

Creatures of Story, Stories of Creatures

Transformative Reading and the Agency of Literature

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Storied Life

In Jeff VanderMeer's *This World is Full of Monsters* (2017), an alien being unexpectedly pays a visit to the short story's first-person narrator, a writer and journalist, whose life will never be the same after what turns out to be a rather disturbing encounter. Upon finding an envelope on his doormat, the narrator soon discovers that it is not a letter that has been addressed to him, but a tiny creature, seeking to transform earthly life into something else entirely. While to fans of Science Fiction this may read like a quite familiar trope of opening a space invasion narrative, VanderMeer would not be one of the most influential writers of what is called New Weird fiction, if it were not for a surprising plot twist right at this point in the narrative: it is a booklet, a living story "covered in green fur or lichen, shaky on its legs" (VanderMeer 2017) that invades the narrator's home on that fateful night. As we learn, the creature's book-like appearance served only as a disguise to trick the narrator into reading it. This strategy ultimately allows the story-creature to colonise the narrator's body, which by that time is already gradually taking on a tree-like shape. "As I slept", the narrator reveals,

the story gnawed its way into my belly and then the story crawled up through my body into my head. When I woke, gasping my resistance, the story made me stumble out the door of my house and lurch through the dark down my street, giddy and dis-

oriented, muttering, “Do not stop me. Do not stop me. Story made me this way. Story made me this way.” (VanderMeer 2017)

In a time in which topics such as habitat destruction, species extinction, and climate change dominate the public and political discourse on the global environment, we are increasingly reminded of how easily the life-stories of planetary beings, including our own, can be rewritten – and not necessarily for the better. The term ‘Anthropocene’ has more often been used in this context to give expression to the concern over the growing and damaging impact of human activity on the biosphere, making it clear that the human has become a driving force behind the ongoing transformation of the physical environment and its ecosystems. Planetary life appears more fragile in the face of the current environmental crisis, but as VanderMeer’s short story shows, the human species is not immune to the effects of the fundamental changes it has introduced to geological history. “Everything is connected to everything else”, Barry Commoner’s much cited first law of ecology reminds us (1971: 16), and so the marks we leave on earth’s crust will ultimately be written on our own bodies. Consequently, it is not only the story-creature of VanderMeer’s short story, but also the narrator who has been irreversibly transformed by and keeps on transforming after their mutual “material-semiotic exchange” (Haraway 2008: 206). Seen from such a relational view towards life, what happens in *This World is Full of Monsters* is a living, creative dialogue between a human and a more-than-human body, interpreting and negotiating each other’s boundaries in order to enhance their life stories.

The fact that semiotic agency is not a property exclusive to humans has often been emphasised in current research in the environmental humanities, and, more specifically, material ecocriticism. Drawing on posthuman philosophy and ethics in general and insights from the new materialisms in particular, this relatively young paradigm rethinks embodied existence in terms of a relational ontology. Material formations, whether human or more-than-human, are not thought to exist and act in isolation from each other, but to “emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating” (Barad 2007: ix). In other words, we configure as much as we are reconfigured by a world that is already a constitutive part of us. Such a relational take on the connections between human and more-than-human modes of agency, as expressed in works such as Karen Barad’s *Meeting the*

Universe Halfway (2007) or Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010), emphasises the limitations of an anthropocentric world view. If we are entangled in relations of mutual responsiveness, this means that the human being appears as only one of many active and intelligible participants in the writing, or, rather, storying of ecological reality.

In the first part of what sets out to be an interrogation of the transformative potential of meaning-making activities on both an evolutionary and material, and, in case of the human, an affective level, I will work towards a redefinition of the human as a creature of story. Drawing on insights of both biosemiotics and material ecocriticism, I will show that all forms of life are driven by creative activities of storying and interpretation. This will help me to argue that human modes of storytelling accordingly appear as an expression of a universal semiotic or creative imperative encompassing all living things.

