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'... then and only then would you be allowed to look to the future': falling out of the Anthropocene with Jeff VanderMeer's *Hummingbird Salamander*

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a detailed close reading of selected key passages from Jeff VanderMeer's 2021 novel *Hummingbird Salamander*, focusing on the ways in which this eco-thriller develops and extends VanderMeer's ongoing concerns about ecology and anthropogenic climate change, which he has articulated across his career – including in his celebrated *Southern Reach* books. These readings negotiate key feelings and sensations of vertigo, falling, and sinking, which the article analyses and theorises further by exploring VanderMeer's novel in conjunction with Timothy Morton's work on dark ecology and non-human solidarity, with additional theoretical frames drawn from the respective works of Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Theodor Adorno, and others. This analysis in turn builds towards a concluding suggestion – drawing, in part, on the respective works of Dipesh Chakrabarty and Sara Ahmed – that considers these key feelings as affective extremes that allow us to encounter ecological awareness as an embodied experience, and thus better grasp the biospheric and planetary scales that may often seem incommensurable for us.

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Anthropogenic climate change presents an impossible epistemology. It has created a contemporary reality where extinctions, unpredictable weather events, and disasters have become traumatically normal, and where incomprehensible destruction occurs at an alarming regularity. In addition, precisely because of this regularity and incomprehensibility, it can even be difficult to understand how we *feel* in our contemporary moment. Despite the existence and increasing prevalence of terms like climate anxiety and

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ecological grief, we often lack the appropriate vocabularies for describing the uncomfortable affects produced by climate destruction. This is not a trivial matter. As Ajay Singh Chaudhary writes, ‘understanding and feeling are two sides of the same coin.’¹ If the epistemology of Anthropogenic climate change appears impossible, it is at least partly so because we cannot fully understand it unless that understanding is coupled with feelings for which we do not currently possess an adequate vocabulary. One of the many entangled urgencies that extends across our contemporary moment is therefore a need to reimagine the terms with which we describe how it feels to live in an era of climate catastrophe.

This article explores one possible set of such vocabularies through Jeff VanderMeer’s 2021 novel *Hummingbird Salamander*. VanderMeer’s writing has consistently grappled with Anthropogenic realities, often by ‘creating tentacular narratives that hybridise established realist genres (such as nature writing) with elements of fantasy, horror, and speculative fiction.’² As Louise Economides and Laura Shackelford note, his writing ‘is exemplary not only in drawing from all of these genres, but also in its imaginative engagements with contemporary ecological challenges.’³ But if it is VanderMeer’s tendency towards the so-called new weird – with its mixture of fantastic, horror, and science fiction elements – that allows his novels to depict the *strangeness* of Anthropocene climate disasters, what happens when his writing switches to other genres?

Upon publication, *Hummingbird Salamander* was largely billed as an eco-thriller that owed more to detective fiction than it did to elements commonly associated with the ‘new weird’. VanderMeer had of course drawn upon detective fiction in some of his previous novels as well, most notably in 2009’s *Finch*.⁴ But whilst this earlier work begins with a homicide investigation involving a body belonging to a member of the fungal ruling class – which places the detective tropes to an ‘alien situation’ that is ‘wholly unknown and perhaps unknowable’ – *Hummingbird Salamander* adopts a more restrained approach.⁵ By VanderMeer’s own admission, it is ‘a more realistic novel.’⁶ The initial reception received by the text also suggests it is a more sombre one: Noah Berlatsky’s review argued that while in earlier novels like *Annihilation* ‘life changes into life, in [*Hummingbird Salamander*] life just ... dies.’⁷ Similarly, Christy Tidwell’s analysis framed the novel as an ‘ecogothic’ text, where ‘we are haunted by our past’ and also by ‘the futures that have not yet come to pass.’⁸ But although *Hummingbird Salamander* may be a more pessimistic novel, it nevertheless tries to reimagine and reorient our current ecological relationships. Key passages in the text open out the possibility of arriving at a new understanding of what ecological awareness might *feel* like in this age of climate emergency. Consequently, this article seeks to analyse these passages from *Hummingbird Salamander* in order to reimagine and reunderstand the significance of vertigo, falling, and sinking

in our contemporary moment. Such an analysis requires its own acts of falling and sinking, and this article thus pursues its ideas through an unmoored and stratified descent that seeks to mirror the vertiginous experiences of its subject matter. Its readings are therefore also a falling and sinking: a performative plunge towards the proposals it articulates.

Hummingbird Salamander is set in a near-future version of our planet, characterised by pandemics and climate breakdown. The narrator and protagonist, ambiguously introduced as 'Jane', is a cybersecurity consultant whose life is irrevocably changed when she receives a message along with a key that leads her to a taxidermic body of a hummingbird that is thought to be extinct.⁹ The message is authored by a radical eco-terrorist (or activist) and wealthy corporate heiress named Silvina, who is also believed to be dead. Jane follows the clues that Silvina has left for her, and thus becomes embroiled in a network of wildlife trafficking and corporate criminality. As the story progresses, Jane loses – or abandons – her suburban family life, whilst pursuing further details of Silvina's visions of a different ecological future. That is, the pursuit of Silvina, the hummingbird, and the salamander serves as a pretext for Jane's own arrival at a new ecological awareness.

