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For any questions, please contact kaisa.kortekallio@helsinki.fi

Becoming-instrument: Thinking with Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* and Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects*

Kaisa Kortekallio

When I finally picked up my husband's journal and started to read, the brightness washed over me in unending waves and connected me to the earth, the water, the trees, the air, as I opened up and kept on opening.

(VanderMeer 2014, 160)

Annihilation (2014), a novel by American writer Jeff VanderMeer, presents the reader with a strange area where nonhuman life flourishes and humans change into something else. All that is left from the researchers sent to investigate the area are their journals – the novel being presented as a journal too. These textual traces entice readers into feeling with the focalizing characters, but they also guide the readers' attention toward the recognition of artificiality: the characters are there to interact with, and yet they are not people.

Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World (2013), a philosophical monograph by American writer Timothy Morton, presents the reader with strange, imperceptible objects that have the power to change humans into something else. A first-person narrator invites readers to feel the visceral force of global capital and the burn of climate change on one's body. Yet the text also guides the reader's attention toward the artifice of this experientiality: the narrator is there, his name is printed on the cover, and yet he is not a person.

This chapter concerns the experience of reconfiguration – and especially the experience of being opened up to nonhuman influences through self-aware engagement with estranging first-person narratives such as the ones introduced above. The question is simple, really: how can literature change its readers? And in particular, how can literature open readers up to environmental change? As a way of approaching an answer, I try out a mode of engagement I call *becoming-instrument*. "Becoming", over-used in post-structuralist and posthumanist discussions to the point of turning into a dead metaphor, has been used to denote "a continued sense of the subject as multiple and always-in-progress, a becoming rather than being" (Vint 2005, 288). This basic notion is at the heart of my approach, too. "Instrument" connotes both musical instruments and scientific instruments: something that is manufactured, calibrated, and played for a specific creative purpose. I suggest that a first-person reader/writer construct can function as an instrument for making sense of both personal and environmental change. My approach loops back to one of the primary texts I think with, that is, Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects*:

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The thinking style (and thus the writing style) that this turn of events necessitates is one in which the normal certainties are inverted, or even dissolved. No longer are my intimate impressions "personal" in the sense that they are "merely mine" or "subjective only": they are footprints of hyperobjects, distorted as they always must be by the entity in which they make their mark – that is, me. I become (and so do you) a litmus test of the time of hyperobjects.

(Morton 2013, 5)

Morton evokes the physical connotations of "impression", turning the scholarly body into a material indicator by which the traces and effects of environmental change become available for research. In this chapter, the self-instrument is tuned and tweaked in order to become more *impressionable*: that is, more receptive to the various effects of textual ecologies.¹

Enactive Theory Meets Posthumanist Practice

I think with posthumanist thinkers, but the thinking also links to another conversation: the enactive approach to literature, developed in recent years in the cognitive humanities (Kukkonen and Caracciolo 2014). The view of reading that often arises in enactive approaches to literature involves distributed agency and co-constitution: both the text and the reader bring something into the reading event, and the reader is to some extent "played" by the text (see Polvinen 2012). Scholars adopting the enactive approach to cognition often also promote a holistic understanding of the cognizing subject: they consider the subject of perception to be "the whole animal, actively exploring its environment" rather than a disembodied mind or a body-independent brain (Noë 2005, 30; see also Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1992; Thompson 2007). Moreover, the emergence of such a mind involves *skillful activity*. Philosopher Alva Noë would claim, for example, that perceiving "isn't something that happens in us, it is something we do" (Noë 2005, 216, see also O'Regan and Noë 2001).

Enactive approaches to literature trace the skillful activity of this "whole animal" in the dynamics of reading. It is, however, still rare for enactive scholars to *methodically employ* the model of co-constitutive, holistic reading. In the common rhetoric, the role of "the embodied reader", the one who engages with the texts emotionally and experiences bodily sensations, still tends to be reserved for lay people. One exception to this trend is Emily Troscianko (2014), who has applied her particular experiential background of eating disorder to her interpretative work. Troscianko's phenomenological account of starvation is thick and detailed, but from a posthumanist perspective, it is problematic in another respect: it mentions the particular experiential background of the scholar as a basis of interpretation, but does not discuss the dynamic and material constitution of that experientiality. Rethinking the condition of embodiment as a more-than-human process would require practices that foreground the embodied activity of becoming-with nonhumans.

