

GRZEGORZ CZEMIEL

Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej*

“Making Kin in Broken Places”. Post-apocalyptic Adolescence and Care in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Borne*

Abstract

This article attempts to place Jeff VanderMeer’s novel *Borne* (2017) in the context of the New Weird, and more broadly within the tradition of speculative fiction represented by the Weird and the Gothic. The aim of this is also to bring into focus the role of genre fiction in diagnosing the uncanny underside of its times. In the present context, the key issue is to develop new models of subjectivity that would embrace a trans-species, less anthropocentric and more ecological model of caring and “making kin”. This phrase references Donna Haraway’s project, which is argued to dovetail with VanderMeer’s conclusions, defining the article’s ethical premise, formulated around the theme of adolescence in a post-apocalyptic setting.

* Zakład Literatury Angloirlandzkiej, Instytut Anglistyki
Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej
pl. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 4A, 20-031 Lublin
e-mail: grzegorz.czemiak@poczta.umcs.lublin.pl

In Mary Shelley's 1826 novel *The Last Man* we read:

The world had grown old, and all its inmates partook of the decrepitude. Why talk of infancy, manhood, and old age? We all stood equal sharers of the last throes of time-worn nature. Arrived at the same point of the world's age — there was no difference in us. (After Hicks 2016: 24)

As Heather J. Hicks points out, this lamentation over the fate of children in the face of a global plague, which ravages humanity and ultimately leads to its demise in the year 2100, is testimony to the fact that “the terminus of modernity eliminates the condition of youth altogether” (2016: 24). In her view, as long as modernity was riding the wave of progress, transforming the world in unprecedented fashion in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, its dynamism could be contained within the framework of *Bildungsroman*, a genre capturing the new trajectories of adulthood elicited by radical social and environmental changes (2016: 24). However, a sense of impending collapse, heralded by technological development running out of control or its inability to deal with the global ecological forces it has awakened, brought this mode of prose writing into question. Thus, turning away from the nascent realist mode of grappling with the era's vital concerns, Shelley embraced the Gothic convention, both in *The Last Man* and in the earlier, ground-breaking novel *Frankenstein* (1818), to articulate the feeling that traditional prose was failing to capture newly precarious adolescence in times of impending catastrophe and unforeseen transformations of humanity (cf. Ulstein 2017: 72–73). Her vision of a global secular apocalypse brings out a key notion: in the face of a doomed struggle for survival, former categories of development understood as teleological growth into maturity become obsolete, rendering useless the concept of innocent childhood and self-controlled adulthood, as well as their projections on the development of human societies. The plague in *The Last Man* lays bare the paralysis experienced by those supposedly holding the position of assured parents, who are wrestling with the task of developing new modes of caring fit for a time when uncertainty about the future necessitates a complete overhaul of our ethical systems.

Shelley's turn towards the Gothic as a mode of criticizing social issues prevalent at the dawn of the industrial society is a move that has been reiterated later at pivotal moments of modern history. Just like the early eighteenth-century Gothic literature offered

a phantasmal counterpart to the rise of instrumental reason, culminating in the Romantic unleashing of monstrosity as a demonic undergrowth of Western industrial and colonial capitalism, the beginning of the twentieth century saw a related major development in the rise of Weird fiction. Fuelled by the earlier proliferation of penny dreadfuls and consequent explosion of pulp fiction, the Weird — epitomized for example by the magazine *Weird Tales* focusing on Gothic horror stories — is today viewed as a mode of writing that functions as a twisted mirror image of high modernism (cf. Sell 2018: 97). Championed by Howard Phillips Lovecraft, the Weird can be regarded from today's perspective as a literary mode that channelled the repressed trauma of the First World War (Miéville 2009), which put industrial growth at the service of militarism and facilitated an unprecedented bloodbath produced by allegedly rational and developed European countries.

