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## Fragmented Worlds, Hybrid Bodies: ‘New Weird’ Narration and Posthuman Realities in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Dead Astronauts*

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### Abstract

The current environmental crisis that has gripped the world has not only affected the ecological balance of the planet but has also changed the geopolitical and socio-economic dynamics of power, forcing us to rethink the impact of this change at a global scale. While the ecological discourse is being fine-tuned to accommodate a practical, solution-oriented approach to the problems of environmental change the representation of that discourse within literary and narrative spaces is also important to create, expand, and critique the foundations of ecocritical philosophy. VanderMeer uses the framework of the ‘New Weird’ to decentralise the human core of ecocritical narratives and depict the posthuman realities of the current ecological scenario. In this paper, I will situate VanderMeer’s *Dead Astronauts* (2019) within this ecological discourse of representing nonhuman and posthuman subjectivities, and study how the author bends linguistic structures, typographical conventions, and narrative constructs to establish the ecological space as a networked, osmotic space that is kept active through interactions across species boundaries. I will study the use of ‘weird’ as an aesthetic and affective category that can be used to debunk the anthropocentric biases inherent in ecological narratives. The primary research questions which this chapter will deal with is how does Jeff VanderMeer’s *Dead Astronauts* (2019) use the narrative techniques, structural framework, and linguistic oddities of ‘New Weird’ genre to represent alternative posthuman realities? In order to answer this research question, I will deal with the idea of breaking the species boundary using the metaphor of contamination and contagion.

**Keywords:** New Weird, Posthuman Realities, Ecological Discourse, Anthropocene, More-than-human Subjectivities.

### Introduction:

Jeff VanderMeer’s *Dead Astronauts* (2019) uses the genre of ‘New Weird’ to introduce characters that subvert the ‘ordinary’ human realities. Through these characters, the novel depicts posthuman truths about the ecological space in ways that novels of realism would fail

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to do. The three central characters in the novel, Moss, Chen, and Grayson, therefore, experience and interact with the environment around them in a manner vastly different from that of humans. The nature of these interactions between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ forms a vital part of VanderMeer’s philosophy of posthuman consciousness. Charting these experiences, and the way they shape the ‘New Weird’ narrative of VanderMeer, is therefore crucial in understanding the way in which the ecological future of the planet is imagined and visualised in VanderMeer’s work through the lens of posthumanism and ‘New Weird.’ The way in which the character of Moss breaks the species boundaries while trying to recognize and establish her own self-identity leads to a positive understanding of contamination as communication rather than as a form of forceful or unwanted spreading of disease. The idea of contamination is thus used to portray the fluidity of identities wherein there is a two-way osmosis between two totally different species. This not only challenges the idea of the superiority of the human species but also prevents the creation of any sort of hierarchy in the natural environment. Secondly, the metaphor of contamination is also used to describe the interaction of the species with the environment within the posthuman context. Since the novel features the use of biotechnology to alter the way different species interact with each other, the metaphor of contamination provides a useful model of analysis to study the ‘New Weird’ landscape in which characters like the Leviathan, blue fox, or the duck with the broken wing operate. This paper will deal with these different uses of the idea of contamination to create ‘New Weird’ landscapes and study the way posthuman identities are depicted in *Dead Astronauts* (2019).