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Enactive approaches do provide tools for considering the nonhuman actors that contribute to literary engagement – both textual devices themselves, and environmental forces and entities that work through text. Merja Polvinen (2012), for example, thinks “of readers as the audience of a magician, being tricked even as they are aware of the trick, and of readers as instruments, producing music specifically by allowing themselves to be played by the text” (Polvinen 2012, 108). Polvinen’s metaphors are tied to a specific understanding of *mimesis as poiesis*: in this understanding, fictions act upon the actual world rather than merely imitate it. Polvinen, along with other enactive scholars, such as Alva Noë (2015), Karin Kukkonen, and Marco Caracciolo (2014), considers fictions as suggestive artifacts and the reading event as active bodily engagement with those artifacts. Enactive approaches also acknowledge that texts and reading are constituted in material relations with biological, social, and cultural ecologies (for an overview, see Caracciolo 2014a).

In the following, I want to connect enactive ideas about environmental and literary engagement to certain *posthumanist reading practices* – in which even the professional reader is allowed to enter into embodied and emotional engagement with textual ecologies. The strong natural-scientific influence in the tradition of cognitive literary studies guides scholars to employ detached, rationalized methodologies that posit the text as an object of inquiry rather than an actor to think with. As the very brief review of enactive approaches to literature above demonstrates, enactive theory is where this tradition is being challenged. This is where the new cognitive approaches could, in my opinion, gain from cross-breeding with critical posthumanisms, which are informed by natural sciences but methodically problematize their epistemological attitudes.

Posthumanist approaches, especially in the strands employing feminist methods, have produced first-person research exploring the entangled aspects of more-than-human engagements. Often this research is labeled as “thinking-with”: Donna Haraway thinks with dogs, Astrida Neimanis thinks with bodies of water, Stacy Alaimo thinks with toxins. Feminist posthumanists tend to emphasize the material processes in which selves and others are constituted, and yet move away from naturalized conceptions of identity² – a predilection that also often characterizes enactivist approaches to cognition, even if the style of research is remarkably different. In the posthuman phenomenology of Astrida Neimanis, for example, “the understanding of ‘body’ that we inherit from a dominant Western metaphysical tradition (a bounded materiality and individual subjectivity)” is bracketed, and the scholarly body is reconfigured as a more-than-human collective constituted by various flows of metabolism, memory, and attention (Neimanis 2017, 41). In this practice, the more-than-human aspects of experience are brought to focus and amplified (Neimanis 2017, 5).

I propose that the posthumanist feminist method of thinking *with* literature (rather than *about* it) can enrich enactive approaches to literature by way of “practicing what you preach” – that is, applying an enactive conception of cognition to one’s personal process of scholarly interpretation. In this chapter, I focus on mobilizing and testing a particular theoretical claim. Marco Caracciolo suggests that the literary techniques of first-person narration can “take readers’ empathic involvement with a fictional character

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to a higher level than would be likely in real life" (Caracciolo 2014b, 32). He argues that reading first-person narratives differs remarkably from both the empathic involvement with second- or third-person focalizers and the empathic involvement with actual people, which tend to follow the second- and third-person patterns of relating. The evocative force of first-person narratives lies, on one hand, in their ability to produce simulated experiences in the mind of the reader and, on the other hand, in the performative power whereby a certain kind of narrator can validate some fictional states of affairs as true within the fiction, called "authentication" by Lubomír Doležel (Doležel 1998; Caracciolo 2014b).

The concept of empathy has been criticized in the posthumanist discussion for its dependency on the recognition of sameness (e.g. Ahmed 2004; Braidotti 2013; Gomel 2014). It is thus important to note that Caracciolo's definition of empathy necessarily contains an imaginative aspect – he uses the term to denote not just "the capacity to experience another person's mental states in a first-person way" (Caracciolo 2014b, 32) but as interchangeably with "mental simulation" (ibid. 32, 38). Empathy, construed in this way, does not imply a hermeneutic understanding of the experiences of the other, but rather the imaginative reconstruction or enaction of such experiences. In the imaginative process of reading a first-person narrative, the simulated experience emerges as the collaboration of textual cues and readerly imagination. In the process, the textual cues activate the readers' "experiential backgrounds" – in all their variation – and in that respect, the imaginative reconstruction of fictional experience is based on recognition of familiar elements (Caracciolo 2014c, 24–26). However, through his analysis of strange and "unnatural" narrators,³ Caracciolo suggests that the reading process can also stretch the readers' capacities into imagining experiences remarkably different from their own (Caracciolo 2014b, 2016).⁴

Deliberately integrating this idea about the evocative force of first-person narration into an actual interpretative process means opening up to the reconfigurative potential of first-person narratives and becoming vulnerable to change. I suggest that this kind of self-aware first-person engagement – called *becoming-instrument* in this chapter – can work toward dissolving the certainty of the human subject and develop instead a model of subjectivity as "multiple and always-in-progress" (as phrased by Sherryl Vint). In this regard, the engagement could resemble certain mindfulness-based contemplative practices, such as zen-buddhist meditation, that guide the practitioner's attention toward the illusionary and contingent features of personal experience. Echoing Fransisco Varela's (1996; see also Thompson 2009) wish of bridging the gap between studies of mind-as-object and mind-as-experience, I suggest that combining enactive theory with posthumanist methodology can – with a labyrinth of caveats to be negotiated⁵ – give rise to new insights into our original question: how can literature change its readers?