At one point in Jane's investigation, she visits an artistic commune called Unitopia. In its abandoned visitor's centre, which houses several derelict displays, Jane encounters a graphic depicting the various sedimentary layers of the earth, as well as different levels of the sky. This graphic is accompanied by text that Jane attributes to Silvina. The first part of this text tells of a hypothetical new way of perceiving the world that would allow humans to see its 'hidden underpinnings.'¹⁰ It posits that this new experience of seeing the manifold communications of multiple species – the chemical signals, the pheromone trails, and so on – would at first be overwhelming. But at the same time, it would also facilitate a radical *opening up*, both of and to the world:

But once you got used to it, you'd look at the ground and it'd open up its layers, past topsoil and earthworms, down into the "deeper epidermis", so to speak, until you're overcoming a sense of vertigo, because even though you are standing *right there*, not falling at all, below you everything is revealing itself to you superfast. And maybe then, while still staring at the ground, even more would open out to you and you'd regress to the same spot five years, ten years, fifty years, two hundred years ago ... until when you look up again there is no street at all and you're in the middle of a forest and there are more birds you could ever imagine because you've never *seen* that many in one place. You've never even seen this many old-growth trees before. You've never known that the world was once like this except in the abstract.¹¹

This is a vertiginous passage: its 158 words are distributed across only three sentences; that is, the first two sentences – one 58 words in length, the other

81 – grow and expand from one clause to the next, as if their substance were somehow uncontainable. The cascading syntax indicates that these sense experiences go deeper than those Merleau-Ponty describes as bodily ‘communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life.’¹² Nor can the experience be understood as simply discerning figures in relation to their background, in accordance with the figure-ground relationship in Gestalt psychology. Instead, the reference to ‘deeper epidermis’ implies a dizzying verticality, wherein the familiar world is rendered strange through sights that were hitherto unseen. Moreover, these revelations were previously unseen because the perceptions described in the passage do not just discern objects from a background; rather, they reach deep inside the background itself. So deep, in fact, that the ground seemingly vanishes from underneath the perceiver’s feet. Silvina’s message therefore returns the ground to its etymological origins. The Old English *grund* was chimeric and contradictory: it meant the ‘surface of the earth’, but also the ‘abyss’ and the ‘bottom of the sea’; something upon which one could walk, but also something to which one could fall or sink. Consequently, Silvina’s claim that ‘you are standing *right there*’ does not prohibit the possibility of ‘falling.’ If the ground can be both surface and abyss – or land and the bottom of the sea – it is possible to be standing still whilst falling and sinking through strata of earth.

VanderMeer’s passage thus implies a physical sensation of sinking and falling through solid ground, both in terms of space and – in the latter parts of the passage – time. At one level, these feelings illuminate the qualities of emotional overwhelm associated with Silvina’s new ecological awareness. As Naomi Booth has observed, falling and sinking are coterminous with a long history of performative poetics relating to depictions of swooning.¹³ The vertiginous qualities of the passage could therefore be understood as a dramatisation of a complex crisis in language. Vertigo, falling, and sinking echo the way in which language cannot adequately express emotional and physical extremes: we fall into ‘the symbolic power of soma when words fail.’¹⁴ That is, VanderMeer’s passage may appear vertiginous because its language is secondary to felt experience. Because the revelations of Silvina’s ecological awareness are depicted as arriving at such a radically ‘superfast’ pace, their details are beyond language. Instead, they are registered through affect – as uncontainable spilling, as vertigo, as falling, as sinking.

These affective extremes in part recall the Kristevan chora. For Kristeva, the chora is a pre-lingual stage of development, wherein vast ‘quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such.’¹⁵ That is, the chora is a stage of development where the subject cannot distinguish themselves from the world around them; where there is little acknowledgement of – and little need for – boundaries. Where the self, thus unbounded, may indeed fall and sink into the deeper epidermis

of the ground. But the chora is also continuously regulated: it is mediated and constrained to a particular ‘ordering.’¹⁶ Moreover, the choral stage is followed by the abject, a ‘violent, clumsy breaking away’ that establishes boundaries between the self and the other, and where ‘the constant risk of falling back’ into the chora provokes a sense of fear and horror.¹⁷ Consequently, the vertigo in VanderMeer’s passage is not solely a somatic expression of overwhelm. More precisely, it is associated with horror – not simply in terms of acrophobia (fear of heights), but also as a deeper fear of sinking back to pre-lingual infancy without boundaries. This in turn implies that the vertiginous feelings of falling and sinking in Silvina’s message signify a curious regression. When falling into the deeper epidermis of the ground, one also appears to sink into infancy.

