

The Monster in the Ocean: Identity in Frank Schätzing's *The Swarm*

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Abstract: *This study explores the discursive construction of negative identity through the monstrous antagonist, the yrr – a collective intelligence of deep-sea organisms – in Frank Schätzing's novel The Swarm and the intricate implications stemming from humanity's interaction with this creature. The yrr represents characteristics fundamentally alien to human nature, such as collective intelligence and ecological harmony, while simultaneously exposing humanity's exceptionalist and destructive tendencies. In doing so, the novel compels readers to confront human responsibility for climate change and environmental degradation. This study contends that the yrr functions as a metaphor for humanity's failure to address pressing environmental issues and serves as a critique of anthropocentric discourse. Additionally, Schätzing's portrayal of the ocean as a space of both mystery and fear reinforces these thematic concerns. By situating the Yrr in the ocean's depths, Schätzing underscores the concept of a vengeful nature, responding to humanity's environmental degradation, colonial ambitions, and ecological ignorance.*

Keywords: *Frank Schätzing; The Swarm; anthropocentrism; climate change; nature's revenge; monster;*

Introduction

In his essay, “The White Man’s Guilt,” James Baldwin describes the curtain of guilt white Americans hid behind as they lived in denial of their history while at the same time defending themselves against their ancestors’ past atrocities. Their inability to come to terms with a history of violence against blacks and their unwillingness to change led to even more atrocities, which created a vicious cycle of guilt and oppression (1965). It is hard to imagine humans, as a species, both individually and collectively, not suffering from a similar case of guilt, denial, and violence when it comes to their past and present relationship with other species and their environment. Living through environmental degradation on an unprecedented scale and arguably the sixth mass extinction or a biodiversity crisis, humans of today are not only carrying the collective guilt of the past, but they also find themselves witnessing and experiencing the disastrous outcomes of anthropogenic climate change. Therefore, if they indeed grapple with similar emotions, one of the many ways of coming to terms with guilt and denial might as well be fictional representations of humans facing the consequences of their destructive actions.

When the disastrous consequences of these actions are represented in a more concretized form, “slow violence”¹ becomes more visible and undeniable. Fictional representations of the detrimental effects of human presence on earth create less resistance than the expression of climate change science in political realms, as made obvious by denialists, and the non-cooperation about environmental issues by the far right all over the world.

Although the debate over whether or not we are in a new epoch substantially dominated by humans, called the Anthropocene or the Human Age, ensues, human impact on the planet, particularly in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, consumption, and production of waste, has shown an upward trend: “Humanity has discovered itself to be implicated in a geological transformation of the Earth, with profound implications for nearly all our reference points in the world” (Trexler 16). One of the crucial reference points is our cultural productions, including literary fiction, as a response to our implication in the planet’s current state and a roadmap for how to navigate our existence as part of a whole.

In this article, our purpose is to analyze one fictional example of this concretized representation of consequences of slow violence in a famous German ecothriller, *The Swarm*, the sixth and most successful novel by Frank Schätzing published in 2004. The novel is a nature’s revenge story that appeals directly to “human guilt” and showcases similar human responses to guilt, referred to by Baldwin in his discussion of racism and denial. Denial and accountability are assigned to various characters in the novel, whose professions range from activist to biologist to politician:

Two competing camps correspond with antagonistic relations between human and nature: an anthropocentric approach that struggles for the superiority of the human race on the one hand and an ecosystemic approach that pleads respect for the alien entity in the deep sea as an “agency” of the ecosystem that has—or should have—equal rights to other entities... (Dürbeck 322)

Our fundamental questions pertain to the representational preferences in the creation of the monstrous concerning the specific qualities that distinguish it from humans as well as those traits that constitute an inverted mirror image of humanity’s destructive nature. We will also be examining the habitat of the monster, the sea, as an apt environment for the unknown and the familiar at the same time. Humans’ familiarity with the seas stems from an evolutionary history, yet the depths of the seas remain largely uncharted territory. Before he

