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The Art and Activism of the Anthropocene, Part II: A Conversation with Jeff VanderMeer, Zaria Forman, and Gleb Raygorodetsky

June 6, 2018 • By Amy Brady







THIS SPRING, Guernica magazine is co-sponsoring a three-panel conversation series with the New York Society Library titled “The Art and

Activism of the Anthropocene.” Each panel convenes some of the biggest names in publishing, journalism, and art for a discussion of their work and why it matters in an age of climate change.

The first panel met on April 11, 2018, at the New York Society Library, and included National Book Award-winning novelist William T. Vollmann, playwright

Chantal Bilodeau, and New York Magazine journalist David Wallace-Wells. The second met on April 19, 2018, and featured novelist Jeff VanderMeer, artist Zaria Forman, and conservation biologist Gleb Raygorodetsky. The series is moderated by Guernica's deputy publisher, Amy Brady.

What follows is a transcript of the second panel. It has been edited for length and clarity.

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AMY BRADY: I would like to start this evening by asking all three of you the same question I asked last week's panelists: what first drew you to the topic of climate change, and what compels you to keep addressing the issue in your work?

GLEB RAYGORODETSKY: I am a conservation biologist by training. A part of my interest in conservation biology and environmental issues comes from the fact that I grew up in a small community

where I was surrounded by people who knew quite a few things about the land that our community was on. And through my career I was looking for opportunities to deepen that connection with the land. Some of my career paths would lead me to Northwestern territories in Canada, where I worked for an Indigenous organization in the mid-'90s. At that time, particular Indigenous groups had been talking about climate change and the impacts that they have been observing for decades, and I guess that was my introduction to the reality of climate change, what it means for communities, what it means for the environment. I tried to deepen my own understanding of the subject and have continued to work with communities on this issue ever since.

ZARIA FORMAN: My mother was a landscape photographer, and growing up we traveled to really remote places for about one month every single year. So I had this love of landscape instilled in me from an early age and started depicting it in my art as soon as I could hold a crayon. In 2007, I traveled to

Greenland with my family — that was the first time I visited the Arctic. At the time, climate change was not as much of a topic of discussion here in the United States, but in Greenland it was. Everyone was traveling there, whether they were newscasters coming to write about [climate], or government officials coming to learn about it. There were also locals having to adapt their lifestyles on a daily basis to the changing landscapes. All that opened my eyes to the climate crisis.

JEFF VANDERMEER: My interest in climate change is intertwined inextricably with a love of nature and with where I grew up, which was in Fiji, in the part near the beach. I was interacting with nature all the time. Also, my dad was an entomologist and my mom was a biology illustrator before computers were made. So we were always surrounded by wildlife. A sea turtle would be brought up for my mom to illustrate, for example. There was always this interesting mix of science and art in our household.

When I started to write fiction seriously in the late '80s and early '90s, the first series I wrote was about a future Earth in which climate change devastated pretty much everything. The remaining people were living in wild city-states that were slowly failing. I thought this topic was of concern back then in part because J. G. Ballard thought it was a concern. There were quite a few amazing dystopias and post-apocalyptic tales from the '70s and '60s when there was a great boom in ecological consciousness.

Today, I feel like an ambassador for nature and animals. I try to present them properly in my fiction. I try to present the complexities of ecosystems. Issues of climate change are in there, but the point is that there's this amazing wealth of life around us that is really resilient if we give it half a chance. And we need to give it a chance because, if we don't, we won't be giving ourselves a chance, either.

The title of this panel series is “The Art and Activism of the Anthropocene.” I want to focus a

moment on the words “Art” and “Activism.” Zaria and Jeff, both of you are artists, working in the visual and narrative arts, respectively. Do you also consider yourselves activists?

ZF: I consider myself an artist first, but definitely an activist, as well. I think activism is asking for change. It’s asking for an action from us, from human beings. The core purpose of my work is exactly that. Psychology tells us that we take action and make decisions based on our emotions more than anything else. With my work I am trying to touch your emotions. I think art has that ability in general. It can make people fall in love with these beautiful landscapes in the way that I have. And I hope that that love spurs action.

