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Unknowing

Abstract:

We call it the Anthropocene, this irreversible evidence of human activity etched into the Earth's strata: concentrated atmospheric carbon dioxide, nuclear material, plastics. But in an article decrying the poverty of our nomenclature, Eileen Crist criticises the arrogance of naming this ecological crisis after ourselves, stating that the voices of all Others – plants, animals, organic matter – have fallen victim to the organised human project of forgetting, characterised by their unnamings in the term 'Anthropocene.' *Unknowing* is an experiment in writing an alternative – the Chthulucene. Coined by Donna Haraway, the Chthulucene captures a global, tentacular web of inter-species relationships in the context of climate crisis, species loss and natural disaster. Taking plant life – which is intrinsically communicative and semiotic (Kohn) – as a powerful actor in worlds of mutual transformation, *Unknowing* explores how ecological crisis necessitates new modes of story-telling that move beyond science-fictional narratives of apocalypse and ecocatastrophe to grant non-humans agency. It therefore steals not only from existing literary practice but also the semiotic processes of plants themselves to suggest a way of recognising the subjectivities of autopoietic lifeforms within living systems of exchange that link humans inextricably with Others.

Biographical note:

Lisa Dowdall recently completed her PhD in Creative Practice at the University of New South Wales. Her fantasy novel, *Impossible Things*, imagines magic as a non-renewable resource, while her dissertation explores postcolonial women's science fiction/fantasy. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Paradoxa*, *Spineless Wonders* and *Global Media Journal*. Contact: lisadowdall@hotmail.com | 0424 320 895

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The blasted remnants of trunks, boughs and roots lay petrified in cocoons of ash, their skin burned black and flaking away. Pieces had been flung into the river, where they lay half-submerged with the water bubbling around them, thick and sulphurous. The bedrock had cracked and gas spewed from the vents, turning the water to poison. Bloated fish bloomed on the surface and swirled downstream, open-mouthed but mute. The humans that once lived there had fled long ago, leaving the land to fend for itself, and die.

Three figures oozed through the cracks and flung themselves on to the river bank, their skin bubbling and their hair falling out. Slowly, they recovered and began to metastasise into almost-human forms: a young maiden with a headdress of quetzal tail feathers; a naked giantess with billowing breasts, belly and thighs; a woman with a sun-disc crown.

They had been conferring for many years; now, they agreed, it was past time to make a change. They began by sinking their fingers deep into the earth and mobilising the organic compounds they needed. Working with the phosphates, amino acids and nucleotides, they slung hundreds of years of bio-evolution into fast-forward, shrouding the land in green fire. Eukaryotes, microbes, phytoplankton, algae: these were first. But the figures didn't stop there. They sent spore into the nutrient-dense atmosphere and brought the rain. Life accelerated: arthropods turned the soil to loam, and new plants grew viciously, reaching higher and higher, twining together in new filaments covered in thorns and mycorrhizal fungus. Everywhere, plants erupted, spiking into the air like fierce rebuttals, all crowding towards the sun.

Happy with their progress, the figures slipped back into the river and dissolved into the vents, not bothering to seal them up – instead, they left them as gateways for whatever, or whoever, would come next. They oozed through the earth's crust, moving north, where they knew they would find their next target, ripe for change.

We came to Svalbard with our bags full of seeds and pollen. We had exchanged uneasy glances, back on the mainland, when we saw that the plane was called *The Beagle*. Maybe this trouble all started back then, when we began to discover things that would have gone better left untouched, uncatalogued, unnamed.

We approached on foot from the landing strip. There was no sun; cloud sagged over the mountains, the black rock was bare except for patches of grey slush, melting beneath the dense atmosphere.

I paused before the blunt concrete entrance jutting out of the permafrost as our guide fumbled off her glove to press her thumb to the touchpad. The façade vaunted Arctic light from its prisms of glass and fiberoptics, and as it licked the exposed skin on my face I felt as though I, too, was being scanned and processed.

I could not shake this sense of surveillance as we passed through the tubular, silent rooms that led deep into the interior. I found it difficult to concentrate – the guide's words ricocheted off me in the gaping space of the vaults, and there was a throbbing in my teeth, in my fingertips and in my belly that seemed to rise up through the ground and quickened as we approached the processing rooms. Perhaps it was just the thrum of the air conditioning – the

permafrost, even here, was melting and the climate control struggled to keep the vault at minus eighteen. But the air smelled strange, too. Sweet, somehow, and thick at the back of my throat. I wondered if I was ill. Zika. Dengue. Malaria. There were new strands all the time; vaccines weren't keeping up with nature's more resourceful vectors.

Inside the vault, I watched them catalogue the special palynomorphs I'd brought and enter them into the database – gymnosperms from the middle Mesozoic, *Ilex* from the late Cretaceous, *Myrtaceaea* from the Paleocene. The other scientists had brought more common seeds, including genetically modified drought- and disease-resistant grains, vegetables and trees. Technicians in gloves and masks wrapped all the samples in foil and sealed them inside plastic containers, which they shelved in towering racks that reminded me of banks of computer servers. I took a few photos on my phone to post online later.