### **Contamination as Communication:**

The most crucial use of the idea of contamination is seen in the character of Moss who is a complex, compound organism who absorbs part of the environment she passes through and leaves a part of herself back. As a result, Moss’s species identity is always shown to be fluid in nature. The osmosis between Moss and her environment is visible prominently in the part where she interacts with Botch - a huge, mutated fish created by the company who devours other creatures experimented on by the company and deemed as failures. While interacting with Botch, Moss is able to reach and see directly into its brain and also project a vision of Botch wandering through the holding ponds and being the sole ruler of the habitat (VanderMeer, 2019, p. 73). Moss explains that the habitat will be “contaminated, wild, always polluted but always resisting” (VanderMeer, 2019, p. 74). Eventually, the company too will be “contaminated across all versions” (VanderMeer, 2019, p. 74) leading to its final downfall. For Moss therefore, contamination does not imply that the area has become impure and harmful. Rather, contamination is used as a metaphor for ecological resistance against the company’s acts of environmental destruction. It is a strategy which Moss wishes to follow to bring about the downfall of this capitalist venture of the company that exploits the bio-reserves for its own benefit. The process of contamination would lead to a return to ecological stability where wilderness will be restored and the power which the company holds over other species like Botch would be subverted. Despite the presence of fantastical elements therefore, VanderMeer uses the genre of ‘New Weird’ to propose a means of restoring ecological balance through a reinstating of wilderness in areas destroyed by the effects of human action. The use of the idea of contamination, in *Dead Astronauts* (2019), is thus based on what Benjamin J. Robertson refers to as ‘fantastic materiality’ which refers to the way in which the narrative structure of the fantastic and the ‘New Weird’ is used to alter the material reality of the world around us in order to “introduce to a world without predetermined notions of reality the means by which to change it” (p. 41). The ‘contamination’ of the holding ponds built by the company to restore wilderness and ecological stability is not just a solution to the environmental destruction within the fictional space of the novel. Rather, it serves as a metaphor that functions beyond the confines of the novel, recognising the need to change the actual ecological space around us and to reclaim it from the exploitative, capitalistic economies that progressively damage the bioreserves of the planet. In this sense, the ‘contamination’ does not just take place within the narrative but also beyond it.

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Another use of contamination in *Dead Astronauts* (2019) can be seen in the same interaction between Moss and Botch in the context of species boundaries. When Moss interacts with Botch, she leaves a part of herself in the tidal pools thus 'contaminating' it; "Was that Moss or Botch? For some part of Botch would forever be with Moss now. Part of Moss would, clandestine, contaminate all tidal pools" (VanderMeer, 2019, p. 75). Communication with Moss does not just take place at the linguistic level but rather at an ontological level where there is an exchange or co-mingling of selfhood. Not only does Moss leave a residue of herself in these pools the effect of Moss's conversation with Botch can be seen on the latter's body who develops a greenish hue on the scales. This contamination in *Dead Astronauts* (2019) which takes place at an ontological level alters the fabric of existence within the ecological space. The fluidity between species, which forms an important part of this contamination, can be understood through the idea of 'cross-species becoming' propagated by Zhuangzi - a Chinese philosopher who lived around 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Existence and selfhood in VanderMeer's novel, similarly, is not an isolated and stagnant one. Rather, it is constantly in a state of flux, whereby interactions with other human and non-human species, and their environments enhances its 'becoming.' Moss's interaction with Botch, therefore, establishes this dynamic and fluid sense of identity within the posthuman world. Both Moss and Botch are altered through their interaction with each other as much as the tidal pools are altered by Moss. This ontological exchange is crucial for the overthrowing of the company's power which prioritises human agency over all other forms of life. To challenge the company's acts of ecological aggression using biotechnology, Moss, Chen, and Grayson must establish the fluidity of existence within the posthuman world. As Philip Armstrong argues, posthumanism finds "ways of describing agency at work through the interactions of a complex and widely dispersed network of actants, both human and other-than-human" (VanderMeer, 2019, p. 196). VanderMeer's text reconfigures the relation between species through this idea of dynamic ontology. Furthermore, as the novel repeatedly demonstrates the agency of every species, be it human, non-human, or even that of characters bio-engineered by the company, is dependent on a host of environmental factors and other species inhabiting there. Although, Moss, Chen, and Grayson are presented as protagonists, the fulfilment of their agency depends on the existence of the blue fox or the dark bird.

The story of *Dead Astronauts* (2019), therefore, continues even after the death of Chen and Moss because of the existence of this network of ecological forces that can still turn the chain of events against the exploitative structures of power. As opposed to this fluidity of identities in the ecological space of the novel, the company's strategy of exploitation is based on the creation of boundaries. This is evident in the wall of globes where the different creatures experimented on by Charlie X was kept. The wall between the creatures serves as a metaphor for Charlie X's restrictive view of animals as organisms isolated from their ecosystems which could be used as resources for human use. Moss's strategy therefore involves the fishlike creature called Leviathan contaminating the wall of globes in the company so that any biological life can trickle in again. The fluidity of Moss's identity was noticeable even at the time she was in Charlie X's lab. As the narrator explains, during her initial days Moss was a green clotted skin that was stretched over the wall of globes (VanderMeer, 2019, p. 95). The wall therefore failed to contain Moss within its confines. It appears that by growing over the wall she has made it porous just like her interaction with Botch opens up a channel of non-conscious communication. By her very nature Moss as a species, intrudes, and is in turn intruded by other species. By using the idea of contamination, therefore, VanderMeer once again highlights the importance of breaking the 'wall of globes' that separates human and non-human species. This act of contaminating and infiltrating the wall that separates life forms is not just a superficial act of defiance against the company but the only viable strategy of restoring environmental stability.