To better understand the implications of these regressive tendencies, it is important to consider regression alongside progression and progress. While the relation between these terms is generally understood to be antonymous, Adorno’s work on progress provides a more complex account. For Adorno, true progress requires stepping out of the ‘spell of progress’, insofar as ‘humanity [...] brings to a halt the domination it exacts upon nature and through which domination by nature continues.’¹⁸ If progress pertains to economic and societal advancements grounded upon extraction and other exploitative processes, then ‘it could be said that progress occurs where it ends.’¹⁹ This final and idealised form of progress – i.e. the cessation of extracting profit from nature, humans, and nonhumans – is ‘encoded’ in the concept of decadence, as exemplified by the story of Nietzsche collapsing in ‘Turin when he saw a coachman beating his horse.’²⁰ Adorno does not offer an extensive discussion of this scene, but its brief appearance is nevertheless significant. As per Booth, the moment of Nietzsche’s collapse is an instance of affective intensity where words fail, and one falls back to the symbolic power of the soma.²¹ But it is also a moment, as per Kristeva, where the boundary between Nietzsche and the outside world becomes porous and choral.²² In this sense, then, Nietzsche is also a figure of vertigo, falling, and sinking. Adorno’s image of progress occurring where it ends therefore shares crucial overlaps with the ecological awareness that Silvina – and by extension VanderMeer – imagines.

Adorno’s argument is equally crucial for Morton, who extends the vocabulary at stake beyond the idea of decadence. In Morton’s reading of Adorno, the account of Nietzsche suggests that true progress might in fact ‘look like a regression to the childishly passionate.’²³ That is, Morton links ecological awareness with feelings and behaviours that would, at least from an anthropocentric perspective, resemble a regression. The process of individuation can thus be described as an anthropocentric training routine, which severs our earlier capacities for solidarity with nonhumans. Borrowing Lacanian terms, Morton describes this severing as occurring between ‘*reality* (the

human-correlated world) and *the real* (ecological symbiosis of human and nonhuman parts of the biosphere).²⁴ The description of 'reality' as being 'human-correlated' coheres with the Lacanian notion of the Symbolic. But the latter half of the quotation carries a slant rhyme – that is, an oblique and imperfect but nevertheless tangible connection – with Kristeva's work on the chora. For Kristeva, the chora is characterised by its proximity to the pure materiality of existence, which in turn recalls the Lacanian sense of the Real. Just as Lacan identified the split – or *Spaltung* – from the Real as being a consequence of a 'subordination to the signifier', so Kristeva argues that it is the 'sign' that 'represses the *chora*.'²⁵ An entry into language marks a split away from the materiality associated with the Real and the chora. Becoming a distinct and anthropocentric subject thus involves a process of differentiation and othering. One is only permitted to become a 'self' if they separate themselves from others. In Kristeva, this differentiation is primarily described as a split from 'the hold of' a '*maternal entity*.'²⁶ But if the chora and the Real are states of radical *undifferentiation*, one would also be severed from the 'ecological symbiosis' of humans and nonhumans, as per Morton's definition. In its combination of 'together' (through the prefix *syn*) and 'life' (as in *bios*), symbiosis is rooted in an undifferentiated act of being together; of life together, in a literal sense. Morton's understanding, via Adorno's Nietzschean scene, of progress as a regression to the 'childishly passionate' can thus be understood as the *unlearning* of an anthropocentric individuation process – as a vertiginous falling and sinking into ecological symbiosis.

In *Humankind*, the 'childishly passionate' possibility for ecological symbiosis can be glimpsed via children speaking to stuffed animals, insofar as the inanimate toys are addressed as if they were conscious lifeforms.²⁷ There is, in other words, a slant rhyme between speaking to one's teddy bear and Nietzsche's collapse at the sight of the abused horse in Turin. In both, a deeply felt emotional connection facilitates a blurring of boundaries between humans and nonhumans. And a comparable slant rhyme also occurs for Jane in *Hummingbird Salamander*. Throughout VanderMeer's narrative, she is accompanied by a 'huge purse that doubled as a satchel', which she affectionately calls Shovel Pig.²⁸ Shovel Pig is first mentioned in the third paragraph of the first chapter, and the name appears for the final time on the penultimate page of the novel. This framing presents Shovel Pig as Jane's most constant companion, whom she always addresses by a capitalised proper name.

This mode of address complicates the pronominal convention of calling Shovel Pig an 'it'. The call of a name is deeply entangled in a network of relations, which include the 'relations between namer and named', as well as 'the relations of kinship, culture and history' that are voiced through the name.²⁹ Any naming event is therefore inextricably bound up with the

instantiation of intricate relationships. In other words, the act of naming 'Shovel Pig' highlights a significant blurring of boundaries. Shovel Pig's name originates from what Jane's boss called the purse behind her back, which Jane herself understands as an indirect 'way of calling [her] shovel pig.'³⁰ That understanding in turn signifies a relational dynamic in which Jane shares a certain commonality with Shovel Pig and identifies with 'it.' The name applies both to the purse and to Jane.

