"I, Baby Raccoon": Jeff VanderMeer and Performed Identity Networks

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Character is undeniably important to any text. *The Last Jedi* (2017), a later installment of the Star Wars franchise, received backlash and outcry due to what was perceived as an out of character portrayal of Luke Skywalker. For example, after a very brief search on Twitter, I found a tweet by user @Lord_Marco_C that says, "The Last Jedi [sic] did my boii [sic] Mark Hamil/Luke [sic] dirty, finally brought back Luke Skywalker and he doesn't have a single real light saber fight" (Toss). Yet, in that same search, user @MithrandilPlays wrote that the film "does complete justice to Luke Skywalker" (Mithrandil). Across the internet, people are bickering incessantly, six years later, about whether or not Luke Skywalker was in character in *The Last Jedi*. How can something be out of character to one individual, but not to others? In this paper I will argue that in the world of modern media the character is not singular, but a network of variations that are all equally real. Throughout this work, I will argue that the multiplicitous, fractured nature of the modern character analysis can be comprehended through an analysis of the performed identity networks of fictional characters. New, contemporary meanings can be extracted when analyzing characters when no one interpretation is privileged over another; the author is just as crucial as a community of teenagers online as an academic, and all these individuals hold sway on the meaning and reality of a text.

I will begin by outlining a theory of character and identity that I call performed identity networks, utilizing the concepts of nodes and links to visualize varying sized pieces within a whole network whole. This theory will be built on theories by individuals such as Patrick Jagoda, Henry Jenkins, Sue Ellen Case, and Samuel Weber. After this, I will perform an analysis of a performed identity network on the works of Jeff VanderMeer. His body of work easily fits within the concept of the network, with most of his series not being chronological or linear

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stories, but multiple contained stories within the same world. People can read works of VanderMeer in any order they wish, and still understand the story. Additionally, VanderMeer has used online interaction and alternate reality strategies to create engagement with his text, such as including an encrypted story throughout his book *City of Saints and Madmen*. Instead of focusing solely on one of his nonlinear series or his explicit use of network, I will analyze the fictionalized version of Jeff VanderMeer himself used as a character in *City of Saints and Madmen* as "X" and played as a joke on Twitter[1] as "Baby Raccoon." I will not be referring to the identity of the author Jeff VanderMeer, but of the fictionalized versions of himself that he includes in his works and on his social media. The aforementioned specific fictionalized identities of VanderMeer, X, and Baby Raccoon, will be defined as nodes. Then, I will link these two nodes together to perform a brief reading of "The Strange Case of X," revealing a dimension to the story that focuses on rewilding as well as the perseverance of the natural world. This paper will propose a theoretical framework with which to comprehend modern, fractured conceptions of character, and to demonstrate how that theoretical framework could be used.

Performing Identity Within a Network

To understand how performance of identity functions within a network form, we first have to define a network. The word network is notoriously flexible, referring to anything from a network of spies in a fiction novel to phone networks like Verizon, T-Mobile, et cetera. Individuals often come across the word network when told by a doctor that they are not "in network" for their insurance and are suddenly paying incredibly steep prices. While all these networks seem vastly different in meaning, there are some core elements of the idea that can help us narrow down a definition in the context of this study. Patrick Jagoda defined the conception of a network, which he referred to as the network imaginary as "the complex of material infrastructures and metaphorical figures that inform our experience with and our thinking about the contemporary world" which is

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[1] Due to the use of interactions on Twitter present in this work, I would like to include a disclaimer. At the time of writing, Twitter was referred to as X by Elon Musk, but retained the handle twitter.com. Due to the enduring nature of the Twitter brand and the likelihood that others may not recognize X due to its broad and vague nature, I will be referring to Twitter as such throughout the work. In addition, posts on Twitter will be referred to as "tweets," and cited as the same.

"closely tied to the growing interrelationship… that digital and networked technologies make possible…as well as the increased embeddedness of these forms in everyday life" (3). To imagine and conceptualize a network then, is to conceptualize the interconnected nature of modern existence. Daily, physical communication is connected to social media, to texts, to emails, to the media an individual consumes, to news. The world is no longer solitary, but a web of connections.

Another crucial element of understanding the network comes from Henry Jenkins' conceptions of convergence culture and participatory networks. Henry Jenkins was the first person to take fan culture and move it into the realm of tangible theory in his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. Convergence culture is defined as the ways in which different forms of media "interact in unpredictable ways" (2). New media, such as social media websites, interacts with old media, physical grassroots movements and books, to create new meanings that cannot be predicted, but can be examined. Participatory networks take the idea of networks above, in which all individuals are embedded in media of all forms around them, specifically to look at how individuals collectively participate and understand media and create convergence. I shift away from Jenkins by focusing on the performative power of convergence and collective participation; that is, how individual's online communication and language reconstructs meaning within a participatory network.