In a second step, I will move away from the stories we are and instead have a closer look at the stories we tell – and read. In this context, I propose that the creative and affective process of reading fiction can be understood as a staging of the relational poetics that is embodied by the material semiotic configuration of the literary text itself. Literature, so I argue, has a transformative potential, one that is also emphasised by VanderMeer's short story cited at the beginning of this paper: when the narrator exclaims that "[s]tory made me this way", he brings to mind that it was, after all, his reading of a booklet that only afterwards turned out to be a story-creature – or, in other words, the affective engagement between his mind and a text – that paved the way for both the story-creature's and his own transformation. I will conclude this paper with commenting on the possibilities that contemporary literary responses to the weird entanglements of human and more-than-human life hold for the ways in which we imagine and rewrite the future of our planet.

Creatures of Story

It goes without saying that stories are everywhere: we find them in the books and diaries on our bedside table, in the songs we listen to, in the news running on TV, in the junk mail filling our mailboxes. They haunt us in our dreams, keep us awake when the mind drifts away, script the drama

of everyday life, and are weaved so deeply into history, culture, and politics that it becomes impossible to imagine a world without them. In short, stories do not only pervade all areas of human life but are what human life is made of.

In *The Storytelling Animal* (2012), Jonathan Gottschall comes to a similar conclusion, introducing the term “*Homo fictus*” (xiv) to describe how storytelling defines us as a species and “connects us beyond our kinship ties” (138). With a mind designed by evolutionary processes to indulge in and, in turn, be shaped by story, Gottschall proposes that the human being is not just any but “*the* storytelling animal” (xvii, emphasis added). What seemed to be a promising attempt to challenge human exceptionalism unfortunately turns out to be a very humanist project of Gottschall, for he misses an important point: if our creative capacity to make sense of the world through storying has, as he argues himself, an evolutionary origin and can be seen, for instance, in the play-like behaviour of mammals, creative responsiveness cannot be a feature unique to the human brain. Consequently, Gottschall’s conceptualisation of human beings as “creatures of story” (6) needs serious revision if it is to be applied in a critical posthumanist context.

The biosemiotic perspective towards earthly life provides a promising point of departure for such a critical intervention. A basic claim of the cross-disciplinary study of living systems from a sign-theoretic perspective is that life – all life – is driven by communicative interactions based on sign relations. The living thing, according to such a performative understanding of material existence, is but an open, dynamic meaning-making organism constantly responding and adapting to the environmental cues to which it is exposed in a “global and evolutionary *semiosphere*” (Hoffmeyer 2008: 5, emphasis orig.). While the term ‘biosemiotics’ appeared only later in the mid-twentieth century and would from then on become of central importance in the work of Thomas A. Sebeok, Jesper Hoffmeyer, Wendy Wheeler and many others, the method of adopting a semiotic approach to the study of life has been applied much earlier in the biological research of Jakob von Uexküll. His concept of ‘Umwelt’, which describes the phenomenal world as perceived by an organism, already captures the idea that the capacity to respond to signs via interpretation is an intrinsic feature of all living matter. As he shows for instance in his *Umwelt und Innenwelt der Tiere* (1909), the species-specific body plan of each animal is designed in

such a way as to allow it to respond to the environmental stimuli to which it has access. In other words, the animal is fitted into an environment that harmoniously corresponds to and is mutually dependent on the animal's physiological and behavioural makeup (Uexküll 1909: 196).

It follows from this idea of a reciprocally constituted ecological reality that there must be some kind of interpretative drive or agency at work in living beings, reaching as deep as into the cellular level of their bodies. Indeed, the communicative and creative processes that are performed by cellular membranes to make sense of and therefore coordinate biochemical information and molecular structures mirror a form of what Hoffmeyer calls "*natural play*" (Hoffmeyer 2008: 197). Since all living matter is necessarily composed of cells, this means that not only human beings, but all forms of life share a semiotic competence and are connected to each other through a creative imperative. This, of course, shatters any anthropocentric world view that holds that our competence to use and interpret signs makes us exceptional as a species. To put it in Hoffmeyer's words:

the distinctive property is not *that* we are semiotic creatures but *the way* that we are so – i.e., in the possession by the human species, held jointly by culture and by biology, of a linguistic resource for thinking and communicating that reaches far beyond the semiotic possibilities available to even the most intelligent of other animals. (2008: 309, emphasis orig.)

