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Introduction: Renaissance Posthumanism and Its Afterlives

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INTRODUCTION: RENAISSANCE POSTHUMANISM AND ITS AFTERLIVES

Steven Swarbrick and Karen Raber

But all that talk about the post-human, the non-human, the inhuman and the problem of lumping all humans into the Anthropocene provides a way of sustaining the human as a problem. What if the human were an effect of its own delusions of self-erasure?

—Tom Cohen and Claire Colebrook,
*Twilight of the Anthropocene Idols*¹

Renaissance literature contains many afterlives. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for example, ends with the Prince of Denmark's impossibly pseudo-posthumous "Horatio, I am dead," whereas the play's ghostly beginning, "Who's there?," blurs the distinction between this life and the next (5.2.340, 1.1.1).² The play's gravedigger asks about Christian burial, whereas Hamlet himself considers a thoroughly materialist afterlife, in which the body is recycled among the Earth's various elements. As this brief example suggests, the concept of Renaissance afterlives raises a series of important questions about time and agency: When does the "after" of an afterlife begin, and where does the agency for transmission to a future moment reside? The question of the afterlife as a religious proposition in early modern thought and writing is, of course, ubiquitous. But the ethics and politics of life on Earth do not arise only out of religious doctrine. From Giordano Bruno to Margaret Cavendish, monist and vitalist theories shaped debates on the proper relationship between human and nonhuman life; these theories resonate for many current scholars with the turn to the "posthuman" in our own literary-philosophical moment.³

For scholars working in the environmental humanities, the turn to the posthuman signifies in various ways the "afterlife" of the human, itself a response to the destabilizing pressures of climate change, toxic ecologies, biotechnology, and species extinction on many levels. In an era in which the distinction between human and posthuman has lost much of its force, environmental scholars have begun to theorize the afterlife of the human

as “intra-active” (Barad), “compositional” (Latour), “companionate” (Haraway), “vibrant” and “affective” (Bennett), and “trans-corporeal” (Alaimo).⁴ Still others have begun to question the very category of life, suggesting that we have always already been “after life” (Thacker), “post-life” (Colebrook), or living/unliving, like a zombie or virus (Serres).⁵ Do these entanglements suggest the death of the human, its survival in other forms, or both? And what do we mean by death or survival? How do terms like “sustainability,” “composting,” or “recycling” enable different visions of the afterlife?

This special issue attempts to answer these questions by focusing our attention on the afterlives of the Renaissance. We treat “afterlives” as a contronym, a word so contradictory that it undoes its own future: on the one hand, “afterlife” suggests a life after death, but it also signals the end of life. Both senses of the word, *afterlife* and *after* life, or survival and extinction, mingle inextricably in the literature of the Renaissance, as we’ve seen already with Hamlet’s postmortem address. Although the scholarship on Renaissance posthumanism has flourished in recent years, this work tends to focus solely on the first definition of afterlives, emphasizing what is lively or animate in the early modern text. But as feminist, queer, disability, and critical race scholars have pointed out, terms such as “life” and “animacy” can also be violently exclusionary, since what is deemed “alive” may very well encode the same racist, ableist, and colonial ideologies that have historically shaped Western ideas of the human as white, patriarchal, and masculine (we return to this point at the end of our introduction).⁶ This special issue provides the occasion to meditate on the second definition of afterlives. We are interested in lives gone askew and in forms of un/living that disjoin the present, like Hamlet’s ghost. In short, we theorize the posthuman as a *problem*, precisely a problem of time and materiality, and one that puts pressure on the logic of pre and post.⁷ The Renaissance afterlives gathered in this collection challenge readers to dwell in the ecologically precarious, at times unlivable, spaces shaped by inequalities directly impacting the Earth system. For this reason, they prove productive sites for analyzing the deep-seated vivophilia that currently underwrites our posthuman moment.