This plural applicability of the name situates Jane and Shovel Pig in an undifferentiated act of being together. Calling Shovel Pig by its proper name opens the possibility of symbiosis. It is therefore fitting that Jane considers Shovel Pig her 'main indulgence.'³¹ Tangled in the roots of 'indulgence' is the Latin *indulgere*, one meaning of which is 'to give oneself up to'. Understood in this etymological capacity, Jane's identification with Shovel Pig is indeed an indulgence. Giving oneself up to something else suggests that one permits themselves to be overcome, permeated, and breached. The act implies both a blurring of boundaries and an undoing of the process of differentiation through which one becomes a 'self'. Indulgence, in this sense, is about the 'childishly passionate' connection that forms a slant rhyme between a child speaking to their teddy bear and Nietzsche in Turin. This is significant, because it reminds us that while *Hummingbird Salamander* overall depicts how Jane falls deeper into ecological awareness, the possibility for that falling and sinking already exists at the very beginning of the novel, in the indulgence of Shovel Pig.

Indulgence, in this etymological sense, thus designates an embryonic possibility space; a vertiginous opening that allows one to fall and sink into ecological awareness. But while the indulgence of Shovel Pig shares a slant rhyme with a child speaking to their teddy bear, the blurring boundaries implied through such instances may inflect differently when presented with more uncanny counterparts. It is perhaps easy to comprehend a deeply felt connection with a plush toy, or Jane's fondness for Shovel Pig, but a taxidermic animal – like the novel's hummingbird and salamander – is far more likely to arouse 'considerable unease.'³² As Tidwell notes, taxidermy presents its subjects as 'simultaneously living and dead', which firmly places them in the realm of the 'undead.'³³ That is, these taxidermied undead might instead share their slant rhymes with the zombies and corpses that inhabit the nadir of the uncanny valley.³⁴ Hummingbirds are astonishingly beautiful animals, but Jane's initial interactions with the specimen she receives are marked by threat and horror. The 'long and slender' beak reminds her of a 'blade or a needle meant to draw blood', which suggests that this taxidermic and *undead* state aligns the hummingbird with vampiric tendencies.³⁵ For Kristeva, the corpse embodies that which we must 'permanently cast aside in order to live', as the dead body reminds us of our own finite materiality that will ultimately undo the anthropocentric processes of differentiation that allow us to understand

ourselves as individual and contained beings.³⁶ The vampiric horror of the taxidermic hummingbird is, in other words, the horror of the abject, where one fears falling back into the undifferentiations of the pre-lingual chora.³⁷

This fear also characterises Jane's experiences of the pile of taxidermied animals that she encounters in a warehouse during course of her investigations – a mass described as a monstrous 'creature' made of 'many parts' such as dead bodies, skins, fur, feather, scales, and glassy eyes.³⁸ Although the 'confusion and chaos' of this uncanny mass first inspires a feeling of nausea, Jane is left with no choice but to 'plunge' inside the pile in order to hide from people who are trying to kill her.³⁹ The ensuing experience is one of deep emotional overwhelm:

I was hidden deep, cringing and shivering from the touch of so much unfamiliar texture. The smothered flat glossy feathers and furs against my arms and legs and face. The dead bright eyes I couldn't see in the gloom. The dull-sharp beaks rasping against me. Hooves and paws from the wrong directions, against my back. I was trying to adapt to the vastness of it ... But the claustrophobia broke me down ... It felt like I was going to drown and suffocate at the same time. That I was in some kind of hell that pressed against my own skin so I couldn't tell where my body ended and some other body began.⁴⁰

If the vertiginous passage from Unitopia described a hypothetical possibility space for new ecological awareness, this plunge into unfamiliar textures offers Jane one embodied approximation of the sensations that Silvina's earlier descriptions depict. The confused intermingling of drowning and suffocating recalls the multiplicities of the Old English *grund*: the taxidermic pile is an assemblage of solid matter, to which Jane nevertheless plunges as if it were liquid; likewise, the vastness of the pile creates a vertiginous sense of depth where the impressions of drowning and suffocating evoke both falling and sinking. And just like the text from Unitopia, Jane's experiences inside this mass of dead bodies abound with different iterations of melting boundaries. In Silvina's passage, references to the 'deeper epidermis' of the ground imply an intermingling of the earth and skin, while Jane's apparent claustrophobia results from the inability to tell where her body ends and another begins. Seemingly living and dead things become confused and incongruously blended together.⁴¹