¹ Rob Nixon’s coinage refers to an incremental form of violence, the effects of which are not immediately clear.

started writing the novel, Schätzing did extensive scientific research and conversed at length with around a dozen scientists, among whom were marine biologists, marine geologists, and a methane-hydrate researcher: “I created an environment as real as possible and added only one fictional element—a deep-sea, non-human intelligence crucial to the plot” (Danger para. 5). As the authorial intent points to a demarcation between a realistic depiction of the setting (along with many of the major and minor protagonists) and a fictional rendering of the antagonist, it is important to delve into the reasons for this preference.

Swarm’s Negative Identity

One of the unique properties of the novel is the endowment of the antagonist with characteristics that are *alien* to humans. Some of them are human aspirations, such as a natural inclination for collective action and cooperation; others are associated with primitiveness or a level of biocentrism humans have yet to reach, such as deindividuation and prioritization of the community and the environment over individual survival. Thus, our initial premise is about the identity of the so-called “yrr,” or “the swarm,” and the qualities that make it truly alien to conceptualizations of what it means to be human. The swarm not only challenges humanity’s belief in their deniability about their responsibility to nature, but it also undermines their conviction in the superiority of their intelligence to all life forms. This becomes particularly noteworthy when the swarm is revealed to be a hive of monocellular organisms:

The yrr form a collective intelligence, like a hive, and have inheritable memories that are passed on by manipulating parts of DNA. Individual yrr recognize each other by using a specific pheromone. Scientists have some success in investigating the yrr and make limited contact. This seems noteworthy, since the human understanding of intelligence as being based within an individual might be challenged when it comes to extra-terrestrial intelligence. (Bohlmann, Bürger 165)

We will begin by explaining some of the social psychological tools utilized in the novel to construct the antagonist, the swarm, and continue with the significance of its habitat as well as the resilience of anthropocentrism to the detriment of humanity itself. Novels, the settings of which are global environments, in the sense that the effects of the events taking place in the narrative cannot be localized or geographically limited, are usually categorized as Anthropocene fiction: “To date, nearly all Anthropocene fiction addresses the historical tension between the existence of catastrophic global warming and the failed obligation to act. Under these conditions, fiction offered a medium

to explain, predict, implore, and lament” (Trexler 9). Similarly, *The Swarm* serves these functions, and because of its functionality, it is hard to evaluate the novel based on its literary merit.

In German environmental literary fiction, Heather Sullivan writes that environmental issues are dealt with in three basic ways. The first of these deals with nature’s revenge theme, while the second focuses on end-of-world scenarios. The third focuses on the concept of slow violence (para. 3). Nature’s revenge themes are neither new nor original. *The Swarm*, despite being a bestseller in Germany and being translated into eighteen languages, has not been widely studied by literary scholars. It is around nine hundred pages, the plot revolves around multiple characters, and at times it reads like a scholarly work on natural sciences, particularly marine biology and microbiology. When condensed into its main plot line, however, a familiar but relatively original depiction of nature’s resistance against human predation and colonization emerges.

All of the representational preferences the author makes pertain to the so-called monster in question, the collective entity called the swarm, who is set on eradicating humanity for valid reasons as it is repeatedly voiced by various human characters in the novel. Nature’s revenge theme evidently needs a metaphor, a concretization of an array of all possible repercussions of anthropogenic destruction of the environment. In the novel, this concretization is realized through many sea creatures that act on behalf of the collective will of nature. As it is harder to fathom a non-embodied consciousness as representative of the planet’s guardian, the consciousness in question can be passed on through particular pheromones and the aggregation of individual cells.