From Renaissance Humans to Posthuman Ghosts

In recent years, scholars have shown that the Renaissance human was, like the posthuman now, open to novel configurations with the lives of “others”: from animals, plants, and minerals, to the racial and colonial

subjects who were typically denied “human” distinction.⁸ Bruno Latour suggests that it may just be that our own ecological and technological moment increasingly mirrors that of the past: “I have the feeling,” Latour writes, “that we are actually closer to the sixteenth century than to the twentieth.”⁹ Citing the Renaissance “notion of a *harmony* between the micro- and macrocosm,” as well as the belief “in a world *animated* by all sorts of entities,” Latour suggests that we will once again have to learn from the cosmologies of “pre-modernity” if we are to recompose a common world.¹⁰

Likewise, in their introduction to the edited collection *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, editors Anna Tsing et al., writing from the intersections of science and technology studies, anthropology, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, feminist new materialisms, and anti-capitalist critique, return to the cosmologies of the Renaissance, particularly the Great Chain of Being theory, to imagine the micro- and macrocosmic imbrications of all living things. As Tsing and her coauthors write:

In Europe, northern Renaissance thinkers came up with a great scheme linking classical, religious, and emergent modern thinking. They claimed that life had evolved from simple to complex. This was a grand and optimistic view that placed humans at the top of the Great Chain of Being, the highest rung of a ladder, where God had once resided. Like the Christian religious thought before it, the scheme assumed that we were all in a single time, on a single trajectory.¹¹

For these authors, the Great Chain of Being is not only posthuman but also postvital: posthuman in the sense that it gathers multiple assemblages of matter, and postvital in the sense that living beings leave traces, even after they are dead. We—humans and nonhumans—live on borrowed time, Tsing et al. suggest: “*After death comes the strange life of ghosts.*”¹² The trick is to bring these ghostly traces out of the past and into our present awareness.¹³

While this special issue does not support an uncritical return to pre-modern cosmologies, it shares Latour’s interest in shuttling between past and present, and finds in Renaissance literary works a valuable window onto the ecological politics of today. Renaissance afterlives, we argue, are not only geared toward *more* life but also put under erasure the present ubiquity of uncritical returns to “life” and “arts of living.” With Jacques Derrida, who, in his final interview, insisted to the very end, “I remain

uneducable when it comes to any kind of wisdom about knowing-how-to-die or, if you prefer, knowing-how-to-live,” we propose that life itself *is* a dangerous supplement.¹⁴ That is, life cannot be *added* to death, because “life *is* living on, life *is* survival [la vie *est* survie].”¹⁵ In other words, Renaissance afterlives pose the very problem of life’s dehiscence or self-fracture.

Without denying, then, the importance of arts of living, as nature-philosophers from Henri Bergson to James Lovelock to Tsing and her coauthors advocate, we remain—together with the authors gathered in this special issue—uneducable in the arts of learning to live. For it is not just the case, as Roy Scranton suggests, that the main ethical task today is “learning to die in the Anthropocene”¹⁶—this keeps the cleavage between life and nonlife too clean; rather, we are suggesting, against the prophylactics of “life,” that what’s most interesting about *afterlives* is the ghostly demarcation or ambiguity of the distinction between the organic body and the inorganic body, sense and nonsense, life and death.

Consider an everyday example of afterlives from *The New York Times*. In “Harvey, Irma, Jose . . . and Noah,” David Brooks asks, “Is there anything we can learn from hurricanes, storms, and floods?”¹⁷ His answer is worth pondering. Brooks writes: “Floods are invitations to recreate the world. That only happens successfully when strong individuals are willing to yoke themselves to collective institutions.”¹⁸ Without exaggeration, Brooks’s answer encapsulates the redemptive mood of the environmental humanities and posthumanities today. Time and again, “we” are called on to collectivize in the remaking of blue, green, and prismatic life-worlds. The project of remaking the world in “our” image is, of course, so utterly tied to our sense of place in the world, to our desperate clinging to an ethics and habitus that sprouted in the Holocene but no longer keeps pace with the accelerations of the Anthropocene, that even the end of our world is (mis)read as an “invitation” to recreate the world for future generations. But here’s the rub: this version of the “end” is never as disastrous as it should be, since it treats the disaster as something edifying; the sublime always creeps in.