What is noteworthy, such modes of broadly understood Gothic were typically associated with childish fancy and low-brow sensationalism appropriate for the working class and thrill-seeking immature readers (cf. Hogle 2002, Gamer 2002). The Gothic and the Weird evolved under the stigma of triviality due to their juxtaposition with the more serious modes of bourgeois realist novel and later its high modernist revision, which precluded treating these popular genres as a fully-blown response to the exigencies of far-reaching transformations that human societies were undergoing in the respective periods. In this sense, the system of literary criticism has pitted the childishness of the fantastic against the sophisticated maturation of prose in works by high modernists. Folkloric legend, supernatural excess, and lurid horror have been, time and again, discarded on the pile of rubbish viewed as cultural waste — a by-product of the massification of society, utilized only by talentless hacks catering for the lowest readerly needs. Despite notable efforts to obliterate the hierarchization of genres and modes of literary expression within more recent cultural and literary studies, this procedure of purification, consisting in segregating writing into serious and frivolous, can be seen to still operate today, for example in how books are categorized in stores or libraries. Regardless of the newly found appreciation for the Gothic, as well as fantasy and science-fiction in general, the fantastic as a writerly mode continues to be cast in the marginal position despite growing interest in such works among the reading public and critics. However, at the same time, novels and stories of this kind continue the tradition they have cultivated since the early days of the Gothic, namely the tradition of picking up the debris and salvaging it for the purpose of creating hybridized genres useful for addressing larger issues informing twenty-first century civilization, e.g. the highly intertextual post-apocalyptic fiction (cf. Hicks 2016: 3).

One example of a current that also operates in this way, embracing post-apocalypse as a form of expression, is the New Weird, a lively literary movement that salvages various elements of the fantastic, breathing new life in them to create something like a literary Frankenstein's monster. Sifting through the Gothic and the Weird, horror and fantasy, science fiction and surrealism, New Weird writers have been developing speculative modes of addressing (obliquely or not) the transgressive aspects of humanity as well as the dark underside of modernity (cf. VanderMeer 2008: xvi–xvii) as epitomized now by globalized corporate capitalism, climate change, ecological catastrophe, worldwide inequality, and mass migration. Using radical imagery and outrageous concepts, this literary current can be easily disregarded as a guilty pleasure for the interminably adolescent millennials, but upon closer inspection — which constitutes the aim of this essay — reveals to be inter-

rogating the ongoing socio-political debate over crucial issues faced by people around the world and problematized in new idioms within the humanities.

Among the key figures in the New Weird we find Jeff VanderMeer, widely acclaimed for his *Southern Reach Trilogy* and anthological work done together with his wife Ann. In his defence of the "uncanny power of weird fiction" he argues that there is true "power and weight to this type of fiction, which fascinates by presenting a dark mystery beyond our ken" because "in that space we discover some of the most powerful evocations of what it means to be human or inhuman" (2014). Intriguingly, one crucial aspect of the New Weird he emphasizes is its power to evoke humility because:

in what is actually our *infancy* of understanding the world — this era in which we think we are older than we are — it is cathartic to seek out and tell stories that do not seek to reconcile the illogical, the contradictory, and often instinctual way in which human beings perceive the world, but instead accentuate these elements as a way of showing us *as we truly are*. (VanderMeer 2014; emphases added)

Paradoxically then, he argues that it is the speculative mode of writing — reinvigorated by revisiting and recycling elements of the aforementioned Gothic-like "dark mystery"¹ — that can offer a way to achieve the task usually associated with the bourgeois realist novel's aim to be like Stendhal's "mirror carried along a high road". Thus, VanderMeer embraces something that the philosopher Graham Harman has termed "weird realism": a mode of writing that accepts reality as "incommensurable with any attempt to represent or measure it" (2012: 116). As a thinker associated with the novel philosophical movement called Speculative Realism, Harman criticises the anthropocentric hubris of representational realism, which more often than not proves to be massively reductive and ultimately fails to usher in new perspectives necessary to properly address larger global issues of today — ones that precisely cannot be represented in conventional terms due to their inhuman scale. After all, for example, we cannot *see* global warming directly, while the massive scale of global inequality eludes any individual efforts to gauge its ramifications in any directly representational terms.