The novel covers a period of eight months, beginning off the Peruvian coast on January 14. A local fisherman disappears after his boat, “*caballito*” is capsized seemingly as a result of being attacked by a shoal of fish. The second part of the novel starts with a quote from a CNN news report about the Chilean “blob,” which was found on a beach and a year later identified as the remains of a sperm whale. Blobs or globsters have been a source of much speculation, and through this metafictional allusion, Schätzing suggests a convergence between his predictions and fictional representation. That his representation is also a manifestation for the future is one of the reasons why he chooses his setting as the ocean from the very beginning. Oceans are what Puxan-Oliva calls global environments, which she defines by merging terms such as “global commons” and “smooth spaces.” Global environments, she proposes:

...are wide, open spaces that are difficult to regulate, inhabit and settle due to their physical nature [...] Among these, we can include the designated ‘global commons,’ which are oceans, airspace, outer space,

and Antarctica and also other contested vast natural spaces like the poles, deserts, jungles, swamps, and highlands. In this list, we could include planet Earth, given its strong force in global environmental concerns such as the Anthropocene. (Puxan-Oliva 42)

The first preference is about the only almost entirely fictional (as opposed to the many protagonists) representation of the antagonist. If the novel is to indeed succeed in appealing to human guilt and nudge humans to take up proactive solutions about anthropogenic damage to the planet and present us with a global environment as a setting such as the deep seas, a species, regardless of whether or not it is to be depicted individually or collectively, would have to be one that readers would have difficulty empathizing with. Otherwise, the element of suspense in the novel would be easily eliminated since it becomes increasingly clear throughout the novel that yrr has a justifiable cause:

As a biological collective, the yrr...come into being in terms of difference: they are what humans are not. They are made up of jelly-like matter, have no distinct physical shape, and are sexless. They possess cognitive abilities, yet their intelligence does not correspond to human intellect or morality. Although the yrr are single-cell organisms, they exist in cellular collectives and communicate via pheromones. They are legion, they aggregate, they shapeshift, and they swarm. (Orich 52)

In other words, the swarm's identity is constructed consciously or unconsciously through negative identity formation. A negative identity is formulated by identifying with roles opposing expectations from society and represents a problematic side of a firm sense of identity consisting of negative aspects of the self (Erikson, 1968). Negative identities in social psychology are considered to be relatively problematic and point to a maladaptive tendency in the individual. According to Jonathan Cohen, "Negative identity occurs when a person or group defines themselves by way of contrast to others, either implicitly or explicitly...Frequently there is a backward-looking quality to negative identities. Why do I define myself as "not you"? Often it is because of something that has happened in the past, and holding a negative identity helps its holder cling to that past." (742) The holder of negative identity in this case, the swarm, bases its defensive response on the history of human existence and how humans interacted with the world around them. In that sense, the swarm's aggressive response is one of self-defense. The attributes of the antagonist clearly make it less likely to negotiate with humans and reach a compromise. When we adopt a negative identity (as the swarm is assigned one

in the novel), “rather than listening to such dissonant ideas and information, we may consciously or subconsciously choose to ignore it, protecting our sense of self at the price of possible resolutions” (Cohen 744).

Negative identity is bound to cause conflicts with whom you have defined yourself against, but that conflict is not of an evil nature in the novel. For example, the negative identity of the swarm manifests perfect alignment with its habitat, the planet, and a selfless, ecocentric approach to existence. It also is very egalitarian in that any part of the swarm can be sacrificed for the higher purpose of the survival of the planet. In other words, there are no queen bees; they are all dispensable worker bees with the awareness of the necessity of prioritizing the hive rather than the queens or any one of the worker bees. The swarm is what humans aspire to be, or sometimes pretend to be, and what they should be if they want their lives on Earth to be sustainable and long-lasting.

