



UNIVERSITY OF  
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**“We’re in the Zone now”:**

**‘Weird’ Geographies for the Anthropocene**

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I also must give my sincerest appreciation to all my friends and family, in particular fellow geographer and inveterate delezian Michael Fleetwood-Walker, who I can't thank enough. Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to the late Mark Fisher, whose work has been a major source of hopeful inspiration for me academically and politically. I hope with this I have managed to bring his seriously relevant ideas into closer conversation with Geography.

## **NOTE**

This is the initial final draft of my undergraduate dissertation that I submitted in April 2022. There's quite a lot of compromises I had to make in terms of content and detail here (due to the word limit and the way these dissertations are examined and marked), and I hope to at some point flesh it out more thoroughly.

## **Cover**

The cover picture is taken from the collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum and is titled *A Grottesque*. It was painted by sixteenth century draughtsman Bartolomeo di David in an unknown year and purchased by the museum in 1895 (full details in bibliography).

The grotesque, as described by Mark Fisher (2016), is the Weird blending of human, animal, plant, and artificial forms to create a jarring effect.

## **Abstract**

This dissertation begins from a literary geography framework to discuss the integration of the genre of 'weird fiction' into geographical analysis of the Anthropocene. Drawing from an extensive review of contemporary academic literature on 'the Weird', I highlight the genre as a source of evocative and productive perspectives and concepts for critical inspection of the current crisis. A pragmatic geographical conceptualisation of the Weird is developed and applied to current turns within geography towards spatial, Neo-Marxist, phenomenological, and more-than-human analyses of the Anthropocene.

The paper centres on the Weird figure of 'The Zone', as developed by the Strugatsky brothers in *Roadside Picnic* (1972) and popularised by Jeff Vandermeer's *Annihilation* (2014), positing it as a spatial form of alterity suited to processing the localised emergences of more-than-human agencies and the 'eerie' workings of global capital that are characteristic of the Anthropocene (Fisher, 2016). The dissertation goes on to consider two theoretical applications of a Weird register or mode. Reading current studies of the Anthropocene, I propose the possibility of a phenomenological 'Global Weirding' and a Weird re-articulation of more-than-human methodologies. The Zone is argued to be a site of disorientation where kinship and solidarity can be found, exposing those within and without to vivid experiences of the radically new, the strange, and the ontologically disruptive: in a word, the Weird.

**NOTE:** a conference paper based on the research done for this dissertation was submitted to and accepted for the upcoming RGS-IBG 2022 conference in Newcastle, presenting in the session on 'Spatialities of Speculative Fiction' organised by Gwilym Eades. The above abstract is adapted from the one submitted to that call for papers.

## **Contents**

<b>1) Introduction</b>	5
<b>2) Methodology and Research Questions</b>	9
<b>3) The Harmont Visit Zone: A Spatial Weird</b>	13
3.1) What is the Weird?	13
3.2) What is the Zone and how is the Anthropocene Weird?	15
<b>4) The American Town: A Phenomenological Weird</b>	19
4.1) What is phenomenology and how does it relate to the Weird?	19
4.2) What is 'global Weirding' and how is the Anthropocene phenomenologically Weird?	21
<b>5) Area X: A More-than-Human Weird</b>	25
5.1) How does the Weird relate to the non-human?	25
5.2) What could the Weird mean for more-than-human geography?	27
<b>6) Conclusion</b>	32
6.1) Coda	34
<b>7) Appendix</b>	35
<b>8) Bibliography</b>	37

## **1) Introduction**

*“The true weird tale must have ... a certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces ... a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space.”*

- H.P. Lovecraft (1925)

*“The sense of wrongness associated with the weird — the conviction that this does not belong — is often a sign that we are in the presence of the new.”*

- Mark Fisher (2016: 12-13)

*“If I was going to be clumsy and make what I say a little more obvious: we’re sort of in the Zone now.”*

- Adam Curtis (2016)

Amitav Ghosh attracted much attention for his argument, in *The Great Derangement* (2016: 11), that climate change as a phenomenon has been banished “from the preserves of serious fiction”, our art and literature drawn into “modes of concealment” that serve to shield us from the horrifying truths of the manmade epoch we now find ourselves in.

Ghosh’s proposal hardly sits right upon inspection. Indeed, as Mark Bould (2021: 3) suggests, it is fundamentally misled. We are constantly confronted with the destruction of the Earth’s environment and climate in our media, whether that be in vast volumes of (often dystopian) science fiction spanning the last century or the emerging genre of ‘cli-fi’ that explicitly sets out to reckon with the more political elements of the present crisis. These mentions of climate change are not limited to insular or obscure texts. Rather, it is the perspective of mainstream literary critique that is limited by an overwhelming concern with ‘serious literature’ and the ‘modern realist novel’. One barely has to scratch the surface of widespread ‘low-brow’ popular media to find not just images of environmental devastation, but serious critiques of capitalism and imperialism in relation to anthropogenic warming. Pixar’s *WALL-E* (2006) certainly does not rely on opaque subtext when depicting an Earth fully harvested by an uncaring corporation while a sedentary consumer population is herded off into the stars towards another planet to exploit. As Mark Fisher (2009) argues, capitalist mass culture is in actuality all too happy to absorb and disseminate the kinds of stories that Ghosh suggests are ‘banished’ away.

Timothy Morton (2013: 1-2) describes climate change as a ‘hyperobject’, a “massively distributed” phenomenon that occupies a “higher dimension”, not appearing to us directly but through ‘non-local’ manifestations. Morton also understands climate change as an ‘interobjective’ mesh that pulls together all things through interrelationships, an observation that matches well the contemporary sentiment of the Anthropocene concept. While the term was popularised by geologists Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 as a way to refer to the human-influenced geological epoch, it has taken on a new life through a barrage of criticism and alternative verbiages that have each sought to emphasise or expose different elements of the concept. Done perhaps most notably by Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz in *Shock of the Anthropocene* (2016) and Katherine Yusoff in *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2019), these terms stress factors varying from capitalism, historic and present imperialism, patriarchy, and ontological ignorance all the way to urban planning practises and the emissions caused by air conditioning. Mark Bould provides an effective list of some of these ‘-cenes’ (reproduced in Figure 1). What this scholarly process has meant is that by invoking the original term, one can simultaneously invoke all these other enmeshed aspects of the Anthropocene hyperobject, and in doing so emphasises the key fact that the present crisis is omnipresent and inescapably entwined in all aspects of life.

**Figure 1** - “le déluge terminologique”, reproduced from Bould (2021: 7)

the Accumulocene	the Eurocene	the Phagocene	the Thalassocene
the Andropocene	the Homogocene	the Phronocene	the Thermocene
the Agnotocene	the Idiocene	the Plantationcene	the Theweleitocene
the Anthroboscene	the Manthropocene	the Planthropocene	the Traumacene
the Capitalocene	the Misanthropocene	the Polemocene	the Urbocene
the Chthulucene	the Naufragocene	the Proletarocene	the White (M)anthropocene
the Corporatocene	the Necrocene	the Pyrocene	the White Supremacy scene
the Econocene	the Novacene	the Suburbocene	&c.
the Eremocene	the Oliganthropocene	the Technocene	&c.

This demonstrates to us another flaw, not just with *The Great Derangement* but with the field of ‘ecocriticism’ (environment-focussed literature criticism) more widely. While analyses of contemporary climate fiction do deal with and criticise euro-, capitalo- and anthropocentrism (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016), popular studies such as *Anthropocene Fictions* (Trexler, 2015) and

*Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel* (Johns-Putra, 2019) fail to move beyond texts that explicitly discuss climate change. When the Anthropocene draws in all aspects of life and looms overhead at all hours, it is neglectful in analysis to ignore the vast 'unconscious' of our media (Bould, 2021). Instead of being a mirror that seeks to reflect accurately the crisis ("the literary critical department of the IPCC"; Garrard, 2019: 186), fiction - and academic engagements with it - should serve as a prism that refracts and distorts our reality, disrupting received notions and representations of climate change in a "more-than-rational, transformative experience" (Hulme, 2021: 7).

This dissertation seeks to contribute to the closure of this gap by highlighting a growing field of literature on 'the Weird'. The capitalised Weird is a noun, adjective, and verb. As a noun, it refers to a genre of fiction that has existed for around a century. This genre is often split into an 'Old Weird' (1910s to 1930s), epitomised by (though not limited to) the author H. P. Lovecraft, and a 'New Weird' (from the 1980s but coherent from 2000s onwards) commonly associated with China Miéville and Jeff Vandermeer (Noys & Murphy, 2016). As an adjective, it refers to an "inflection or tone" (Luckhurst 2017: 1045) present in these texts, usually manifesting in a particular thematic narrative: of transgression between the spheres of the known and the unknown, or the intrusion of the alien into the settled and familiar (Lovecraft, 1925; Fisher, 2016; Luckhurst, 2017). As a verb - 'to Weird', 'Weirding' - it refers to inquiry that attempts to expose or study subjects that are ontologically disruptive. This can be seen in an emerging field of philosophy and critical theory on the Weird that is rich from the contributions of Graham Harman, Eugene Thacker, Mark Fisher, Gry Ulstein and James Kneale among others. The last half-decade has seen many edited volumes and journal issues of such analysis (listed at the beginning of Table 1), which have broadly borrowed from contemporary turns within philosophy in exploring weird fiction.