To understand performative power in networks, I will first briefly define performance studies and performativity in the context of this work. Performativity refers to the studies of how actions create reality through words, movements, et cetera. The idea of language creating reality came from J.L. Austin's lectures published as *How to Do Things With Words*, which forwarded a theory of speech acts. Speech acts meant that the words we say were actions in it of themselves– such as saying 'I Do' or christening a ship. Austin's work relates more to the idea of linguistic performativity than the more theatrical performance studies, though– performance studies focuses on how the act of performing creates meaning. This meaning could build from street performances, theater performances, and more. In our case, I want to consider how networks, and people within networks, perform meaning through their online actions and interactions, both in a theatrical way as audience members, and in a linguistic way as creators of meaning.

Crucial to the conceptualization of network performance is the concept of links and nodes. Jagoda refers to networks as "structure[s] composed of links and

nodes" which helps conceptualize the simultaneously solitary and communal elements of networks. Each singular unit in an internet network acts as a node, able to exist on its own without any understanding of the greater concept. To view the links between these nodes is to view the greater net we work as a whole, see the connections between each solitary unit, and see how this changes the overall understanding of the network. One text message would be a node, and that text could easily link that to the greater network of all text messages sent on a phone. Further, that compilation of all text messages is also a node, linked to the greater network of modern communication. The text messages could be linked to nodes such as social media, email, phone calls, or even face-to-face communication to better understand the network of one individual's communication. Networks are expansive and exponential. Nodes and links can explain a small, two- person network, or the greater global network.

Blending network theory with performance theory clarifies how I define nodes and links in the context of this paper. Links and nodes in networks may be better understood through Samuel Weber's concept of pearls and threads. Weber used these words in his work "Theatricality as a Medium," which unpacked the structure of theater, specifically plays. Weber's theater theory applies here due to the similarities between threads and pearls and links and nodes. Threads are defined as the "general plot of the play" while pearls are "specific scenes of the play" (23). The concept of threads and pearls are important precisely because the scenic "'pearls' can be separated from…the 'thread'," (23) allowing for moments in theater to exist as separate entities to the scenes surrounding them. Theater can have meaning in its scenes, but it gains greater meaning when it's conceptualized within the context of the greater thread, or the complete plot of the play. The definition of pearls and threads provide the building blocks for links and nodes, which take performed network identity one step further. Theater is linear; networks are nonlinear. Thus, links and nodes are actions of nonlinear performance, with each node and link being interacted without regard for space and time. Anyone can encounter a node at any time and connect those nodes to others in your own order; you will likely never encounter the whole image of a network. Thus, the act of linking nodes, of understanding networks, is a performative one – it constitutes an individual's reality through adjustments in language and action.

One example to explain the performative nature of networks could come from an individual's experience with a film. Two individual consumers, Person A and

Person B, are planning to see a film. Person A has already interacted with outside nodes– they have watched the trailer and read three film reviews. The film itself will be the fourth node to link within the network of the film. They go into the film with preconceived expectations, which alters the way Person A understands and experiences the film. The links alter, and potentially define, Person A's viewing experience. Conversely, Person B has seen nothing about the film and has no knowledge or expectations of the film. The film on its own is the first node and is the whole of the network that Person B is experiencing. Afterwards, though, Person B writes a review on Letterboxd, a popular social media site for reviewing films and sharing with friends. Person B starts by sharing their review, then reads the reviews of their friends. As they link their own Letterboxd review with other individual's reviews, with each review acting as their own self-contained nodes, Person B reconceptualizes their experience with the film. By the time they turn the next day to speak about the film with someone else, their opinions will have become linked to a network of nodes made up of Letterboxd users, meaning that Person B's understanding of their own experience with the film will have been altered by the whole of the network. If Person B was to talk to a friend, Person C, that person would encounter the whole of Person B's network as a node, which links with their own. Maybe Person D will come across Person B's review and link that node to his own perception of the film without perceiving the greater node of Person B's interpretation of the film. And then maybe Person C and Person D talk with Person E, on and on, building out networks and new perceptions infinitely. By encountering other understandings, opinions, themes, and interpretations, consumers alter their perceptions of their lived experience. When or how the network works is entirely up to the choices of the consumer. The choices an individual makes within the larger network performs their reality, even more so when living in a technological age, taking action not only physically, but digitally. The network, then, is a space for nonlinear performance, stretching further outward as individuals link additional nodes into their understanding.

