene.

As mentioned earlier, the key contingencies we should bring to table while using Greimas' actiantial narrative scheme of sender, object, and receiver are to avoid giving the sender an anthropomorphized motivation, agency, or narration selective capabilities. These contingencies would also be capable of seeing and acknowledging a series of coincidental and totally amoral features in the workings of entities such as Area X while one devises a narrative out of these workings. In *Annihilation,* those at the margins are the first to experience the future that awaits all of us; those very people who have nothing to do with initiating the Event, and have no bad intentions of manipulating the environment in favor of their covert objectives; the kind of ominous and secretive objectives which are pursued by Southern Reach Agency. As Robertson (2018) believes,

There is an environmentalism of the subaltern, of people who experience the slow violence of hyperobjects such as Area X. They confront a kind of materiality that conditions them without being known or knowable according to the humanist assumptions that produced it – humanist assumptions that have always already failed to represent them and their interests. (p. 60)

Area X could not care about the fact that such subaltern subjects have little to do with inflicting nefarious impacts on the environment since it presupposes no narratological, moral or motivated selection in its workings as a sender. In this part of the novel, the agonies of blameless subaltern people could be a testimony to the occurrence of "a long series of coincidences and unlikely outcomes" in settings where the workings of a formidable entity such as Area X transpire (Caracciolo, 2018, p. 185). And if some people could or could not survive the catastrophic repercussions of its workings, it is not due to their any particular effort or enterprise as the receivers or any one motivated or selective act of Area X as the sender, but their survival or their failure to survive should be seen in the light of "the haphazard, chance-driven logic of the strange – and not at all Darwinian – evolution (a major player in the novel)" of Area X (Caracciolo, 2018, p. 185). The strange "evolution thus becomes an abstract, nonhuman actant undermining expectations of human mastery over the course of the narrative" (Caracciolo, 2018, p. 185); a kind of 'mastery' which would always want to make the workings of the most indifferent and amoral senders such as Area X as having

a motivated and object-oriented tendency, and the works of a single, revengeful entity.

The non-selective, totally random and unmotivated workings of Area X as a formidable sender make the transference of the object – which as mentioned earlier refers to the knowledge one could attain from the inner workings, teleology and motivations of Area X – impossible for the receivers, and these workings does make the receivers aware of their already-lost autonomy and the meager possibilities they have for asserting their agency – not necessarily constructive or destructive agency – in the anthropocene. In the next part, we would be looking at various semiotic strategies with which the expedition members attempt – as receivers – to implement or lose their autonomy while gaining knowledge and understanding – the object – out of the workings of the formidably unmotivated and de-anthropomorphized Area X – the sender.

4.3. The Agency of Human Entities in the Anthropocene: Entangled between the Semiotic Regimes of Programming, Manipulation and Adjustment

The first reaction of human receivers/characters – and the Southern Reach Agency in particular – against the formidability of Area X as an uncontainable sender is to continue the programming semiotic regime that has been governing the relationships between "humans and Mother Nature in pre-anthropocenic times" (Petitimbert, 2017, p. 10). They hope that this regime could beget them the object – the knowledge – they tend to have out of this formidable sender. In *Annihilation*, the very reason why lots of expeditions were dispatched to investigate the emergence of Area X could be read in accordance with the workings of this regime. The pre-anthropocenic regime of programming between humans and Nature "is developed on the basis of the believed continuity, regularity and therefore predictability of the determinist laws ruling Nature, envisaged as a purely inanimate and passive object that can be both studied by exact sciences and plundered and exploited ad libitum by the industry" (Petitimbert, 2017, p. 4). In such a regime a receiver simply needs to rely on the pre-existing, stable and knowable determining factors of a predetermined and passive Nature, and hope for the attainment of the airtight, categorical and comprehensive objects of knowledge.

When the programming regime fails to make sense of Area X's anomalies in its positivistically driven investigative pursuits, the receivers adopt another semiotic regime which is called the regime of accident. Petitimbert (2017) believes that "the regime of the accident is currently prevailing ever since the Anthropocene" (p. 10), considers human values as being normal, and regards anything that does not fit into the epistemological bodies of knowledge as anomalies. After recognizing these anomalies under the regime of accident, they become susceptible to what Petitimbert (2017) calls anthropogenic manipulation, which is believed to be the semiotic regime with which receivers tend to approach this formidable sender.