Likewise, Renaissance Christian models of apocalypse, like those that circulate in our era of extinctions, plagues, floods, and anthropogenic catastrophes, remained resolutely anthropocentric, focused on human salvation through the intervention of a loving god. Ark narratives, the accompanying paratext of apocalypse, whether ancient or modern, are similarly incapable of imagining the end of life without implying the persistence of life, world, and spirit. Even Andrew Marvell’s “yet green, yet growing ark” (484), which imagines the speaker carried away in ecstatic dissolve, removed from human history and shattered among the elements,

cannot but end in the recapitulation of the genealogical (and heterosexual) afterlife of the child (“The young Maria” [651]), whose future certainly means no future for Marvell’s queer wood (“She *straightness* on the woods bestows” [691, emphasis added]).¹⁹

By contrast, the Renaissance afterlives gathered in this collection, though they may offer hope, do not sacrifice a disastrous reckoning for the boon of a better tomorrow; instead, they entangle life’s creative diversity with a curious openness to life’s intractable negativity. As Benjamin Bertram muses in his essay for this issue, an Erasmian ethics of *communitas* relies on an absence, a lack that is only resolved in an unrealizable future when all humans, and all life, exist in “friendship” and mutual respect. For Bertram, Erasmus’s dung beetle enjoys a posthumous life because it uniquely embodies, indeed labors in the interests of, both life and death. Bertram’s analysis of Erasmus disinters in the work of this most humanist Renaissance thinker an impossible commitment to community, one that is only achieved in and through death.

Vin Nardizzi’s entry in this collection suggests yet more resonances with the posthuman. Bringing disability studies and biopolitics to bear on Renaissance exegetical practices, Nardizzi argues that, far from inventing the human, Shakespeare retooled Oedipus’s “vulnerable footsteps” in the image of a disabled, plant-like, and “posthumanist Gloucester.” By following after Oedipus’s injured steps, from Sophocles’s *Oedipus Tyrannus* to *King Lear* to posthumanist and biopolitical discourses, Nardizzi not only traces the afterlives of ancient texts but also demonstrates that Renaissance writers were, perhaps despite themselves, already in the business of disseminating “human” form in wayward and precarious fashion, already grafting the human body onto posthuman, vegetal, and disabled figures. This manner of following after posthuman figures continues in Craig Dionne’s essay, only this time taking us beyond ancient literary texts to the recursive textuality of the Earth’s deep history. Dionne excavates the relationship between the deep evolutionary history of ecological materialism and the local history of human action. The image of human action simultaneously fades in the time lapse of evolutionary history, while within that scripted space a set of enmeshed agencies emerge: Shakespearean “bias” questions the autonomy of human action, unpacks the virtual power of nonhuman inscription, and ultimately frames human self-fashioning as a novel way of improvising nonhuman scripts. Greenblatt, meet Darwin. Our next essay turns to the precarity of our posthuman enmeshments. Accounting for the premodern history of the gorilla, Holly Dugan asks whether granting the gorilla a Renaissance would allow us “to create new understandings . . . of premodern, posthuman interspecies interactions,

especially ones that model a more expansive notion of what constitutes the Renaissance and whose histories are included within it.” Doing so, Dugan hints, might give us insights into the gorilla’s present precarious position under threat of extinction.

For Julian Yates, pastoral fantasies in Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* Trilogy are haunted by the specter of extinction as well, which is both a game—*Extinctathon*—played by *Oryx and Crake*’s characters (who fail to understand its relevance for Crake, engineer of the apocalypse) and the condition of writing in the postapocalyptic world inhabited by Crake’s friend, Jimmy, whose journals necessarily address an inhuman future rather than a human readership. Moving from the threat of extinction to the givenness of nonlife itself, Liza Blake’s essay finds in Margaret Cavendish’s writings an anti-anthropomorphic vitalism that rejects the imposition of human standards of liveliness or agency, anticipating recent theorists who have questioned posthumanism’s privileging of these qualities. Finally, Hillary Eklund’s essay turns to the disappearing future of wetlands to uncover “a reading practice informed by the material and temporal indistinction of wetlands themselves.” Eklund’s essay locates a structure of feeling in the spatio-temporal indeterminacy of wetlands that is both proleptic—anticipating “the possibility of wetlands’ disappearance”—and “mingled”: “The temporalities of geologic ages, seasons of migration, historical annals, and evolutionary mutation mingle together in an impure mixture that resembles the categorical indeterminacy of the marsh itself.” Both affective and stratigraphic, the marsh in Eklund’s essay mixes together nonlinear and nonhuman timescales in ways that are not, strictly speaking, elegiac, since they point to futures hitherto unimagined, written in the peat and muck.