While human language indeed allows us to interpret more complex cues than, for example, a unicellular organism, it is only the latest evolutionary development within a world filled with semiotic activity. What biosemiotics does from an ethical perspective is to show that human culture, including our need to tell stories, is rooted in a creative capacity evident in all living matter. The forms of expression of our innate creativity may differ in degree from those of other beings, but not in category, and so the human appears to be only one among many other "semiotic creature[s]" (Hoffmeyer 2008: 309).

Although Hoffmeyer's biosemiotic approach to human creatureliness acknowledges the distinctiveness of human semiotic agency, it is not aimed at fleshing out any notion of human exceptionalism. Instead, Hoffmeyer foregrounds the continuity between human and more-than-human sign processes (cf. 2008: 312). In doing so, his understanding of human crea-

tureliness has much more in common with David Herman's concept of the "creatural" than with that of the "creaturely" as formulated for instance by Eric Santner or Jonathan Gottschall. The creatural, according to Herman, captures "human's and other animal's shared condition of embodiment, their shared vulnerability vis-à-vis the environments in which they live" (2016: 4) and thus differs from more deficit-orientated connotations of creaturely existence.¹

As responsive systems that are positioned towards an equally responsive world, our creatureliness is grounded precisely in our state of openness to material-semiotic agency, involving us in an open-ended process of becoming-in-relation. Where organisms and environments interact with each other, there can be no stasis, but only constant movement, which is why, according to Gilbert Simondon, metastability appears to be an essential characteristic of the living thing (cf. 1992: 305). For Simondon, being is not an actualised and fixed state or substance resulting from the process of individuation; being is the relational process of becoming. Thus, individuation becomes a performance of the poietic energy of life, the living entity an anticipation of and participant in the semiotic activity that constitutes the world.

Simondon's philosophy of individuation is linked to a notion of potentiality for becoming inherent in all life and reveals striking parallels with the relational ontology theorised in both biosemiotics and material ecocriticism. Wendy Wheeler, in an attempt to bridge biosemiotic and ecocritical thinking, explores how human symbolic semiosis and creativity "build upon an essentially *non-conscious* and *poetic* intelligence in nature" (2016: 87, emphasis orig.). Wheeler identifies how this intelligence is expressed, for instance, in microbial symbiosis, a process which, according to endosymbiotic theory, must be regarded as an important source for evolutionary innovation. Characterised by the cellular communication between two different organisms, which respond to and incorporate each other's forms and functions just to merge into a more complex form of existence, the process of symbiogenesis shows that the evolution of life is driven by the "creative

1 Herman (2016) shows how Santner's distinction between different qualitative modes of creaturely existence and experience implies a hidden anthropocentrism at the heart of his argumentation. For a discussion on the creaturely, see Santner (2006).

encounter between similarity and difference" (Wheeler 2006: 133). Within this continuous material-semiotic "play of patterns and exchange" (Wheeler 2014a: 375), we can indeed identify a tendency to grow new meanings in biological life that is reiterated in human modes of storying and interpretation. Pointing out how creativity thus appears as a category that must have its origin outside of human culture, Wheeler argues that

[i]t is surely right to say that biological, as well as aesthetic, life is made of stories. Just as a reader plays with resonant patterns in order to discover (recursively and in narrative time) the growth of poetic meanings, so evolutionary life – on the basis of a primordial difference initiated by the coming into being of a membrane – plays with patterns of similarity and difference metonymically encoded [...]. (2014b: 77)

Wheeler's focus on the semiotic bonds between human and more-than-human life questions an anthropocentric understanding of creative agency. At the same time, she emphasises the important role of narrativity in both actualising and engendering notions of the lived poetics of relationality. A similar view on the ways in which nature is modelled by and represented in human culture and vice versa is taken in more recent ecocritical approaches to literature.