In the novel, it is the regime of manipulation that propels one group of characters – such as the Control and the psychologist as the mouthpiece of Southern Reach Agency – to fancy the idea of containing Area X (sender) and extracting an airtight and comprehensive body of knowledge (object) out of its workings. In doing so, this group of receivers has no qualms in manipulating their fellow humans and colleagues. As Prendergast (2017) comments, Area X may have compelled a previous expedition to annihilate itself, but ultimately, we learn that the novel's title likely derives, not from the threat Area X poses" (p. 351); this threat comes from the activation word which the psychologist has at her disposal to "help induce immediate suicide" in the other expedition members if she deems it expedient. (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 135) That the Southern Reach Agency has given self-destruct buttons to its members powerfully allegorizing the extent of the manipulation of human society's unsustainable environmental practices. In one part of the novel, the biologist refers to the psychologist's manipulative power as follows:

We knew that the psychologist's role was to provide balance and calm in a situation that might become stressful, and that part of this role included hypnotic suggestion. I could not blame her for performing that role. But to see it laid out so nakedly troubled me. It is one thing to think you might be receiving hypnotic suggestions and quite another to experience it as an observer. (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 33)

The seemingly 'calm and balance' are euphemisms for the compromise of expedition members' autonomy as the requirement to participate in Area X expeditions. In this sense, the manipulative stratagems of the Agency are more

radical than any possible threat of Area X in manipulating humans' autonomy; more radical than Area X. The Agency – and its mouthpieces and representatives such as the psychologist and the Control – seriously influences not only what its members can do but also what they can will.

Such attempts to manipulate the sender and the receivers are done in the hope of reaching a contract, a compact or a covenant with Area X; the contract which would make it into a more intelligible sender. One of the caveats of such a manipulative contract is to deny the individuality of both the sender and receivers so they could be treated as instruments for reaching the object of knowledge. In the novel, the namelessness of expedition members could be read in accordance with the Agency's denying of individuality from them. Given Southern Reach's instrumentalist attitude toward its employees, its policy of replacing professional designations for names may reflect its desire for total hegemony. The policy reduces people to their jobs (biologist, surveyor, anthropologist, psychologist) and so attempts to restrict their actions to those of a particular professional role.

Next to the Control and the psychologist who abide by the regimes of programming, accident, and ultimately manipulation, we have a receiver such as the biologist who adopts adjustment in her dealings with Area X. Petitimbert (2017) defines adjustment as "a process which is neither planned nor uncertain or guided by scheming subjects trying to manipulate each other, but which is entirely dependent on the mutual discovery of just relations by sender/receiver actants" (p. 8). Conversely to the other three, in this regime, there is not a subject in control who/which could gauge things from a distance, nor could he/she/it examine them with a view to either pragmatically or cognitively manipulate them. He/she/it "will feel united to the becoming of what surrounds him, he will view himself as part and parcel of the immanent and encompassing process of things" (Petitimbert, 2017, p. 8). In the process of adjustment, a receiver such as the biologist is turned into an Earthbound. Borrowing this term from Bruno Latour's conceptualization of Anthropocene, Vermeulen (2020) believes that "the Earthbounds [like the biologist] feel attached (bound) to the earth as well as heading (bound) for a different relation to the planet" (p. 16). They are headed towards an understanding that "stops [them] to prod and sways them to accept" (Westhauser & Stuit, 2021, p. 18). This stopping also helps them to see themselves and their surroundings as simultaneously being "host and guest, host and parasite, human and nonhuman." (Westhauser & Stuit, 2021, p. 18) By

cherishing and looking for places where the very notion of borders and binaries between the human and the inhuman is annihilated, Earthbounds like the biologist acknowledge limitations in our demarcations and are 'bound' to expose those "who still believe the planet is a gridded globe to be subdued" (Vermeulen, 2020, p. 16).

The first consequence of the biologist's adoption of adjustment as her mode of understanding Area X refers to the revisiting of her beliefs about the relative value of human-human relations. The novel endorses de-emphasizing human relationships in favor of a larger human-nonhuman community. Since her husband fails to adopt adjustment proactively, he finds it difficult to understand the adaptive dealings the biologist has with Area X. That is why the biologist becomes estranged from her husband because she chooses to interact with the world in a manner adapted/adjusted to human-nonhuman communities. Her husband, who accepts the anthropogenic ethos of contemporary Western societies, in particular their valorization of monogamous romantic love, interprets the biologist's mode of interaction as a rejection or exclusion of him. As their marriage reaches crisis, he volunteers for the Southern Reach's eleventh expedition. He dies of cancer shortly after his mysterious return from Area X, about which he remembers nothing. Having volunteered for the twelfth expedition, the biologist discovers inside Area X's strange lighthouse a heap of journals from previous expeditions and writes:

Even as my husband wanted me to be assimilated in a sense, the irony was that he wanted to stand out. Seeing that huge pile of journals, this was another thing I thought of; that he had been wrong for the eleventh expedition because of this quality. That here were the indiscriminate accounts of so many souls, and that his account couldn't possibly stand out. That, in the end, he'd been reduced to a state that approximated my own. (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 110)

Voluntary 'assimilation' – and not the imposed and corporate assimilation by the Agency's hypnotizing efforts – and refraining from 'standing out' are the ultimate goal – or bound – of an Earthbound like the biologist who has committed himself to adjustment and adaptation when setting her affairs with Area X as the formidable sender.