Together, these essays showcase the richness of early modern scholarship on the topic of the posthuman in fields ranging from ecocriticism, disability studies, ethology, animal studies, genre theory, extinction studies, biopolitics, and vital materialism. Turning now to the penultimate section of this introduction, we offer a reading of Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost* centered on that most lively of posthuman figures, the human face. Like *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost* calls on “living art,” including the art of the face, to tarry with the negative of “devouring time” in pursuit of eternal life or “fame” (1.1.1–14); only this art, the art of the face, proves unstable—not only plastic (malleable, adaptive, and life-furthering) but also explosive (*plastique*). We trace the shards of that destructive plasticity to Jeff VanderMeer’s posthuman fiction, *Annihilation*, in our conclusion.²⁰

Facing the Posthuman, Undoing the Face

Meditating on the intersection of art and the face as both are bound up in posthuman extinction, Claire Colebrook embraces Deleuze and Guattari's insight that art is not, as she puts it, "the expression of humanity, in general, but the destruction of any such generality through the preservation and temporality of the 'nonorganic life of things.'"²¹ Without dismissing the pull of the face entirely, Colebrook counters Levinas's concept of the face-to-face encounter that grounds his ethics as precisely about singularity, about the human race "mirroring itself" to the exclusion and destruction of all that is not human with accounts of what we might call the faces of the Anthropocene—faces that fail to congeal into a single identity or elicit an affective response.²² The Levinasian face, as Deleuze and Guattari point out, is always Western, European, white, and male: it is not, they write, "a universal. It is not even that of the white man. It is White Man himself."²³ Indeed, what a face is, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, is not a body part associated with the head but rather a "surface," a "map"—it is "the inhuman in human beings."²⁴ Colebrook asks with regard to Levinas's faciality, "Is face, human face in its radical distinction and immateriality, really what one wants to save?"²⁵ Or should art opt instead for indistinction, for the annihilation of faciality altogether?

That question should not be unfamiliar to readers of Renaissance literature, especially Shakespeare. Problems with faces are, after all, a repeating motif in many plays—their relative readability, art's role in constructing them, their composite nature, their iterability or imitability. Previous scholarship has been rightly concerned with Shakespearean faces as byproducts of acting skill or cosmetics, and as a register of categories like class, gender, or race. Certainly, Shakespeare's faces put into question the relative humanity and relative individuality of many of his characters: just think about descriptions of Othello or Aaron, or the two sets of twins in *The Comedy of Errors*. Yet Shakespeare also challenges the association of the face with life itself, with vitality.

In *Love's Labour's Lost*, for instance, we find a case that uncannily resembles what Katherine Behar calls "Botox ethics," a deadening of the face that assaults the tyranny of "vivophilia," the privileging of the living over the dead.²⁶ Writing from the perspective of Object-Oriented Feminism, Behar questions the new materialism's bias toward lively, responsive dynamism in the objects, animals, and humans it assembles. Like Liza Blake, whose essay on Cavendish for this collection resists the bias toward life and liveliness that renders present theory "not so much post-humanist as more expansively human," Behar points out that when

posthumanist theory considers faces as objects, maps, or inhuman surfaces, they are still most often represented as alive, mobile, and so capable of creating meaning through expression, which relies on living muscles, tendons, and nerves all working actively together. In this fashion, materialism hangs on to a certain residual anthropocentrism, the preference for what is, like us, alive and therefore endowed with organic agency. For Colebrook, this inability to “say no to life” is at the root of the nostalgia for a (fictional) better version of humanity that prevents writers from imagining our complete future erasure. Behar similarly argues that materialist theorists tend to resist self-implication in the networks of things they observe. Behar argues that a “strategic necrophilia” might provide a welcome interruption to this celebration of the mobile and so living or vital features of the face. Botox, she argues, quite literally introduces death into the lively visage of its user, but it also represents a “necrophilic form of plasticity,” paralyzing the muscles that make the face move and thereby preserving the face’s aesthetic organization.²⁷ Unlike Colebrook or Deleuze and Guattari before her, Behar does not reject singularity, allowing that inward-directedness can function as a kind of productive annihilation. A Botox-inhibited face loses muscle memory, loses mobility, becomes deadened, and in this fashion interrupts engagement with other faces, other humans, creating “a new form of inner-directedness”:

Botox ethics seeks not to articulate connections but to inhibit them; to create not unbounded subjects but enclosed objects; it recommends not outward-directed networking and changeability but inward-directed unexpressivity and singularity.²⁸

Botox ethics “turns us into objects, shoots us up with our own plasticity, and lets us—as objects—exist mutually, independently, and graciously.”²⁹ Its deathliness is not an alternative so much as a means of complicating the whole idea, the whole performance of life.