### Cross-Species Becoming:

The characters in *Dead Astronauts* (2019), on the one hand, can be seen as posthuman subjects within the 'New Weird' Space trying to reclaim the environment from the oppressive structures of power symbolised by the company. But on the other hand, this distinction between human and non-human subjects is also broken down by VanderMeer in his novel. We observe that one of the central characters, Grayson, is a human character who can see things with one of her eyes that others cannot. Similarly, Moss, who is a complex sentient organism takes on a human form. It is also indicated that Moss's consciousness probably is that of a homeless woman named Sarah, who finds Charlie X's journal. Even Chen, who is made up of equations, appears in the form of a human. The breakdown of the binary between the human and the non-human indicates that ecological existence in VanderMeer's text is based on shared consciousness. The binaries between the human and the non-human fail to operate in this weird space. The actants who influence the turn of environmental processes all possess what Katherine Hayles designates as 'nonconscious cognition' (VanderMeer, 2019, pp. 10-11). Hayles's (2017) expanded definition of cognition includes all those processes that "interprets information within contexts that connect it with meaning" (p. 22). It extends the boundaries of cognition beyond the confines of anthropocentric thinking by recognising the processes of nonconsciousness 'thinking' in other biological forms and even technical systems. The division of the ecological space into cognizers and noncognizers allow for a non-anthropocentric understanding of agency wherein other biological forms who leave a significant impact on the environmental space through their actions also become a vital part of ecological thought. Hayles (2017) argues that it is imperative to overcome the misconception that humans are the only relevant cognizers on the planet in order to understand the complex relationships between other biological and technological systems of cognition that operate around us.

In *Dead Astronauts* (2019) these complex systems of cognition and the relationship between human, non-human, and technological units of nonconsciousness cognition is clearly seen. When Moss lets the blue fox into her head, she says that they are not strangers (VanderMeer, 2019, p. 28). This is because although the blue fox and Moss are meeting for the first time in this reality, they have already encountered each other in alternate versions of this reality. Moss therefore relies not on the conscious re-cognition of the blue fox but on the nonconsciousness familiarity which they share on account of their encounters in alternate realities. When the blue fox delves into Moss's mind it sees how the foxes had helped them in their fight against the company in other realities (VanderMeer, 2019, p. 28). Moss, therefore, views all forms of life as intrinsic part of their mission, and sees the inherent connection that exists among all of them. When the three of them approach the city, the narrator says that they are surrounded by enemies sent for them. These enemies who take the shape of 'monsters' are "Bio-matter with nanites instead of intent" (VanderMeer, 2019, p. 10). Although these 'monsters' have been sent by the company to punish them for rebelling against its power, the lack of 'intent' on their part shows that they have no conscious power of cognition. However, as Hayles's (2017) analysis has shown nonconscious cognition on the part of humans, and other biological and technological forms also constitute an important part of ecological agency. The monsters who are in reality bio-matter without intent belong to the group of cognizers who have their own nonconscious mode of thinking. Moss, therefore, does not look down upon them as enemies but rather is sympathetic towards them as "she was closer to them in her flesh than to Grayson or Chen" (VanderMeer, 2019, p. 10). Moss's kinship with these vague forms of biomatter shows that she does not limit her consciousness to the human forms of cognition. Rather, she sees all biological forms as part of the ecological consciousness which she shares with other organisms like Botch. This interconnectedness between biological agents, and its effects on the overall planetary condition can therefore be understood by considering Moss, Botch, Charlie X, the dark bird, and all other biological and technological actants as part of a 'cognitive assemblage' (VanderMeer, 2019, p. 4).