Exploring not only the expressiveness of the more-than-human on a very elemental and evolutionary level, but also how matter is modelled by discursive practices such as writing and storytelling, material ecocriticism, too, has been applying a narrative logic to the embodied and creative responsiveness of matter. What is new here is that the agency or performativity of all matter – and not just living matter – is examined, with special focus on how semantic meaningfulness is constructed through material-discursive practices connecting human and more-than-human agencies. In this context, material ecocriticism has introduced the concept of 'narrative agency', as discussed by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann in particular. Narrative agency describes matter's capacity to articulate itself by the stories that emerge in the mutual entanglements between human and more-than-human beings or forces. These material stories are of course not understood to be linguistically told by matter itself. Rather, the world's textuality, or what has been referred to as "storied matter", becomes articulated by way of "narratives in the minds of human agents and in the very structure of its own self-constructive forces" (Iovino/Oppermann

2012: 83). In other words, human beings can read the world's co-emerging narrativity as a text as much as they can read for it in literary texts.

In addition to acknowledging the creative and regulatory agency of evolutionary and biological semiotic processes, material ecocriticism calls attention to the role of human modes of narrating and interpreting planetary reality. It critically examines the promises and downsides of human symbolic activity, and, in doing so, self-reflexively comments on its own practice of anthropomorphising the semiotic interactions happening in and between organisms. It cannot be denied that our human ways of categorising and reorganising the world can have detrimental effects on the environment. More often than not "cognitive manipulations of the environment are followed by its physical manipulation" (Maran/Kull 2014: 45). The process of what Timo Maran labels "semiotization of matter" (2014: 141) thus faces us with our ethical responsibility to find a new language to narrate the present and the future of planetary coexistence.

Material ecocriticism, which understands itself as a practice of reading "into the thick of things" (Iovino 2015: 82), reminds us that our human ways of storying can aid us on this search, however problematic they may appear with regard to the practical results of environmental modelling activities. In this context, it presents literature to be a particularly productive means for engaging human beings not only in a reading for traces of material agency, but also in a process of experiencing the creative or narrative agency that may result from the interplay of matter and discourse.

Literature and Transformative Reading

With the negative consequences of human modification of the global terrestrial and marine biosphere becoming more and more evident, the question of how we can engender ways of experiencing our "enworlded" (Wheeler 2006: 15) existence has become a central interest in the environmental humanities. As we have seen, material ecocriticism proposes that literary reading represents one way to explore our embodied relationality as corporeal and responsive beings. To understand why the practice of reading is believed to be so productive for fostering notions of the relational dynamics that characterise planetary life, it is worthwhile to examine the "transformative ecological function" (Zapf 2014: 65) of literature in

more detail. On the most basic level, reading literature could be defined as an affective encounter between reader and text or, in other words, between mind and matter, in which readerly creativity and textual patterns interact with and operate on each other in order to co-create meaning. As a dynamic actualisation of the narrative agency encoded in the formal and semantic sequences of the text, reading thus appears as a performative act; an act that according to David Attridge involves “a *staging* of feeling and meaning” (2004: 109, emphasis orig.). What is distinctive about literature is that it offers more to readers than just semantic content: it is an “act-event” (Attridge 2004: 108) that happens in the moment of readerly reception of and is staged in the affective response to the text. As such, literature can enable an individual aesthetic experience rather than access to historical or scientific information or knowledge. Consequently, the meaning of the literary text is attached to involving the reader in the co-creation of aesthetic effects and affects: a dynamic process of responding creatively to the literary text’s verbal creation of “something we might call ‘otherness’, or ‘alterity’, or ‘the other’” (2004: 19). The other, according to Attridge, is not an object or entity which is brought into existence by any given creative event. Rather it connotes a notion of novelty enacted in moments of creative “openness of the mind to what it has not yet grasped” (Attridge 2004: 23). In the context of literature, this means that otherness may come into being through both the creative act of writing and the readerly response to that writing. Therefore, it is always the result of a “mental and emotional restructuring” (Attridge 2004: 28) caused by readerly encounter with difference. What Attridge calls a literary work’s singularity is based on its potential to produce a creative tension or relating