Much research has been done to showcase the human tendency for irrationality despite the ungrounded persistence of associating the human mind with rational decision-making (Kahneman 2011; Ariely 2008; Ellis 1975). This is one of the most essential traits of the swarm, a trait that human beings assume to have despite evidence to the contrary. The brutal rationality takes effect when the swarm continuously sacrifices non-human creatures. Thus, although negative identities formed in human societal contexts lead to immediate conflicts and a dichotomous worldview and often result from them, it is clear that the swarm has had a longer history of existence on the planet and only decided to set itself as an example for an ecologically aware creature after a long exposure to human destruction of its and presumably humans’ habitat. Humans exist in a passive state that lacks purposefulness in the sense that they are not in alignment with their surroundings to the degree that the swarm is, and they have a much weaker sense of belonging. For humanity, the planet is considered one of many possible places of dwelling; although that is an approach that would have been considered unrealistic a few decades ago, it has now found its application with technological advances in space travel and settlement on Mars. The way the swarm exists on the planet is not a state, which can seemingly be distinguished from the planet itself. The swarm, by definition, is a collective entity that is moving together in the same direction. Constructing the swarm by using negative identity formation helps the author highlight the traits humans are deficient in to showcase their self-destructive, exceptionalist, and at times narcissistic attitude towards other species, even when their superiority is brought under question.

Negative identity formation explains the anti-human and ahuman qualities of the swarm. Another fascinating and carefully crafted quality is that the swarm is sea-bound. It is partially related to the negative identity that the swarm has, as humans are land mammals that cannot survive underwater, and

presumably the swarm and all the creatures it entails cannot survive on land. There are other ecothrillers that concretize the destructive forces of nature as aquatic creatures, and in the later parts, the possible reasons why aquatic creatures make the reader identify with the antagonist to a lesser degree will be analyzed. Massification is considered to be a social defense mechanism where the group turns into an inseparable and indistinguishable mass and everyone is supposedly the same (Hopper 2003), and that is the swarm's *modus operandi*. But massification, as much as it strengthens the group, decreases the ability of "the other" to empathize, regardless of ethical factors such as morality or sentience. Humans are less likely to empathize with a group than with an individual. Humans are also less likely to empathize with a member of another species, let alone species such as mussels, jellyfish, or crabs. As it soon becomes clear, what seems like individual attacks by various aquatic creatures turns out to be a consciousness moving *en masse*: In one instance, "[a] gigantic swarm of mussels settles on the rudder" (Schätzing 96). In another, it is reported that "[s]warms of jellyfish are also causing concern off the coast of Australia" (Schätzing 162). A marine biologist in the book, Sigur Johanson, also confirms their operational habit:

With the exception of the whales, the organisms they're using are almost exclusively creatures that occur *en masse* -worms, jellies, squid, mussels, crabs. They're organisms that live in shoals or swarms. Millions of creatures are being sacrificed for the yrr to achieve their goals. The individual doesn't matter to them. Would humans think like that? Sure, we breed viruses and bacteria, but for the most part we use man-made armaments in manageable quantities. Mass biological weaponry isn't really our thing. (Schätzing 586)

These are a few examples of what could either be perceived as a collective entity sacrificing its parts or a more superior consciousness who does not hesitate to sacrifice other sentient creatures for the survival of not only itself but the species the members of which it is also sacrificing. Anthropomorphism is also more conducive to empathy on the part of the reader. Schätzing's preference for the swarm's habitat, as well as its deindividualization, makes the characters and the readers more emotionally distant from its moral worth even after the two species manage to communicate with each other via mathematical formulas. In one of the scientists' attempts at communication with the swarm, after solving the mathematical problems they are sent, the swarm sends the crew on the ship an image of the ship seen from below. Although the message never becomes entirely clear, the swarm is exposing humans to their own image and implicitly to their own deeds, which probably constitutes the fundamental reason for its attack on humanity. The image of the