Harman's "weird realism" is perhaps best seen, in a broader socio-political context, when coupled with Mark Fisher's idea of "capitalist realism" coined in the 2009 book under that title, where he argues that the kind of conservation of culture we are currently witnessing as part of an overabundant self-replication of the contemporary media machine is merely a repetition compulsion that reinforces a toxic status quo. "A culture that is merely preserved", he claims, "is no culture at all" (2009: 3). This forecloses, in his view, any hope for change or at least for some conscious adaptation necessary to address the rampant ecological and social injustice. In that sense, as long as the current socio-political regime replicates itself, it forecloses any lines of flight leading out of the self-exhausting stasis, which does not appear to be a catastrophe but in fact is one, albeit stretched in time and space. This paralysis of imagination — as Fisher emphasizes with force — makes it easier to think the end of the world rather than the end of capitalism.

¹ This dark mystery is crucially — as China Miéville suggests in an interview with Jeff VanderMeer for *Weird Tales* — an updated version of the sublime, viewed now as "quotidian" insofar as the weird is discovered to underpin our reality, revealing the fact that reality *is* weird, the horror consisting rather in the realization of the futility of our efforts to make it feel homely (VanderMeer 2011: 741).

Translated into literary terms, this predicament can be formulated — as McKenzie Wark proposes (2017) — as a dialectic between the “serious” novel and “frivolous” genre fiction. Following Amitav Ghosh, Wark proposes to consider climate and social justice specifically as a literary problem. This bundle of issues, he concludes, “exceeds what the form of the bourgeois novel can express”, which amounts to what Ghosh termed a “great derangement” — a state in which literature conceals rather than reveals the scale of difficulty we are now facing. This is because, “[f]rom the point of view of [...] the bourgeois novel, certain things one can know about the outer world can only appear as the strange or the weird or the freaky” (McKenzie Wark 2017). Wark points out that the current global system of civilization forms a totality that cannot be addressed through the kind of prose in which “bourgeois subjects can keep prattling on about their «inner lives»” (McKenzie Wark 2017), leading him to embrace formerly exiled genre fiction — e.g. horror, fantasy, Gothic, etc. — as a vehicle for fathoming a larger totality (as scary as it may be) instead of carving out for itself a fake stable world where business goes on as usual. Thus, as an exercise in imagining a vaster, densely interconnected totality, speculative fiction becomes in this critical account a mode of searching for sustainable means of living and caring.

Indeed, given the looming threat of unforeseeable changes induced by human-made global warming, the traditional novel has utterly failed to develop a language that would be helpful in tackling this subject in literary terms. It is rather science fiction, or specifically climate-fiction (“cli-fi”)² that attempts to grapple with the problem, although it employs means specific to the Gothic or the Weird rather than those developed within the more conventional psychological realism, which in this perspective proves to be myopically anthropocentric. One specific sub-genre that wrestles with the question of a world made no longer sustainable is of course the already mentioned post-apocalyptic fiction, which can be traced back, in its secular form, to Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*.

The “widespread appeal of the apocalypse”, Monica Germanà and Aris Mousoutzakis argue, is due to the fact that it “has served as a template to construct different sets of cultural anxieties at different moments in time” (2014: 2). The two scholars credit the current rise in interest in post-apocalyptic prose to the problematic relationship with the concept of modernity (Germanà, Mousoutzakis 2014: 4). This serves as a convenient framework that coincides with the above-sketched trajectory of the Gothic, the Weird, and the New Weird. Modernity is brought under erasure within such narratives not for the purpose of enjoying its ultimate breakdown but rather, as Alice Curry invites us to think, “to make room for new, and different, world orders [...] by invoking planetary dislocation [...] to refute such alienation and negotiate a more embedded relationship between humans and the earth” (2013: 42). In this light, post-apocalyptic visions can be argued to “interrogate the current epistemological framework held responsible for crisis” (18) and point towards more sustainable modes of living and caring, grounded in a reconsideration of the concept of humanity. As numerous authors working in the area of so-called “post-humanities” argue, in order to reassemble the social we need to rework human subjectivity so as to make it embrace much more than the “affluent white male” perspective, so as to include women, children, and ultimately non-humans too. This is necessary to foster a culture of nurture and care, one that would simultaneously acknowledge humanity’s dependence on,