[...] between me, as the same, and that which, in its uniqueness, is heterogeneous to me and interrupts my sameness. If I succeed in responding adequately to the otherness and singularity of the other, it is the other *in its relating to me* – always in a specific time and place – to which I am responding, in creatively changing myself and perhaps a little of the world as well. (2004: 33, emphasis orig.)

Since the encounter between similarity and difference seems to be central to creative activities such as literary reading, it follows that with literature, we seem to be drawn into a relational process of meaning-making that resembles the world-building activities shared between human and nonhu-

man beings. Like the reader of a literary text, who creates something new by responding to the text's singularity, living matter, too, needs to be open to and negotiate the world's alterity in order to evolve. The type of creativity that becomes expressed in the mode of literary reading resembles the generative activity of living matter, which is why literary reading may be understood as an actualisation or staging of the relational processes constituting ecological reality (cf. Zapf 2014: 51). We are creatures of story because we are not only made and re-made by the beings, places, and phenomena we encounter, but also by the stories we tell and read. In reading literature, we become involved in a literary search for traces and clues and are invited to respond to textual ambiguities and otherness in a way that holds an ethical potential for approaching the other outside of literature.

As Attridge points out, our response to a literary work's staging of otherness "must involve something like responsibility because the other cannot come into existence unless it is affirmed, welcomed, trusted, nurtured" (2004: 125). Readerly response to literature thus is a "responsible response" (ibid.) precisely because it thrives on and operates as an experience of the other as other. The literary work demands of the reader a certain openness to formal innovation, textually reinforced notions of ambiguity, inaccessibility, and incomprehensibility in order to unfold its aesthetic effect: that is, a process of letting language "refigure the ways in which I, and my culture, think and feel" (Attridge 2004: 125). What is at stake in the literary experience is nothing less than the question of agency.

To illustrate this point, let us look again at Jeff VanderMeer's *This World is Full of Monsters*, introduced at the beginning of this paper. Right from the beginning, the story makes it unmistakably clear that the world as experienced and described by the narrator is conflicting with the reader's understanding of the dynamics of empirical reality. On the one hand, it is the sheer unimaginable ontological status of the ever-changing, alien story-creature that confronts the reader with what lies outside of his or her usual and familiar modes of thinking. On the other hand, the almost Kafkaesque series of metamorphosis through which the narrator has to go during his dream-like journey into a weird future contributes to the short story's weirdness. Since the organically progressing transformation of the narrator is central to the short story and yet extremely difficult to grasp even after several readings, I will try to reconstruct his evolution from a human

to a more-than-human being in more detail before moving on to a more formalist interpretation of the text's affective agency.

After the story-creature has invaded the narrator's body and gradually turned him into a half-human, half-tree creature, he is forced to wander restlessly through his neighbourhood until he reaches a nearby forest, where he is violently "face-planted" into the ground just to become "awash in dreams of chlorophyll and photosynthesis" (VanderMeer 2017). When he awakens from a sleep that lasted no less than a century, he has to face a world so alien and surrealistic compared to the one he remembers from his past life that he has a hard time making sense of his surroundings. Against all odds he manages to find his way back into his old neighbourhood and takes shelter in the basement of his house, which, by now, looks so ruined and weathered that it, too, appears to have been altered almost beyond recognition. While he is already tormented by the question of what happened to him, his family, and the world, it is the encounter with his doppelgänger that finally throws him into an existential crisis: the doppelgänger reveals that he has been created by the story-creature in order to replace the narrator during his absence.

Now that our narrator is back, there is, however, no need for the double to exist any longer. He dies almost immediately and returns the skin that he had borrowed from the narrator.