The biologist's adopted adjustment model, the novel intimates, could have saved their marriage if they had subsumed it into a larger human-nonhuman community, where their bond would have been one among many, compatible with and enriched by a larger web of relations. This is suggested in the very lines of the discovered journals. The biologist reads his last address to her:

Seeing all of this, experiencing all of it, even when it's bad, I wish you were here. I wish we had volunteered together. I would have understood you better here, on the trek north. We wouldn't have needed to say anything if you didn't want to. It wouldn't have bothered me. Not at all. And we wouldn't have turned back. We would have kept going until we couldn't go farther. (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 167)

The testimony that he 'would have understood [her] better' in Area X, acknowledges that assimilation and utter adjustment into and with Area X could have empowered the couple to forego arbitrary means of communication in a world where most relations – human to tree, tree to tree, otter to river, river to salt marsh, salt marsh to ocean – are nonverbal or predicated on non-epistemological and non-arbitrary relations. Quoting Steven Shaviro, Pendergast (2017) regards human-human relations as "interactions between entities, when one thing affects, or is affected by, another is valid, and therefore, any party can interact with even those aspects of an entity [such as Area X or the complex relationship between a couple in such anthropocenic environment] that it cannot come to know" (p. 356). 'We wouldn't have needed to say anything if you didn't want to,' the biologist's husband promises her, a promise he can make, perhaps, because Area X has taught him a logic of sustainable coexistence independent of coercive and manipulative efforts of Southern Reach Agency and its representatives.

The second consequence of the biologist's adjustment model of understanding Area X as the formidable sender in the novel refers to her reaching a new comprehension of human-nonhuman relations. She becomes capable of attesting to the abundant life in Area X without assigning any instrumental value to it, as is evident in her tendency to give long nature descriptions unnecessary to her narrative of the expedition:

In few other places could you still find habitat where, within the space of walking only six or seven miles, you went from forest to swamp to salt marsh to beach. In Area X, I

had been told, I would find marine life that had adjusted to the brackish freshwater and which at low tide swam far up the natural canals formed by the reeds, sharing the same environment with otters and deer. If you walked along the beach, riddled through with the holes of fiddler crabs, you would sometimes look out to see one of the giant reptiles, for they, too, had adapted to their habitat. (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 12)

This excerpt shows that the biologist heeds the complexity of ecosystems in Area X, in contrast to the overdeveloped homogeneity of human civilization beyond its borders. Prendergast (2017) believes that "the omission of commas between prepositional phrases in the clause 'you went from forest to swamp to salt marsh to beach' evokes the density of biodiversity in the landscape" (p. 345). As an Earthbound, the biologist reaches her description of diverse nonhuman organisms due to her adjustment to the fact that all the recondite details of these organisms in Area X could not be explained away or given utilitarian anthropogenic values (Prendergast, 2017, pp. 345-6).

The biologist's adjustment to her surroundings is so distanced from the manipulation and programming regimes of the Agency that he takes pride in becoming categorically impressed by Area X, and at the same time not being capable of exerting any impact on this area:

Fun for me was sneaking off to peer into a tidal pool, to grasp the intricacies of the creatures that lived there. Sustenance for me was tied to ecosystem and habitat, orgasm the sudden realization of the interconnectivity of living things. Observation had always meant more to me than interaction. And yet, I was nothing but expression in other ways. My sole gift or talent, I believe now, was that places could impress themselves upon me, and I could become a part of them with ease. (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 110)

The biologist acknowledges her dependence on larger human-nonhuman communities by referring to 'ecosystem and habitat' as 'sustenance' for her; she points to her material reliance on the web of food consumption and her spiritual reliance on the 'interconnectivity of living things.' As an Earthbound, the biologist's selfhood is penetrable, adaptable, and relational, and as a receiver, does not attempt to derive utility as an object of knowledge out of the sender.

In one part of the novel, the biologist speaks of a kind of "truthful seeing" after

adjusting her expectations from Area X (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 90). Later due this kind of seeing, she finds in herself the capability of fathoming non-human entities outside arbitrary and conventional structures of signification and bodies/objects of knowledge. That is why she describes her surrounding as follows:

The wind picked up, and it began to rain. I saw each drop fall as a perfect, faceted liquid diamond, refracting light even in the gloom, and I could smell the sea and picture the roiling waves. The wind was like something alive; it entered every pore of me and it, too, had a smell, carrying with it the earthiness of the marsh reeds. I had tried to ignore the change in the confined space of the tower, but my senses still seemed too acute, too sharp. I was adapting to it, but at times like this, I remembered that just a day ago I had been someone else. (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 194)

'The brightness' makes the biologist appreciate the incomprehensibility of both the seemingly familiar and unfamiliar things. As a receiver, she does not pursue the conventional objective of deriving an airtight and comprehensive object of knowledge out of the sender, and as Christopher Margeson (2018) comments, "accepts the irreducible heterogeneity of the world… and remain open to the dizzying otherness of non-human existents without regrouping them too quickly in some set of knowledge" (p. 48). This acceptance and openness is against the burning compulsion in conventional receivers that "they have to know everything" in their semiotic interaction with a sender as formidable as Area X (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 194).