To map out the potential of this combined approach, I think with two primary texts that evoke and thematize reconfiguration: Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014) and Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects* (2013).⁶ In this reading, I align with the narrators, letting their experience inform mine. Unlike readings emphasizing identification or immersion, this reading strategy maintains an awareness of fictionality: this is engagement with fictional minds as "a bundle of effects stories can have on their recipients"

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(Caracciolo 2014b, 32) rather than fictional minds as potential persons. To steer away from the ambiguity of the term "empathic engagement", this form of engagement will from now on be called *enactment* of fictional experience.

Annihilation: Promise of Self-Immolating Ecstasy

One of the most remarkable similarities between *Annihilation* and *Hyperobjects* is their complex take on first-person writing. Both of them employ a distinct first-person narrator: in *Annihilation*, the narrator is called "the biologist", in *Hyperobjects*, "Tim Morton". However, both works are also committed to decentralizing the human subject "within a universe that clearly sees us as simple atoms like everything else" (VanderMeer 2015), developing instead a mode of ecological existence that has been called "dark ecology" (Morton 2013, 2016) or "weird ecology" (Tompkins 2014). I suggest that both of these first-person perspectives invite readers to engage with them in ways that draw on their experiential background, and yet, through defamiliarizing techniques, foreground the fictional aspects of that engagement. Moreover, I suggest that this twofold move of intimate engagement and cognitive estrangement serves to encourage an environment-oriented sense-making process.⁷

The novel *Annihilation* is written in the form of a field journal, narrated by a secretive biologist who shies away from stable identities, becoming part of the ecosystems she studies rather than keeping an observational distance. The biologist is part of an expedition group sent to study a post-catastrophical site referred to as "Area X": a place somewhere on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, a place where traces of human life have been almost obliterated by an unknown event. The journal is part of her assignment: all members of the group are instructed to keep one, private from the eyes of others. Her mission is to report her observations about Area X and about the group. From the observations, it becomes apparent that the flora and fauna of the area are not your usual stable objects of scientific description, and the biologist is not your usual scientist-focalizer:

At one point, [a pair of otters] glanced up and I had a strange sensation that they could see me watching them. It was a feeling I often had when out in the wilderness: that things were not quite what they seemed, and I had to fight against the sensation because it could overwhelm my scientific objectivity. There was also something else, moving ponderously through the reeds, but it was closer to the lighthouse and in deep cover.

(VanderMeer 2014, 30)

Tuning into the perspective of the biologist, I am guided into noticing the nonhuman environment rather than the human: the text describes marshland ecotopes in detail, making note of the color of reeds and the eerie sounds of the forest at night, always leaving room for the unknown. It does not provide me with the names of the other group members, nor does it narrate their history. They are deemed

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insignificant – by the narrative, and by my reading. I make note of the color of the reeds, and I wait for something to emerge from the dark forest.

Soon into the expedition, the biologist is exposed to a transforming event. There is a tower under the ground, and the inner walls of the tower are filled with writing made of fungal growth. She leans in to read the text: by then, she is already contaminated by the emanating spores. This is a moment familiar to me from earlier reading of science-fictional and Weird texts – from J. G. Ballard, William S. Burroughs, Stanislaw Lem, and H. P. Lovecraft. After this, everything will be made psychedelic, or perhaps psychotic: the individual mind will soon be flooded by the inhuman forces, and a horrific ecstasy will wipe away all rational subjectivity. I will give into that ecstasy too, I will let the text fill me and carry me, and I will be annihilated. This is, according to Burroughs, the dynamic of *panic*: I realize that everything surrounding me is undoubtedly and uncontrollably *alive*, and as a consequence lose the sense of being the center of my world (Burroughs 1985). Philosopher Val Plumwood (1996) describes a similar loss of subjectivity in her essay "Being Prey", in which she accounts for her experience of being attacked by a crocodile.

And so it happens in *Annihilation*. Except it does not. Many things *are* made psychedelic: the walls are alive, the biologist feels a "brightness" in her body – a brightness that sculpts her into becoming something else entirely – and she becomes impervious to the hypnotic inductions practiced by the group's leader. She cannot help but perceive differently. But she is as stubborn as she is scientifically trained: she refuses to give in to transformation. She does not trust the hypersensitivity that makes walking in the forest feel like listening to "an intense and expressive aria", and as a result, she remains a consistent subject even in the face of annihilation.