² As Jessica Langer points out, “cli-fi” is “never *only* about the climate” but about “many overlapping factors that create an inhospitable world” and the ways in which we fail to recognize their gravity (2018).

and inseparability from its environment understood not in dualistic terms as a cultural haven nestled in a dangerous (or indifferent) natural world, but as an ecologically conceived immanence we are all an inextricable part of. The vulnerability entailed by recasting our subjectivities in those terms is aptly captured in the image of child, a traditional figure of hope (Curry 2013: 195). Children, however, would be regarded in this perspective not as representative of purity and innocence but rather of openness to change, plasticity, self-transformation, and receptivity to the environment facilitated, in aesthetic terms, through something that Charles Baudelaire has vividly called the state of "drunkenness" in which children regard the world in a perpetual "state of newness" (1964: 8). What is at stake here, Curry concludes, is to bring out a sensibility "occupying that threshold preceding integration into adult systems of social and political responsibility" since it is an "especially privileged position to engender change" (Curry 2013: 197).

Curry's ecofeminist perspective privileges young adult post-apocalyptic fiction because it elicits transformation and self-exploration through interpretative work demanded by a setting that does not offer immediate answers and calls for active development of ethical frameworks grounded in material, environmental conditions and an empathetic relation with fellow inhabitants of Earth, both human and non-human. It is for this reason that — paradoxical as it may seem — she views post-apocalyptic literature as an exercise in "ecopoiesis": a conscious effort to make sustainable homes in "broken places". This last term has been employed by Jeff VanderMeer in an article for *The Revelator* to emphasize the fact that "people today already live in situations of ecological collapse and displacement" (2017b). His remark is doubly important in the present context because it not only concerns the current state of late capitalism but also constitutes "the reality of the situation in my novel *Borne*" (VanderMeer 2017b). The latest novel from the author of *Annihilation* explores — through its post-apocalyptic setting and an array of stunning, more-than-human characters — all the issues mentioned above, delivering a genre-based consideration of modernity from the perspective of scavengers living in a toxic world and "making kin" (to use Donna Haraway's term elaborated further on) in such "broken places". By making the quandaries of parenthood and adolescence the staple of his novel, VanderMeer tackles the questions of growth, care, and formation of kinships involving a diversity of species (and even going past that concept), thus venturing beyond the boundaries of anthropocentrism and dualism, suggesting trans-species ecological justice and ethics of care.

The novel *Borne* — praised for the way it "intertwines references to current events with musings about the long-range logics of ecological and economic traumas" (Hageman 2017) — offers a bleak vision of the future in which biotechnological manipulation and rising ocean levels have led to the collapse of the world order and spawned a myriad of fantastic "biotech" creatures. In an unnamed ruined city the remnants of humanity scavenge for whatever is left of civilization to make a living among the debris left by the formerly authoritative "Company", a biotechnology corporation, which Toby Litt aptly described in a review for *New Statesmen* to be like "Apple Inc as imagined by H.P. Lovecraft" (2017). The Company, as can be gleaned from scanty bits of information scattered throughout the book, is responsible for the creation of all manner of biotech creatures: memory beetles that can alter one's recollections, predator cockroaches and crab spiders that act as battle gear, diagnostic worms capable of operating within one's body and providing biological data, and alcohol minnows that intoxicate when eaten. However, all these

biotechnological marvels fade in comparison with the grandest of them all — the giant bear Mord, several stories high and able to fly, who used to stand guard at the Company but in the aftermath of its collapse has turned against his former creators, wreaking havoc on the city, “reimagining” it and “replenishing” (VanderMeer 2017a: 33)³ with whatever useful salvage sticks to his fur, making it possible for vigilant scavengers like Rachel and Wick to reclaim it. These two protagonists — who provide the story’s perspective, with Rachel firmly in the position of a narrator who recounts the events from a later point in time — live in the so-called Balcony Cliffs, where they shelter and cling to whatever hope of survival this bleak world can offer them.