As such, the fear Jane experiences is not truly one of confinement or enclosure but instead, more fittingly, one of porousness. It is a fear of etymological indulgence, where Jane gives herself up to these dead bodies and feels overcome, permeated, and breached in the process. It is a fear of the abject, where Jane's 'entire body falls beyond the limit[s]' and boundaries by which she differentiates herself from other human and nonhuman bodies, and instead becomes 'a cadaver', a body like all the rest.⁴² This uncanny pile of taxidermic bodies therefore undoes the very notion of uncanniness. Through the melting boundaries that it evokes, the different categorisations

of the uncanny valley – the stuffed animal, the corpse, the zombie, the so-called healthy human, and so on – are all revealed to be ‘illusions.’⁴³ Jane’s vertiginous overwhelm results from a radical and destabilising undifferentiation: to borrow from Morton, ‘there is no uncanny valley, because everything is uncanny, because we can’t say for sure’ if a particular body is ‘alive or not alive, sentient or not sentient, conscious or not conscious, and so on.’⁴⁴ As a consequence, Jane’s somatic experiences ultimately suggest an embryonic possibility space where the borders that control anthropocentric differentiations fall and sink away, and thus allow a new opening ‘through to the symbiotic real’ of ecological awareness.⁴⁵

Given the shared resonances between these scenes and Morton’s theories in *Humankind*, it might be tempting to read *Hummingbird Salamander* as directly informed by Morton’s work. *Humankind* was first published in 2016, five years before VanderMeer’s novel, and evidence suggests he read Morton’s book in 2017.⁴⁶ Moreover, it has become relatively commonplace to interpret VanderMeer’s fiction via Morton.⁴⁷ But these resonances are in fact more numerous and complex. Several key moments in VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach* books also feature vertigo, falling, and sinking. When the biologist encounters the Crawler in the climactic moments of *Annihilation*, she compares the experience to a ‘sensation of drowning.’⁴⁸ This scene also takes place in the underground topographical anomaly called the Tower, which the previous expeditions into Area X describe as ‘an endless pit burrowing into the ground’, or a structure that had ‘fallen into the earth’, where one might ‘never stop falling.’⁴⁹ In *Authority*, the protagonist John Rodriguez – aka Control – has a recurring dream of staring ‘down into an abyss’ and then falling in it (3).⁵⁰ Moreover, these dreams foreshadow the end of the novel, where Control jumps down to a glimmer of brightness that arises ‘deep in the lagoon below.’⁵¹ Indeed, the conclusion of Control’s story takes place whilst falling, as his final actions involve jumping ‘into the light’ at the bottom of the Tower.⁵² In addition, when the flashback chapters in *Acceptance* depict the night that Area X first emerged, the lighthouse keeper Saul Evans – who becomes the Crawler – experiences ‘a kind of vertigo [...] as if a vast pit had opened up beneath him and he was suspended above it, about to fall.’⁵³ And when that same night is depicted from another perspective in *Absolution*, the scene focuses on the tragic agent Old Jim, who reflects on drowning in distinctly undifferentiated terms: ‘in time, he would shed his self, drift down deep ... become nestled in the water and the reeds.’⁵⁴ Each of these examples involves transformative moments and locations in the story of Area X, and all are expressed through vertigo, falling, and sinking. Furthermore, all but one of these examples precede VanderMeer’s engagement with Morton’s theories, as he first began reading works such as *Hyperobjects* after *Annihilation* was published.⁵⁵ The descriptions of vertiginous ecological awareness in *Hummingbird Salamander* are therefore not an expression of a passing, recent, or

borrowed idea; rather, the novel draws upon concepts and descriptions that have a long history in VanderMeer's writing. Vertigo, falling, and sinking echo independently across many of his novels.

At the same time, it is equally important to note that similar independent echoes also occur in Morton's own body of work. When *Dark Ecology* maps out the 'anatomy' of ecological awareness, Morton's favoured simile refers to 'chocolate with concentric layers', where each 'descending layer' leads to a more 'accurate attunement'.⁵⁶ This idiosyncratic image does not seek to describe the exact content of ecological thought, but rather the 'attitudes' – or perhaps the affects – with which 'those thoughts are held'.⁵⁷ In other words, the progress from one affect to the other – from guilt to shame; or from melancholy to horror; or from the ridiculous to the ethereal; and so on – is described as a descent. Each 'deeper layer' represents 'a phenomenological reduction of the layer around it'.⁵⁸ Although not articulated in precisely these terms, this sinking through concentric layers – of reducing the experience of one layer after another – echoes Morton's elaborations on Adorno's idea of progress occurring where it ends. Since the progression towards ecological awareness resembles a descent through concentric layers, the associated imagery might indeed look like regression at first. That is, while the descent reaches ever downward, the affects and attitudes themselves progress from guilt to joy – seemingly on a conventionally upward trajectory. The concentric layers therefore espouse a paradoxical movement of downward ascent. Indeed, the very details of the vocabulary in *Dark Ecology*, such as the reference to 'descending layers', also recall vertigo, falling and sinking: 'to descend' is rooted in both the Old French *descendre* – meaning 'to fall into' – and the Latin *descendere*, meaning 'to come down' and 'to sink'. Like the biologist in *Annihilation* – or like Saul Evans in *Acceptance*; or like Jane in *Hummingbird Salamander* – the approach towards ecological awareness *feels* as though one is being swallowed up. We are sinking, and we are falling, but we are not 'floating blissfully in outer space'; instead, we are swallowed 'like Jonah in the whale of a gigantic' biosphere.⁵⁹