Back in the plane's too-warm cabin, I flicked through the images I'd taken in the vault. They were all smudged and the glare of the fluorescent lights on the lens had impressed strange fingers of green and orange at the edges. Later, in my room at the hotel, I found I could not remember the names or faces of the people I'd met – not the guide or the other scientists. When I tried, more fingers of light obscured them from me and, if I strained to recall any specific features, the glare became unbearable and I had to shut my eyes and blink away the pain.

I wound up staying north longer than I planned because there was an ash cloud disrupting global flight paths. But I found I liked walking across the tundra in the middle of the night when it was still light out. My feet slithered on the moss as I made my way through the tangle of crowberry and bearberry down to the rush of the river. Sometimes I saw voles, sleek and plump with the early summer, slipping into their burrows, licorice root clutched in their jaws. I liked how the midnight sun cast a gold net across the river, and the deep red shadows among the groundcover of willow and cotton grass seemed to throb with a solar rhythm, as though the land itself had a pulse. I hadn't been able to shake the feeling of something thrumming in the vaults, through the walls, through my skin, but long walks helped me push it to the back of my mind. I had dreams, now, of walking up to the vault and finding the doors propped open, the tentacles of some chthonic beast spilling out, reeling me in.

I was taking my last midnight stroll before I flew home when I saw it: a shard of light lodged in the space between two ridges, much too bright. I watched as it oozed across the sky and ran down the horizon in a gold sheath that spread across the river. It was so thick it sank beneath the surface and the water bubbled up, venting steam that crystallised into arboreal structures of weed. I tried to run but my ankle turned on the slick rock and I sprawled on my belly.

I turned to see the light breach the river bank. Wherever it touched, thickets of grass and heather knitted with thorn grew as if in a time-lapse. Soon, the bracken had engulfed my arms, my legs, my torso. I tried to fight my way out, but the sharp fingers pulled me towards a narrow chasm churning with viscous gold light. I tumbled over the edge and fell down and down, through the bottomless hole, choking on the air, which was thick with pollen and spore.

I landed on my back before the entrance of the vault, its electronic display malfunctioning, blaring bare and white. Above, the sky: roiling, its edges cracked, and through it, long fingers of light, thick like treacle, bursting through, dripping down, swallowing the clouds. I saw

thickets of saxifrage roiling and spreading, and I crawled forward, though the door that should not have been left open, and into the vault.

Inside, plants had broken the walls and gnawed at the mountain from the inside out. The roots took me instantly, cocooning me in white webs of mycorrhizae like a caterpillar ready for pupation. I did not panic. Anaesthetised, I let the plants do their work. They wrapped me inside a shell of fungus, and vines came to carry me to the higher branches. I saw many white cocoons, just like mine – plump, swaying fruit in a new kind of orchard. I felt no pain or anguish. The air smelled so sweet. Like endless summer.

I opened my eyes one last time. Great webs of climbing vines – liana, moonseed, ivy – had latticed the sky, which was dotted with algal blooms. Halfway between here and there, in a galaxy of swirling pollen, I saw a stream of voles, all running so fast their bodies blurred and then there was only the appearance of speed, a grey streak with a thousand feet that disappeared through a curtain of light. I smelled burning and glimpsed the world on fire, but the heat could not reach me there.

Research statement

Research background

Unknowing explores how to write the Anthropocene or, as Donna Haraway has termed it, the Chthulucene: a term evoking the monstrous and entangled ways in which living systems affect and are affected by ecological crisis. Interrogating the autopoietic power of vegetal life, *Unknowing* extrapolates on the work of theorists such as Lynn Margulis, James Lovelock and Dorion Sagan who believe that biospheric evolution is characterised by ‘the continued disturbance of geological, chemical, and atmospheric equilibria’ (Cooper 35). In its persistent expansion, life tends towards complexity, and is *generative* rather than entropic or adaptive. Within these morphologies of crisis, *Unknowing* experiments with new ways of thinking and writing the human as situated within increasingly intelligent and social networks that are multi-species, inter-subjective and mutually constitutive.

Research contribution

Building on emerging theories of plant sentience or intelligence, *Unknowing* experiments with the constantly evolving affiliations and assemblages that characterise vegetal life, especially within periods of planetary flux. Despite comprising the majority mass of life on Earth, plant life has been overlooked in creative works addressing the Anthropocene and does not inhabit a strong position within the public imagination.

Unknowing therefore seizes upon the Chthulucene as an opportunity to explore modes of writing that capture the strange and mutually constitutive relationships between humans and non-humans—especially plants—that move beyond the scientific, technological and anthropocentric. *Unknowing* also seeks to liberate not only the human but also the vegetal subject from the biopolitical narratives to which the generation and production of life has often been confined, especially in science fiction.

Research significance

Unknowing is the first in a series of pieces of experimental writing addressing the Chthulucene and represents an ongoing research project. A version of *Unknowing* will be published in an edited collection on the evolving status and relevance of vegetal life called *The Covert Plant*.

List of works cited

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