While the Weird, both as fiction and scholarship, is not concerned directly with the issue of climate change, this dissertation argues it provides conceptual objects that can assist geographical analysis of the Anthropocene. This dissertation therefore seeks to, through an extended critical literature review of the field, elucidate the Weird and demonstrate how it can be applied within geography to, as Michael Hulme suggests, 'thicken' our understanding of climate change (2021). This is done through three thematic chapters, each drawing from a different text: *Roadside Picnic* (1972) by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Silent Spring* (1962) by Rachel Carson, and *Annihilation* (2014) by Jeff Vandermeer. These texts were chosen because they each feature a 'Zone', a particular spatial formation of the Weird which this dissertation

argues is a powerful analytical object for inspecting the Anthropocene. Figure 2 spells out this structure.

<b>Figure 2</b> - The structure of this dissertation			
	<b>Zone 1</b>	<b>Zone 2</b>	<b>Zone 3</b>
<b>Main Theme</b>	Spatial	Phenomenological	More-than-Human
<b>Book</b>	<i>Roadside Picnic</i> (The Strugatskys, 1972)	<i>Silent Spring</i> (Carson, 1962)	<i>Annihilation</i> (Vandermeer, 2014)
<b>Zone</b>	The Harmont Visit Zone	The American Town	Area X

The first chapter of analysis serves to properly introduce and define the Weird as a distinct analytical concept in the context of the Anthropocene, providing a spatial formulation of the Weird through *Roadside Picnic* and ‘the Zone’. Having established this conceptual base, the second chapter engages more closely with the Anthropocene as phenomenologically Weird. This chapter performs a re-reading of the classic environmental text *Silent Spring*, arguing that as the Anthropocene becomes more visible we can draw on phenomenology to consider a disorienting perceptual condition of ‘global Weirding’. The third and final chapter uses *Annihilation* to show how the Weird not only fits into the more-than-human turn within geography but develops it by emphasising the notion of ambivalence towards life. The dissertation concludes by summarising the various vocabularies covered before finishing with a meditation on the Weird, suggesting that it is an essential component of visions of utopia in the Anthropocene.

It is worth noting this dissertation lacks a discrete literature review section. This decision was made to aid the structural flow of argument. However, the information and discussion that would be expected in a literature review can be found in the following sections: contextual and foundational information on the Anthropocene was included in this introduction; methodology is considered in section 2; and an introductory outline to the central concept of the Weird can be found in this introduction and in section 3.1.

## **2) Methodology and Research Questions**

This section discusses the research undertaken for this dissertation.

Literary geography has been an established field of research since the 2000s. While the field has “multiple meanings and is practised in a variety of ways”, it is fundamentally based in the application of geographical and spatial analysis to critical literary studies (Literary Geographies, 2015). “To both literature and geography, place matters”: people form their identities through place, using literature to relate themselves to the world through narratives and settings (Anderson, 2015: 121). While much ecocriticism aims to inspect place and even the planetary in literature, this can become limited to textual readings of representations (Johns-Putra, 2019; Fisher, 2016). Literary geography moves beyond straightforward studies of representation by ‘not stopping with the text itself’: as Jon Anderson and Angharad Saunders explain, a “relational approach to literature, and literary geography, suggests...that any book is not ‘fixed’ or ‘finished’, but is a moment in a trail of action” (2015: 118).

Here Anderson and Saunders draw on Sheila Hones’ conceptualisation of the text as a *geographical* ‘event’ which ‘happens’ when it is read. This event constitutes a “spatial interaction” between author and reader which brings together “people, places, times, contexts, networks, and communities”, brimming with the potential of these convening agents (Hones, 2008: 1302). Acknowledging the event of the text, therefore, entails considering spatial “relations of action, thought, influence and imagination” that may occur and what may arise from them (Anderson & Saunders, 2015: 118). This justifies an approach that “regards the world of the text as important” but is ultimately “interested in exploring where the lines of this world come from and go to”. In short, this dissertation is informed by literary geography in that it is less concerned with an analysis of cut-and-dried ‘already-produced’ representations than the ‘potentiality’ of thematic concepts that can be consciously drawn from each book and used for geographical thought (Colebrook, 2006).

**Crucially therefore**, this dissertation should be understood as an extended critical review of an emerging field of academic literature on the Weird which uses fiction texts as a device to frame the broader ideas covered.

This literature review was conducted using a ‘snowball’ methodology, importantly supplemented by recommendations obtained by corresponding with key academics in the field (listed in Table A1). This research was driven by a single initial research question: “*what use*

does weird fiction hold for geography in the Anthropocene?”. Table 1 provides a thematically arranged overview of the academic literature surveyed. These themes were discerned ‘in vivo’ during research. While there is slippage between these categories, they provides a rough mapping of the field’s key texts. Thematic chapters were subsequently formulated from these emic observations, each intended to provide a satisfying and practical synthesis of particular areas of material (Saldaña, 2013). Similarly, a series of research questions were devised after the initial research period had concluded, used both in writing to direct the analysis of the key themes detected and to provide a ‘road-map’ of the dissertation for the reader: these questions stand as the subsection titles for each chapter (see contents).

**Table 1**- Overview of key literature surveyed in this dissertation arranged by theme and sorted by year, detailing journal articles, essays, and book chapters in a concise format. This selection is not exhaustive but intended as a practical introductory guide to the key texts that informed my readings and analysis - complete citations can be found in the bibliography.

As would be expected from an emerging subfield, a significant portion of literature on the Weird (though not a majority) was contained within a few specific compilations and journal issues. These are highlighted first.

**Edited volumes and journal issues on the Weird**

- Montin & Tsitas (2013), *Monstrous Geographies: Places and Spaces of the Monstrous*
- Genre journal (2016), vol. 49 (2): *Old and New Weird*
- Paradoxa journal (2016), vol. 28: *Global Weirding*
- Sederholm & Weinstock (2016), *The Age of Lovecraft*
- Greve & Zappe (2019), *Spaces and Fictions of the Weird and the Fantastic: Ecologies, Geographies, Oddities*
- Greve & Zappe (2020), *The American Weird: Concept and Medium*
- Pulse journal (2020), vol. 7 (1), *Weird Sciences and the Sciences of the Weird*

**The Anthropocene**

- Latour (1993), *We Have Never Been Modern*
- Latour (2011), ‘Love Your Monsters’, In: Shellenberger & Nordhaus, *Love Your Monsters: Postenvironmentalism and the Anthropocene*
- Latour (2014), ‘Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene’, *New Literary History*
- Bonneuil & Fressoz (2015), *Shock of the Anthropocene*
- Yusoff (2019), *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*

**Climate narratives and ecocriticism**

- Trexler (2015), *Anthropocene fictions: The novel in a time of climate change*
- Ghosh (2016), *The Great Derangement*
- Mossner (2017), *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative*
- Holgate (2019), *Climate and Crises: Magical Realism as Environmental Discourse*
- Johns-Putra (2019), *Climate change and the contemporary novel*
- Bould (2021), *The Anthropocene Unconscious: Climate, Catastrophe, Culture*

- Hulme (2021), 'Chapter 7: Artistic Creativities: climate change re-imagined' In: *Climate Change*

### **Weird critique and philosophy**

- Miéville (2011), 'M. R. James and the Quantum Vampire', *Weird Fiction Review*
- Harman (2012), *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy*
- Thacker (2015), *Starry Speculative Corpse*
- Thacker (2015), *Tentacles Longer Than Night*
- Kneale (2016), "'GHOULISH DIALOGUES" H. P. Lovecraft's Weird Geographies', In: Sederholm & Weinstock, *Age of Lovecraft*
- Noys & Murphy (2016), 'Introduction: Old and New Weird', *Genre*
- Noys & Murphy (2016), 'Morbid Symptoms: An Interview with China Miéville', *Genre*
- Weinstock (2016), 'Afterword: Interview with China Miéville', In: Sederholm & Weinstock, *Age of Lovecraft*
- Luckhurst (2017), 'The weird: a dis/orientation', *Textual Practice*
- Turnbull (2021), 'Weird', *Environmental Humanities*

### **Historical-materialist and spatial analysis of the Weird**

- Kneale (2006), 'From beyond: H P Lovecraft and the place of horror', *Cultural Geographies*
- Miéville (2009), "The Weird", In: Roberts, Vint & Bould (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*
- Thacker (2011), *In the Dust of this Planet*
- Montin & Tsitas (2013), 'Introduction', In: Montin & Tsitas, *Monstrous Geographies*
- Montin (2013), "'Strange Outlandish Star": Spaces of Horror in the Poems and Memoirs of the War Poets', In: Montin & Tsitas, *Monstrous Geographies*
- Price (2016), 'Prosthetic Pasts: H. P. Lovecraft and the Weird Politics of History', *Genre*
- Murphy (2016), 'Supremely Monstrous Thought: H. P. Lovecraft and the Weirdering of World Literature', *Genre*
- Shapiro (2016), 'The Weird World System', *Paradoxa*
- Greve & Zappe (2019), 'Introduction: Ecologies and Geographies of the Weird and the Fantastic', In: Greve & Zappe, *Spaces and Fictions...*
- Kneale (2019), "'Indifference Would Be Such a Relief": Race and Weird Geography in Victor LaValle and Matt Ruff's Dialogues with H. P. Lovecraft', In: Greve & Zappe, *Spaces and Fictions...*
- MacCormark (2019), 'Queering the Weird: Unnatural Participations and the Mucosal in H. P. Lovecraft and Occulture', In: Greve & Zappe, *Spaces and Fictions*
- Luckhurst (2020), 'Afterword: Weird in the Walls, In: Greve & Zappe, *The American Weird*