To reiterate for clarity's sake: there is more at stake with vertigo, falling, and sinking than a mere similitude between isolated texts. Whether read comparatively or on their own terms, these ecologically focused works repeatedly circle around vertiginous feelings. As if by spectral interconnections, these phenomena occur across several years, across several texts. Reading *Hummingbird Salamander* – or reading any of the other examples mentioned above – thus involves a particularly idiosyncratic *mise en abyme*. Vertigo, falling, and sinking place us in an abyss.

That abyss may not exactly align with the open-ended indefiniteness of Derridean deconstruction, but there is nevertheless something of Derrida within it. In the second part of *Of Grammatology*, Derrida notes that the infinities of 'a horizon or an abyss' respectively recall either 'progress or a fall'.⁶⁰ These notions of horizon and abyss – of progress and fall – are

mentioned in contrast to what Derrida calls the ‘workings of the historical process’ in Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages*.⁶¹ While the Rousseauian model leads to a strange course of repetition, Derrida implies that the infinite fall of an abyss may be capable of representing ‘the turn [...] of the return.’⁶² To elaborate on these implications, the fall inside an abyss is tantamount to experiencing a shift in one’s position. One might spiral in ceaseless rotation; or alternatively, one might simply face backwards and observe what has been left behind. The former motion would be one of perpetual turning, while the latter would indicate some form of return.

The motions implied in Derrida are therefore akin to the ones described by Daniela Cascella, who reflects how in falling one can ‘look up at the ceiling’ – or, perhaps, the ground – of their own making.⁶³ In this case, falling enables Cascella to see both ‘beautifully crafted’ pictures as well as ‘detritus, [...] incomplete images [and] emerging patches of grey.’⁶⁴ This falling view is varied and far-reaching: it takes in the beauty of artificial veneers; it observes the damage and the wreckage around that veneer; and it glimpses the incomplete shapes of future possibilities and possible futures. Falling in the abyss therefore involves both perception and becoming: in turning, one is also turned; the experience is ultimately one of change.

In plainer terms, falling into the abyss returns us to the ecological vertigo in the passage from Unitopia. That the opening of the ground therein should be accompanied by ‘a sense of vertigo’ is not a surprise. Vertigo implies far more than a loss of balance or dizziness. During the fifteenth century, it primarily described a whirling or spinning motion. Moreover, it is derived from the Latin *vertere*, meaning ‘to turn’. Its Proto-Indo-European (PIE) root is believed to be *wer*, meaning ‘to turn, or to bend’, for which the Sanskrit *vartare* (‘turns around’) stands as hypothetical evidence. That PIE root in turn connects vertigo to words like ‘convert’, ‘diverge’, ‘divert’, ‘pervert’, ‘subvert’, and so on. Rather than simply produced by looking down from a great height, or by physiological causes pertaining to the inner ear or the vestibular nerve, vertigo is about being turned. About being diverged or converted. This sensation, coupled with the vertiginous qualities of Silvina’s passage, indicates that the ecological awareness proposed at Unitopia is about a change of form or character. It is about a change of course and a new direction. It is about diverging from previously accepted hegemonic positions. In other words, it is possible to experience vertigo as a loss of balance because vertigo reminds us that nothing is rigid and unchanging, but rather kinetic and therefore open to change.

This understanding of vertigo is affirmed by the latter parts of Silvina’s message, which are revealed in the final stages of VanderMeer’s novel:

You’re, in fact, standing on an alien planet. And once you got used to that, maybe then ... only then ... you’d be able to reach a level in which you

inhabit the consciousness of an animal – something less advanced, at first, like a tortoise or squirrel, and then work your way up to something ‘fairly’ intelligent, like a wild boar or a raccoon.

And once you’d worked your way ‘up’ to human, or sideways to human, or down to human ... whatever that looks like ... then and only then would you be allowed to look to the future, to think of a time beyond, only then would you know enough because you’d feel it in your skin, and in your flesh.⁶⁵

Whilst the cascading sentences in the first passage emphasised its depictions of vertigo, these subsequent paragraphs centre on turning. The metamorphoses from one animal to the next are the most obvious indication of this. But the passage also turns the idea of progress on its head: contrary to anthropocentric assumptions of evolutionary hierarchy, progression towards the human does not proceed upwards but instead moves sideways or downwards. This proliferation of possible directions is already enough to cast doubt on comparative terms like ‘less advanced’. The multi-directionality towards the human echoes the way in which ‘advanced’ is likewise a contradictory term: although its common usage suggests modern development and new progress, its late Latin origins combine *ab* – meaning ‘from’ – and *ante*, meaning ‘before’; in other words, advanced is also *from before*, which rather reverses the notions of linear and unidirectional progress its common definitions imply. Once again, the binaries between progress and regression are troubled and blurred. What is called ‘advanced’ might not be a movement forward but rather an emergence of something archaic from before. Progress may in fact be regression, or vice versa. Consequently, the comparative hierarchy suggested by ‘less advanced’ begins to disintegrate, as the order it implies loses all conventional points of reference.