In the tradition of science-fictional "forbidden zone" narratives such as Lem's *Solaris* (1961) or Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962), the deciding moment of transformative estrangement is soon followed by the disintegration of the knowing subject. *Annihilation* stretches the moment of estrangement, making the biologist's resistant practices more like a deliberate inquiry than an inevitable slide into subjectivity. This is also apparent in the style of the novel: even when reporting moments of utter panic, the narration does not turn into the more sensational type of horror-writing that would break the sentence structure or the borders between subject and environment. Neither is there any sentimentality. Even the confessional passages such as the one below, in which the narrator reveals previously hidden information about the brightness, retain a tense formality in the name of "scientific objectivity".

It may be clear now that I am not always good at telling people things they feel they have a right to know, and in this account thus far I have neglected to mention some details about the brightness. My reason for this is, again, the hope that any reader's initial opinion in judging my objectivity might not be influenced by these details.

(VanderMeer 2014, 150)

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In the novel, several processes of transformation overlap and intersect: the ecosystemic change of the geographical area that is Area X and the resulting loss of an anthropocentric worldview; the progressing brightness that transforms the biologist's body; and, perhaps most obscured of them all, a psychological process of grieving the death of her husband – who took part in the previous expedition to Area X. Even though the end of the novel provides a resolution to some of the psychological tension, the conflict between the distanced tone and the transformative subject matter holds.⁸ The tone can be understood in the context of the biologist's resistance to emotional and ecological transformation: in order to retain her humanity under the onslaught of nonhuman forces, she practices techniques that affirm her as a consistent, discrete self: repeatedly wounding her body, and compartmentalizing her thoughts through research and writing. Distancing thus becomes a technique for affirming the boundaries of the subject, and for keeping the self-annihilating ecstasy of the brightness at bay.

My side burned, but I could tell that too-quick repair was taking place, enough for me to move about [...]. I knew not to trust this feeling of well-being, that it could simply be the interregnum before another stage. [...] To keep the brightness in check, I would have to continue to become wounded, to be injured. To shock my system.

(VanderMeer 2014, 151)

As the narrative accounts for the events, readers are invited to enact the fictional experience of the character in all its sensory texture and complex emotionality. At the same time, the report-like tone of the account asserts a distance between the readers and the fictional mind of the biologist: the reader is repeatedly reminded of the artifice of writing that mediates the biologist's experience – and, perhaps, also of the fictionality of the novel itself. In other words, this may not be the kind of first-person narrative that Caracciolo (2014b) intends to draw out in his article, as it does not provide an unhindered illusion of first-person access to a fictional mind. However, the experientiality of reading is not annulled by the awareness of fictionality. Rather, the distancing style activates those parts of one's experiential background that are salient to the cognitive tasks of analysis and resistance. In enacting this particular fictional experience, a certain fearful tension builds in the body, and the experiential contrast between scientific objectivity and more-than-human entanglement is enhanced. Becoming-instrument involves becoming aware of the ways in which this contrast is produced in reading. Timothy Morton's work on the impressive forces of nonhuman objects can enrich this awareness.

Hyperobjects: Ecological Thought as Becoming Impressed

The dark ecology of literary scholar Timothy Morton, particularly the book *Hyperobjects*, also narrates bodily transformations stemming from environmental transformations: the effects of climate change, globalization, and ubiquitous oil in the body of a scholar. In doing so, it calls for an engagement with its

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first-person narrator. As Stephen Muecke has noted in his review of *Hyperobjects*, the correct category for this book is not any particular scholarly discipline but the cross-intellectual practice of "theory" – and "you don't read theory to advance the discipline you might belong to – you read it for stimulation" (Muecke 2014). I claim that Morton's writing thematizes this very function, making the act of being stimulated a requirement for ecological thought.

In dark ecology, first-person experience is presented as constituting of encounters with other objects. The "object-oriented" approach Morton promotes is committed to revealing the activity, unknowability, and strangeness of material things. For an object-oriented ontologist, human subjectivity inhabits no special ontological category – "the being of a paper cup is as profound as mine" (Morton 2013, 17). By turning the reader's attention to nonhuman objects, and the material relations of humans-as-objects and other objects, Morton foregrounds the limitations of human cognition. Like the writers of Weird tales such as *Annihilation*, Morton insists that the real is permeated by weird and awesome processes. He also uses similar literary techniques to evoke estranging, grotesque, and sublime effects: the evocation of material monsters, visceral imagery, first-person narration, and a reversal of subject-object relations (see VanderMeer 2011 for the Weird).⁹

The monstrous concept of *hyperobject* is a particularly effective tool in the project of reconfiguration. A hyperobject is defined as "a thing that is massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton 2013, 1) – a system or a process that escapes human sensory perception and cognitive capabilities, but still has the power to transform human existence. Global warming, radioactive materials, and ubiquitous plastic can be considered hyperobjects, but so can the processes of evolution and extinction, and so can things like the English language and money. A hyperobject is both *pervasive* and *viscous*: in the idiom of Cara Daggett, it

penetrates you to the cellular level and yet sticks to you and everything you know on Earth and everywhere: it is something like a wasp drowning in a jar of honey – the more you panic and resist it, the more stuck you become.

