

Warped Writing: The Ontography of Contemporary Fiction

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Warped Writing

The Ontography of Contemporary Fiction

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ABSTRACT: The theoretical obsession with writing (or *écriture*) in poststructuralist and deconstructionist thought marks one of the sites where the shift from a (crypto-modernist) epistemological to a (properly postmodern) ontological dominant (McHale) was negotiated. If the problematic of writing seems to point to epistemological challenges (how can language represent reality? to what extent can meaning be controlled?), it also brings into play ontological issue of temporality, force (de Man), and godlessness (Hägglund). If, as this special issue argues, ontological concerns have taken on an intensified urgency in twenty-first-century fiction, this essay shows that this is reflected in the contemporary novel's intensified concern with the issue of writing as a way of engaging the imaginative challenges of the Anthropocene. A focus on writing not only allows literature to interrogate the affordances of the literary in relation to other fields of knowledge production (an epistemological concern), it also positions writing as a figure for human action and responsibility in a human-designed world more generally: writing, in this context, becomes a figure for actions that leave an indelible trace; that consists of the more-or-less violent displacement of matter; that leaves an imprint whose long-term consequences are impossible to control. I discuss Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*, Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island*, and William Gibson's *The Peripheral* as novels that do what I call "ontographic" work not because of an environmental thematics (only *Annihilation* is explicitly about the environment) but through an intense exploration of the topic of writing as a form of more-than-human agency.

KEYWORDS: Anthropocene, environment, epistemology, ontography, writing

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FROM *ÉCRITURE* TO ONTOGRAPHY

It is a postmodern commonplace that binary oppositions tend to disintegrate under close scrutiny. The very distinction through which Brian McHale defines postmodern fiction is no exception. In his 1987 landmark *Postmodernist Fiction*, no sooner has McHale defined the difference between postmodernist and modernist fiction as a distinction between a “poetics dominated by ontological issues” and “one dominated by epistemological issues” (xii) than he admits to a zone of indistinction between the two. Investigating the career trajectories of Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and others, McHale observes how in their work “absolute epistemological uncertainty” comes to “tip over” into ontological doubts that alter the terms of these authors’ writing ever after (19). The development of William Faulkner, in contrast, shifts from “problems of *knowing* to problems of *modes of being*” exactly once (in the eighth chapter of *Absalom, Absalom!*), only to return to an epistemological problematic after that. The relation between ontological and epistemological dominants, then, is marked by a “bidirectional and reversible” process: “Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability” (19)—and, we are meant to infer, *vice versa*.

While my essay (and this special issue as a whole) are interested in what comes *after* postmodernism and in how McHale’s ontological dominant has made way for what the introduction calls “earnest ontologies,” McHale’s fairly evasive phrase “at a certain point” and the apparent reversibility of Faulkner’s development remind us that literary developments do not follow neat linear patterns. Indeed, I argue that one strand of contemporary “earnest” literary ontologies can be understood as a qualified replay of a theoretical occupation with the notion of writing that coincided with the shift from epistemological to ontological that McHale so influentially observed. Poststructuralism has long lost its short-lived hegemony in literary scholarship, and done so because of genuine methodological and intellectual problems (Ellis).

Still, recent scholarship that aims to come to terms with the ways climate change and the Anthropocene destabilize the customary relations between human and nonhuman, between materiality and meaning, has begun to retrieve some poststructuralist sensibilities and ideas as part of an updated

theoretical toolbox (Clark; Fritsch, Lynes, and Wood; Morton). In line with such scholarship, and as a shorthand to track the shift from McHale's intervention to the present, my essay retrieves one particular notion, that of "writing," without therefore subscribing to the poststructuralist program or a deconstructionist reading method.

For writers like Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida, the "certain point" where ontology and epistemology morph into one another was called writing, or *écriture*. For these writers, *écriture* names a site where distinctions between speech and writing, between subject and object, and between first and second person dissolve. And while these theorists play a minor role in McHale's account (even if they are duly mentioned), their thought would make its way to American literature departments in the 1970s and 1980s and influence postmodern and post-postmodern literary production (Ryan). Irrespective of the merit of these theoretical oeuvres, their influence on literary and academic culture is undeniable.