### **Phenomenology, climate, and geography**

- Ingold (2005), "'The eye of the storm": visual perception and the weather', *Visual Studies*
- Ingold (2007), 'Earth, sky, wind, and weather', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*
- Ingold (2010), 'Footprints through the weather-world: walking, breathing, knowing', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*
- Simonsen (2013), 'In quest of a new humanism: Embodiment, experience and phenomenology as critical geography', *Progress in Human Geography*

- Zahavi (2019), *Phenomenology: The Basics*
- Hepach (2021), 'Entangled phenomenologies: Reassessing (post-)phenomenology's promise for human geography, *Progress in Human Geography*
- Hepach (2021), 'Is climate real?', *The Philosopher*

### **Phenomenological disorientation and 'Global Weirding'**

- Friedman (2010), 'Global Weirding Is Here', *The New York Times*
- Weinstock (2016), 'Lovecraft's Things: Sinister Souvenirs from Other Worlds', *Age of Lovecraft*
- Alaimo (2017), 'The Anthropocene at Sea: Temporality, paradox, compression', In: Heise, Christensen & Neimann (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*
- Simonetti & Ingold (2018), 'Ice and Concrete: Solid Fluids of Environmental Change', *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology*
- Mathieson (2019), 'The Oceanic Weird, Wet Ontologies and Hydro-Criticism in China Miéville's *The Scar*', In: Greve & Zappe, *Spaces and Fictions...*
- Cons (2020), 'Seepage: That Which Oozes', In: Billé (ed.), *Voluminous States: Sovereignty, Materiality, and the Territorial Imagination*
- Woodward (2020), 'Monkey Panic in the Deep Time Machine', *Pulse*

### **Weird science**

- Bradić (2019), 'Towards a Poetics of Weird Biology: Strange Lives of Nonhuman Organisms in Literature', *Pulse*
- Bradić (2020), 'Weird Sciences and the Sciences of the Weird', *Pulse*
- Bradshaw (2020), 'Accessing Microbial Lifeworlds: Weird Entanglements and Strange Symbionts', *Pulse*

### **More-than-Human Weird critique**

- MacCormack (2016), 'Lovecraft's Cosmic Ethics', In: Sederholm & Weinstock, *Age of Lovecraft*
- Mayer (2016), 'Race, Species, and Others: H. P. Lovecraft and the Animal', In: Sederholm & Weinstock, *Age of Lovecraft*
- Greve (2019), 'The Weird and the Wild: Media Ecologies of the Outre-Normative', In: Greve & Zappe, *Spaces and Fictions...*
- Ingwersen (2019), 'Geological Insurrections: Politics of Planetary Weirding from China Miéville to N. K. Jemisin', In: Greve & Zappe, *Spaces and Fictions...*
- Thacker (2019), 'Naturhorror', In: Greve & Zappe, *Spaces and Fictions...*
- Ulstein (2019), 'Age of Lovecraft? Anthropocene Monsters in (New) Weird Narrative', *Nordlit*

### **Ambivalence**

- Rose (2013), 'Anthropocene Noir', *Arena*
- Garrard (2012), 'Worlds Without Us: Some Types of Disanthropy', *Substance*
- Dekeyser & Jellis (2020), 'Besides affirmationism? On geography and negativity', *Area*
- Ulstein (2021), 'Heights They Never Should Have Scaled: Our (Weird) Planet', *SubStance*

### **3) The Harmont Visit Zone: A Spatial Weird**

A man stoops nervously behind a tombstone, attempting to evade the gaze of a military police patrol. His companion groans with pain: an otherworldly phenomenon has liquified the bones in his lower half. Their satchels are full of bizarre artefacts thought impossible by science: self-replicating batteries, rings that exhibit perpetual motion, containers of solid empty space. They are *stalkers*, scavengers who infiltrate an area called *The Zone*, the circumference of which is strictly policed by the UN and military forces. The novel is set in the decades following an event called the Visit, when six of these Zones suddenly materialised, all falling on a straight line across the Earth's surface. The central conceit of the book, from which the title comes, is that these Zones are the result of an alien visitor that was indifferent to Earth's inhabitants, the Zones and the supernatural relics within merely the detritus from the cosmic equivalent of a 'roadside picnic' (1972; 2012).

This chapter provides a foundational explanation of what the Weird involves as a geographical concept. The first subsection synthesises various understandings of the Weird, while the second proposes the analytical object of 'the Zone' to spatialise the Weird.

#### **3.1) What is the Weird?**

Roger Luckhurst (2017: 1052) defines the Weird as a concept of transgression that "twists or veers away from familiar frames and binary distributions". This is the key idea of the Weird: the entrance of 'a Real' that cannot be digested and incorporated into previous systems of understanding (Ulstein, 2019a). The Lacanian register of the Real is that which is "foreign to Imaginary-Symbolic reality": unimaginable to the individual and indigestible by the structural realm of ideology and discourse (Fisher, 2009: 22-23). Fisher describes the Real as what any imposed reality must avoid confronting, as it exposes the "fractures and inconsistencies in (our)...apparent reality". In classic Old Weird narratives the Weird often takes the form of revelations which straddle the scientific and unearthly, such as China Miéville's figure of the 'arche-fossil-as-predator': the uncovering of intelligences and agencies that preceded or influenced humanity in its nascence (2011). *Roadside Picnic* notes almost immediately that the most important fact of the Visit was not any scientific subsequent discovery but the occurrence of the Visit itself, decentering the human and forcing the conclusion that reality is much stranger than previously imagined (Fisher, 2016: 83; see also Bradshaw, 2020). This is why Miéville classifies the Weird as 'abcanny' rather than 'uncanny', implying the intrusion of something

foreign into the known, rather than an emergence from within of something repressed but strangely familiar (2011).

Continuing, the definitions posed by Mark Fisher uniquely stress the centrality of agency to the Weird. Fisher (2016: 61-62) uses the twin motifs of presence and absence: the Weird is marked by the appearance of “that which does not belong”, this either borne as a Weird presence or a ‘present’ absence. Using the dictionary example of a bird’s ‘eerie cry’, he suggests that absence becomes unsettling when there “is a feeling that there is something more in (or behind) the cry...a form of intent that we do not normally associate with a bird”. Similarly, a landscape emptied of life is eerie when the reason for this absence is not understood, hinting at the possibility that a new and unknown agency that has supplanted those formerly present. In marking the importance of strange and unseen agencies, it can be seen more clearly how the Weird becomes about “the forces that govern our lives and the world”: the Anthropocene is Weird through its status as a higher-dimensional hyperobject, a poltergeist that affects everything while remaining not “fully available to our sensory apprehension” (Fisher, 2016: 64; see also Szerszynski, 2017). Crucially, two constituent parts of the epoch, hypermobile capitalism and administered colonialism, can be understood as Weird agencies in that they act from seemingly nowhere.

A third aspect of the Weird is an ‘ecological’ tendency to collapse scales. Timothy Morton’s *Dark Ecology* and Luckhurst (2017: 1049) each utilise etymological flairs by referencing the Old Norse ‘urth’ (indicating cyclicity) and the ‘wyrð’ of Shakespeare’s ‘weird sisters’ (denoting destiny or fate; Morton, 2016: 6). Morton suggests that “ecological awareness is essentially weird” because of this “twisted, looping form”: not only are all ecological systems incalculably complex loops of matter, energy and causation, but also involve situations where distant scales “flip into one another” (6-7). The Anthropocene clearly highlights these loops: the positive feedback loop between permafrost melting in the Arctic and global temperature rises, for example, causes a “crashing together of disparate spatialities and temporalities”, bringing together the spatial (cellular to ecosystem to global) and the temporal (seasonal to decadal to geological) into a dense “ecological milieu” (Turnbull, 2021: 277). As Luckhurst suggests, it is “no wonder that there are lots of weird fictions that focus on malignant stirrings of ancient things long buried in the earth”, for this is perhaps the central narrative of an Anthropocene where the ‘negative externalities’ of carbon emissions and environmental damage manifest locally and reveal themselves to be far from distant or passive (2017: 1057; Latour, 2014).

To summarise, the Weird should be conceptualised as a mode that exposes and expresses the complexity of the Anthropocene hyperobject. It draws attention to the ontologically-disruptive, to traces of interloping but elusive agencies, and to interrelations between vastly different scales. In a geographical application, the Weird therefore naturally leads us to the “agency of the immaterial and the inanimate” and to our ensnaring in the “rhythms, pulsions and patternings” of occluded forces- social, geological and ecological (Fisher, 2016: 11).