JVM: Everything I’ve learned or experienced about climate change has been very much felt in my body. Take, for example, the Gulf oil spill. For a lot of us, the spill was in our heads for a long time and it seemed like it was going to go on forever — it was

like a little physical pressure inside the skull. That feeling came out in the pages of the *Southern Reach* trilogy, which is why climate issues are more obviously noticed in those books than in prior ones.

So, I don't think it's really a question of whether what I write is about activism. Writing about landscape in a certain way is a political act. Whether you want to be an activist or not, you are going to be perceived as having a view of the environment that causes discussion and disagreement. I am kind of split on how fiction can actually effect change because I go back to Ballard and other people in the '70s who were writing about similar things, and ask myself: did that change the world, or not?

More and more teenagers are telling me that they are going into environmental science in part because they read my books in class. Maybe that's giving me too much credit, but it makes me feel more hopeful about fiction making a difference. By the way, a percentage of all royalties from *Southern Reach* will go directly to

environmental charities, the ones with the least bureaucratic overheads and are doing projects that make sense for local people.

Gleb, for you I want to turn my question about activism on its head. Your book, *The Archipelago of Hope*, reads as a form of activism, and I can only imagine how difficult it must be to continue to have the kinds of conversations that you had in that book with people who have yet to fully grasp the plight of Indigenous peoples. So my question for you is, what is the art of activism? Or put another way, how do you choose what narratives to tell or what pictures to paint to get people to listen?

GR: As an artist and an activist, I am driven by the idea that our world is defined by the stories we tell ourselves about ways of living. I have learned much from people who are patient and generous enough to teach me that there are different ways of telling the story about how we should live on Earth. The people who have the richest and the deepest stories are the

communities who have been nurtured by the same place over a generation. It's something that I didn't experience growing up but something I longed for all my life. I wrote the book to change the narrative, to create alternative stories about how we, as human beings, can be in the world in a way that is not just about us but more about respecting each other and life in general. Indigenous people are important storytellers; my role is to just to create a bridge. But it's not enough. It's not enough to share stories. You actually have to work at translating Indigenous stories to a larger audience, and that is ongoing work. It's hard for me to see this as an art form. It is just a way of life.

The subtitle of tonight's panel is "Strange Reality: The Art and Activism in Transitional Environments." Keeping the phrases "strange reality" and "transitional environments" in mind, I want to delve deeper into what each of you thinks about when creating your work. Jeff, your *Southern Reach* novels — and your most recent novel, *Borne*

— are often called “weird fiction,” in part because of the strange realities they depict. Many of your landscapes are in states of transition because of human activity, others because of forces we don’t quite understand. What is it about transitional spaces that inspires you?

JVM: Transitional environments help us to break down the partition between what we see as inside the body and outside the body. Consider the fact that we have clouds of microbes that follow us everywhere that are in communication with other clouds of microbes. We’re living with all these creatures on and around us at all times, and they help us function.

I have a story that I am working on that’s set in the future. Humans live on islands surrounded by seas of garbage. I know, it sounds delightful. On these islands there are molecules that make the sounds of birdsongs, although there aren't any birds anymore. It speaks to our situation today where important changes are invisible. We don’t recognize, for example,

the decreasing density of animal populations. They just aren't the same as what would have occurred back when conquistadors first landed on what is now the United States. We don't realize what we've lost because the evidence is not immediately visible, and we don't think enough about how to make it visible. So that's something that I've been trying to do with my fiction. Sometimes it comes out in uncanny ways because hauntings are a very useful way to get across this idea.

Zaria, let's discuss your pastel drawings that you made while working as an artist-in-residence in Antarctica. That continent is undergoing transitions even faster than many scientists predicted. As an artist, how do you capture a place undergoing such rapid change on a static canvas?