On the face of it, linking contemporary literature's uncertain ontologies to the notion of writing seems less than promising: it may appear fatally anthropo-, Euro-, and logocentric, and repeat what Marco Caracciolo's essay in this issue identifies as poststructuralism's myopic focus on "verbal *language* as a primary route into the failures and discontinuities of subjectivity" (365). Poststructuralism, on this reading, perpetuates a bifurcation between mind and world in which language is firmly on the side of the mind and serves to occlude the mind's entanglement with material realities. This exclusive focus on language has informed poststructuralist accounts of identity, power, and reality, and it has occasioned a return to the material world and the body in more recent critical thought.

I accept this critique of poststructuralism, but I maintain that one particular aspect is worth retrieving to account for a shift in recent literary production: the moments when poststructuralism shifted from a commitment to language's capacity to shape the world to a concern with *écriture*'s not-merely-human capacity to destabilize the relations between psychology and ontology, between mind and world, and between subject and object-world. It is this intimation that subject and world are both destabilized that, I argue, resonates in contemporary literature's engagement

with the figure of writing, which makes it a promising resource for confronting contexts such as rampant climate change, mutant neoliberalism, and intrusive algorithms, which currently make what McHale called “ontological plurality or instability” an existential rather than merely a semantic concern (19).

The crucial insight that makes *écriture* a valuable notion is that it reminds us that the opposition between speech and writing is not a neat distinction, but is in fact itself destabilized by a more fundamental mode of what Jacques Derrida called “generalized writing” or “*arche-writing*” (Norris 28). Writing, on this account, not only refers to the empirical act of writing, but also to a fundamentally unstable ontology—an ambivalence that is confusing, to be sure, but that, as the literary works I discuss below show, is also undeniably productive: it provides literature, as a self-reflexive form of writing, with a privileged resource to negotiate ontological questions. On this account, traditional characteristics of writing—risk of loss, finitude, exteriority, the absence of the author—become features of reality *as such* (Bennington 49, Hägglund 50). The observation that these “structural features of writing” are readily available in cultures (think of Australian Aboriginals) that have not developed a writing system confirms Derrida’s point: they are crucial ontological features, and it is the fact that a Western intellectual tradition has banished them under the rubric of writing that, for Derrida and, as we will see, in significant instances of contemporary fiction, makes writing a crucial site where the limitations of that tradition can be confronted and a radical ontological uncertainty apprehended.

For writers like Foucault and Barthes, writing liberates the world from the impositions of the human mind: it releases language from the hold of human psychology and surrenders it to an impersonal realm, “an order of reality which belongs to some sphere beyond any which is subjectively ordered” (Banfield 88). This explains how for the theorists I am retrieving here, writing paradoxically restores the materiality of the world through the very medium—language—that too often brackets that materiality.

This essay argues that the destabilization of the relation between mind and world that took place in the name of *écriture* has regained a renewed relevance in contemporary fiction. As this special issue argues, the

ontological dominant that McHale identified over three decades ago has not exactly been superseded, but it has increasingly become entangled with readers' everyday experiences and daunting questions of human responsibility. Among other things, this means that "ontological plurality or instability" (McHale 19) ends up reconnecting to the epistemological issues from which McHale saw postmodernist fiction take its leave—to questions of what McHale called "accessibility, reliability, and limitation of knowledge" (10). In the Anthropocene, which names the moment when distinctions between human and nonhuman realities become deeply entangled and vulnerability can no longer be outsourced to non-human realms, these questions have become irrevocably enmeshed with difficult questions of agency and responsibility. In this context, I show, a number of prominent novelists have circled back to the problematic of writing to explore fundamental questions about the relations between mind and world and between human and nonhuman life.

The three novels I discuss in this essay highlight different contexts in which ontological instability has become an existential concern: the nonhuman power of algorithms (in Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island*), the colonization of everyday life by neoliberalism (in *Satin Island* and in William Gibson's *The Peripheral*), and anthropogenic environmental crisis (in McCarthy, Gibson, and Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*). Cumulatively, these novels develop an updated notion of writing that, like the poststructuralist notion of *écriture*, affirms a reality that is not routed through the human psyche and that has an impersonal, more-than-human agency. Unlike earlier interventions, however, and in keeping with the Anthropocenic insight that human and nonhuman realms are irrevocably entangled, this contemporary notion of writing underlines that the world we confront is indelibly shaped (rather than controlled) by human intervention. Writing, in these novels, not only names the emergence of a reality that is irreducibly strange, but it also serves as a figure for the ineluctable human contribution to that weirdness.