### 3.2) What is the Zone and how is the Anthropocene Weird?

Eugene Thacker's *In the Dust of this Planet* (2011: 10) is an attempt to comprehend politically the world as Weird. The Anthropocene has fundamentally challenged modernism (Scott, 1998), an ideology which has acted to “recuperate” the unruly non-human world into a “human-centric worldview”, an ontological frame which Thacker calls ‘the world-for-us’. This effort is necessarily limited: the non-human world is often ambivalent towards humanity but still must be slotted into the “solipsistic” frame of the human subject through science, culture or politics: “after all, being human, how else would we make sense of the world?”. Thacker describes the inaccessible world, which “resists or ignores our attempts to mould it into the world-for-us”, as the ‘world-in-itself’ (2011: 11). The Weirdness of the world lasts only as long as it remains unmetabolised. For example, the ecological modernisation agenda, encompassing activities such as emissions trading and biodiversity offsetting, can be seen as an attempt - albeit an unsuccessful one - to render digestible the ramifications of the Anthropocene to the current socioeconomic order (Brockington & Scholfield, 2010).

Thacker goes on to introduce a spatial motif into this framework. The image of the ‘magic circle’ deliberately draws on an occult imaginary of summoning forces through an inscribed and bounded threshold, a “textual convention” which “implies openness, change and lively movement” (Kneale, 2006: 120). The magic circle refers to situations where the world-in-itself is revealed “at the same time that it recedes into darkness and obscurity”, remaining ultimately unknown: the summoning gone tragically wrong (Thacker, 2011: 48-49). This however implies an intentional human inquiry into the Weird through science or philosophy. What is crucial for a Weird geography is the moments when the Weirdness and complexity of the world-in-itself manifests unprompted “without any magic circle to serve as boundary”. Actively disrupting any human designation of a boundary between the apparent and the unknown, the ‘magic site’ signals an unwarranted incursion of the new and Weird (2011: 68).

*Roadside Picnic* is “perhaps the biggest influence on writers of the New Weird” (Luckhurst, 2017: 1055). The Zone is a magic site, a Weird space where preconceived notions are broken and unknown agencies supplant the human. The Zone featured in the novel partially overlaps with the town of Harmont and has emptied the space within its borders, supplanting humanity and instantiating an impenetrable sovereignty. The eerie landscape that remains is marked by an absence: it was once inhabited and owned, but now is not. In entailing these Weird presences and eerie absences, I suggest the Zone as a ‘spatial form of alterity’ is distinct from other similar concepts:

**The Frontier.** While the Zone may be the target of attempts to understand and annex, it differs in that the Zone is not a ‘terra nullius’, as the frontier is envisaged (Jepson, 2015). The Zone is haunted by the eerie traces - the ‘present absence’ - of previous inhabitants. The space has been ceded but is also in no way inert land to be re-conquered, for it has been usurped by an elusive agency. In other words, unlike the teleological expansion envisaged by the frontier, the Zone presents an area that was once understood and possessed but has escaped - or been taken - back into a Weird unknown (Li, 2014).

**The Heterotopia.** Similarly, while some equate the spaces of weird fiction to heterotopias, they bear a key difference in their formation (see Luckhurst, 2017; Montin, 2013; Weinstock, 2016). Foucault describes the heterotopia as a “place... formed in the very founding of society”, a “counter-site” of “crisis” or “deviation” to which unsavoury elements are banished, thereby serving a “function in relation to all the space that remains”: brothels, asylums, prisons, and colonies are used as examples (1984). The heterotopia therefore is defined from the outside, with an understood but undesired Other forced into the confines of this space. Conversely, the Zone, as a magic site, is where the occupying Weird stakes its own claim: an unruly space that is defined from within and expands outwards from a point of origin.

In summary, the Zone can be understood as attuned to spaces where the ‘normal’ is supplanted by the Weird. The Zone entails a movement between states - known/unknown, inside/outside, old/new - where assumed ontologies are disturbed and interlopers are acted upon by immaterial and irrupting forces. Landscapes devastated by the ‘world-in-itself’, such as natural disasters or environmental deterioration, are one genre of the Zone, as are those where the ethereal human agencies of the Anthropocene - capitalism and imperialism - make themselves known. This chapter now concludes with a demonstrative application of the Zone to both a notionally ‘human’ and ‘non-human’ context.

Inside *Roadside Picnic's* Zone, intruding stalkers must wend an intricate path through a minefield of deadly phenomena. These forces distort the landscape, forcing humans to traverse and experience space much like those excluded from the constructed 'world-for-us' (MacCormack, 2019). While this may invoke images of wildlife crossings and roads blocked by natural disasters, James Kneale (2019: 99) discusses this in relation to black experiences during travel of an 'atmospheric racism' (occurring "despite the absence of a specific agentive source") that can "deform space and time". The unstable unit of a 'Jim Crow Mile', which accounts for "both physical distance and random helpings of fear, paranoid, frustration, and outrage" (taken from *The Safe Negro Travel Guide*, 1954), calls to mind the ways in which landscapes can be Weird for some but not others (Kneale, 2019: 102-104). Such spaces can be considered a Zone, as an atmospheric and insidious racism unmoors those subject from the 'standard' experience of space and time.

Stephen Shapiro (2020: 56) understands some recent "Black-oriented" Weird narratives, such as *Lovecraft Country* (2016), as a 'Woke Weird', which deploys the aesthetic and motifs of the genre to engage the audience's "political sensorium" to the entrapment of minorities in the cruel and ethereal agency of racial capitalism (see also Fisher, 2009). A pertinent contemporary example would be how the aquifer depletion and pollution caused by soft drink bottling plants have transformed vast areas of rural farmland across India into Zones. No supernatural force is at play in these peripheral regions: just the externalities of the Coca Cola Company (Rader, 2008). The inconspicuous method of groundwater extraction employed entails impacts far beyond the boundaries of the bottling plant. For an under-politicised local population, the saline corruption of the literal ground beneath their feet will occur seemingly without cause. In understanding this area as a Zone therefore, it serves to denaturalise and provoke critical inspection of the ultimately Weird flows of globalised capitalism. The eerie experience of living within such places - distorted and corrupted by the 'implosion/explosion' of global-scale extractivist reconfigurations of territory (Brenner, 2014) - is considered more in the following chapter.

To conclude, however, the most vivid and popular example of the Zone is the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone in Ukraine. Jonathon Turnbull describes the Weird lifeforms and habitats that have flourished in the wake of the 1986 nuclear incident as "challenging assumptions of where life belongs", exposing "our concepts, methods, and ontologies as inadequate" in the face of "ecology's inherent weirdness" (2021: 277). However, the Fukushima Exclusion Zone perhaps poses a more relevant icon for the Anthropocene. Declared in the wake of the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake/tsunami and subsequent nuclear disaster, the Zone encompasses much of the town

of Ōkuma. The waterborne contaminants that leaked from the swamped Fukushima Daiichi plant are reminiscent not only of the mists and oozes that “populate many of our speculative fantasies about the end of the world” but also symbolise the ‘seepages’ of the Anthropocene (Thacker, 2011: 69; Cons, 2020). Jason Cons terms ‘seepages’ to refer to flows - of materials, pollutants, and people - that operate “at radically heterogenous times, scales, and viscosities”, sabotaging those projects of the ‘world-for-us’ that attempt to “produce space and territory as solid containers” (2020: 206).

Bringing us in a (Weird) loop, however, are the stone tablets that dot the shores of Fukushima Prefecture, installed in the Middle Ages to mark the high water of tsunamis for future generations (Ghosh, 2016: 55). What better icon of the Anthropocene’s Weirdness than a monolithic warning that now stands alone in an eerie landscape, emptied of the human and usurped by a formless radioactive agency?

**Figure 3** - Japanese ‘tsunami flood-line marker’: “Do not build any homes below this point. High dwellings are the peace and harmony of our descendants. Remember the calamity of the great tsunamis.” (taken from Kohlstedt, 2016)



#### **4) The American Town: A Phenomenological Weird**

“There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings” (Carson, 1962: 1). One day however, a “strange blight” slowly began to infiltrate this paradise. Despite the sun shining kindly and the wind blowing calmly, as they always had, myriad forms of life became afflicted by a malady transmitted seemingly from nowhere. Plants wilted, even with the nourishing rain. No bees buzzed, leaving the fruit orchards empty. Livestock suffered devastating stillbirths. The rivers filled with dead fish and then a gruesome and suffocating slime. Most tragic for the townspeople, children would fall and die with no warning, struck by an unseen and terrifying force. The most eerie and pervasive symptom, however, was the silence: the birds had vanished, leaving the grieving families alone with only the disquieting howl of the wind. A malicious and invisible presence was threatening the very town’s existence. The irony, as is now well known, is that they were cursed not by some malevolent Lovecraftian ‘outer god’, but the use of pesticides by other humans.

This chapter considers a phenomenological application of the Weird, suggesting that the Anthropocene is not only conceptually Weird but experientially so. After providing a brief introduction to phenomenology in geography in relation to the Weird, the chapter considers how climate change is constantly manifesting Weird affects/effects that disturb our dispositions and mediate our perceptions, entering us into a condition of ‘global Weirding’.