It therefore seems fitting that the final suggested direction towards the human is ‘down.’ Because the passage has undermined the stability of comparative hierarchies, the downward movement suggested via ‘down to human’ is not a denigrating gesture. Rather, this trajectory mirrors the ‘descending layers’ that Morton describes in the latter stages of *Dark Ecology*. The progression implied in Silvina’s message involves a paradoxical double-movement. On the one hand, ‘down’ implies a falling or sinking motion of descent. According to a linear temporality, it also suggests a lapse to the past. But on the other hand, the passage suggests that this descent is necessary so that one can ‘look to the future’. In other words, while the motion may fall and sink downward, it simultaneously facilitates a perspective on futurity that suggests – in conventional thinking – an upward trajectory. The falling ‘down to human’ thus represents an abyssal turn. Like the earlier reflections offered by Cascella, this falling allows one to glimpse incomplete shapes of future possibilities and possible futures. In

this way, the paradoxes in the passage also echo Adorno's suggestion that true progress occurs where it ends. They similarly reverberate with an understanding of the chora and the Real as sites of radical *undifferentiation*, through which one might sink towards ecological symbiosis. In other words, all the different but overlapping conceptualisations of ecological awareness discussed in this article coalesce in the latter stages of Silvina's passage.

This complex coalescence of concepts and ideas makes a significant suggestion about scale. In plainer terms, the scale of the passage itself is already capacious, simply in terms of the range of discourses it holds. But the passage also blurs and extends the sense of scale within it. As it erodes conventional points of reference for hierarchical order, it also casts doubt on all systems of measurement – including those of scale. Moreover, when the passage refers to the future, it is defined as a 'time beyond', which suggests an enormously vast temporal remit. And these patterns are not limited to the concluding section. With its references to regressing backwards to 'two hundred years' ago, the earlier extract likewise features an extensive timescale, albeit in the direction of the past instead of the future. In other words, the feelings of vertigo, falling, and sinking in the passage are consistently haunted by an awareness of scale.

Such hauntings are not incidental. For Morton, ecological awareness is defined by the knowledge 'that there are a bewildering variety of scales', of which 'the human ones are only a very narrow region.'⁶⁶ For instance, on 'an inhumanly large timescale', igneous rocks would – as lava or magma – behave like liquids, 'moving, shifting, melting.'⁶⁷ But on a microscopic spatial scale, a porous rock assumes the proportions of a 'gigantic empty cathedral.'⁶⁸ The details VanderMeer folds into the message from Unitopia – the references to chemical signals and pheromone trails; the acts of sinking and falling through strata of earth; the regressions to both ecological symbiosis and the distant past; the process of inhabiting the consciousness of a tortoise or a racoon; and the glimpses towards a future 'time beyond' – are all further examples of this bewildering scalar variety. Moreover, the critique of comparative hierarchies in the latter stages of the passage mirrors Morton's argument that 'the human scale is not the top scale' of this vertiginous multiplicity.⁶⁹ The feelings of vertigo, falling, and sinking expressed in the passage are – in other words – slant rhymes for scalar bewilderment.

The perplexity implied by 'bewilder' is itself a kind of vertigo. Its etymological components include the archaic *wilder*, which likely developed as a back-formation of 'wilderness'; that is, in being bewildered, one is also lured back into the wilds. Bewilderment is therefore another form of turning, one that echoes the shifting perspectives and the capacity for change found inside vertigo. It is likewise a form of *returning*, insofar as the lure of the wilds mirrors a fall back towards the chora and the Real – which are, in this context, the radical *undifferentiations* of ecological

symbiosis. The affective extremes in VanderMeer's work are thus an attempt to articulate the emotional content of encounters with the various planetary scales that illuminate how human beings 'are not the only important actors', but rather 'with and of the earth' where innumerable 'biotic and abiotic powers' are 'the main story.'⁷⁰ Vertigo, falling, and sinking are concrete approximations for the intense feelings of awe, horror, and/or the sublime that might accompany a turn away from the narrow anthropocentric scalar range, and towards the full bewildering variety of scales that await beyond it.