However, the mechanism that guides these cognitive processes in the environment are not restricted to living forms only but also extends and includes the material parts of the environment. The tidal pools where Moss leaves a part of herself is the same place where Grayson discovers Sarah after the death of Moss. The tidal pools too, therefore, play a part in the attempted reconstruction of the environment after the company has destroyed everything. Similarly, in the narrative of Sarah, while being chased by the company, she recalls a story her mother told her in order to calm herself. The story refers to the existence of a 'forest mind' that ruled over all (VanderMeer, 2019, p. 184). The forest mind which comprised earth, trees, clouds, and other natural elements was "awake in a way no person could be awake...Mind that was not mind" (VanderMeer, 2019, p. 184). The 'forest mind' does not have any active power of interpretation or decision making. Thus, the 'forest mind' that was not mind, or the tidal pools where Moss leaves a part of herself are important non-cognizers and agents that determine the success of the fight against the company. Although they cannot actively think and choose to resist the acts of environmental destruction they act as supports for cognizers like Moss and Sarah, so that the latter can rebuild the ecological balance and reclaim the control over bioreserves from the company.

### **Conclusion:**

The character of Moss is described by the narrator as being "uncommitted — to origin, to gender, to genes" (VanderMeer, 2019, p. 8) referring to the fluidity of her existence and the ease with which she can metamorphose or transform herself. In the fight against the Company across different timelines, this strategy of contamination is used with the hope that even when they are defeated there would be residues of Moss in the tidal pools from which they can start anew. This is evident at the end of the novel where, Grayson, after the death of Chen and Moss, comes across a figure resembling the latter near the tidal pools and wonders if Moss has returned (VanderMeer, 2019, pp. 315-317). Although this figure turns out to be a human character named Sarah, there are a lot of similarities between Sarah and Moss which indicates that the mechanism of contamination has breached the human/non-human species boundary. This breach of the category of the 'human' to facilitate a transfer and exchange of knowledge characterises VanderMeer's epistemological realities of the posthuman world. This is because although there are different versions of Chen, Grayson, and Moss fighting against the Company in different timelines, some sort of knowledge sharing across different realities about the dangers of the company and the strategies already adopted (successfully or unsuccessfully) to defeat it is crucial. Although posthuman subjects of knowledge are embedded and embodied within geopolitical, ecological, and genealogical dimensions they are defined by the relations they share with human and non-human others (Braidotti, 2018, pp. 33-34). For example, the novel clearly states that it is essential to understand whether the dark bird is in their favour or against them in this particular reality before they decide upon their strategy to fight the Company. Similarly, there are repeated references in the text of how Moss, Chen, and Grayson, have a vague idea of where they meet each other for the first time while starting the fight in each reality, or how certain events transpire in particular situations. Moss refers to this as 'phantom sensations' when she feels that she is "using the tidal pool rules to do the things she wasn't doing here" (VanderMeer, 2019, p. 25). Although there are differences in the way events occur or the nature of Chen, Moss, and Grayson, the knowledge about the alternate versions of reality where they have already fought against the Company is essential to the current version of reality. Existence, in the world of *Dead Astronauts* (2019), is thus a part of a shared experience that includes both human and non-human species from the current reality and alternate versions of one's own self in other realities. Moreover, the strategy to survive within this dystopic world created by the company is developed by every species inhabiting this 'weird space' and is not solely restricted to the humans. This knowledge about the basic nature of the environment one has to survive in, is rooted within the structure of ecological systems and is

shared by all forms of life both human and non-human. The posthuman subjects of knowledge and the interactions between them also shape the ecological space that they inhabit. The precarious condition of the environment, and the condition of the non-human species within that space necessitates the use of the 'weird narrative' to capture the changing equations between the self and the other.

Taken together, the posthuman figures and more-than-human agencies in *Dead Astronauts* (2019) reveal that ecological existence in VanderMeer's 'New Weird' universe is grounded not in stable identities or clear-cut species hierarchies, but in a shared field of cognition and affect that cuts across human, nonhuman, and technological forms. By drawing on Hayles's (2017) notion of nonconscious cognition and cognitive assemblages, the novel destabilises the binary between cognizers and noncognizers and shows how tidal pools, biomatter "monsters," the forest mind, Moss, Grayson, Chen, Botch, Charlie X, and even the blue fox all participate- albeit in different ways- in the shaping of planetary processes and resistances. Ecological agency here is radically distributed: it resides as much in vague, non-intentional bio-matter and ambient "supports" as in sentient rebels who consciously oppose the company.

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### Bio-note

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