##### **4.1) What is phenomenology and how does it relate to the Weird?**

There has been a modest tradition of collaboration between phenomenology and geography since the early 2000s (Thrift, 2004; Anderson & Wylie, 2009; Simonsen, 2013; Anderson, 2016; Hepach, 2021a/b). These transactions have sought to investigate how the world mediates our consciousness and subjectivities (Anderson & Wylie, 2009). As Kirsten Simonsen explains, it is “insufficient to describe the world’s general structures without also attending to the way they are experienced from within” (2013: 23). Similarly, Dan Zahavi explains that the “aim of phenomenology is to reveal aspects and dimensions of our subjective lives” that have been neglected in favour of objective and quantitatively measurable phenomena (2019: 34). This chapter, therefore, is concerned with the “standardly overlooked” question of how the Anthropocene is experienced ‘from within’.

To explain phenomenology efficiently, we begin with the lifeworld. The lifeworld, as Zahavi puts it, is “the world we live in”: the taken-for-granted and pre-theoretical realm of experience that is

our surroundings (2019: 50). We exist spatially within our lifeworld - we view things from particular perspectives - meaning that we are essentially and unavoidably embodied. This embodiment is not only spatial but temporal, encountering “the present on the basis of the past, and with plans and expectations for the future” (2019: 13). In this sense, we are embodied socially too, enmeshed in political, cultural and economic relations and meanings: “the phenomenal body is ridden with power” (Simonsen, 2013: 18). Moving on, our perceptions are also marked by an ‘intentionality’: our consciousness is not “self-enclosed” but “primarily occupied with objects and events”, constantly and inherently concerned with exterior phenomena (Zahavi, 2019: 17). We can, of course, also ‘intend’ differently towards an object depending on the situation and our disposition, factors which stem from our embodiment - this being termed *genetic* (for individual histories) and *generative* (for transgenerational and sociocultural factors) phenomenology. In these two concepts of embodiment and intentionality, consciousness is thus defined by an openness to its surroundings, phenomenology ultimately “insisting on the interdependence and inseparability of mind and world” (Zahavi, 2019: 28). As Maximilian Hepach explains, acknowledging this entanglement is to adopt the position that subject and object - and thus subjectivity and objectivity - are inextricably ‘co’-‘related’ (2021).

In considering how phenomenology can be specifically *Weird*, the notion of affect is important. The correlationist standpoint argues that our perception and consciousness is unavoidably connected to the world: our surroundings, our social position, and our previous experiences. Affect is similar in that it denotes an “always emergent” capacity to structure encounters “so that bodies are disposed for action in a particular way” (Anderson, 2016; Thrift, 2004: 62). The Deleuzian conceptualisation stresses agency in particular: all things have the capacity to ‘affect’. The way a tree has grown, a sideways glance in public, and the weather outside all possess affects that, while non-representational (put briefly, beyond ‘representational’ forms, such as text, music, film, and visual art; Thrift, 2007), can influence and structure our consciousness.

From this, we can understand Simonsen’s ‘moments of disorientation’ (2013:20). “Instability and shifts” in our lifeworld, brought on by unexpected and disturbing affective agents, can undermine our confidence in the knowledges that ground our existence. This disorientation can be understood as a phenomenological reaction to the *Weird*, persisting until the subject can digest the crisis and “reground and re-orientate their relation to the world”. In this way, phenomenological disorientation is not necessarily traumatic - “destabilizing and undermining” - but can instead induce “productive moments leading to new hopes and new directions” (2013:20). The following section poses the argument that the Anthropocene figures as the foremost force disorientation of our time.

#### 4.2) What is 'global Weirding' and how is the Anthropocene phenomenologically Weird?

The Anthropocene is a Weird time. It has given rise to immaterial and non-human agencies which have forcefully confronted the high modernist and capitalist agenda, shattering the base assumptions of anthropocentrism and capitalocentrism (Ingwersen, 2019). It has also birthed scale-collapsing ecological loops, resetting human and geological history like a broken bone, humanity merely 'panicked monkeys' trapped in the churning 'deep time machine' (Chakrabarty, 2009; Woodard, 2020). While these revelations can produce a disorientation, it is distinctly generative (in the phenomenological sense), in that it is based on the reworking of transgenerational sociocultural constructs. This chapter instead seeks to explore how the Anthropocene is genetically disorienting, shattering conceptions that have been formed within a single lifetime and lifeworld.

In examining the affects of our material surroundings, Ben Anderson and John Wylie stress that we cannot take 'materiality' to only include solids (2009: 326, 331). Arguing against a "bizarre fetish" in geography for the grounded and concrete, they suggest that "textures and densities, liquidities and radiances" may also serve as affective "imperatives within and through which movement and sensation" can occur. This position is held elsewhere (Simonetti & Ingold, 2018), particularly in a variety of 'oceanic', 'wet' and 'more-than-wet' ontologies (Mathieson, 2019; Peters & Steinberg, 2019), but is particularly notable in a trio of articles produced by Tim Ingold between 2005 and 2010. Ingold draws on James Gibson (1979) in dividing the lifeworld into medium, substances, and surfaces. While we can physically interact with surfaces and substances, the medium acts as an ethereal 'facilitator' by forming the very realm in which such interactions take place. While the clearest example would be the air, weather, air pollution and crucially the climate also fall under the category of medium (Adey, 2013). We are 'immersed' in the climate, constantly casting the things we see in different lights: "not so much an object as a medium of perception" (2005: 102). Ingold therefore concludes that the climate - which we 'walk, breathe, feel, and know in' - lies as the very "root of our moods and motivations" and is thus at the core of knowledge production (2010: 122).

Maximilian Hepach has applied this spectrum of ideas to anthropogenic climate change (2021: 51). We as humans possess lifeworlds that we must adapt to over time, such as by learning how local weather patterns limit our daily routines: we, in other words, become "literate in a given climate". When this climate shifts it can become disorienting, as "the immaterial rhythms of our daily lives...become increasingly out of sync with the climatic medium through which we live" (2021: 53). Hepach draws on a recent study led by Jean-Francois Bastin that claims 22% of the

world's cities (and up to 30% of those in tropical and sub-tropical regions) will in the next 50 years experience "shifts into entirely novel climate regimes with no existing analogues across the world's major cities", sending over half of the global population "into a climatic realm that is, as of yet, incomprehensible and unreal" (Bastin et al, 2019; Hepach, 2021: 51).

Thomas Friedman wrote in 2010 that as the hots "get hotter, the wets wetter, the dries drier and the most violent storms more numerous", global 'weirding' would be a more appropriate phrase than 'warming'. Timothy Morton also uses the term to refer to natural phenomena that are extreme and "strange of appearance" (2016: 5). We can take 'global Weirding' however, to denote not only the meteorological but also the phenomenological nature of such changes, as they enter us into a Weird "climatic realm" that is disorienting and unreal. Gerry Canavan & Andrew Hageman named their 2016 issue in *Paradoxa* 'Global Weirding' specifically following Friedman's usage, aiming to highlight the "localities within the totality of the global" and the Anthropocene as spatially heterogeneous (2016: 8). This returns us to the central concern of the phenomenological approach: while embodied individuals will not personally perceive abstract global temperature increases at decadal scales, they will experience spatially located climatic events and other Weird climate phenomena with increasing frequency and intensity.

This 'invisibilist' model (Hepach, 2021), where one does not perceive the gradual global-scale mechanisms of the climate hyperobject but instead local manifestations, is the reason why the Weird can be such an effective mode for considering subjective experiences of the Anthropocene. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) can be read as an examination of a series of Zones that had appeared across America, the rural landscape reworked by immaterial and highly hazardous pesticides. Carson's account is memorable not just for the objective research conducted (the relentless detail and volume of which can itself produce a dizzying effect), but also for narrativising the experiences of those living in such areas: Carson at length quotes "irate" and "puzzled" farmers who, when interviewed, expressed confusion, frustration, and helplessness in the face of their affliction (1962: 138). Most interesting however, is when Carson notes the deleterious consequences were often actually understood by agri-business associations beforehand: human agencies, when incentivised by capital and driven by a logic of externality, thus capable of behaving just as callously as any non-human 'world-in-itself'. The phenomena that pesticide overuse entailed - the 'present absences' of mass die-offs and health effects arising across species for no apparent reason - are textbook examples of how occluded agencies and Weird webs of causation can produce an eerie effect, proving especially disorienting for those whose lifeworlds and identities are deeply entangled with nature and capitalist flows of accumulation (Brenner, 2014).

To conclude, this chapter turns to the question of how geographical inquiry can apply this 'Weird phenomenology'. The philosopher John Ruskin in 1884 published two lectures on what he called "The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century": a distinctive weather formation of haze and wind that he had first experienced thirteen years earlier. Ruskin's lectures lay out with conviction his belief that this "plague wind" had never before been experienced in history, drawing evidence foremost from his own lifeworld and the act of 'looking out the window': "I am fifty years old...and since I was five, have gleaned the best hours of my life in the sun of spring and summer mornings ; and I never saw such as these, till now" (1884: 33). Jesse Oak Taylor argues that while Ruskin's case was deemed "decidedly unscientific", it touched on a central concern: how to "describe something that has no name, and for which there is no language" (2018: 10, 15). In other words, the concern of how one can discuss the Weird phenomena and disorientations of the Anthropocene.