(Daggett 2014)

Morton presents this as an inescapably personal experience:

I do not access hyperobjects across a distance, through some transparent medium. Hyperobjects are here, right here in my social and experiential space. Like faces pressed against the window, they leer at me menacingly: their very nearness is what menaces. From the center of the galaxy, a supermassive black hole impinges on my awareness, as if it were sitting in the car next to me at the traffic lights. Every day, global warming burns the skin on the back of my neck, making me itch with physical discomfort and inner anxiety. Evolution unfolds in my genome as my cells divide and mutate, as my body clones itself, as one of my

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sperm cells mixes it up with an egg. As I reach for the iPhone charger plugged into the dashboard, I reach into evolution, into the *extended phenotype* that doesn't stop at the edge of my skin but continues into all the spaces my humanness has colonized.

(Morton 2013, 27)

Morton connects the invasive qualities of hyperobjects to the practice of writing. For him, accounting his personal impressions is a technique for studying hyperobjects. His approach to environmental thinking requires an openness to nonhuman objects – including art objects. Openness is a counter-move to the kind of distanced observation usually considered as the proper scientific attitude (the same attitude *Annihilation's* biologist fails at), which Morton considers “a psychic and ideological construct designed to protect me from the nearness of things” (Morton 2013, 27; see also Morton 2010, 8). The “things” that call for attention in the time of radical environmental change are not merely near, but in crushingly invasive contact with human bodies. This invasion is also at the heart of VanderMeer's Area X, in the transformation of the ecotopes, and in the contamination of the biologist. What unites Morton and VanderMeer, and sets them apart from most environmental writers, is their call for opening up to the strangeness of environmental transformations rather than preserving nonhuman Nature as a harmonious and stable setting for human activity. First-person engagement plays a great part in this project: one's personal impressions become “litmus tests in the time of hyperobjects” (Morton 2013, 5; see quote in the introduction to this chapter).

According to Morton, the existence of hyperobjects forces thinking into acknowledging a paradox: that there are real, material things that exist and act independently of human perception – and that there is no metaposition from which to approach these things. It becomes impossible to write from a position “outside” hyperobjects. Rather, the self is always impressed by hyperobjects, and to some extent constituted by them. By following the “footprints”, the traces of hyperobjects in individual bodies, one can make hyperobjects perceptible. The human body thus becomes a measuring device, and the rhetorical self becomes a phenomenological instrument – an affordance, a handle by which you can grasp a hyperobject and communicate the feel of it.

The rhetorical self Morton frequently uses is quite effective in evoking embodied experientiality. Consider, for example, the kinetic and physical way in which he evokes the experience of listening to a musical track by the group My Bloody Valentine:

When I listen to My Bloody Valentine, I do not reach out toward the sound – instead, I am assaulted from the inside by a pulsation that is also sound, a physical force that almost lifts me off the floor. Kevin Shields's guitar sears into me like an x-ray, scanning me, strafing me. The chords lurch around one another sickeningly, gliding in and out of tune, amassing towers of harmonics through dissonance. Distortion pulps and fragments the sound into a welter of gravel and thick oil.

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(Morton 2013, 29)

The strategic purpose of the passage is to support the notion of the viscosity of hyperobjects – that is, the impossibility of distancing oneself from them, either intellectually or aesthetically. In Morton's line of thought, aesthetic experience in general is not "attunement" of a subject to an art object (in the Kantian sense) – instead, the art object "tunes to me, pursuing my innards, searching out the resonant frequencies of my stomach, my intestines, the pockets of gristle in my face" (Morton 2013, 30). This relationship between objects, termed *interobjectivity* by Morton, can be considered a visceral form of Polvinen's (2012) "being played" and an extreme form of becoming-instrument. Interobjectivity differs remarkably from the general understanding of empathic engagement, which is considered to be an *intersubjective* phenomenon that requires participants capable of experiencing mental states. Morton, however, sees intersubjectivity as "a particular instance of interobjectivity with which humans are familiar [...] 'intersubjectivity' is really human interobjectivity with lines drawn around it to exclude nonhumans" (Morton 2013, 81–82).¹⁰