The novel begins with Rachel performing a daring feat of snatching a curious, fist-sized sea anemone-like entity from Mord’s fur. Strangely beaconing to her, this “vase” gradually surpasses all expectations, proving in time, along with its growth, to be a sentient being that straddles the boundary between plant and animal, formed and formless, and finally human and non-human (understood in terms of personhood):

a sleek vase with rippling colors that strayed from purple toward deep blues and sea greens. Four vertical ridges slid up the sides of its warm and pulsating skin. The texture was as smooth as waterworn stone, if a bit rubbery. It smelled of beach reeds on lazy summer afternoons and, beneath the sea salt, of passionflowers. (B 52)

“Borne” — as Rachel names “him” (a tentative and ultimately groundless assumption about the being’s gender) — finds home at her place. She gradually develops maternal feelings for him, which is augmented by the fact that Borne can actually speak and, as seems fitting for an adolescent, requires guidance and care in his discovery of the world and his self-explorations that pose a myriad of questions regarding identity, personhood, provenance, and possible purpose. This aspect of the novel is also well seasoned through dialogue, which renders with tenderness and humour the process of learning language and expansion of cognitive horizons.

The addition of Borne into the family, despite Wick’s reservations, proves to be pivotal for the city’s fate given the fact that the inhabitants of Balcony Cliffs find themselves caught between a rock and a hard place as Mord’s destructive roving, in which he is accompanied by his regular-sized killer-bear “proxies”, is more and more actively resisted by the so-called Magician. An enigmatic figure, who allegedly used to work for the Company like Wick, she has set her sight on taking over the city. She had amassed a range of biotech and weapons in her stronghold, and keeps a “family” of her own, consisting of “feral children”:

Other than Mord, the poison rains, and the odd discarded biotech that could cause death or discomfort, the young were often the most terrible force in the city. Nothing in their gaze could tell you they were human. They had no memories of the old world to anchor them or humble them or inspire them. Their parents were probably dead or worse, and the most terrible and transformative violence had been visited upon them from the earliest of ages. [...] four had traded their eyes for green-gold wasps that curled into their sockets and compounded their vision. Claws graced their hands like sharp commas. Scales at their throats burned red when they breathed. One wing sighed bellows-like out of the naked back of the shortest [...]. (B 388)

³ Hereinafter referred to in abbreviated form as “B” with location number.

Already at this point it becomes clear that the novel's focus is with the question of relationships between creators and their creations, much in the vein of dilemmas experienced by Doctor Frankenstein.⁴ *Borne* brings this issue forward in his expression of anxiety over being a "made thing" — i.e. a machine — when he points out to Rachel that she was too made by two people and is indeed made of flesh (B 598). Close association with *Borne* ultimately leads Rachel to embrace him as a "person" (B 847), which stands in contrast to the relationship between Company and its child-turned-foe Mord, one between Mord and his proxies, and the one between the Magician and her feral children, who remain under her custody but have been transformed by her into a menacingly augmented deadly militia. As the novel finally reveals, all of these "children" have been subject to intense transformations, often crossing the boundary between the human and the non-human. The Magician's feral children used to be normal but were given over to her for experimentation in exchange for biotech or supplies, Mord's proxies prove to be capable of living peacefully when released from the mighty grip of their master, while Mord himself is revealed to have actually once been a human. Their status as monsters is thus problematized and recast in terms of how they are woven into structures of kinship understood, as Donna Haraway claims, as more-than-human assemblages that "unravel the ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species" (2016: 102).

Although "all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense" (Haraway 2016: 103) and we all share a fleshly existence in the same environment, Haraway argues that "kin are unfamiliar (outside what we thought was family or gens), *uncanny*, *haunting*, active" (Haraway 2016: 103; emphases added). There is a significant difference between promulgation of established family structures and making kin, since the latter does not assume a pre-established framework that identifies specific beings as "persons" or "children". Haraway's slogan for the Anthropocene, or Cthulucene as she likes to call it, is "Make kin, not babies!" In this she does not endorse some form of anti-natalism but rather invites us to think outside genealogical structures, adopting a caring attitude towards all life, "making babies rare and precious" as she told Lauren O'Neill-Butler (2016). In *Borne* — regardless whether we consider the behemoth-bear Mord who used to be human but had no idea what was to become of him, or the feeble boy Teems who is almost traded over for a handful of biotech — caretakers of all kinds are brought under scrutiny.