Like the poststructuralist reflections I mentioned, contemporary fiction deploys a number of characteristics of the empirical act of writing to describe the entanglement of the human and the nonhuman, but these

characteristics are decidedly different than they were half a century ago: writing is now a figure for both human and nonhuman actions that leave an indelible trace, that consist in the more or less violent displacement of matter, and that leave an imprint whose long-term consequences are impossible to control. Action, in these novels, is imagined as what I will call a form of “ontography”—a “writing of things” in which ontological reality is not only being written *about*, but in which the actions of the human and nonhuman entities that make up reality also actively write that reality into existence.

In recent years, the notion of “ontography” has become a key signifier across different disciplines for thinking about ways to access reality from a nonanthropocentric perspective. In its broadest sense, the term “encompasses different kinds of medial processes and operations of tracing and registering the Real” (“Ontography”). Object-oriented ontologist Ian Bogost has deployed the notion to name efforts to describe (ideally without psychologizing and overinterpreting) the plenitude and interconnectedness of the more-than-human world. Ontography, Bogost writes, names “a general inscriptive strategy, one that uncovers the repleteness of units and their interobjectivity” (38); it aims at “the revelation of object relationships without necessarily offering clarification or description of any kind” (38). This practice leaves room for “fitfulness,” “disjunction,” “incompatibility,” and what Bogost calls “the jarring staccato of real being” (40). As we will see, such a descriptive practice is explicitly explored in both *Annihilation*—where the biologist/journal writer moves toward a writerly practice in which more-than-human actions are recorded in a way that leaves room for fits and disjunctions—and *Satin Island*—which insists on preserving the glitches, hiccups, snags, and bugs that beset the articulation of the semiotic and the material, of cyberspace and meatspace, of writing and life.

As media theorists Lorenz Engell and Bernhard Siegert remark, the term “ontography” not only refers to a philosophical or artistic procedure (as it does for Bogost), but can also refer to the “graphic” activity of things themselves. As they note, “[o]ntologies do not wait for philosophers to be written and then descend on the world; rather, they are writing themselves as materially existing and effective operations” (6). In *Annihilation*, as in

Satin Island, things are not only written, but they also actively *write*. Indeed, writing emerges as a key category for imagining the agency of things, and for the capacity of nonhuman agents to cocreate the world. Bogost himself coins the notion of “carpentry” to name the action of things—a notion from which, he believes, philosophy can learn if it wants to overcome its “semiotic obsession,” its “overabundant fixation on argumentation” (91).

The step that Bogost does not take is that, when we consider writing as a figure for human and nonhuman agency alike, carpentry is itself also a form of writing. From this perspective, the world is constituted by ontographic practices that intersect each other in uncertain ways—uncertain, in that there is no overarching scriptural authority that masters these interactions. Ontography, then, is the name of both a particular ontology (in which human and nonhuman agents *write*) and a literary program—one that suspends our psychological investment in the world in order to make it available as a mesh of human and nonhumans scripts. As the rest of this essay shows, a number of significant works of contemporary fiction has turned ontographic in both senses.

SCRIPTURAL SATURATION: TOM MCCARTHY’S
SATIN ISLAND

Few contemporary writers are as overtly indebted to poststructuralism as Tom McCarthy; at the same time, few have done more to situate their work in a modernist lineage. *Satin Island*, McCarthy’s fourth novel from 2015, updates modernist and poststructuralist concerns for our age of ubiquitous computing, instant archiving, and what McCarthy in a companion essay calls “data saturation” (“Death of Writing”). In that essay, McCarthy approaches this contemporary condition by turning to the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Michel de Certeau, which, McCarthy shows, is crucially concerned with writing: Lévi-Strauss’s work is “infused with meditations on the very act of writing—the blind spots that it opens up, the traps or pitfalls that it sets,” while de Certeau imagines society as a “giant ‘scriptural system,’ a ‘scriptural enterprise,’ a ‘scriptural project.’” For de Certeau, the forces and vectors that make up

social life can be conceived as so many acts of writing, and this anticipates our contemporary world of “omnipresent and omniscient data” in which human actions are recorded, shaped, and even anticipated by powerful algorithms (“Death of Writing”).