I suggest that one method is to follow in the "decidedly unscientific" steps of Ruskin and become attuned to personal experiences of climate change. This builds on the work of non-representational theorists and phenomenologists in proposing the earnest act of reaching into one's own lifeworld: noting the disquiet when hearing another report about the 'hottest/coldest/wettest/driest/stormiest' period on record, recognising the disorientation felt when unusual weather patterns occur (the author considers a personal anecdote from the March of 2021 of a heatwave occurring in the same week as snowfall to be a formative encounter with the climatic Weird). An example of such work is the *Feral Atlas* online project (Tsing et al, 2020), a multi-disciplinary collection of studies on 'feral' natural phenomena that have infested our "imperial and industrial infrastructure": in other words, it is a catalogue of Zones and other Weird emergences. *Feral Atlas* provides a multi-method and collaborative record of this "patchy" Anthropocene 'from within', remaining situated despite covering subjects from 'mud volcanoes' and 'sea fire' - phenomena that would not sound out of place in *Roadside Picnic's* Zone - to those that could fit neatly into recent directions within more-than-human urban political ecology, such as the lives of invasive 'museum insects' and plastic-eating slum livestock. These studies are important because they combine rigorous data collection with an acknowledgment (often through prose, poetry, and art) of the subjective disorientations that these Weird effects can induce in researchers and the (often Global South) populations that are the first to be subjected to them.

In summary, this chapter has examined a phenomenological dimension to the Weird and proposed the condition of 'global Weirding', aiming to draw attention to how disruptive Anthropocene phenomena can disturb our lifeworlds. Weird affects can produce 'moments of

disorientation', shifting both our generative and genetic phenomenological knowledges and forcing us to 'reorient' into a new and Weird reality. In arguing so, this chapter has expounded upon the observation made by Jolene Mathieson that the Weird is "a phenomenological tool for confronting a more-than-human world" by highlighting the potential of a Weird register to geographical studies of phenomenological experiences in the Anthropocene (2019: 115).

## **5) Area X: A More-than-Human Weird**

An unearthly stone structure stands at the centre of a vast area of coastal wilderness. A team of four women are inserted into this place, 'Area X', in order to understand the strange phenomena inside. The twelfth of its kind, the expedition finds, between eerie deserted villages and other abandoned structures, a pristine wilderness full of unnerving hybrids: mosses composed of human cells, dolphins with "painfully human" eyes and an oozing snail-like creature that leaves a trail of English script. They discover that the Zone is home to an inscrutable agency - assimilator, invader, symbiote - that is refracting everything into itself, creating "out of our ecosystem a new world" that is not only "utterly alien", but completely ambivalent to the role of humanity in this new and Weird Eden (Vandermeer, 2014: 66, 128).

Geography as a discipline has inhabited the uncomfortable settlement between nature and society "more self-consciously than other disciplines" (Whatmore, 2002). Twenty years ago Sarah Whatmore's *Hybrid Geographies* declared that the human was inextricably embedded in the non-human and framed the "world as an always already inhabited achievement of heterogenous social encounters" (2002: 3). Twenty eight years ago, Erik Swyngedouw theorised 'the city as a hybrid', born of "interwoven processes...both human and natural, real and fictional, mechanical and organic" (1996: 66). Donna Haraway's boundary-blurring figure of the cyborg - simultaneously human, animal, machine - is foundational to this long-lasting 'more-than-human turn', a paradigm of hybridity (Haraway, 1985, in 2015). However, by also explicitly and consciously drawing on the Weird, a mode dedicated to the shattering of ontologies, productive advances can be made in thickening more-than-human critique and addressing an Anthropocene where the fate of humanity is superfluous to the churning of runaway environmental feedbacks.

This chapter begins by reflecting comparatively on how both the Old and New Weird each present the non-human. From this foundation, it then seeks to discuss the New Weird's emphasis on more-than-human relationships that are simultaneously affirmative and ambivalent, and in doing so, poses a vision of what a 'Weird geography' could be.

### **5.1) How does the Weird relate to the non-human?**

A common critique of the Old Weird is that it is a "reactive genre created for and by white men in the throes of existential angst" (MacCormack, 2019: 59). One of the more common motifs of Old Weird authors, especially H. P. Lovecraft, is a panicked frightfulness in the face of a 'cosmic'

indifferentism and relativism. The uncovering of agencies and processes that operate at the scale of a radically inhuman 'deep time' was treated by Lovecraft as "a revelation that produces a sensation of 'cosmic horror'" (Johnson, 2016: 102). James Kneale has considered at length how, in the face of a world Weirder by scientific advancement, Lovecraft attempted to stave off this panic by retreating to Anglo-Saxon nationalism and racist xenophobia (2006; 2016; 2019): Fiona Price (borrowing from Alison Landsberg) calls this a 'prosthetic memory', designed to soothe and comfort (see Kneale, 2006, 2016, 2019; Price, 2016). Miéville has consistently argued that the Old Weird's "traumatised...response to the alien and hybrid" stems from the horrors of the First World War (Noys & Murphy, 2016; Miéville, 2009; Montin, 2013). Crucially however, Miéville sees Lovecraft's xenophobia not as a "pathology of modernity" but as an essential part of the modern project itself (Weinstock, 2016: 241). This not only falls to the racialised imperialism which the modern West is built on (Yusoff, 2019), but also what Bruno Latour calls the 'modern critical stance' (1993; 2011). Latour explains how modernity, and thus the Anthropocene, has been built on the ontological separation of the human and the non-human in terms of biology, timescale, and relative value. While the Old Weird epitomises this stance, the New Weird contests it, exhibiting an active willingness to abandon human pretences of importance, exploring and embracing the Weird world we inhabit.

Benjamin Noys & Timothy Murphy (2016: 125) introduce their comparative issue on the Old and New Weird by noting that the latter demonstrates a "sensitivity of welcoming the alien", viewing the Zone as a site of "affirmation and becoming" and the chaos of the Weird as a subversion "of the various normalizations of power and subjectivity". The work of Jeff Vandermeer, amongst other New Weird authors, prominently figures not just mutation and symbiosis but strange life forms that are normally absent from fiction. *Annihilation's* Area X is populated by an array of moulds, lichens and mosses. Airborne spores and particles drift through the air, diffusing into the human body until there is no distinction between inside and out. In this way, the New Weird rarely resorts to the monsters of the 'world-for-us' - supernatural or gothic figures (ghosts, vampires) that not only resemble but are often directly concerned with humans - instead preserving a "relationship with reality" that serves to both highlight and embrace its inherent Weirdness (Miéville, 2011; Bradic, 2019). Lifeforms such as the plant, fungus and insect inhabit a totally alien "life cycle", "desire structure" and "morphology", embodying a Weirdness that disturbs the anthropocentric "order of things" (Bradic, 2019: 16). The iconic Weird creature, exhibiting a "taxonomic transgression" of chimeric tentacles and a rhizomatic organ-brain-body, is the octopus: a carnivalesque being of "problematized ontology" in a world-for-us dominated by the mammal and vertebrate (Miéville, 2011; Thacker, 2019). In spite of the "irreducible difference" between us and such creatures, the

New Weird settles on “a cautious admission of kinship” and the possibility of a Weird empathy with the non-human: a position demonstrated notably by the popular recent documentary *My Octopus Teacher* (Mayer, 2016: 122; Ehrlich & Reed, 2020).

Moritz Ingwersen understands this more-than-human focus of the New Weird as a “radically egalitarian allocation of voice and agency” that “revels” in a ‘flat ontology’: one that privileges no actant above any other (2019: 78). Ingwersen conceptualises many Weird life forms and objects - plants, insects, soils, clouds - as a “commodified underclass in the planetary relations of production” that in the Anthropocene have suddenly displayed an alarming agency: in words that echo Bruno Latour, “venue and participants become one, the customary hierarchy between background and foreground is revoked” (Latour suggests that in a “surprising inversion...it is human history that has become frozen and natural history that is taking on a frenetic pace”; 2014).

A Weird geography would therefore be informed in this manner by Latour’s actor-network theory (ANT). ANT is fundamentally about the tracing of networks of interactions between actants. These actants have “no specific homogenous morphism”: “anthropo-morphic, but also zoo-morphic, physi-morphic, logo-morphic, techno-morphic, ideo-morphic” (1990: 380). Furthermore, this non-hierarchical network puts emphasis not on matters of space - “close and far, up and down, local and global, inside and outside” - but on relations: in doing so, it allows us to think of the Earth as an intensely interrelated “global entity...which nevertheless remains continuously local”. The ANT approach is essentially Weird in its scale-agnostic interconnectedness, allowing the refocusing of inquiry onto neglected actants who take many different forms and are important not because of their position within a spatial structure or the size of their impact but through the connections they possess with others.