As Matt E. Lewis notes in his review of *Borne*, the book "makes the readers question their own relationships, the reality of trust, and the nature of family in a devastated world" (2017). In this, he concludes, VanderMeer achieves something unique: by drawing us in with "familiar scents" (and familial, one might add), he takes us somewhere altogether different, leaving us "utterly vulnerable" (Lewis 2017)⁵. In a sense, by utilizing elements of a psychological, family drama (as if in response to Wark's and Gosh's argumentation), VanderMeer uncannily expands the notion of family, showing us how *natural* it in fact is to

⁴ This appears to be a more general trait, as identified by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, who argues that monsters continually ask us why we have created them (1996: 20). Ulstein, in turn, follows Bruno Latour in reading Frankenstein's negligence as something that we should be afraid, not the monster itself (2017: 73).

⁵ This is corroborated by Neel Mukherjee, who argues that "[t]he education of *Borne* coils around to become an education for his educators and, by extension, the readers" (2017). In this sense, the novel can be seen as offering "weird education" — one that operates by way of uncanniness rather than overt didacticism.

successfully “make kin” with a being that eludes us as to its gender, genealogy, mode of consciousness, and motives — one that, in the end, becomes a monster worthy of Mord himself and willing to face up to him.

Borne is acutely aware of the fact that he might be a weapon, and Rachel confirms at least his potential to become one when she suggests that every person can be a weapon (B 3931). This also resonates with the current social situation, in which parents could just as well regard their own children as ones who will bring the world as we know it to a bitter end through blind consumerism and consequent rise in the consumption of fossil fuels. Such a perspective, sketched by Jessica Langer (2018), uncannily reverses the situation in which parents are (as many horror stories show) desperately trying to save their children from the monster. In the Anthropocene, however, the children themselves are both monstrous *and* can bring salvation. This affiliation with the monstrous is not something we should thus shy away from. Instead, monstrosity needs to be embraced at a quite fundamental level. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen claims, “[m]onsters are our children” and without them we would not exist (1996: 20). This might be the ultimate trick pulled off by VanderMeer: by luring us in with a promise of traditionally Gothic villain, first found in the dreadful Mord, then in the Company, or in the evil Magician, he ultimately locates monstrosity as a liminality or hybridity resting at the very heart of family, i.e. in becomings of adolescence or in other transformations, be they biotechnological or emotional depending on the story’s vagaries. This metamorphic element, poignantly conveyed by the theme of adolescence, works in two ways, turning the situation on its head and making parents “grow up” just as much as children do. In the Anthropocene, humanity is revealed to be like children (as VanderMeer points out by using the term “infancy” in civilizational terms in a passage quoted above) who need to transform themselves in a process of adaptation which does not follow any preformatted blueprint.

In this, *Borne* can be seen as an instance of the “posthuman Gothic”. Although Hara-way remains sceptical about the term “posthuman” since she does not endorse any finite concept of “the human” to begin with, there are interesting points of contact between these theories and others that employ notions of haunting, darkness, or monstrosity in their attempts to express the more-than-human ecologies we inhabit. Michael Sean Bolton defines the posthuman Gothic as a form that “finds instances of terror and horror arising from the interfaces and integrations of human and technologies; specifically, in the inevitability and exigency of these unions as a matter of the continued existence of the human subject reconstituted as posthuman” (2014: 2). This theme, going back to the beginnings of Gothic literature (Bolton 2014: 4), is about how the “fearful unknown” could be in fact “our future selves” (Bolton 2014: 14), the horror arising from the fact that we are not in the position to fully control our becomings in an environment that actively transforms us in consequence of our own actions. These processes, however, do not have to be only a matter of technology as they involve the entire spectrum of nature-culture, encompassing — as *Borne* aptly demonstrates — a continuity between the technological and the natural, thus giving rise to an uncertainty that stems from the blurring of the difference between the human and the non-human as emphasized in the category of so-called “species Gothic” (Prمود K. Nayar’s term; after Bolton 2014: 2). This notion seems particularly fit to account for the novel’s weird and overabundant biotech, which (as Rachel herself suggests towards the end) may be the face of future as a result of an

intense "cross-pollination between the human and non-human" (Mukherjee 2017) that provides the novel's narrative thrust.