Having slipped into his human body, the narrator flees again into the forest. There, he comes across "a beast like an enormous squat centipede" or what he later calls a "schooling-creature" (VanderMeer 2017), sending out tiny versions of itself to devour the narrator alive by feasting on his memories of the past hundred years. Instead of dying, however, the narrator regains consciousness and finds himself in a new, and even stranger environment that turns out to be the creature's inside. His final journey through the school-creature's digestive tract marks the beginning of a longer series of further transformation processes. Although the ending of *This World is Full of Monsters* is anything but clear and unambiguous, the short story suggests that the narrator finally accepts being "broken down and becom[ing] nourishment for the beast that enclosed [him]" (VanderMeer 2017) in order to become excreted as a story-creature himself.

As this, necessarily incomplete, summary of *This World is Full of Monsters* demonstrates, VanderMeer's vivid imagination of both weirdly unfolding layers of alternative realities and alien modes of being somehow

resists being explored in an analytical framework. Rather, it must be experienced in the reading of the short story itself to make any sense at all. There seems to be something peculiar about VanderMeer's reworking of familiar modes of literary writing, which makes his short story challenge our usual strategies of approaching literary texts. Instead of narrating a chronologically unfolding story, VanderMeer presents the reader with a fragmented collection of the narrator's grotesque progression through different, unfathomable bodies and states of being. This fragmentary structure interferes with the short story's coherence and engenders a sense of disruption which, in turn, is also captured in the story's theme of violent bodily transformation.

Adding to the challenges imposed on the reader by this kind of textual composition, the short story further requires the reader to show a certain openness or tolerance towards the strangeness of the creatures encountered throughout the narrative. All of them are named after their ontological peculiarities, and even though we are given at least some information about their traits and characteristics, what we learn from the narrator's brief and incomplete descriptions of their physical appearance, functions, and intentions is very little. This is most clearly illustrated by a mysterious "scientist-creature" referred to by the narrator as Dead-Shell, which seems to evolve and change its appearance as one reads. What at first appears as a turtle-like being with "a hundred scrawny necks attached to tiny bulbous heads with gaping mouths" (VanderMeer 2017) hanging inside of its shell, almost instantly turns into a talking, intelligible creature made of almost nothing but a huge mouth. A few sentences later, the narrator draws yet another picture of Dead-Shell by describing it as a babbling, living host or collection of hundreds of eyes:

How should a Dead-Shell talk? "Maw maw maw," it said, and then "Maw maw maw chaw chaw chaw." And then, "Dam dam dam dam maw maw maw chaw chaw haw." But this was Dead-Shell throat-clearing and I could feel many eyes upon me from it, except that Dead-Shell's eyes were not on its dead shell but instead flitting through the underbrush and overbrush on the rotting shores, through thickets of trees roving in their hundreds if not thousands. For Dead-Shell's evolution made its sight independent of its self, and those eyes too had their own lifecycle, and were so numerous because of the predation upon them. Over Dead-Shell's span, Dead-Shell would

shed upwards of five hundred eyes, and only during the molting could it produce more that would ascend wing-ward to stare down from on-high. (ibid.)

Hiding in almost every paragraph following the one cited above, the creature's countless eyes indeed seem to follow both the narrator and the reader, thus reinforcing a sense of a ubiquitous gaze through which the agency of the other can be experienced. Rather than with a sight of something, the narrative confronts readers with an insight into "the limits of [their] own powers to think and to judge" (Attridge 2017 [2004]: 44) that which, because of its strangeness, remains unthinkable.