ship, resembling at first an Egyptian obelisk, serves as a potent metaphor for the constructed and relational nature of perceptions that might only gain valency when the onlooker's perspective is changed. What the image represents—the ship that sent the message in the first place—becomes clear only after it is viewed from sideways. Similarly, constituted through a framework of negative identity, the physical, socio-cultural, and moral divergence of the yrr from humanity makes it easier for the reader to perceive it as monstrous. The definition of monstrosity has historically been linked to divergence from various tenets of humanity that we might associate with a constructed “normative self” that constitutes humanity. However, once the perspective is tilted a little, like the aforementioned image above, then, it becomes clear that some of the characteristics that might classify the yrr as monstrous can also be identified within humanity or vice versa. This is because the relationship between the normative self and the monstrous other is always dynamic and interdependent. In this regard, Michael Uebel posits that the monsterization process operates by

a not very complex process of projection onto the other of unwanted or unrecognized qualities and attributes, so as to construct the other. The difference of the other is emphasized in order to reinforce an imagined notion of sameness, where identity depends upon a relation to difference. But if we define ourselves against the other, we also define ourselves by internalizing the other. (45)

The yrr is monstrous because its destructive potential is a manifestation of the qualities that pertain to humanity. This is precisely why the yrr elicits fear: it has the potential to cause mass extinction, induce climate change, and inflict irreversible harm to global fauna and flora in its efforts to protect itself, all on a scale far greater and more rapid than humanity is capable of achieving. For example, the yrr's indirect creation of tsunami waves is an action that aims to devastate billions of lives, not just humans but a complete wipe-out of the flora and fauna of Northern Europe.

Moreover, Schätzing establishes various other parallelisms between the yrr and humanity. For instance, the yrr's primary means of attack on humanity is via manipulation of other animals such as whales, sharks, and crabs. The jelly-like substance enters other animals' nervous systems, circumventing their decision-making processes. Overriding the autonomy of other animals undermines these animals' intrinsic value. The yrr's relentless use of other animals for their own aim and benefit might indicate a supremacist view of themselves. This abusive behavior of the yrr closely mirrors human experimentation on animals in the book, as recounted by an ex-military scientist, Greywolf, who briefly partook in this project on remotely controlling

dolphins and whales for battle purposes. By sending electric signals to the dolphin's brain,

They had it swimming left, right, then leaping clean out of the water. They could switch on its aggression and make it attack. They could even trigger its flight mechanism or induce calm. It didn't matter whether the animals would have wanted to participate. (Schätzing 476)

Despite the repeated warnings from scientists, these experiments are conducted with the support of a complex web of political, social, and governmental institutions that uphold this anthropocentric discourse. At the top of this complex chain of hierarchical systems is the U.S. President, depicted in a stereotypically overzealous and bigoted manner. Accepting the yrr's intelligence, he asserts that "I very much doubt that they have any intrinsic right to inhabit this planet as we do. There's certainly no mention of them in the scriptures" (Schätzing 511). As is clear, the perceived moral superiority is intertwined with a religious hegemony that in turn reveals the ascendancy of certain cultural norms, reinforcing ongoing and established binaries that have contributed to the segregation and abuse of particular parts of the world since the onset of colonization. The yrr's high level of intelligence might also suggest the possibility of its own set of morals, albeit unbeknownst to humanity. It might also be their supremacist sense of morality that prompts the swarm collective to perceive humanity as a potential rival and to decide, seemingly arbitrarily, to eradicate humanity at this particular moment in time. This possibility is voiced by one of the scientists, Samantha Crowe. After the team of scientists received the prehistoric picture of the world, she states,

They're telling us is that this their planet ... They've decided they want to destroy us. We're not going to defeat that logic by arguing that we want to survive. Our only chance lies in trying to show them that we acknowledge their primacy. (Schätzing 758)

If Crow's interpretation holds true, it implies that the hierarchical worldview is also present in the swarm collective. However, if Crowe's view is not valid, then it suggests that even scientific discourse may inadvertently conceptualize the natural world within a hierarchical framework rather than adopting a more harmonious view or integrative perspective.