Both Haraway and VanderMeer utilize the category of "haunting" in relation to the way we experience the environment. The latter specifically argues in "Hauntings in the Anthropocene" that global warming, for example, could be fruitfully regarded as a "haunting" because many of its effects are not felt directly but rather "under the skin". Therefore, as our categories no longer offer sound coordinates for grasping this reality, "mapping elements of the Anthropocene via weird fiction may create a greater and more visceral understanding" (2016)⁶. As *Borne* says mid-way through the novel, he admits to having been haunted by multiple questions regarding life on the planet, colonization, civilization, ghosts as well as feeling haunted and spooky:

Hauntings came up a lot with *Borne* once he wasn't a "child" any longer. I would come to realize a haunting meant something different to him. The landscapes he traversed looked nothing like what I saw, might to me seem like a bombardment of senses I couldn't even imagine. (B 2046)

The experience of the environment is equated, in this account, with a haunting. Rachel feels similarly, for she often speaks of herself as a ghost in a haunted landscape until she literally states "I was a ghost. I was a ghost" (B 2807). Without the environment that shaped her — whose memory feels "like being haunted by a grotesque fairy tale, something that when voiced came out not as words but as sounds in the aftermath of an atrocity" (B 68) — Rachel is haunted not only by the past but also by the problem of "how to maintain the self when the environment which produced that self no longer exists" (Smith, Hughes 2013: 11). The experience of self is thus revealed to originate not in some kind of an essentially personal, intimate human core but in the environment, which co-produces us, "bears" us to employ the novel's key terminology: making us not only "born" but also "borne" by the world we inhabit. The sense of a deep kinship with nature, experienced as an invasion of something other, weird, alien, is the beating heart of what Smith and Hughes term "ecoGothic", a mode in which Gothic hauntings are used to account for our relationship with the natural environment.

As is suggested by the previous quotation, *Borne* is equally haunted by the fact of being shaped by a world he cannot fully comprehend. Through his eyes, or the uncanny focalization this character brings into the narrative, we are invited to ponder a post-apocalyptic world. "Therein is expressed", Brad Tabas writes, "one of the terrors of our current situation, our deep awareness of the looming environmental crisis coupled with our awareness of the ways in which the limits of our minds hinder our every attempt to master or rationally model the world around us" (2015: 10). What Rachel learns from *Borne* is that she cannot have access to the kind of a world that *Borne* is experiencing. In this sense, she takes an important lesson in anthropocentrism, gauging its limits in the course of "making kin" with non-human sentience. To achieve this, an aesthetic of the

⁶ In another turn of phrase that brings Haraway and VanderMeer together, the former also speaks of a "possibility for changing maps of the world" through "building new collectives out of what is not quite a plethora of human and non-human actors" (1992: 327). Her cyborg — imagined as a confluence of the "technical, organic, mythic, textual, and political" (329), illustrated by Lynn Randolph's *Cyborg*, could be equally well expressed by *Borne*.

weird becomes crucial insofar as it allows, in Mark Fisher's words, "to see the inside from the perspective of the outside" since "[t]he weird brings to the familiar something that ordinarily lies beyond it" (2016: 67). As we traverse the unwelcome landscapes of the collapsed city along with the protagonists, we are uncannily displaced into a weird reality which, through its extreme conditions, brings a realization that perhaps the idyllic vision of a thriving global civilization is a spectre that haunts a *more real* life within an unstable, unsustainable ecosystem that is running out of control.