Reading the above passages from *Hyperobjects* through the conception of interobjectivity, one can acknowledge the text as an aesthetic object that evokes embodied experientiality and draws its power both from the material affectivity of nonhuman objects and from the specific practices of interhuman affectivity – such as first-person narration. Both Doležel's (1978) *authentication* and Neimanis's (2017) *amplification* are helpful here. In the passages, a first-person narrator authenticates the physical effects and bodily feelings of interobjective relations as true within the theoretical construction presented in *Hyperobjects*: they are true *as experiences*. The overt stylization of the passages (metaphors and similes; repetition of structures such as "as I"; rhythm; synesthetic expressions) marks them as distinctly literary, as already saturated with skill, learning, and culture. Instead of seeking an objective stance outside hyperobjects, Morton's approach embraces personal impressions as means of inquiry. As such, this is a performative mode of writing, one that develops an understanding of the impressive and invasive qualities of hyperobjects by amplifying the experiential feel of them.

Enactment of Fictional Experience as a Mode of Inquiry

Returning to the reading of *Annihilation* further demonstrates how this kind of deliberate engagement applies to engaging with a literary object. As mentioned above, *Annihilation* is presented as an expedition journal. Over the course of transformational events, the process of analytical writing is presented as a tool for making sense of the experience. It is an insufficient tool – there seems to be no way of getting to the truth about Area X – but it is presented as necessary for psychological purposes. In accounting for the oppressive vitality of Area X and the brightness that works its way in her body, the narrator makes a note of the impossibility of thinking about Area X without writing.

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[T]here is a limit to thinking about even a small piece of something monumental. You still see the shadow of the whole rearing up behind you, and you become lost in your thoughts in part from the panic of realizing the *size* of the imagined leviathan. I had to leave it there, compartmentalized, until I could write it all down, and seeing it on the page, begin to divine the true meaning.

(VanderMeer 2014, 93, italics in the original)

The most apparent mental strategy applied by the biologist, *compartmentalization*, protects the mind from shattering from the impact of the hyperobject that is Area X. As the biologist walks the marsh trail toward an abandoned lighthouse, she thinks of the strange biology of the tower/tunnel. Instead of trying to consider the whole truth, "a vast biological entity that might or might not be terrestrial", she focuses on analyzing specific details of her observations. In her mind, "contemplating the sheer enormity of that idea on a macro level would have broken my mood like an avalanche crashing into my body" (VanderMeer 2014, 90). Her focus on detail is later echoed in the journals left behind by members of earlier expeditions. One particularly provocative journal focuses solely on the thistles that grow in the area, giving lengthy and detailed descriptions of them. This single focus is presented as "a way of coping" with the horror of there being a "terrible presence hovering in the background of these entries" (ibid. 114). The compartmentalizing approach is also considered as "guerrilla warfare" against the invasive agency of Area X – a way to fight an enemy you cannot directly confront, physically or mentally.

The biologist keeps on analyzing, and so do I. I read the novel several times, making note of the cues and tones provided by the text, tuning into the resistant attitude of the biologist. As she is oppressed by the vividness of her impressions, so am I: there seems to be no proper way of talking about this book in an academic context. I can dissect it and categorize all my findings, but I am always left with a feeling that I have been misled – that my analytical training, like the scientific training of the biologist, has failed to prepare me for the encounter with this strange text. Accounting for the reconfigurative potential of the novel requires surrendering to subjective experience: the enactment of theoretical reader models, rather than a mere critical assessment of them. Only after repeated exposure to the novel, as well as to the theory introduced above, do I find release from the analytical tension.

In the novel, the journals of the expedition members become representatives for their writers. Every member is instructed to keep one, and is encouraged to keep them private. Finding a decaying mound of discarded journals inside the abandoned lighthouse, the biologist feels as if she has encountered a "pile of ghosts". From this pile, she finds the ghost of her husband, the journal "stuck to the back of another journal by dried blood or some other substance... written in the confident, bold hand-writing I knew from birthday cards, notes on the refrigerator, and shopping lists" (VanderMeer 2014, 118). The material description of the journals makes them seem like dead bodies, a rotting mound that documents a history of unnamed expeditions gone awry. The journal of the biologist's husband carries the traces of his actual, familiar body: the blood and the handwriting.

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Finding the journal of her husband, the biologist also finds a connection to him that was not realized when he was still alive. She carries the journal with her for some time without daring to open it, and when she finally does, the experience becomes a resolution of a long-accumulated tension.

When I finally picked up my husband's journal and started to read, the brightness washed over me in unending waves and connected me to the earth, the water, the trees, the air, as I opened up and kept on opening.