ZF: I will start by saying it's hard for me to actually see the change with my own eyes, because I'm not going back to the same places year after year to the same location at the exact same time of year. I've also

had the opportunity to fly with a NASA mission over both Greenland and Antarctica. There's a glacier in Greenland that I just finished drawing that's one of the fastest moving glaciers in the world and one of the largest. The speed at which it has been moving has picked up tremendously in the last 30 years. The folks at NASA told me they could see the difference year to year.

I try to make my work as realistic as possible. I want to make the viewer feel like they are standing in front of the glacier that I saw. But I also see iceberg and glacier drawings as portraits — portraits of things that are ephemeral and are changing day by day, and week by week. Quite often, by the time I'm finished with a drawing, the actual thing that I drew looks entirely different from when I first saw it. In a way, I'm not only documenting these landscapes; I'm trying to figure out how to preserve their beauty.

Gleb, in your book you write about traveling to several communities to speak with Indigenous

peoples about how their land is changing in the face of climate change. You write that Traditional Knowledge can inform the work that climate scientists are doing. Can you expand on this?

GR: The world is not static; it is in constant flux. And for generations, people who knew how to see the world as it is noticed these changes. There are stories from First Nation peoples of Canada who remember migrating with the trees as the glaciers retreated thousands of years ago. The changes that are happening now are not necessarily different from those that have been historically observed. What is different is the magnitude and the rate at which the changes are occurring. All that causes difficulties for communities who are struggling to adjust.

One elder told me that the winds are different, that they speak to us but we don't understand the language. But when you ask Indigenous people about how devastated they must be, they are actually a lot more grounded in reality than outsiders like me. They

say, “Take some time to learn the language.” What these people are seeking are opportunities to stay on the land and change with the land. Scientists, however, have a different way of interacting with the landscape. Their interactions are more short term, and their approach is different. To them, the spiritual is not part of what the land is or what the sea is or what the environment is. So that’s one of the main lessons that I think the scientific community could learn — that there’s a lot more to the world than just numbers and graphs and trends. It’s about our relationship with the land.

My next question is for all three of you. What has surprised you the most in your research and observations related to climate change?

GR: Let me say first that it’s a little weird to be a white guy sitting here on stage talking about stories and issues that are not mine. I am always cognizant of the fact that these are stories that are shared with me and that I’m just a confidant. I was given permission

to share the stories under certain conditions. I was allowed to share them here and in the pages of my book. So I have some discomfort speaking on behalf of people whose experiences I don't necessarily share. That said, I was surprised that this message of hope kept coming up. In my research I realized that climate change is not a thing. It's a combination of many things, a manifestation of how we, as a global community, really messed up and how we think about being on this planet. Indigenous communities are facing many different challenges that are economic, environmental, and social, so climate change is just this amplifying layer over everything else that they deal with.

And yet they are not hopeless. They are totally cognizant of all the challenges yet they look into the future with hope, and to me that is really amazing.

JVM: I was surprised by the fact that, after *Annihilation* came out, I received invitations to speak in science departments because a lot of scientists are

looking for new ways of storytelling. To really grasp the entirety of what's happening with climate change, we need more scientists who are generalists to grasp the complexity of the issue. For example, there's a biologist at Hobart and William Smith named Meghan Brown who developed a module based on white deer in upstate New York. Both science and creative writing students are invited to come together to create a full understanding of this one finite place and what lives in it. I thought this was an interesting thing to do because one way in which art activism fails is in not being individually linked to a place and understanding it. And this would give those students a taste of what it means to have a deep, interdisciplinary understanding of a place.

The other thing that I found quite interesting is the beginning of what you might call "soft-tech." A lot of what we call "hard-tech," like smart phone software, is incredibly primitive compared to natural systems. Now, I like to talk about natural systems because if you're talking to someone who is politically in the

center or center-right, you need to talk in terms of systems or they wind up thinking you are a tree-hugger. Anyway, an example of soft-tech would be like a mushroom cultivated artificially that can replace Styrofoam. You just toss it in your backyard and it biodegrades in a couple of months.