This notion is perhaps best captured by what Rachel and Wick finally discover inside the abandoned Company building, which they enter in search for Wick's medicine. At a sealed-off level they are able to reach only through a hole dug out by strange foxes who seem to have an unknown agenda of their own, Rachel encounters the mysterious Hall of Mirrors, where a "wall of silver became a river of silver raindrops and then a frozen scene [...] a pretty-enough scene, from a place undamaged by war" (B 4141–4148). This scene "that would fill anyone from our ruined city with such yearning" (B 4192) is the other side of reality, one that is no longer accessible and, as Rachel concludes, "was so obvious a trap" (*ibidem*). What it shows is an idealized place from the past, where Company shipments would go — "the past preying on the future" (B 4497). The inaction and lack of reflection that led to global ecological crises is cast in *Borne* as the Company, *tout court* — an aggregate of technological and economic development blinded to its own nature and the influence it has on the future of the planet. In this sense, the Company is a kind of a temporal monster that would take our future away from us. This is the crux of the ecological injustice of our times: though unevenly distributed in temporal and spatial terms, the post-apocalypse is something we are living through right now, but it only becomes visible when we shift from capitalist realism to *weird realism*, employing non-mimetic speculative fiction as our cognitive vehicle.

As Merjin Hos argues, the novel *Borne* is sufficient proof that "eco-fiction has come of age" (2017). In the form of weird fiction that reworks Gothic conventions, mixing them with speculative fiction, science-fiction, *Bildungsroman* etc., it has risen to the challenge of addressing the "great derangement". Although such ecogothic fiction "is still emerging from its literary pupa" (Poland 2017: 56), the state of nascent becoming that does not congeal in a fixed form befits its subject matter, wherein the human is reformulated in terms of companionship with other critters, who "human and not — become-with each other, compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time and stuff in sympoietic tangling, in ecological evolutionary developmental earthly *worlding and unworlding*" (Haraway 2016: 97). In *Borne*, where genre fiction is employed to problematize the apocalyptic unworlding through ecological collapse and the painstaking task of making a liveable world right here and now through inter- and trans-species composition, true horror does not lie in the monstrosity of a giant flying bear or the malign conquests of the Magician and her troop, but in the blindness to the ramifications of unsustainable practices in late capitalism. To rectify this blindness, a deep shift in aesthetic categories becomes paramount. Weird fiction offers one such "emancipatory catalyst" that "lays bare and challenges the limits of imagination, and explores how to expand, transform, and evolve beyond those limits" (Ulstein 2016: 94). *Borne* sets out to achieve this by way of "salvaging" in terms of both "literary salvage" (Hicks 2016: 3) and "salvage love" (Hageman 2017). The former consists in revamping the aesthetics of the sublime, particularly

strong in the Gothic tradition, from various sources in order to evoke a sense of "dark ecology" (Morton 2016): an awareness of deep, complex interrelationships that underpin what we used to regard as a separate, standalone, self-sufficient subjectivity. The latter emerges from this recognition as a predilection for a companionship that transgresses former structures of affiliation in favour of unconditional care for others, representing various forms of sentience, and for the world as a totality that cannot be fully rendered in conventional representational terms but needs to be approached speculatively, through various non-mimetic literary modes, including weird fiction.

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In a recent interview, Mayer Hillman asks "What legacies are we leaving for future generations?". "Our children and grandchildren", he grimly answers, "are going to be extraordinarily critical" (2018). The issue does not consist in adapting our technologies so as to mitigate short-term effects for a handful of those rich enough to secure their well-being in a sealed-off paradise. The stakes are rather different and have an unexpectedly literary dimension. The point, as VanderMeer, Haraway and others indicate, would be to refashion our perception of the natural environment and acknowledge our deep entanglement in its processes, some of which already lie beyond our control despite the fact that we have initiated them. In the Anthropocene, Steven Shaviro points out, we have "exposed ourselves [...] to the geological and biological forces that respond to us in ways that we cannot anticipate or control" (2017). The fact that agency is much more distributed in this view does not mean we have to lay off any efforts to alleviate ecological crises. On the contrary, we have to acknowledge the operation of forces that can never be humanized in any way, and find ways of striking the right alliances, forging connections that extend beyond traditional notions of "a human family" and encompass all of our kin on Earth. The adoption of *Borne* by Rachel is a humble yet significant gesture in salvaging the kind of love, so rare in post-apocalyptic "broken places", which could help foster an agenda of companionship in which whole ecosystems could flourish, giving all life a chance to thrive.

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