Writing, for McCarthy, is an all-encompassing process that saturates and even *constitutes* the contemporary world. *Satin Island* confronts this situation of ubiquitous writing through its protagonist, named U., who works as a corporate anthropologist tasked with writing the “Great Report”—a comprehensive account of the present. The novel not only uses the figure of writing to imagine a data-saturated urban reality in which movements, consumer transactions, keystrokes, and click-throughs are relentlessly recorded, tabulated, and cross-indexed, but it also sees processes of writing at work in the natural environment. One of several media stories U. is obsessed with is a live-streamed oil spill. He describes this spill as “Earth open[ing] its archives,” as “Earth well[ing] back up and reveal[ing] itself; nature’s hidden nature gush[ing] forth” (116). The oil spill not only shows nature *acting*, this action is also emphatically presented as an “ontographic” act—as a form of *writing*: watching “the streaks and clusters taking shape as oil spread slowly inland,” U. imagines “ink polluting paper, words marring the whiteness of a page” (98). Whether we are talking about geological or algorithmic action, writing, in *Satin Island*, is a general name for the impersonal processes that constitute the contemporary world.

Human writing is only a minor constituent of this world. This generalized *écriture* is a serious challenge for U. How to write a “Great Report” about the world when the world is busy writing itself? The report initially appears “un-plottable, un-frameable, un-realizable: in short, . . . *un-writable*” (126), until U. realizes that, far from being unwritable, the Report has “*already been written*. Not by a person, nor even by some nefarious cabal, but simply by a neutral and indifferent binary system that had given rise to itself, moved by itself and would perpetuate itself [...] that’s what it *was*” (133–34). The world, in other words, is nothing other than the acts of self-reporting that constitute it. This insight resonates with the scriptural ontology of the Anthropocene: as Tobias Boes and Kate

Marshall have remarked, the data-saturated and climate-changed world of the Anthropocene is “not simply something that is written *about*; it is something that is actively shaped and created through acts of human inscription” (64)—and, we may add, through the ceaseless scriptural activities of nonhuman entities.

The Anthropocene world that *Satin Island* intimates is a version of what Mark Seltzer has called “the official world”: a world consisting “both of itself and its self-description, denotation, or registration” (6). The whole world becomes a comprehensive process of self-writing, or what McCarthy calls an “auto-alphaing and auto-omegating script” (134), and this writing becomes coterminous with the world itself: “It is not merely that there is nothing in the world that is not in the files,” Seltzer writes; “the correlate is that there is then nothing in the files that is not in the world” (143). In the official world, “taking note of the fact is a fact-producing act” (7)—and, *vice versa*, every act counts as an inscription with material, indelible effects.

U. initially reacts to this insight into the writerly ontology of the contemporary by weaponizing his anthropological practice—what he calls “Present-Tense Anthropology™”—as a way to dismantle the vast system that is continuously writing itself into existence (139). He soon realizes that this fantasy underestimates the reach of the system: far from human interventions having the power to explode the system from within, he realizes, “the explosion’s taking place already—it’s always been taking place. You just didn’t notice . . .” (140). The desire for a distinctively *human* act (such as the illusory politically significant act of sabotage U. contemplates in the novel), it appears, has always already been factored in by the more-than-human writing machine. As McCarthy writes in his companion essay, “[t]here is no space outside this matrix [of a world constituted by writing], no virgin territory of pure ‘aesthetics’ or neutral ‘reflection’ on which it hasn’t impacted” (“Death of Writing”). Still, this does not condemn human life to utter powerlessness: if humans are not the “authors” or even the “operators” of the scriptural system, they have always already been cowriting the environmental and digital processes that now seem to have reduced them to “actions and commands within

[their] key-chains" (134). *Satin Island* unfolds as a series of efforts by U. to find a way for human agency not to be swallowed by encompassing processes of writing that can yet not be escaped, as the distinction between human and nonhuman writing is radically uncertain.

Writing, in *Satin Island*, is not only all-encompassing and performative, it is also irreducibly *material*—even if dominant techno-utopian discourses that advertise the cloudy weightlessness and immateriality of data conveniently obscure this. *Satin Island* consistently counters this obfuscation. The vast corporate project that forms the background of U.'s ethnographic activity is called the "Koob-Sassen Project." Inscrutable, boring, and sprawling, the Project appears as a vast digital network involving "many hook-ups, interfaces, transpositions—corporate to civic, supranational to local, analogue to digital and open to restricted and hard to soft and who knows what else" (13–14).

The novel insists that the Project's articulation work is inescapably *material*: it is an infrastructure project to be compared to "poldering and draining landmasses of thousands of square miles, or cabling and connecting an entire empire" (29). The Project, in other words, is not only a self-perpetuating process of self-writing and data processing, it is also, as the terraforming imagery of "poldering and draining" shows, a messy and physical form of geological inscription: "The Project was supra-governmental, supra-national, supra-everything—and infra-too" (135). *Satin Island* continuously reminds the reader that this material dimension introduces glitches into digital scripts: the novel is filled with delayed flights, missed meetings, lethal cancers, buffering signs that mar scrambled Skype conversations, . . . Ultimately, what the novel calls "all the extraneous clutter, all the world-debris" continues to derail the digital dream of total transcription (97).