In its lovers’ obsessive focus on facial beauty, *Love’s Labour’s Lost* offers an opportunity to think about the inhumanity of the face, its iterability, and the ethical disabilities it incurs in those who dwell on it. The play is also a rich test case for how a Beharian reading might work, enforcing in its generically confused and confusing conclusion a kind of Botox ethics. The play hinges on acts of masking, philosophical ambitions that are defeated by self-blind self-centeredness; above all, it keeps harping on faces in proto-posthumanist ways that devitalize them. Berowne defends Rosaline’s beauty from the King’s charge that she “is black as ebony” (4.3.243) by finding her equal to such “wood” (4.3.245). Dumaine chides

him for “holding vile stuff so dear,” while Longaville points to his shoe, saying, “Look, there’s thy love, my foot and her face see” (4.3.272, 273), which the Arden glosses as a comparison between Rosaline and Longaville’s presumably ugly and black shoe. On the one hand, this exchange can be read for the convergence of discourses involving xenophobia, the racializing of barbarism (Berowne calls himself “a rude and savage man of Ind,” while the King joins in mocking Berowne’s elevation of blackness by invoking Ethiopes [4.3.218, 264]) and sexuality (since shoes can indicate baseness, and therefore sexual debasement). But reading literally here makes some sense as well, given the persistent interchangeability of faces and objects. At the show of the Worthies, Holofernes is mercilessly teased: “Thou hast no face,” Berowne tells him, which is why he “will not be put out of countenance” (5.2.604, 603). “What is this,” Holofernes responds, pointing to his face (5.2.605): the group responds by supplying options—a cittern (guitar) head, the head of a bodkin (hairpin), a death’s face in a ring, the pommel of Caesar’s sword, a face carved on a flask, a profile embossed on a brooch. “We have put thee in countenance,” says Berowne; “we have given thee faces” (5.2.619).

In this cascade of objects that can stand in for faces, or have faces on them, or in some way present a face to the world, the whole idea of what a face is, what it means to have one, is thoroughly disfigured, leaving Holofernes not merely disconcerted (“put out of countenance”) but simultaneously denied a face altogether *and* granted too many of them. In Levinasian terms, this might mean that the company of nobles has become inhospitable to Holofernes, is denying his humanity, refusing to be taken hostage by his face, as it were. They are collectively the Judith who engineers his facial “death.” But such a humane humanist reading is undercut by the sheer fact that everything under the sun in this play has a face: literally, the sun, the heavens, the earth, women, men, the moon, as well as coins, rings, flasks—the play uses the word “face” more than any other Shakespeare work. This leaves no place for Holofernes to establish a distinction, an exception for his human face. He drowns in the flood of gifts from his noble audience. His face, along with Rosaline’s black shoe-like visage, is merely an object or assemblage, plastic but neither lively nor authentic.³⁰

Arts of Unliving

At its root, the problem of faciality is one of reading—how to make sense of the other and the self, how to distinguish the two, or even discover if there can be such things as “self” or “other.” Shakespeare throws the act of

reading into question, weirding it, hollowing it out and twisting it toward the uncanny in *Love's Labour's Lost*.

Julian Yates, in his essay for this collection, observes that “speculative fiction serves as a discursive trading ground with texts past.” In Atwood’s case, Yates details the changes she rings on pastoral form, on tales of lone survivors, on the novel itself. The Robinson Crusoe journaling of her protagonist has, as far as Jimmy believes, no future readership. By the trilogy’s end, the Craker who ultimately emerges as scriptor writes the postapocalypse for and about a species that is, Yates notes, both “more and less than human.” Perhaps even more than pastoral, a genre like romance absorbs and transmutes posthumanist ideas while charting its journeys on land, sea, and beyond the boundaries of the planet. About Shakespeare’s romances Steve Mentz has argued that the form evolves to describe a new set of environmental conditions: the rediscovery of late classical Greek romances in the Renaissance spurred a flourishing of this most “scandalous” but “durable literary kind.”³¹ Shakespeare’s ecologically attuned tales of catastrophes and recovery reflect the genre’s function as a kind of ecological machine, recycling forms from both comedy and tragedy into new and useful paradigms. The plays are especially prescient in their decentering of the human hero, who is made subject to natural systems, often through maritime disasters like shipwrecks. Instead of human authority, individuality, and dominance, romance privileges interconnection and persistence.³² What we now call science fiction or speculative fiction was once described as scientific romance, and its key feature, especially in the work of a figure like H. G. Wells, was likewise the decentering of a human hero who was subjected to long-term natural processes like evolution.³³