The more soft-tech we can create that works with the world and its complex systems, the further away we will get from things like overuse of plastics. Even without climate change, we would be in a huge amount of trouble because of plastic pollution. So soft-tech is something that needs to be monetized. Capitalism has let us down because we need to monetize everything. A lot of this soft-tech could be jump-started a lot quicker if it wasn't having to compete against battery or solar power.

ZF: I was really surprised when I got an email from NASA. I thought, "I'm just this little artist from Brooklyn and NASA scientists want me to come fly with them? This is crazy!" I actually thought it was all

a hoax until I entered my first science meeting.

People often ask me why NASA wanted me to fly with them. I think one reason is because they have been doing this research for years and years. That particular mission has been going on for a decade, and yet we are still not moving in the right direction, at least not fast enough. They recognized the need to communicate their findings in another way that's not just numbers and dry statistics. There was a scientist in particular who came from a family of artists and recognized the power of art to communicate something. NASA has a way bigger social media following than I do, but they needed me to help paint the bigger picture.

JVM: That reminds me of a scientist who used to deliver findings in the form of poetry. This happened in, like, the 1700s or 1800s. Back then, they used a form of dream journal, which is where fantasy originated from. They would actually do a dream journal and write some fantasy plays with their theses

embedded in them. It was an interesting confluence of fiction and science.

If you could get just one person to take away one thing from the drawings you make or the writing that you do, what would that one thing be? Gleb let's start with you.

GR: I don't have great insight myself, so I will quote somebody. A slogan I heard during my research is, "Land is Life." I think if just one person could really understand what that means, then that'd be a win.

ZF: I want people to experience a connection with these landscapes that are otherwise so far off and not a part of our everyday lives, yet are at the forefront of climate change. I try to represent the beauty of these places because I want people to fall in love with them like I did. You have to love something to want to protect it.

JVM: What I would like for people to take away is

what I try to put into my books, which is the beauty of the moment within our environments. Whether you are in an urban environment or a wilderness one, there are moments of amazing beauty in even the most mundane elements of nature. It matters what we do in the moment, even if that means feeding the birds in our backyards. It matters that you can help wildlife even if just for a season. We are all just here for a season.

Thank you, everyone. We now have time for some questions from the audience.

AUDIENCE MEMBER No. 1: Zaria, we love your work and have it in our homes. What draws you to ice and glaciers?

ZF: I've always been inspired by water in all of its forms. I don't think I'm unique in that way. All human beings need it to survive, and it covers so much of our planet. A perfect landscape has a stream running through it, or an ocean. There's always an

element of water in anything that makes us feel at ease. We find respite in it. So for me, artistically, water is an endless source of inspiration. There are so many ways to render it in all its different forms. When I first began painting professionally, I was doing large storms, skylscapes, hurricanes, tornadoes, cloud formations, and then moved on to lakes and oceans and rivers, which I'm still learning to draw well.

AUDIENCE MEMBER No. 2: My question is for everyone. All of you have talked about being inspired by rural or semi-rural places. How can people like us, who live in New York City, combat climate change?

JVM: There's a lot of urban wildlife, and there are ways to promote it in ways that some places need to be more conscious of, such as providing shade. In Florida, you have these outside developers that build cities or parts of cities that are just all cement with no shade. It makes no sense for the environment.

I was out in Central Park hiking just today, and I was

surprised to see that it was approximating the same feeling of woods. It's good that you have it. Another thing that's important is to leave animals alone, just let them live their lives.

I dealt with several of these issues in *Borne*, which is about a city trying to recover and the ways that people recover. A part of that recovery is imagining cities that use more soft-tech and which are more like the natural world. There's no way that we're going to willingly go back to a pastoral age. That's not going to happen. But we can make our cities more efficient. I mean, even recycling is kind of a joke in the United States, as opposed to Sweden, where they burn it and the burning actually fuels other things. Cities need to push for better regulations, especially in a context where we have the Trump administration — I use the term “administration” very loosely — trying to undermine climate action. These things need to be fought at the state and city levels. I don't know if that's a good answer, but that's the best I have right now.

GR: I want to add that I think it's important to realize that cities are not boxed off. They depend on what's happening in rural areas, on the roots of food. The more attention you pay to where your food comes from, its quality, and how it's produced, the better quality of life you're going to have in the city as well.