(VanderMeer 2014, 160)

The biologist's reading dramatizes the issue of enactive engagement with first-person narratives. Reading the journal enables an experience of intimacy that the accumulated years of shared living could not release.

My husband had had an inner life that went beyond his gregarious exterior, and if I had known enough to let him inside my guard, I might have understood this fact. Except I hadn't, of course. I had let tidal pools and fungi that could devour plastic inside my guard, but not him.

(VanderMeer 2014, 167)

There is more to this revelation than interhuman relationships: the "opening up" serves as a model for ecological subjectivity. During the story, the biologist repeatedly reports her observations of the biological life of Area X. In these passages, the emotional and aesthetic aspects of an environmental orientation emerge most clearly, evoking a sense of an experiencing subject who appreciates life in a profound way. The contrast between this observational sensitivity and the report-like manner of accounting for interpersonal relationships contributes to the modeling of the character as psychologically complex but unsociable. As a reader, I am invited to feel a closeness to someone who feels more comfortable in desolate marshlands than in crowded restaurants. I am also invited to observe the biologist in different habitats, to mark the changes in the tone of her narration. Toward the end of the novel, these tones and preferences emerge as *expressions of her environments*.

[F]un 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. He knew all of this, I think. But I never could express myself that well to him, although I did try, and he did listen. 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 part of them with ease.

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(VanderMeer 2014, 110, italics in the original)

The way to understand the biologist on her own terms, then, would be to observe her as a living creature, an organism in an ecosystem. *By being impressed by her environments, she becomes their expression*. In that way, she has been open for interpretation all the time she has seemed closed due to the lack of verbal expression of emotions. Being a fictional creature, she can only be tracked by the textual traces she leaves: the fictional journal text of *Annihilation*. But she is there, as real a thing as any narrator of a letter – and she can be engaged with. The sense of engagement may well be an illusion. That does not make it less true.

As mentioned in the introduction, Marco Caracciolo argues that the literary techniques of first-person narration can “take readers’ empathic involvement with a fictional character to a higher level than would be likely in real life”. For him, first-person internal focalization provides an intimate access to the fictional experience of a character – an access the kind of which is not possible with actual persons (Caracciolo 2014b, 32). In reading *Hyperobjects* and *Annihilation*, I have chosen to accept this hypothesis as a methodical starting point: I have become *impressionable*, and found a way to enact the experiential states evoked by first-person narration. Furthermore, this reading has led me to suggest that the dynamic of enactment also applies to narratives that are not explicitly fictional but rhetorical devices in non-fiction texts, enabling a mode of enactive engagement with textual constructs usually conflated with actual persons – such as the rhetorical I in *Hyperobjects*, and, to the extent you find plausible, the rhetorical I of this chapter.

Conclusion: Becoming-Instrument and Reconfiguration

Science fiction and fantasy stories are full of narratives about (often horrifying) assimilations with and incorporations into other entities. What sets *Annihilation* apart is that the biologist successfully *resists* the incorporation into the strange entity of Area X. Although boundaries between the biologist’s body and other entities in the novel are porous and mutable at times, a distinct separation remains between the narrative I and the experiential environment. Neither the acknowledgment of nonhuman agency nor the realization of the constructedness of one’s experiential self leads to a total annihilation of human subjectivity or to complete abandonment of rationality. At the end of the novel, the biologist leaves her journal and proceeds deeper into Area X, anticipating a “cataclysmic molting” of the area and the final transformation of herself into something nonhuman.

I will not be here when the thirteenth expedition reaches base camp. (Have they seen me yet, or are they about to? Will I melt into this landscape, or look up from a stand of reeds or the waters of the canal to see some other explorer staring down in disbelief? Will I be aware that anything is wrong or out of place?)

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(VanderMeer 2014, 194)

What is annihilated here is not subjectivity as such, but the conception of the human subject as the sovereign master of a passive environment. In *Annihilation*, epistemic control over one's environment is a necessary but limited tool, as the "interconnectivity of living things" both transforms and transgresses human subjectivity.

In *Annihilation* and *Hyperobjects*, the characters of the biologist and Tim Morton are presented as objects for hyperobjects: their fictional bodies are affected by strange imperceptible forces, and they are transformed in the process. These modeled transformations, conveyed to readers in the first-person singular, can train the readers' abilities for imagining and enacting experiential change – for deliberately remodeling their experiential worlds to include nonhuman agency. If art and literature are considered as practices that reorganize the naturalized conventions of experience (see Caracciolo 2014a; Noë 2015), literary transformations like this reorganize a specific aspect of experience: personal change as part of environmental change.