Satin Island's update of *écriture* evokes an unruly writerly dynamic that subtends contemporary life—and in that way, it provides a more material, more ethically charged, and more existentially urgent update of Derrida's notion of "arche-writing." This updated "arche-writing" is not an impersonal, anonymous force, but a force field where digital, geological, environmental, biological, and human agencies interact in intractable ways. Ultimately, the

complexity and multiplicity of these interactions guarantee that *writing*—in which human life still functions as an agent, even if it has lost its dominance—does not morph into a kind of foolproof *programming* in which human life is fully disempowered. Indeed, the novel presents itself as an example of a residual capacity to at least participate in and leave traces in broader writerly processes. *Satin Island's* insistence on glitches and snags shows that the dream that scriptural processes can be harnessed as a mode of data-driven programming is a digital fantasy that denies the disorienting force of writing.

It is significant that McCarthy confronts this fantasy in, of all things, a novel—after all, as a conceptual artist, theorist, and critic, he had other formats available: in a move reminiscent of earlier instantiations of *écriture*, literature is a singular site where the self-stultifying dynamics of writing are revealed. *Satin Island* lacks a distinctive novelistic form: the book's ontography is made up of numbered sections, as if it were itself an anthropological report, and more than one critic has remarked on its conspicuous formlessness (Ammah-Tagoe; Miller). *Satin Island* is, before anything else, a kind of writing. Even if it no longer believes in the efficacy of traditional formal devices (character, psychological depth, plot), it holds on to the conviction that literature, as a self-reflexive mode of writing, can reveal the writerly ontology of the present. Such writing does not provide a stable ground, but rather evokes an unruly and uncertain ontology. *Écriture*, we could say, is not scripture: even if it is ubiquitous and marked by mystery, it does not provide the consolation of consolidated truth and foolproof control, only the urgency of existential uncertainty.

NATURE, WRITING: JEFF VANDERMEER'S *ANNIHILATION*

Annihilation, the first novel in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy, similarly takes on the form of a report. It is ostensibly a field journal containing the meticulous and fairly dispassionate observations of a nameless biologist, who, together with a psychologist, an anthropologist, and a surveyor, is sent to investigate the mysteries of Area X, a seemingly pristine region of coastline separated from the rest of the United

States by an invisible border. The crew encounters a bewildering environmental reality, with a so-called tower burrowing into the ground and repeated encounters with a shapeshifting “vast biological entity that might or might not be terrestrial” (90). This entity later receives the name of “the Crawler,” but that does not resolve the question of its identity: appearing intermittently as “a series of layers in the shape of an archway,” “a great sluglike monster ringed by satellites of even odder creatures,” or “a series of refracted panes of glass” (176), the Crawler is an elusive shape that, the biologist gradually discovers, operates by infiltrating human consciousness and cloning humans. The biologist comes to the eerie realization that her shifting perceptions of the Crawler might be copies of her own thoughts: the entity “might be pulling these different impressions of itself from my mind and projecting them back at me, as a form of camouflage” (179). Here *Annihilation*’s reliance on the repertoire of so-called weird fiction becomes apparent, as it confronts its human characters with nonhuman entities that disrupt both the laws of nature and the border between the human and the nonhuman world.

Even if we have abandoned the data-saturated hi-tech reality of *Satin Island* for a fully weirded natural environment, human and nonhuman life forms still co-constitute the world through feedback loops that threaten to erode human agency: “I did not feel,” the biologist writes, “as if I were a person but simply a receiving station for a series of overwhelming transmissions” (172). *Annihilation* hints at the possibility that the report we are reading is itself a projection by the Crawler for which the biologist serves as an unwitting scribe. The organism may operate in this way, she surmises, “[t]o thwart the biologist in me, to frustrate the logic left in me” (179). What started out as an epistemological quest turns out to have important ontological ramifications, as we move from doubt to a more radical uncertainty about the very constitution of the world, or indeed the authorship of the report we are reading.