This scalar context for falling out of the Anthropocene is not exactly coterminous with concepts such as posthuman scale. For scholars like Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, this term primarily pertains to extending the size, duration, or other elements of specifically human existence. Consequently, Thomsen stays firmly within the human scale, to the extent that even his reflections on speciation draw upon anthropocentric imaginings such as those in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*.⁷¹ While such examples understand scale as a relationship of relative spatiotemporal size, the approach in *Hummingbird Salamander* involves thinking across multiple relationships at multiple different levels. Likewise, although any concept of scale 'presumes the existence of at least another scale', the idea of a distinctly posthuman one implies a comparative affiliation that calls back to the human.⁷² By contrast, the passage in VanderMeer diverges from comparative ordering. It instead imagines scalar relations that appear more rhizomic and non-hierarchical – and which encompass both humans and nonhumans alike, including earthworms, topsoil, trees, tortoises, squirrels, and racoons. The resultant effect reaches across a full bewildering range of scales, which is a significant gesture. Ecological awareness may – as per Morton – require attention to scalar varieties, but scholars have also noted that such comprehensions do not always lead to phenomenal experiences that are immediately felt. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, because of the gap between the time-scales of 'human world history' and geological time, matters concerning the latter usually 'fall out of view' in Anthropocenic discourse.⁷³ By extension, the full bewildering extent of biospheric and planetary scales – geological or otherwise – may seem incommensurable with human perception and imagination. If humankind rarely experiences itself 'as a species' and finds it difficult to emotionally identify 'what being a species is', its capacity to recognise that it co-exists with, and depends upon, other nonhuman species will also be extremely limited, if not impossible.⁷⁴ The multi-relational scales in Silvina's message are an attempt to redress this gap in human imagination. The passage is quintessentially informed by a desire to inhabit other scalar perspectives, so that they may *feel* less distant from immediate human experience.

To be exact, the multi-relational scales in *Hummingbird Salamander* do not attempt to *bridge* this gap in human imagination. A bridge might provide a

direct connection between two points, but it is also a construct; an artifice. Similarly, a bridge only reaches over a gap or chasm, and so maintains a distance from the actual depths of the terrain. A bridge is, in other words, drawn away from the gap, and its relation to that space will always be abstract. Instead, as the final stages of Silvina's passage suggest, the only way to truly 'know enough' is to 'feel it in your skin', which demands a more immersive encounter. As a result, the gap must be traversed by falling within it. After all, a gap is an abyss, where a descent can be both a turn and a return. Where in being turned, one is diverged and converted – allowing themselves to affect the space they are in, and to be affected by it. Where the fall offers an undoing of the boundaries and processes of differentiation through which one identifies as a self. Where, instead, one might identify as a species, and thus understand themselves in relation to other species as well.

It is for this reason that the feelings of vertigo, falling, and sinking are so crucial to the passage. The multi-relational scales in VanderMeer's novel express a demand for an empathy that is so deep it is experienced not just rationally or in the imagination, but also physically within one's own skin. Consequently, this demand reveals the outer limits of empathy. As per Sara Ahmed, empathy 'sustains the very difference' it seeks to overcome; even as we imagine that we feel 'what another feels', our actual felt experience is 'something other' than that.⁷⁵ The desire to feel the feelings of another maintains our distance from them, since that desire plays no role in the emotions of the other.

Such complications are compounded further when desiring to feel across the boundaries of different species. It is not possible to inhabit the consciousness of a tortoise or a raccoon, and to feel as they do. But Ahmed also notes that a truly responsive mode of ethics involves 'being open to being affected by that which one cannot know or feel.'⁷⁶ This manner of radical openness in turn echoes some of Morton's arguments regarding ecological awareness. The latter stages of *Humankind* suggest that one might exit the anthropocentric scalar range via an experience of emotional extremes. That is, an open awareness of nonhuman scales means that we are 'affected by them' to such an extent that we become 'excited or horrified' by attuning to their presence.⁷⁷ Here, as with Ahmed, the encounter involves that which we cannot fully know or feel, but which nevertheless affects us; moreover, in being affected, we begin to feel our own – perhaps different – extremes of emotion. To put this differently, whilst it is not possible to feel as a tortoise or a raccoon does, the feelings of vertigo, falling, and sinking can all be inhabited within our own skin. They are slant rhymes of the intense emotions described in Morton, and the immersive turns they promise enable an openness akin to Ahmed's responsive ethics. When faced with the limits of empathy, these feelings can serve as immediately felt phenomenal experiences of the vast range of nonhuman scales. They are extremes of feeling that can populate the gap between human imagination and other

scalar perspectives, thus making biospheric and planetary scales feel less incommensurable for us. They are, in simple terms, what ecological awareness might *feel* like as an embodied experience. Of course, mere feelings may seem insufficient in the face of the urgencies of climate catastrophe. Anything other than a total and immediate overhaul of societal systems will be insufficient at this stage. But to ensure that any systemic overhaul can truly endure, perhaps our felt experience of biospheric existence must also be reimagined. Perhaps by inhabiting vertigo, falling, and sinking – letting them happen to us, and to affect us – we could find ourselves turning and being turned to unexpected new directions. We could even begin to understand, in our own skin, what it takes to really look to the future.

Notes

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37. Ibid, p. 13.
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39. Ibid.
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