As mentioned earlier, one key advantage that the yrr possesses, however, is its singularity of being – a harmony within itself and its surroundings that allows it to have the potential to assume any and every form. In contrast, as intimated, humanity is depicted as existing in a state of complete disarray. In the novel's third part, the narrative shifts to the ship *Independence*

in the Antarctic Sea, which serves as a microcosm of the land surrounded by cold and dangerous water and various nations attempting to confront this threat. However, as Shannon Lambert aptly puts it, “Under the guise of an ‘aggregate,’ the humans on the boat increasingly ‘disaggregate’” (131). The small, international science team aboard the ship operates under the leadership of U.S. Navy General Commander Judith Li. Although their stated mission is to contact the yrr to make peace, their efforts are covertly subverted by the American double team, who secretly develop a biological weapon aimed at eradicating the threat. Double dealing, espionage, secrecy, and hidden agendas create an environment of distrust, where political and personal objectives overshadow the broader interests of humanity. Soon enough, the tension quickly escalates as the scientists and military officers turn against one another, resulting in violent confrontations. Meanwhile, the yrr below tears the ship apart, creating a chaotic scene that mirrors the broader discord present on Earth aptly summed up by Samantha Crowe: “This is what happens when intelligent species disagree” (Schätzing 819). In creating a sense of fear and danger, the author fully benefits from the narrative possibilities the freezing waters offer. As the ship starts to sink and the narrative reaches its climax, the cold water adds another level of threat to the survivors. In the novel, the sea holds significant narrative and spatial importance. It functions not only as the habitat of the yrr but also evokes primordial fears and a sense of wonder in humanity, serving crucial roles in the development of the narrative.

Unknown Depths as Space for Narrative Tension

Humans and other land animals inhabit a world where approximately two-thirds of the surface area is covered with water. This vast expanse is a territory that lies beyond human control, ill-suited for perpetual habitation due to our evolutionary divergence, and has posed significant navigational challenges for a very long time due to unpredictable weather events, inadequate instruments, long distances, or deliberate misguidance. One popular example of misguidance is those of “medieval merchants intentionally disseminat[ing] maps depicting sea serpents like Leviathan at the edges of their trade routes in order to discourage further exploration and to establish monopolies” (Cohen 13). This shows that the threat and fear that monsters pose have sometimes been used to maintain political, economic, and geographical boundaries. The seaside and sometimes established pathways serve as a natural topographic boundary between the familiar, mappable, and discoverable land as opposed to the unknown, uncharted, dark, and murky waters. Schätzing benefits from the same fear of the unknown associated with the sea by placing the swarm intelligence within the oceanic depths. The novel is profoundly informed of the locational dangers of the sea. At one point, one of the scientists in the book, remarks about the undiscovered nature of the sea, “People are fond of saying

that we know more about space than we do about the oceans. It's perfectly true, but there's a simple reason why: we can't see or move as well in the water as we can in outer space" (Schätzing 494). The relative difficulty of movement in water and obstruction of sight are potent reasons for our fear of the waters. Therefore, historically, even for seafaring nations, the sea has been home to countless monstrous creatures. For example, Balinese people regard mountains "as the seat of the gods. By contrast, the sea receives the filth of the land," or for the Javanese, "the sea is a wilderness beyond the control of human society and as such inspires a certain awe" (qtd in Polunin 270, 271). Hence, the sea has always been a fertile place for the monsters due to our primal fear of the unknown, in this case the vast swathes of three-dimensional spatiality, including depth, width, and height, about which humans have very little sensory information.