The recent posthumanist fiction of Jeff VanderMeer (called by one reviewer the “weird Thoreau”³⁴), as does Atwood’s *MaddAddam* novels, seizes on this aspect of romance; *Annihilation* also ends up eerily, perhaps instinctively haunted by Shakespeare’s most famous romance play, *The Tempest*, a play that Scott Maisano has argued is a precursor to scientific romance.³⁵ This is not to say that VanderMeer’s *Annihilation*, the first volume of his Southern Reach Trilogy, consciously engages with Shakespeare but rather that it teems with uncanny traces and shadowy remains—the afterlives—of Shakespeare’s play.

Annihilation’s Area X is an amorphously expanding zone, an island walled off by an alien force, full of noises, hums, and strange sounds; it is a spongy, mossy, hallucinatory sphere that is ambiguously located.³⁶ A series of expeditions have been sent into the zone, all of which have either murderously self-destructed or returned transformed beyond recognition. The novel is narrated by the biologist of the most recent party, who

studies the zone's transmutation of all that lies within its boundaries into "something rich and strange." In Area X, human life is merely more vital matter to be colonized as part of what might be the end of humanity—but might also remedy the shipwreck of a hollow, corporatized, necrotic world beyond. It is a "hyperobject," to use Timothy Morton's term, a phenomenon beyond apprehension yet viscerally present.³⁷ There, expedition members known only by their disciplinary fields (biologist, psychologist, surveyor, anthropologist, linguist) encounter weird life forms they cannot recognize in a terrain that they cannot map, even with, or perhaps especially with the tools of traditional knowledge-gathering that they possess. They are perplexed, entangled, and finally colonized, deterritorialized in the Deleuzian sense, but also physically, materially infected with a kind of fungal growth produced within the boundaries of the "island."³⁸ In a deserted village the biologist finds decaying houses filled with "peculiar eruptions of moss or lichen" whose posture and location suggests they are the remnants of human beings.³⁹ She cuts a sample of moss from the "forehead" of one of these, projecting onto the mass the underlying structures of a face where none remains. Her sample goes nowhere, reveals nothing about what these eruptions are. Stumbling over an object "rising out of the earth . . . a kind of tan mask made of skin, half-transparent, resembling in its way the discarded shell of a horseshoe crab," the biologist muses, "I felt as if I should recognize these features—that it was very important—but with them disembodied in this way, I could not."⁴⁰ The materials that make up human bodies and human faces are absorbed—and recycled. Outside the village, she glimpses a dolphin in a canal: it looks back at her with an eye that strikes her as "painfully human."⁴¹ Area X fashions its own "fish-man," its own Caliban, by distributing human and animal parts indiscriminately across new life forms.

Instead of a drowned book or a Crusoe chronicle that no humans will read, *Annihilation* gives us textual decay in the form of a pile of journals from past groups that molder in the lighthouse at the center of the sphere of anomaly. Language, books, and photographs like body parts fail to perform their appropriate tasks, serving rather as compost for the zone's fungal life. The biologist struggles to follow the phrases written on a spiral subterranean tower, generated out of the living substance of the walls themselves. Like the biologist, the reader knows little that is certain, experiencing a deconstruction of the usual categories of reading or knowledge: without its linguist, who never makes it past Area X's boundary, the biologist must unravel alone the words written on the walls of an inverted spiral tower, words generated out of fungal growths that ultimately form a long gnomically self-referential "text." The reader likewise

joins the journey, seeking meaning, driving toward the novel's conclusion in hopes of revelation. We operate from the assumption that our generic expectations provide us a kind of map, with recognizable features and a resolution, a departure from the island, at the story's end. But what is a map, the biologist wonders, "but a way of emphasizing some things and making other things invisible?"⁴² Rather than leaving Area X, she heads deeper in to its confinement, leaving her fungal doppelganger, Ghost Bird, to exit the "island" and return—or invade—the Southern Reach. It is Ghost Bird who will return eventually at the conclusion of the trilogy's third novel *Acceptance*, an inhuman human with a willing, still-human fellow traveler, Grace, to discover that "the hegemony of what was real had been . . . broken forever."⁴³