My persistent hope is that first-person involvement, such as the mode of reading presented here as becoming-instrument, can add both intensity and detail to processes of reconfiguration. I have posited a reading self as a heuristic instrument that, in engagement with literature, produces knowledge of the biocultural mesh it is embedded in. The instrument might be inadequate – it is calibrated in the pressures of several disciplines with partly contradicting methodologies and agendas, and as such it is an experimental hunting dog, purposefully bred yet potentially hazardous. It might be mad science, and it might be witchcraft. Yet this mongrel approach can help us reconsider the importance of personal involvement and aesthetic experience in understanding both literature and environmental phenomena. Therefore, it is worth exploring.

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¹ I make no empirical claims on the effect of *Annihilation* and *Hyperobjects* on other readers than myself. The reception of both works indicates that they can indeed be read in countless varied ways. Rather, I focus on the evocative potential in VanderMeer's and Morton's literary techniques, specifically first-person narration, and explore what happens if one intentionally inhabits the subject position these texts supposedly offer their readers.

² By "naturalized conceptions of identity", I refer both to the notion of human subjects as sovereign individuals, as developed in modern Western philosophy, and to the reductive notion of identity as a stable end result of biological and evolutionary processes, as proposed in popular versions of evolutionary psychology.

³ Caracciolo has worked with estranging narratives by, for example, William S. Burroughs, Julio Cortazar, Marie Darrieussecq, Bret Easton Ellis, and Mark Haddon.

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⁴ Caracciolo's work on readerly experience rests on the notion of *experientiality*. The term was introduced by Monika Fludernik (1996) to designate narrative's "quasi-mimetic evocation of real-life experience" (1996, 12). In contrast to Fludernik's definition that construes experientiality as primarily a property of narrative, Caracciolo's use of the term focuses on the phenomenology of the event of text-reader interaction. He argues that

even if engaging with narrative does involve mental representations of some sort, its experientiality cannot be understood in representational, object-based terms. Instead, we should think of experientiality as a kind of network that involves, minimally, the recipient of a narrative, his or her experiential background, and the expressive strategies adopted by the author. At the root of experientiality is, then, the tension between the textual design and the recipient's experiential background.

(Caracciolo 2014c, 30)

This is also the sense in which the term is used in this chapter.

⁵ One of the more crucial caveats is that the two approaches employ different epistemological interests: posthumanist thought strives to actively transform research practices, whereas cognitive approaches, due to their natural-science genealogies, tend to maintain a carefully apolitical stance. In this question, I side with the posthumanist ethical and political project.

⁶ In this chapter, I read *Hyperobjects* more for its literary qualities than for its philosophical implications. Therefore, I do not take up the task of considering Morton's thinking in light of the many traditions it draws from, but focus instead on the techniques he uses to affect his readers. I also acknowledge the critique of one of those traditions, namely, *object-oriented ontologies* or *OOOs*, given by many feminist new materialist scholars – the most frequent critique being that OOOs do not properly consider the world-constituting role of power-relations in their ontological model – but I steer away from the debate for the time being. I trust that inquiries combining feminist and object-oriented perspectives can provide important insights even if there is no consensus on the ontological aspects of knowledge-formation. (See Åsberg, Thiele, and van der Tuin 2015 for an overview of the critiques.)

⁷ *Cognitive estrangement* is one of the grounding concepts in science fiction research. Coined by the Marxist theorist Darko Suvin in 1972, cognitive estrangement has traditionally been considered as the primary effect that distinguishes science fiction proper from related genres such as horror and folkloric fantasy. In short, Suvin's theory defines science fiction as the sort of fiction that systematically presents "an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (Suvin 1979, 4). This systematic construction necessitates a novel element that sets the entire fictional world apart from the empirical reality of authors and readers, and enables the normative world-model of the reader to be transformed. (Suvin 1979, 63–64) While Suvin's theory focuses on the traditionally cognitive, that is, rational aspects of literary engagement, and veers away from bodily experientiality, it can give a general idea of the transformative dynamic at play in reading strange fiction such as *Annihilation*.

⁸ The issue is taken up again in the third part of the trilogy, *Acceptance*, with a significant change in the narrative voice of the biologist. This change will be discussed at length in my doctoral dissertation (forthcoming in 2019).

⁹ Object-oriented ontologists (or "speculative realists", a term that marks a slightly different but overlapping group of thinkers) have been known to affiliate themselves with Weird literature – according to philosopher David Roden, this might even be considered as the main uniting feature in the "otherwise fissiparous movement" (Roden 2016).

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¹⁰ Similar ideas about the force of nonhuman matter have been developed by New Materialist and material-ecocritical thinkers (e.g. Barad 2007; Lovino and Oppermann 2012).