Explorations in these dangerous waters have historically been known to beget their own legends, justifying any form of violence or colonization attempt in these heroic endeavors. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Heracles "slew it [Hydra of Lerna] with merciless bronze, with the help of the warlike Iolaus, and the advice of Athene driver of armies" (Lines 295-331, 12). Beowulf boasts of having slain nine sea monsters during his swimming contest with Breca (lines 575-78) and later vanquishes Grendel and Grendel's mother, who inhabit a cursed lake near Heorot (lines 1251-1650). The eradication of monsters in these monster-infested waters signals humanity's full control over their respective environments. Schätzing is fully aware of the narrative potency of placing his creation in the sea. The choice conveys the idea that humanity no longer controls a very large portion of the world, which inherently invokes fear. If human history on Earth is regarded as an exploratory and colonizing endeavor, characterized by the conquest of multiple spatial and abstract frontiers, then the swarm collective can be seen as nature's response to human exceptionalism and the degradation of what humans believe to be their own habitat. The yrr attempts not only to decolonize the planet but also to reclaim Earth and exterminate a colonizing species. In this regard, Schätzing is also very well-versed in the tradition of sea monsters. The third-person narrative voice provides a succinct summary of some of these traditional monsters and their history of instilling fear in humanity:

The sea was full of monsters. Since the beginning of human history it had been a place for symbols, myths and primal fears. The six-headed Scylla had preyed on Odysseus' companions. Angered by Cassiopeia's boastfulness, Poseidon had created Cetus, a sea monster, and cast sea snakes at Laocoön when he foretold the fall of Troy. Sirens were lethal to sailors unless they stopped their ears with wax. Mermaids, aquatic dinosaurs and giant squid haunted the imagination. *Vampyroteutis*

infernalis was the antithesis of every human value. Even the horned creature of the Bible had risen from the sea. (Schätzing 337)

As is evident from these examples, sea monsters have also been historically conflated with real animals unfamiliar to European perception. The sea, as an unknown domain, has always contained this potential of surprise and wonder. Indeed, a 16th-century Swedish scholar, Olaus Magnus, in his *Description of Northern Peoples* (1555), states that some monsters incur harm; however, a second type “actually protected people, even from other sea creatures, its unexpected behaviour eliciting wonder” (Starkey 38). The novel reinforces this dual sense of fear and wonder via the yrr. The creature’s motives, particularly its decision to eradicate humanity, along with its level of intelligence necessary to undertake such a mission, evoke a sense of fear. Simultaneously, however, its evolutionary mechanisms, methods of storing knowledge and communication, and its physical invincibility and flexibility incite wonder among scientists. Schätzing benefits from the representation of the sea as a primordial place, instilling a mixture of profound emotions. The novel’s opening chapter underlines this fear that the fishermen have: “The thought of diving filled him with trepidation. He was an excellent swimmer, but, like most fishermen, he had a deep-seated fear of the water” (Schätzing 11). Moreover, the uncharted waters serve to reinforce the mystery surrounding the yrr, providing ample opportunity to gradually reveal the swarm collective in a fragmented manner. Initially, the yrr’s jelly-like body is partially caught in cameras, then the luminescent cloud surrounding its dark liquid tissue is discovered, and subsequently, the mechanism through which it aggregates to transmit information/memory/communication is revealed. Hence, the reader incrementally gains a visual understanding of the yrr, as if slowly assembling the disparate parts of Frankenstein’s monster. The revealed being is an entity that is antithetical to everything humanity is while simultaneously mirroring humanity in several crucial points. It is a sea monster of unprecedented nature and scale: a collective consciousness and memory that is territorial and brutally rational. The ultimate anti-human and ahuman monster. The swarm is antihuman because it wants to destroy people; it is ahuman because it lacks fundamental human attributes such as morality and compassion.

Thus, the sea as a space serves multifaceted narrative purposes in the novel. It hosts diverse marine life, including a primordial threat lying dormant in the form of the yrr organism, designed in stark contrast to humanity. The sea emerges as a battleground, the primary frontier of resistance, with nature responding to humanity’s environmentally destructive activities—such as pollution, overfishing, and North Sea oil drilling—by seeking relentless revenge. Moreover, the oceans encapsulate all the landmass on Earth, creating a continuous and interconnected expanse on a global scale. For Puxan-Olivian,

it is for this reason that “oceans are incontestable global environments” (55). This aspect directs the narrative to be beyond national concerns, forcing it “to address global concerns” (55). The seas and oceans are depicted as environments housing intricately complex natural systems, such as El Niño events, Gulf Stream currents, and methane-rich continental shelves, all of which have the potential to significantly alter atmospheric events. Additionally, it is portrayed as possessing a primordial and formidable power beyond comprehension, almost as if it has agency –vengeful and potentially destructive if not approached with care and respect for harmonious coexistence. For instance, scientist Knut Olsen remarks on the perilous nature of places like Hawaii, where residents have adapted to live with the destructive forces of volcanic activity:

The people of Hawaii had lived with the monster for generations, and knew what would happen when it beat its retreat. The receding water created a violent pull that swept everything into the sea, washing over anything left standing. ... The monster of the deep came on land to feed, and when it returned to the ocean it dragged its prey with it. (Schätzing 359-60)

The immense power of both natural and artificially induced disasters renders the sea a space inherently imbued with fear, threat, wonder, and potential harm. Eventually, all that humanity achieves is a temporary truce with the unknown, rather than an assertion of superiority. This is made worse by their ignorance of when that truce might come to an end. It is true that humanity has gained a newfound awareness of its own place in the ecosystem, but it remains unclear whether or not this humility will render them more conscious about their relationship with their surroundings in the future.

Conclusion

Throughout the novel, humanity’s sense of exceptionalism and anthropocentrism have received blow after blow, and the novel concludes with a vague truce with the yrr, perhaps suggesting to humanity that this is its last chance to repair both its relationship with this organism and the broader environment. The novel’s epilogue in the form of Samantha Crowe’s diary underlines humanity’s destitute condition: “The yrr didn’t merely destroy our cities: they laid waste to us internally. We roam the Earth with nothing to believe in” (Schätzing 879). Hence, the threat that the yrr poses is a wake-up call for the necessity of a paradigm shift in engaging with the natural world. The novel underlines that the solution to humanity’s current ecological and existential crises does not lie within the capitalist, egocentric, and imperialistic grand narratives that have long dominated political, economic, and social

systems—narratives largely constructed by the Western world. Instead, it hints at an alternative model: a more decentralized, ecocentric, and harmonious way of life that embraces marginal voices, acknowledges the value of multiplicity, and promotes diversity and coexistence rather than exploitation and dominance. Therefore, humanity’s perception of the world should also be tilted a little (or perhaps sideways) to embrace this shift of perspective. The slow transformation of one of the novel’s central characters, Anawak, who is a scientist and acculturated in the Western scientific discourse, provides a compelling example. His character arc –his estrangement from his Native American community in Nunavut to gradually reconciling with his Indian roots and worldview– illustrates the potential for embracing alternative perspectives. In this regard, the book’s opening epigram, “hishuk ish ts’awalk” is cryptic for the reader at first, but “Anawak is the one to eventually receive a translation, ‘all is one’” (Hambuch 44). This reflects the novel’s overarching theme of interconnectedness, suggesting that humanity’s future depends on recognizing the intrinsic value of all living things and the harmony with the environment. In conclusion, Frank Schätzing explores the complex relationship between humanity and nature in *The Swarm* and envisions a compelling antagonist –the collective entity known as the yrr.

Through his use of negative identity, Schätzing emphasizes what humanity lacks and should aspire to adopt, such as ecological harmony, collectivity, and selflessness, and what it retains and should perhaps get rid of such as destructive impulses and egocentrism. The novel underscores the urgent issues of climate change, environmental degradation, and pollution by incorporating a revengeful nature symbolised through the swarm. The emplacement of the swarm into the sea further reinforces humanity’s complex and destructive relationship with the environment since the depths of the sea are one of the only places that human degradation has not fully reached and humanity’s control is not absolute. Ultimately, the book is a potent reminder of the fragile relationship between humans and the Earth and the catastrophic consequences that might arise when the scales are tipped a little.

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