Annihilation, like *Satin Island*, figures this ontological disturbance as a process of writing. One peculiar feature of the unruly entity that haunts *Annihilation*’s Area X is that it *writes*: “An . . . organism . . . was writing living words along the interior walls of the tower . . . Whole ecosystems had

been born and now flourished among the words” (90). The script takes the form of perfectly grammatical (if mysterious) English sentences, but they are also material, even organic: they are made from “what would have looked to the layperson like rich green fernlike moss but in fact was probably a type of fungi or other eukaryotic organism” (24).

Annihilation uses the figure of writing (rather than of language per se, on which previous criticism has focused; Ulstein 90–94) to figure the intricate connections between human and nonhuman agencies. In the last part of the trilogy, and in an eerie transformation of the common analogy between DNA and the language of life, it emerges that the writings have a human origin, but that the nonhuman entity has hijacked the linguistic capacity to copy, mimic, and transcribe. This power to disseminate signs and alienate matter and meaning from their origin is one of the empirical features of writing on which a theorist like Derrida capitalized, most famously in his discussion of Plato’s understanding of writing as a *pharmakon* that is both cure and poison (Bennington 42–64). Here, this dynamic again disturbs the natural order, as the entwinement of biological and semiotic drift not only proliferates enigmatic sentences but even clones humans. As I noted, ontological uncertainty also infects the report we read, as the question whether it is authored or merely ghost-written by the biologist (who will morph into a creature named “Ghost Bird” later in the trilogy) is properly undecidable.

Again, literature serves as a special zone of indistinction where epistemological limits and ontological distinctions dissolve. *Annihilation* functions very much the way Area X functions within it: a space where *écriture* reveals—even as it constitutes—the entanglement of human and nonhuman dynamics.

VanderMeer’s trilogy intimates a continuity between the entity’s scriptural work and the human compulsion to record and archive everything. The tower is filled with “a moldering pile” of documents chronicling the eleven earlier explorations of the terrain, which are gradually absorbed by the midden: “Torn pages, crushed pages, journal covers warped and damp. Slowly the history of exploring Area X could be said to be turning into Area X” (111–12)

In the second volume of the *Southern Reach* trilogy, entitled *Authority*, the setting shifts from the weird wilderness to the office. Control, the novel's protagonist, is charged with investigating the dismal track record of the Southern Reach, the shady government agency tasked with exploring Area X. Rather than a riveting procedural, however, *Authority* is a deadpan comedy of data (mis)management, in which Control is overwhelmed by the proliferation of writing: "Even when he asked questions he was hemorrhaging data. He had a sudden image of information floating out the side of his head in a pixelated blood-red mist" (142). Data bleed into the world and further erode the distinction between human and nonhuman realms. The writings he is asked to put in order "looked in part as if he had tracked in dirt on his shoes from outside," turning him into "a new kind of urban farmer, building compost piles with classified material" (152). Gradually, the difference between the settings of the first and second volumes collapses as the sprawling mess of information becomes an environment in its own right: "His office began to close in on him. Listless pushing around of files and pretend efforts to straighten bookshelves had given way to further Internet searches" that, it turns out, provide images that look a lot like Area X (288).

Here, the *Southern Reach* trilogy comes eerily close to *Satin Island*, as digital and environmental realms spill over into one another through the deterritorializing drift of data.

As I noted, poststructuralist theorists celebrated *écriture* as a process that reveals a dynamic that was not dominated and controlled by human concerns. The contemporary fictions I discuss here, I suggested, mobilize the figure of writing to intimate a world in which human and nonhuman forces are irrevocably enmeshed. In *Annihilation*, this recognition of human responsibility and agency—reflected in the trilogy's concern with pollution, nature mismanagement, and militarization—goes together with a gradual surrender to the weird world the novel encounters in Area X. The novel and the rest of the trilogy portray, in the words of one critic, a "journey from escaping and fighting the monstrous, to accepting and even embracing it" (Ulstein 88). This bracketing of human privilege and the effort to allow the warped world of Area X to emerge in all its

more-than-human splendor is one of the novel's key stylistic features, as it constantly pushes its nature descriptions to the limits of "the incommunicable, the nameless" (Ulstein 91). These descriptions are a sustained exercise in writing a world emancipated from human projections—what we could call an "ontographic" writing project.

ANTHROPOCENE ERASURE: WILLIAM GIBSON'S
THE PERIPHERAL

In *Postmodernist Fiction*, McHale notes that, just as detective fiction is "the epistemological genre *par excellence*" (9), science fiction is "*the ontological genre par excellence*" (59). In a later essay, McHale nominates the SF subgenre of cyberpunk as, perhaps, the ontological genre *par excellence par excellence*, as he sees it emerge "from the interaction and mutual interference of SF and mainstream postmodernist writing" ("Towards a Poetics" 5).