AUDIENCE MEMBER No. 3: It feels like all of you think about the environment in ways that centralize humans and human civilization. Could you talk about what it might mean to think about the environment in terms of removing humans from the center?

JVM: I've been experimenting with nonhuman points of view in my fiction. Of course, you can't really write a piece of fiction from the viewpoint of an animal, but you can fudge it. One of my stories is called *The Strange Bird*, and it's about a bird that includes some human DNA. It made me rethink the world in a

certain way; I had to rethink it as vertically as opposed to horizontally. I had to rethink other things with regards to narrative and what it means to empathize with this bird. I'd like to see more writers do that, because I see writers researching physics all day long but they're not willing to do anything about animal behavior science.

AUDIENCE MEMBER No. 4: I want to ask whether you think that “Anthropocene” is a fair word to describe our current moment.

GR: It's a word that describes humanity's advantage in the world. That's all. I come from the Soviet Union, and it was a dictatorship. But that doesn't mean that every community had a dictator. It doesn't mean that the collective psyche was defined by what was happening in one place in that vast country — it's the same thing with “Anthropocene.” The reason why my book has the word “archipelago” in the title is because I'm recognizing the fact that there are communities in the world that are maintaining different ways of

relating to the land. And I feel that it's there, in those communities, that we'll find instructions for how to do it in a better way.

JVM: It's a useful word in the short term, in terms of geologic time. But none of this matters, because we as humans don't particularly care about geologic time because it doesn't concern us.

AUDIENCE MEMBER No. 5: If the Anthropocene puts humans at the center, I wonder: Who is the protagonist in our story, and who is the antagonist?

GR: It's a bit of a Jekyll-and-Hyde situation. We live with a certain amount of hypocrisy no matter what we do because of the systems that contain us. We have smart phones that are dependent on all kinds of labor that none of us want to look at too closely. We every day do something that's harmful because we have no alternatives, and we have to soldier on despite these things. There are those who want a radical

revolution, but the problem with that is that anywhere you see political instability in the world, you see environmentalism going out the window first. So we're almost forced into a situation where we have to compromise our ideology in the short term or risk losing everything.

AUDIENCE MEMBER No. 6: The word beauty comes up in a lot in these kinds of conversations. Do you find that there's a limit to how you can discuss beauty in conversations about the environment or in your own work as artists?

ZF: I think we definitely need to go beyond just beauty. I think a lot of us need to be, like, scared into action or disgusted into action, and I think it's important to watch the movies that are frightening and look at paintings of destruction. But personally, I don't feel that that's my role. I'm a positive person, and the way I express that is to show beauty. I do think that it's more hopeful to look at beautiful things than the things we're destroying, because destruction

can potentially make us freeze up and not want to do anything. It can be paralyzing. But that's not for everyone — I think some people need to see the destruction, the ugliness, to take action.

JVM: When I talk about beauty, there are two different kinds of beauty I'm talking about. One thing is the ecstatic experience I have when I'm hiking that is transferred into the emotions of the text. But the other that I'm often trying to do is the reason I'm known for writing weird fiction. Weird fiction is the idea that you're trying to get across some understanding of the "other," of something monstrous, or of something that human beings think of as monstrous, by finding the beauty in it. So I'm not engaged solely in the idea of traditional beauty, but rather in something that's disturbing that a character or the prose convey that is quite beautiful if you look at it from a different direction.

Many people don't think of sharks as beautiful, but I do. That's just one example of the things we project

onto animals and the environment that aren't actually true. The other thing is defining “utopia” and “dystopia” differently. If you write in a post-apocalyptic or dystopian way, and you hand your book to someone who’s been displaced by climate change, and they say, “Oh, that sounds pretty nice,” then you need to reexamine the bubble you’re living in and what you think of as beautiful.

**Thank you, everyone, for being here this evening.
And many thanks to the panelists for such a
thoughtful conversation.**

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Photo of the panelists by Hillary Brenhouse.

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