Nor does Shakespeare always choose to mend this broken hegemony. *The Tempest's* Prospero promises "I'll deliver all" but then faces the audience to request they lift the spell that keeps him, now humble and powerless, enslaved on this theatrical fantasy island rather than restored to his "Naples." Where is the real here, where the fiction? The conclusion of *Love's Labour's Lost* works in related fashion, offering no direct corrective to Holofernes's humiliation by reestablishing his humanity. Holofernes is, after all, not the real problem in the play. It's his noble tormenters who most need a dose of Botox ethics. At the news that the princess's father has died, merriment turns to grief in the unexpected about-face of the play's final scene, and she appoints to the men one year of study, this time in an "insociable" environment where they may more carefully evaluate their attachment to the women they wish to marry (5.2.795). With no one to witness their actions and no humanist subjects to study, the men accept a banishment that may educate them in the limits of their own situated knowledge of the world. The men are appointed to withdraw into a kind of strategically imposed misanthropy, becoming temporary hermits to learn the limitations of their humanist leanings, ghostly birds of prey denied the targets of their desire. At a minimum, their new "academy" will correct their erroneous assumption that their countenances are what count. If the end of comedy is the compulsory creation of new life and the affirmation of social networks, then Shakespeare's play resists that outcome, enforcing instead in its tragicomic turn a paralysis, as the men enter a kind of suspended animation. In this fashion, they are implicated in the system of object-substitutions they playfully mobilized against Holofernes—made frozen objects waiting to learn to "exist mutually, independently, and graciously" alongside those from whom they believed themselves distinct. Is there a future here? Perhaps, or perhaps they never learn and are consigned to extinction. This play chooses not to imagine that future.

We confront a similar crisis of reading in the face of extinction. The Holocene conferred wholeness, indivisibility (holo = whole), and established a recognizable, supposedly reliable narrative; the Anthropocene disfigures and defaces that narrative and human beings' place in it, leaving us out of countenance. Anthropocene humans haunt themselves, with faces at once animal, vegetable, and mineral. Shakespeare's discombobulated Holofernes belongs to a genealogy of that phenomenon, a precursor to the derailments that are required of stories that can cope with anthropogenic crisis. The essays we have collected here offer a range of "weird fictions," new models for reading askew, and new Renaissance textual revenants that might productively afflict our troubled present.

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NOTES

1. Tom Cohen and Claire Colebrook, "Preface," in *Twilight of the Anthropocene Idols*, ed. Tom Cohen, Claire Colebrook, and J. Hillis Miller (London: Open Humanities Press, 2016), 11.
2. All subsequent citations from Shakespeare's works—act, scene, and line number—are taken from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, 5th ed. (New York: Longman, 2003).
3. For representative accounts of the "posthuman" and related discourses, such as the "new materialisms," see *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013); *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); *New*

- Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, ed. Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2012); N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); and Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
4. See Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); and Bruno Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 471–490.
 5. See Claire Colebrook, *Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction*, vol. 1 (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2014); Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); and Eugene Thacker, *After Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
 6. See Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen, "Introduction: Has the Queer Ever Been Human?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2 & 3 (June 2015): iv–207.
 7. For a related account of the posthuman as a problem in the Deleuzo-Guattarian sense, see Claire Colebrook and Jami Weinstein, "Preface: Postscript on the Posthuman," in *Posthumous Life: Theorizing Beyond the Posthuman*, ed. Claire Colebrook and Jami Weinstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), ix–xxix.
 8. See, for example, *Renaissance Posthumanism*, ed. Joseph Campana and Scott Maisano (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Craig Dionne, *Posthuman Lear: Reading Shakespeare in the Anthropocene* (Brooklyn, NY: punctum books, 2016); *The Indistinct Human in Renaissance Literature*, ed. Jean E. Feerick and Vin Nardizzi (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012); *Posthumanist Shakespeares*, ed. Stefan Herbreyter and Ivan Callus (New York: Palgrave, 2012); Karen Raber, *Shakespeare and Posthumanist Theory* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2018); and *Spenser and the Human*, special issue of *Spenser Studies*, ed. Ayesha Ramachandran and Melissa E. Sanchez, vol. 30 (2015).
 9. Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" 480.
 10. Latour, 480.
 11. Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, "Introduction: Haunted Landscapes of the Anthropocene," in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, ed. Anna Tsing et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), G9.
 12. Tsing, G8.
 13. In truth, there are two types of ghosts in Tsing et al.'s introduction. There is ghosting that enhances and indeed enables life, what we might call vitalist spectrality. And there is ghosting that destroys life. The latter, according to Tsing and her coauthors, results from humanity's destructive impacts on the planet:

Ghosts remind us that we live in an impossible present—a time of rupture, a world haunted with the threat of extinction. . . . Yet . . . [g]hosts, too, are weeds that whisper tales of the many pasts and yet-to-comes that surround us. Considered through ghosts and weeds, worlds have ended many times before. . . . The landscapes grown from such endings are our disaster as well as our weedy hope. (G6–7)

There is “disaster” and there is “hope”: two versions of the return of the repressed. Freud, of course, was never satisfied with this opposition between pleasure and unpleasure. The problem, as he saw it, was that “disaster” would always be made external, and thus minimized with respect to pleasure, whereas “hope” suggests a restoration of life’s true face: paradise regained. In this sense of opposition, vitalist spectrality inflects the present moment in the direction of life-to-come. After all, “worlds have ended . . . before.” But this way of theorizing the disaster as one of countless “endings” that we may yet *learn to live from*—ever after—overrides the authors’ main point: that the ghost is our ontology.

14. Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (New York: Melville House, 2007), 25.
15. Derrida, 26.
16. Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2015).
17. David Brooks, “Harvey, Irma, Jose . . . and Noah,” in *The New York Times*, September 12, 2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/12/opinion/harvey-irma-jose-and-noah.html>.
18. Brooks.
19. Andrew Marvell, “Upon Appleton House,” in *The Complete Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (London: Penguin, 2005).
20. Catherine Malabou defines “destructive plasticity” as the detonation of form in *The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012) and draws fruitful comparisons between her theory of plasticity and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (7–12), a touchstone of Renaissance humanism.
21. Claire Colebrook, *Death of the Posthuman*, 146.
22. Colebrook, 144.
23. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 176.
24. Deleuze and Guattari, 170, 171.
25. Colebrook, *Death of the Posthuman*, 152.
26. Katherine Behar, “Facing Necrophilia, or ‘Botox Ethics,’” in *Object-Oriented Feminism*, ed. Katherine Behar (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 123–43.
27. Behar, 135.
28. Behar, 135.
29. Behar, 139.
30. For more on faces in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, see Karen Raber, *Shakespeare and Posthumanist Theory* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2018), 74–87. The term “countenance” has profitably been plumbed for its many levels of meaning in work on friendship and patronage in the period; see, for instance, Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 140–76.
31. Steve Mentz, *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550–1719* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 168.
32. Mentz, 168–169.

33. See Sherryl Vint, *Science Fiction: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 10.
34. See Joshua Rothman, "The Weird Thoreau," in *The New Yorker*, January 14, 2015: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/weird-thoreau-jeff-vandermeer-southern-reach>.
35. Scott Maisano, "New Directions: Shakespeare's Revolution—*The Tempest* as Scientific Romance," in *The Tempest: A Critical Reader*, ed. Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2014), 165–94.
36. Area X has elements of both Florida and Vancouver, two locations familiar and important to VanderMeer and indistinguishably present in the novel, rather as *The Tempest* appears to take place somehow in both Bermuda and the Mediterranean.
37. See Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
38. See David Tompkins's review essay, "Weird Ecology: On the Southern Reach Trilogy," in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 30, 2014: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/weird-ecology-southern-reach-trilogy>. See also the subsequent conversations between Timothy Morton and Jeff VanderMeer, published in the LARB, December 24, 2016: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-conversation-between-timothy-morton-and-jeff-vandermeer/>.
39. Jeff VanderMeer, *The Southern Reach Trilogy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 64.
40. VanderMeer, 93.
41. VanderMeer, 63–64.
42. VanderMeer, 44.
43. VanderMeer, 585.