The cyberpunk genre is customarily taken to have been consolidated in William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*. Measuring the difference between *Neuromancer* and Gibson's 2014 novel *The Peripheral*, the novel in which he returns to science fictional futures after a series of novels set in the present, makes it possible to assess the contemporary aftermath of McHale's declaration of an ontological dominant. Even if the only form of writing that figures directly in the future world of *The Peripheral* is tattoos, the world of rampant economic inequality, predatory algorithms, and environmental destruction that it evokes is (dis)organized by a writerly logic that adds existential urgency to the unstable ontology of the novel's storyworld.

McHale, like many other critics, sees the key ontological contribution of *Neuromancer* in its imagining of cyberspace (a term Gibson famously coined): a virtual interface in which "[t]he user of this system has the illusion of moving among these representations as through a landscape, but a landscape entirely mental and virtual. The matrix is a 'consensual hallucination'" ("Towards a Poetics" 11–12). Cyberspace, for Elana Gomel, is marked by the "topological identity of virtual and urban spaces" (357). The novel already signals this merging of real and virtual environments

in its famous first sentence: “The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel” (*Neuromancer* 3). McHale reads the encroaching indistinction between material and digital realms and between human subjects and nonhuman environments as the outcome of a process of “prosthetic augmentation”: cyberpunk is marked by “an entire range of prosthetic possibilities, from biomechanical arms and legs” to devices “that enable human beings to extend their presence into unlivably hostile environments (deep space, ocean abysses)” (“Towards a Poetics” 15).

Eventually, McHale notes, this process of cyborgization “shades off into a complete human–machine symbiosis or fusion” (16). McHale’s analysis repeats the drift of his general thesis about the shift from epistemological to ontological: once the relation between human and nonhuman becomes too intricate, it tips over (or “shades off”) into ontological instability and plurality. As we will see, the storyworld of *The Peripheral* is organized around a writerly dynamics that makes questions of responsibility, agency, and epistemological access to reality unavoidable, and arguably more urgent than ever in the face of the economic and environmental derelictions the novel evokes.

The title of *The Peripheral* may initially suggest it endorses McHale’s scenario of prosthetic augmentation: a peripheral is a kind of drone body that people can inhabit from a distant location. Still, the novel’s very first sentence begins to indicate its distance from the fantasies of self-extension that mark McHale’s take on cyberpunk: “They didn’t think Flynn’s brother had PTSD, but that sometimes the haptics glitched him” (1)—and note that the incomprehensibility of some terms here (“haptics”? “Glitched?”) immediately foregrounds epistemological challenges besetting readers’ access to the storyworld. Burton, Flynn’s brother, is a war veteran living in a near-future rural America, and the haptics are tattoos he had “worn in the war, put there to tell him when to run [. . .] which direction and what range” (1). As the novel’s only image of writing, these tattoos immediately qualify writing as an *ontographic* activity—as a way of exerting power in the material world. The end of war leaves Burton with sensations resembling “phantom limb,” which, as the first sentence

has it, sometimes “glitched him”—an expression that turns an intransitive verb into a transitive one to underscore that, in this world, human subjects are not so much prosthetically enhanced; instead, they *are* the prosthesis: his body used “to be controlled remotely, turning him into a kind of drone” (McFarlane 117).

Anna McFarlane has noted that *The Peripheral* indicates a move in Gibson’s work “from optics to haptics,” that is, from a “fetishization of the subject’s ability to control their environment” to a recognition of characters’ “interdependence with the environment” (129). A comparison of the opening lines of *Neuromancer* and *The Peripheral* signals this shift from the visual to the haptic, but it also points to the power differences that animate the relation between subjects and their world: the fact that Burton’s life is *being scripted* by someone else, even if this scripting, as *Satin Island* already intimated, is never a case of straightforward programming: it involuntarily “glitches” its object.

The Peripheral raises questions of agency, responsibility, and force by imagining not one but two futures: a near future situated in an impoverished United States, where Flynn and Burton live, and a twenty-second-century future inhabited by an all-powerful small elite living technologically enhanced lives. The futures are separated by a multicausal, slow, drawn-out collapse of civilization initiated by climate change, which also results in political destabilization, mass extinction, and the end of democracy. While in the world of the novel, information can travel back in time, physical matter cannot. This set-up shapes the power differences between the two worlds: the hi-tech future can freely intervene in the near future, and the games the people in the near future are paid to play provide actual labor in the later future. This is enabled by superior data-processing technology: “Information from there affects things here [...] Their stuff’s all seventy years faster than ours” (192).