Dead-Shell is a striking example of a literary creation of otherness. Even though we cannot possibly draw a clear picture of this creature, we are still engaged in a creative dialogue with the text and invited to experience and respond to the challenges imposed on us by VanderMeer's weird writing. In other words, the reader is compelled to experience the affective agency of literature which, following Attridge, lies in its ability to evoke in the reader "not primarily an idea or image, or a series of ideas and images, but a memory of this specific sequence of words, a memory suffused by the qualities of my experience of them" (2017 [2004]: 157). Just as VanderMeer's narrator is bodily and mentally destabilised, even disrupted by alien creatures, so the reader is affected by an encounter with a sense of otherness as expressed in the short story's linguistic inventiveness. One may be perplexed and even overwhelmed by the text's experimental style and surrealistic narrative and not come to a final conclusion about the story's meaning after all. But it is precisely in this coming into contact with textual ambiguities that texts such as VanderMeer's *This World is Full of Monsters* entail a potential for experiencing the limits of our agency as human beings. Our planet is indeed filled with forms or stories of life which we, as one expressive species of creatures among many others, only partially understand. Being reminded of this fact through literary texts that not only work through less anthropocentric conceptions of creative agency but also challenge readerly agency, may be one way to be forced to look at us and our relation to the world in a different way.

Stories of Creatures

Among the many events and signs that we and other creatures weave into meaningful narratives to make sense of the worlds we inhabit, those resulting from anthropogenic climate change might be the most challenging to process and respond to in the twentieth-first century. While climate change is a global phenomenon that cannot be experienced except in local weather- or environment-related events, it has nonetheless a lasting effect on ecosystemic relationships and directly shapes the life stories of human and more-than-human beings alike. Finding ways that enable us to explore our inextricable entanglement with and develop a notion of ethical responsibility for this world is more urgent than ever. In this context, the “imaginative space for otherness” (Zapf 2016: 92) opened up in the moment of literary reception provides a promising opportunity to experience and reflect upon our embodied relationality as environmentally embedded beings. Being what Hubert Zapf calls a “sensorium for what goes wrong in a society” and “a medium of constant cultural self-renewal” (2016: 91), the literary text can stage that which is “marginalized, neglected, or repressed in dominant discourses” (90) and thus allows for registering and responding to the other of culture.

With the pressing challenges of a globally changing climate among us, it is not surprising that a growing number of literary writers work through a very specific version of otherness – that is, modes of more-than-human expressiveness and agency. Ecologically minded works of Weird fiction, such as those by VanderMeer, in particular participate in taking seriously a sense of responsibility for the more-than-human other by affirming its agentic capacities. *This World is Full of Monsters* is a fine example of how the human can be re-imagined through literary explorations of the response-able, storied, and creatural condition shared across all living things. The beings encountered in this short story are indeed anything but passive and helpless but, quite the contrary, actively respond to and subvert human individuals and culture from within. It is in this way that VanderMeer’s story may function as a response to overlooked and repressed issues within contemporary societies, including the anthropogenic impact on the environment with which we are faced today. By focusing on the corporeal dimension of transgression, the story negotiates fears of losing individual autonomy and control and asks for a re-evaluation of the concept of

human agency. When we are as entangled with the world as the story's narrator is with his surroundings, agency can no longer be understood in terms of a unidirectionally operating force. Rather, it becomes an assemblage of multispecies performances affecting other beings as much as it is affecting ourselves.

Understanding our immersion in the planetary community requires a kind of openness for existing realities that might escape our familiar modes of reading the world. Literature, with its ability to foster a sense of curiosity for that which lies both on and beyond the surface of the narrative text, provides an imaginative space in which the transformative potential of responding to and being affected by dynamic, material-semiotic flows can be witnessed. As I hope to have shown with the help of VanderMeer's *This World is Full of Monsters*, contemporary literary explorations of the weird complexity of ecological relations involve the reader in a quite challenging, yet promising dialogue with textually reinforced notions of creatural sameness and difference. By facing the reader with textual ambiguities, stories such as *This World is Full of Monsters* demand a kind of creative responsiveness to otherness that we might want to cultivate beyond literary encounters as well. In a critical moment in history in which our planetary future seems to depend on a revision of our usual ways of relating to and acting in the more-than-human world, the transformative experience as engendered in moments of literary reception might indeed prepare us for the difficult task of changing our values and habits without having to transform into something else entirely.

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