## 5.2) What could the Weird mean for more-than-human geography?

A demonstrative example of a Weird more-than-human geography would be Matthew Gandy’s studies on Abney Park in London (2012; 2019). Gandy notes that while urban parks often reflect a paradigm of propertied and heteronormative citizenship, Abney Park has arisen as a space of refuge for squatters, political radicals, (often homosexual) cruisers and other ‘outsiders’ against the wishes of a wider ‘proper’ public (2012: 733). Home to many ‘unseemly’ encounters (Wilson, 2016), the park has become “an island...separated in ecological, cultural, and political terms”. A strange domain where others have emerged and coalesced on their own impetus, the park figures as a Zone.

One such occupant of this Zone would be the hoverfly *Pocota personata* (pictured in Figure 4), a Weird creature which pleasantly imitates the bumblebee in appearance yet relies as larva on the gruesome 'rot holes' provided by "the gradual death and decay" of old-growth trees (2019: 392, 400). The hoverfly operates on a "distinctive" temporality, relying for a habitat on the "aesthetically and legally challenging" process of allowing mature trees to die 'in situ' over decades and centuries. This deep-time-situated hoverfly therefore presents a practically Weird disturbance to a municipal policy perspective ill-equipped to process such unpleasant forms of ecological interaction as death and slow, gradual decay (Gandy, 2019: 401).

**Figure 4** - *Pocota personata* in-situ at Abney Park (taken from Gandy, 2019; photographed by Russell Miller in 2013).



*Pocota personata* is also notable for being an indicator species capable of providing deep insights into "climate change, habitat fragmentation...and a plethora of other anthropogenic environmental impacts" (Gandy, 2019: 398). Despite this, Abney Park and the hoverfly possess no legislative protection. The fly and other insects are not only officially neglected but reacted to with revulsion or outright violence, treated as "archetypal" others, "enemies of mankind" (Rehling, 2013: 97). Indeed, the 'homo sacer' of the insect has "fallen under an immunological paradigm of bio-political governmentality" which deploys violence with disgust and delight in equal measure (2019: 399; Agamben, 1998). In making a case for the protection of *personata*,

Gandy suggests one path lies in the work of Roberto Esposito, who argues to unabashedly “value all life”, regardless of whether that life is unpleasant or even actively harmful for humans - the mosquito being one example (Esposito, 2008). This approach is not concerned with an individual ‘species-by-species’ prioritisation but a collectivistic “flourishing of conditions for life in general...even if it contains some elements of threat”. From this ontologically challenging perspective, non-human lifeforms are “simply acknowledged on their own terms”: equally important and deserving of existence as any other being (Gandy, 2019: 399).

An ambivalence, both towards the form that life takes in general and to the continuation of human life specifically, is a common theme in the New Weird. In *Annihilation*, the biologist compares the sublime nature within Area X to her depressive memories of the degraded human world beyond, wondering whether she has “changed sides” or whether there are even ‘sides’ at all. She tiredly resigns from her speculation after being unable to recover from an unsettling revelation: she “can no longer say with conviction” that the Weird and radically non-human reality within the Zone “is a bad thing” (Vandermeer, 2014: 129; for further analysis see Ulstein, 2019a & 2021). Greg Garrard notes that ‘disanthropy’ - a generalised wish for the extinction of humanity and ‘return to nature’ - has long haunted Western environmentalist thought as a “cruel, defensive response to the fundamental challenge ecological crisis poses to our sense of reality”, a position much more suited to the hateful cosmic nihilism of the Old Weird (2012: 44). The “calculated callousness” and evasive “mental withdrawal” that disanthropy offers lends itself to an ‘ecological fascism’ of biopolitical management in neglecting two obvious facts: that the elimination of the human species by climate change or another force would “involve death and suffering on a scale unparalleled”, and that a differentiated Anthropocene ‘necropolitics’ means this suffering has already begun (Garrard, 2012: 44; Yusoff, 2019; DeBoom, 2021).

However, by drawing on the work of Thomas Dekeyser & Thomas Jellis, we can salvage some theoretical worth from a nuanced Weird perspective that is not actively disanthropic but merely ambivalent to life and death. Dekeyser & Jellis argue that there is a “widespread affirmationism” in contemporary geography: a “tendency to espouse – ontologically, politically, and/or ethically - that which is lively” and to promote life, both human and non-human (2020: 323). They do not call to move beyond this but point to a ‘gesture of refusal’. In a present marked by “anxiety” and “disillusionment” in the face of crisis - an “Anthropocene Noir...without a known ending” (Rose, 2013: 215) - we can perhaps choose not to be caught up in the panic of triage but momentarily ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway, 2016): a manoeuvre that “urges the coming-to-terms-with, rather than the working-away of, a past or present that wounds, disturbs, mortifies, destroys” (Dekeyser & Jellis, 2020: 323). This involves engaging in a ‘flat ontology’ of grief, recognising the

wounding and death of all things equally: humans, animals, plants, 'inert' materials and even phenomena (such as the diminishment of distinctive and culturally valuable seasonal weather patterns: see Allison, 2015). By becoming ambivalent not to downplay the suffering of humans but to underline the harm inflicted upon all things, it may be possible to identify in the wake strange connections and kinships waiting to be made.

Returning to Gandy's *Pocota persona*, we can find a practical and situated geographical example of this act. Abney Park has become a site of 'citizen science', where a "grassroots form of scientific practice" acts outside the "evidentiary hierarchies" of institutional ecology: the relationship with *personata* (as an indicator species) is not only a 'scientific alliance' that acts to produce new knowledge but also a 'heterotopic alliance' where activists seek to protect the park through the fly. These alliances, Gandy suggests, form part of an 'affirmative biopolitical paradigm' that recognises the "coalescence of interests...between disparate groups" in the defence of marginal space, whether that be saving a small park in London from redevelopment or 'saving' the whole planet (Gandy, 2012: 740; 2019: 397). This human cooperation with a Weird non-human - one that exists only because of the decay of other life - has fostered an appreciative kinship between researchers and the fly, those involved emotionally nourished even despite the obliviousness of *personata* to the "evolving socio-ecological matrix" both partners are buried in (2019: 397). As Deborah Bird Rose suggests, working with non-humans to preserve common space can serve to decentre us from the oft-distressing "singular position of spectator" (2013: 219).

This recognition of our embeddedness within nature is described by Latour as a 'compositionist modernity' that figures progress as a process not of distancing, but of "becoming ever-more attached to, and intimate with, a panoply of nonhuman natures" (2011). Instead of a frantic effort to postpone confrontation with ecological disaster, we must instead stay with the trouble and learn "to be truly present": as entangled actants in a more-than-human global network that is pregnant with possibility, throwing ourselves into "what we have been doing all along at an ever-increasing scale, namely, intervening, acting, wanting, caring" (Haraway, 2016: 1; Latour, 2011).

This chapter has engaged with the Weird as a site of more-than-human discourse. It began by setting the fearfulness of the Old Weird against a New Weird: the former reacting in fear to the inherent Weirdness of nature while the latter choosing to highlight and embrace it. From this foundation, the chapter has used the work of Matthew Gandy in Abney Park to discuss a distinctly Weird geography that is marked by an ambivalence: not just to the morphological

qualities of actors but also to anthropocentric notions of the value of life. To conclude, I gesture in Figure 5 to Donna Haraway’s metaphor of ‘string figures’ (referring to the playing of cat’s cradle), which serves as a methodological mission plan for Weird more-than-human geographical inquiry. Rejecting Lovecraft, who in his retreat into a fearful xenophobia claimed he was either an Englishman “or nothing whatever” (Kneale, 2019: 98; taken from Derleth & Wandrei, 1971; 208), Haraway instead calls geographers to abandon such pretenses of superiority and dive headfirst into the “hot compost piles” of the Anthropocene (2016: 4). By entering ambivalent alliances with Weird others on equal and common ground, new forms of knowledge production can be conducted at a crucial point in history: as Haraway argues, the geographer and subject will have to “become-with each other or not at all”.

**Figure 5** - Donna Haraway’s explanation of her ‘string figures’ concept (2016: 10).

Playing games of string figures is about giving and receiving patterns, dropping threads and failing but sometimes finding something that works, something consequential and maybe even beautiful, that wasn’t there before, of relaying connections that matter, of telling stories in hand upon hand, digit upon digit, attachment site upon attachment site, to craft conditions for finite flourishing on terra, on earth.

String figures require holding still in order to receive and pass on. String figures can be played by many, on all sorts of limbs, as long as the rhythm of accepting and giving is sustained. Scholarship and politics are like that too—passing on in twists and skeins that require passion and action, holding still and moving, anchoring and launching.

## **6) Conclusion**

In just the last twelve months, there has been a range of journal articles that have sought to wrestle with the Weirdness of the Anthropocene. A few examples include David Chandler and Jonathan Pugh's proposition of 'Anthropocene Islands' as "liminal sites of relational entanglements" (2021: 410); Anna Lawrence's review of 'vegetal geography' and empathetic engagements with flora (2021); Maaret Jokela-Pansini and Elisabeth Militz's exploration of 'breathing new futures' and the agency of Italian youth entangled in pollution (2022); and Adam Searle's study of biotechnological 'de/extinction' and the 'spectral ecologies' of vanished species (2021).