The Peripheral does not prominently use metaphors of writing: the juncture between the two futures is hidden in a black box, “[s]omething to do with quantum tunneling,” that no one understands (39); in historical time, the transitional process that separates the two futures is appropriately called “the Jackpot.” Yet the operation of that black box does

resonate with the logic of arche-writing. Quantum tunneling, we learn, generates “continua” between past and present, but once the future world connects with and interferes in the past, that past stops being the past of this future world and becomes an alternative timeline, “a stub” (38). This means that the exploitation of the earlier future operates without fear of retribution or upheaval, and this is why Gibson has referred to the novel’s near future as a “third worlded version of contemporary America” (Newitz): the same impudence with which colonial powers extracted (and continue to extract) labor and natural resources from the Global South is now unleashed against the American population. But this also means that the novel’s ontology is such that the agents in the novel’s sophisticated future *cannot write, rewrite, or erase their own past*: their capacity to rewrite the past at once makes that past strictly irrelevant for their present. Their capacity to tamper with other lives is, in other words, not an ontographic power at all.

In the world of *The Peripheral*, then, it is possible to script the lives of others (even if that effort is, throughout the novel, beset by glitches, snags, and “wobbles” [174]), to have your life scripted by others, but emphatically not to author your own life. As is the case in *Satin Island* and *Annihilation*, there is no autonomous writing space outside the scriptural machine, as the illusion of autonomy is bought at the price of irrelevance. The characters in Gibson’s far future can write autonomously, but to the extent that their writing is autonomous, it is also irrelevant, and stops having any purchase on their own continuum. Autonomous writing makes nothing happen—it is, in other words, no ontography, no constituent of the world, no real agency.

Gibson’s sequel to *The Peripheral*, entitled *Agency*, makes this crisis of agency even more apparent, as it underlines that the far future of *The Peripheral* is only one of infinitely many “stubs,” which holds no privilege among the vast plurality of possible worlds. This fear that actions may end up in an insignificant stub resonates with contemporary concerns over extinction—not only of nonhuman species but of human life itself. The novel signals this insignificance through the movable and changeable tattoos that Ash, one of the privileged far-future characters, is wearing—a clear counterpart to the “haptic” tattoos that direct

(and then abandon) Burton. If their “black ink” superficially resembles a kind of writing, it does not leave a permanent trace, it does not displace matter, and it does not commit to future consequences—it is superficial rather than ontographic. Ash’s posthuman tattoos are explicitly post-Anthropocene: they feature “a terrified tangle of extinct species” (183), “every bird and beast of the Anthropocene extinction” (50). Ash, the novel notes, is “obsessed with a catalog of vanished species, addicted to nostalgia for things you’d never known” (85). In the novel’s agential logic, this also means a nostalgia for a world where black ink still left traces, had consequences, survived itself, and made history—for the ontographic set-up that is evoked in *Satin Island*, in *Annihilation*, and in *The Peripheral*’s near future. *The Peripheral* calls it a “[g]loriously pre-posthuman” world (75)—a world in which human and nonhuman forces were still irrevocably entangled and conscripted. By picturing the irrelevance of a world without such conscription, *The Peripheral* indirectly underscores the centrality of *écriture* for understanding the ontological urgencies of the present.

My argument has capitalized on the hesitation that marks the transition between the epistemological and ontological dominant in McHale’s work—a hesitation that, in the work of a number of French theorists, provided an opening *beyond* epistemological doubt and to a realm where mind and world, subject and object, and semiotic and material entities were deeply enmeshed with one another. If these earlier elaborations of *écriture*—as an opportunity to overcome the strictures of language *from within*—welcomed access to domain unshackled from human domination, their update in contemporary literature underlines that there is no reality that is not co-constituted by human and nonhuman actions. In an Anthropocene world marked by rampant climate change, mutant neoliberalism, and intrusive algorithms, human and nonhuman forces are fundamentally entangled and jointly disrupted. In *Annihilation*, *Satin Island*, and *The Peripheral*, the dynamics of writing serve to foreground how agency is distributed between human and nonhuman actors in the composition of an uncertain world. Action, in this world, is never autonomous, always consequential; in the fictions I have discussed, ontography is always what

the introduction to this issue calls an “earnest” ontology—an engagement with ontological uncertainty, and this time for real.

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