After acknowledging the unconventional kind of relationships between human-human and human-nonhuman entities, one should refer to the impact of the sender's materiality on her understanding of Area X as the third consequence of the biologist's commitment toward adjustment. This consequence turns any narrative or account which she forms out of this area into a severely marked construct by this area's materiality – and not by the arbitrary nature of narrative structures of programming or manipulation regimes. The novel concludes with a reminder of narrative's inescapable materiality. Toward the end of the novel, the biologist reveals that, while bunkered in the lighthouse, she has "spent four long days perfecting this account you are reading, for all its faults" (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 127). The supremely arbitrary nature of any narrative structure or body/object of knowledge one could derive out of this formidable sender takes a deeper significance when the biologist discovers hundreds of journals written by

previous explorers of Area X. In a symbolic manner, the biologist realizes that "the very physical structure of this decomposing pile of journals alongside their accounts cannot escape its own vibrant, transforming, transitional materiality, as it slowly morphs from subjective human voices narrating their observations *about* Area X into objects that themselves become part of the uncanny ecology *of* Area X" (Hegglund, 2020, p. 41). The biologist recognizes this in her last act of the novel, as she leaves her journal on top of the decomposing pile before departing up the coast, deeper into Area X. By leaving her narration with the others, she acknowledges that any subjective account or narrative as a derivable object out of this formidable sender cannot transcend or be detached from the material ecology of Area X. As Hegglund (2020) comments, "If it is a human narrative, it is also a transient one – a transience reflected by the biologist's continuing awareness of her transformation from a Cartesian subject of knowledge into something else entirely" (p. 42). This 'transformation' betrays giving the biologist or any human entity as a receiver in the equation between sender, object and receiver the ultimate narratological autonomy.

As observed, the expedition members' (receivers) conventional semiotic regimes – programming, accident and manipulation – for dealing with Area X fail to acknowledge the intricacies of Area X (sender). It is only through the regime of adjustment with which only one of the receivers, the biologist – and to some extent the husband at the end of his expedition in Area X – manage to reach an incomplete yet genuine understanding (object) of the formidable materiality of Area X, and through this understanding revisit their dealings with both each other and non-human entities. The regime of adjustment turns receivers such as the biologist into Earthbounds who would be bound to be impressed by the sender without expecting to have any impact or derive any complete object out of it.

5. Conclusion

The present study utilizes the contingencies on rigid conventional models by Greimas and Gosh so that its proposed framework could acknowledge the brunt of unpredictable, unmotivated and uncontainable agency of Area X on the stability of these conventional models. The study realizes that these contingencies would open up a particular kind of openness to extant conventional models that could address the weird and uneasy coupling of human/nonhuman agencies of narration

in the anthropocene. This framework does not function on the basis of bounded, temporal, goal-oriented, linear and casual narration chains, and would turn both human and non-human entities into mere actants. These actants are devoid of any anthropogenic harmony, discord, morality or immorality, and would result in partial and strange knowledge and understating for individuals in anthropocenic set of circumstances.

In *Annihilation*'s anthropocenic set of circumstances, Area X's formidable materiality – even when it as a non-human entity generates words symbolically – could not bring about the emergence of a narrative structure. The reason for this lack of emergence is due to the lack of a selective agency behind the workings of Area X. Area X, as the representative of the environment in the anthropocene, should be regarded as a formidable sender from whose workings the novel's characters, as the receivers, could not derive any straightforward bodies of knowledge – as the object. In allocating the role of the sender to Area X, any anthropomorphized inkling of such a narratologically-informed semiotic role should be denied, and the unmotivated and indifferent nature of its workings should be emphasized. Faced with such a formidable sender, the receivers adopt various semiotic regimes including programming, accident, manipulation and adaptation. It is only through the adjustment semiotic regime that an apt state of becoming, assimilation and partial understanding is materialized for some of the characters such as the biologist. Having recognized her limitations, the biologist as a receiver is transformed into an Earthbound who revisits the relations which could exist between human/human and human/non-human entities. These relations could not escape Area X's materiality, could not become exclusively anthropogenic, and could not result in a series of instrumental utilities for appropriating and manipulating the uncontainable aspects of Area X.

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