This dissertation has attempted a survey of an emerging field of academic research to demonstrate the salience of the Weird to geography. As geographers increasingly adopt Anthropocene-based frames of thought ("non-modern, relational, non-linear, and more-than-human"; Chandler & Pugh, 2021: 409), I have sought to demonstrate how the Weird mode provides a register well suited to articulating such notions. Having stemmed from tales where both time and space similarly shift 'out of joint', the Weird engages the strange phenomena and agencies that are seeping from the cracks of the Anthropocene.

The three chapters of this dissertation have sought to provide an overview of some productive aspects of the Weird that are directly relevant to geography, with each introducing a practical concept or lens through which the Anthropocene can be understood. These can be summarised as follows:

- **The Weird:** a mode or tone that refers to strange and ethereal agencies. Weird subjects and phenomena are often hybrid in nature and complicate previous worldviews: disrupting simplistic ontologies, collapsing arbitrary divisions, and re-linking distant scales.

- **The Zone:** a spatial form of alterity in which the Weird has supplanted the human without invitation. These Weird irruptions often entail a conspicuous 'present absence' of the human and frustrate attempts to confront the agencies within. Key examples of the Zone include areas of destruction caused by natural and manmade disasters, sites of capitalist and unsustainable resource extraction, and landscapes undergoing environmental degradation or ecological change.

- **Global Weirding**: the phenomenological sensation of disorientation in reaction to the appearance and unearthing of Weird phenomena by Anthropocene processes (climate change, environmental degradation, human extraction).

- **Ambivalence**: a sentiment that emphasises a Weird 'flat ontology' of the Anthropocene in regards to the biological morphology, ecological importance, methodological utility, potential for kinship with, and inherent value of different actants.

Even at its most basic, the Weird stresses the blurring of boundaries and the arrival of the new and strange. This dissertation has foremost aimed to showcase academic literature on the Weird as something beyond simple textual analysis, capable of providing applicable and highly political commentary on the nature of knowledge production in geography. Crucially, this dissertation does not claim to have wholesale conceptualised fresh methodological critiques of geographical inquiry. Instead, each chapter has sought to, even modestly, re-articulate such critiques through the lens of the Weird and apply them to the Anthropocene context: chapter three proposed a spatial form attuned to ulterior agencies that can be applied to many manifestations of climate change; chapter four applied the phenomenological imperative to attend to embodied experience by highlighting the disorientations caused by climate change; and chapter five recouched the more-than-human methodological critiques of those such as Haraway and Latour by emphasising an ambivalence towards the Weird and the potential of collaborative 'kinships' with non-humans. The Weird, as I have demonstrated, provides an appropriate and effective vocabulary through which these sentiments can be delivered to and by geographers.

This review is naturally incomplete due to the constraints of the dissertation format. There is a significant amount of promising material that has been left uncovered: historical-materialist analyses of why weird fiction arises; Weird metaphysics and object-oriented-ontology (OOO); queer and feminist Weirds; indigenous and postcolonial Weirds; the oceanic Weird; Deleuzian Weirds; Weird science; and the Weird's sister-concept of hauntology. While some of these subjects have been considered by geographers (particularly Graham Harman's conceptualisation of OOO), there is still a wealth of literature here to be examined through a specifically geographical lens. Table A2 provides a brief overview of starting points for these subjects.

## 6.1) Coda

*The Weird and the Eerie* (2016) is considered the black sheep of Mark Fisher's corpus, more focused on the textual than the political. However, weird fiction is ultimately *speculative fiction*: it looks to the beyond and the new, engaging us through a cathartic and revelatory "enjoyment in seeing the familiar and the conventional becoming outmoded" (2016a: 13). With so much of Fisher's work dedicated to the ability of the dominant socioeconomic order to neutralise opposition – converting "confidence into dejection" (2016: 770) – a study into that which can disrupt this entropy is key.

Academics and activists must enter "a subtle attitude of awed listening" to "the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim" (Lovecraft, 1925). A Weird geography will recognise the contradictions and inadequacies of the current order in the face of the Anthropocene and to aim tear holes in the endless "grey curtain of reaction", revealing the Weird tentacles that slither betwixt (Fisher, 2009: 81).

Even while the future can be seen "only in glimmers" the openness of it excites and invigorates us (Fisher, 2015: 587). In *Roadside Picnic*, when the stalkers reach the heart of the Zone, they are reduced to childlike, ecstatic wonder at the possibilities before them: "HAPPINESS, FREE, FOR EVERYONE, AND LET NO ONE BE FORGOTTEN!" (2012: 193). It is for us to grasp these possibilities with the same enthusiasm: "new perceptions, desires, cognitions" (Fisher, 2015: 587) – all yet nameless, and radically Weird.

## 7) Appendix

<b>Table A1</b> - Record of academics contacted when researching for this dissertation (not including dedicated dissertation supervisor; based at University of Cambridge unless otherwise noted)			
Name	Date	Name	Date
Ben Platt	28/06/21	Phillip Howell	11/11/21
Michael Hulme	29/06/21	Maximilian Gregor Hepach	29/11/21
Jonathon Turnbull	29/06/21	Stephen Shapiro (University of Warwick)	17/12/21
James Kneale (University College London)	30/06/21	Matthew Gandy	24/01/22
Juliet Martin	08/07/21		

<b>Table A2</b> - Brief overview of key texts covering themes reviewed as part of this dissertation but not extensively discussed (sorted by year)
<p><b><u>Queer and feminist Weirds</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hayward (2010), Fingereyes: Impressions of Cup Corals, <i>Cultural Anthropology</i></li> <li>• Shapiro (2020), 'Woke Weird and the Cultural Politics of Camp Transformation', In: Greve &amp; Zappe, <i>The American Weird</i></li> <li>• MacCormack (2019), Queering the Weird: Unnatural Participations and the Mucosal in H. P. Lovecraft and Occulture, In: Greve &amp; Zappe, <i>Spaces and Fictions...</i></li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Weird utopias</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fisher (2018), 'Acid Communism', In: Fisher &amp; Ambrose (ed.), <i>K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004-2016)</i></li> <li>• Simonetti &amp; Ingold (2018), 'Ice and Concrete: Solid Fluids of Environmental Change', <i>Journal of Contemporary Archaeology</i></li> <li>• Peters &amp; Steinberg (2019), The ocean in excess: Towards a more-than-wet ontology, <i>Dialogues in Human Geography</i></li> <li>• Ulstein (2019), "'Through the Eyes of Area X": (Dis)Locating Ecological Hope via New Weird Spatiality', In: Greve &amp; Zappe, <i>Spaces and Fictions...</i></li> <li>• Garforth &amp; Iossifidis (2020), 'Weirding Utopia for the Anthropocene: Hope, Un/Home and the Uncanny in Annihilation and The City We Became', <i>Pulse</i></li> <li>• Lanzendorfer (2020), 'The Weird in/of Crisis, 1930/2010, In: Greve &amp; Zappe, <i>The American Weird</i></li> </ul>
<p><b><u>Postcolonial Weirds</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Costantino T. (2013), 'Unsettling Empty Spaces, Displacing Terra Nullius', In: Montin &amp; Tsitas, <i>Monstrous Geographies</i></li> <li>• Whyte (2018), Indigenous science (fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral dystopias and fantasies of climate change crises, <i>Environment and Planning E</i></li> </ul>

- Ingwersen (2019), 'Geological Insurrections: Politics of Planetary Weirding from China Miéville to N. K. Jemisin', In: Greve & Zappe, *Spaces and Fictions...*
- Deckard & Oloff (2020), "The One Who Comes from the Sea": Marine Crisis and the New Oceanic Weird in Rita Indiana's *La mucama de Omicunlé* (2015), *Humanities*
- Shapiro (2020), 'Woke Weird and the Cultural Politics of Camp Transformation', In: Greve & Zappe, *The American Weird*

### **Deleuzian Weirds**

- MacCormack (2016), 'Lovecraft's Cosmic Ethics', In: Sederholm & Weinstock, *Age of Lovecraft*
- Murphy (2016), *Supremely Monstrous Thought: H. P. Lovecraft and the Weirding of World Literature*, *Genre*
- Szerszynski B. (2017), 'Gods of the Anthropocene: geo-spiritual formations in the Earth's new epoch', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 34, pp. 253-275
- Fineman (2020), 'After Weird: Harman, Deleuze, and the American "Thing"', In: Greve & Zappe, *The American Weird*
- Harman (2020), 'Concerning a Deleuzian Weird: A Response to Dan Fineman', In: Greve & Zappe, *The American Weird*

### **Historical-materialist analysis of the Weird as a genre**

- Several by Kneale (2006, 2016, 2019) for the Old Weird and Lovecraft
- Miéville (2009), 'The Weird', In: Roberts, Vint & Bould, *Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*
- Andre-Driussi (2016), *Roadside Picnic Revisited* (for *Roadside Picnic* specifically)
- Sederholm & Weinstock (2016), *The Age of Lovecraft*
- Shapiro (2016), 'The Weird World System', *Paradoxa*
- Shapiro (2020), 'Woke Weird and the Cultural Politics of Camp Transformation', In: Greve & Zappe, *The American Weird*

### **Hauntology**

- Derrida (1993), *Spectres of Marx*
- Fisher (2014), *Ghosts of My Life*
- Fisher (2018), *K-Punk*

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