Networks as nonlinear performance lead directly into how *identity* is performed in a network. To turn back to the filmgoer examples, Person B is constituting their identity by posting on Letterboxd. This action creates a node, one that can be linked with other Letterboxd reviews on Person B's profile. They have a network constituting and performing their identity within Letterboxd, but people could also consider their Letterboxd account as one node in a greater

network, one individuals can link with their Twitter profile or Instagram. Maybe, if the individual is a filmmaker themselves, they will connect the films they claim to like with the films they make. When you like a tweet, follow a creator on TikTok, post on Instagram, or so on, these posts and interactions become your online identity. Identity on one social media may differ from the another, creating separate conceptions of personality for each website. When linking the individual nodes of social media identities together, one comes closer to comprehending the whole performance of that individual, at least in the media space. They are not fractured, but multicast, a dozen different iterations of the same person across a network. I am borrowing the term "multicast" from Dhiraj Murthy's textbook, *Twitter*, emphasizing that individuals "become content producers" (8) themselves, posting heaps of different content which creates different theatrical portrayals of the self, then actively interacting with those versions across the internet. Even though a networked reading of identity brings us closer to a whole person, though, it never becomes the whole of that person. It does, however, become the whole of that person's performance. Their fictive projection of identity in many ways becomes their real identity because it affects not only their internal perception of themselves, but the external view of their personality by others.

Identity networks, though, are equally dictated by the observer as by the creator. Just as Person A and Person B built their own network of meaning about a film, one could build their own interpretation of an identity, choosing which nodes to interact with. If someone only knows an individual due to taking a college course with them, their networked perception of that person's identity is limited to the context of that course. If they then turned to the internet and found that individual on Instagram and Facebook, their networked perception would adjust and grow. Identity networks are performed equally by the individual themselves and by their surrounding audience. In fact, you cannot have one without the other. Sue Ellen Case argued that when interacting online, people require an assumption of a live person behind whatever account or post they are interacting with. She refers to the account or post as an "avatar" (174) or "mask" (177) which often comes with a presupposed human being behind it. This mask "depends upon some notion of the 'real' or the 'natural' for its function" (177), meaning that an individual online can only become real when someone else assumes they are. A person becomes a person through someone else's belief. To create an identity requires an audience for the performance, someone to see the technologized identity and accept it as reality.

The conception of a performed identity network can apply to how readers view characters in fiction media. Analyzing a character within its own network requires analyzing that character through the context of how individual conceptions of the character, or nodes, link to the greater understanding of the character as a whole. When applying the theory of digital performance of networked identity to text, one must consider the nodes that are performed through technological networks. To explain this application further, I turn to the example of Nick Carroway in *The Great Gatsby*. I could start by considering the node created by a social media interacting with the text specifically around Nick's identity. Maybe I could turn to a Discord server, a Reddit thread, or Tumblr tag. One quick search of "Nick Carroway" on Tumblr came up with two posts of note: one in which a Tumblr user describes themselves "giving [their friend] the Look every time something extremely homosexual happens" (fluff-e-boy) while watching *The Great Gatsby* for class, and another user claiming "Nick Carroway and Jay Gatsby are both queer and [they] will not hear otherwise" (shadowsandstarlight). Nick Carroway, when read using the conception of his character performed by Tumblr users, can be identified as a queer man. I can then take this Tumblr node to and link this to the textual node of the character. Analysis of scenes such as Nick's mysterious trip into a private room with Mr. McKee, or narrative cues such as the romanticization of Gatsby through Nick's point of view, become central to the reading. By using the performed node of the character created within the network of Tumblr and linking it with the textual node performed by the character's actions, readers create a broader, more complex reading of a character. This analysis of Nick's performed identity network reveals something new, specific to the modern age: *The Great Gatsby* can be read as a queer novel by modern readers.

The method with which readers analyze a character through performed identity networks then takes a clear structure. First is to define the character node from the original source (referring to the text of a novel, the dialogue in a video game, the portrayal in a film). Then, define outside nodes of identity performance, whether coming from a community online, a different text, or maybe a different individual. Finally, consider the full network, rereading the text with the full context of the character now defined. Whatever issues arise as central to both characters become central to the text, highlighting things that may have previously been overlooked. New, yet important, meanings can be derived from old sources.

All this considered, the remainder of this project will demonstrate the process of using a theory of performed identity networks to read the character that is the fictional Jeff VanderMeer. I will begin by doing a reading of Jeff VanderMeer's short story "The Strange Case of X," and emphasize how the character of X in this story is a fictionalized version of Jeff VanderMeer himself, existing in limbo between the factual and the fictional. Then, to further understand the identity network of the fictional Jeff VanderMeer, I will consider the node created by VanderMeer himself on Twitter, in which he refers to himself jokingly as "Baby Raccoon." After understanding how X and Baby Raccoon function as versions of the same character, I will perform a second reading of "The Strange Case of X" which focuses exclusively on my understanding of the greater network of fictional VanderMeer. I will link X and Baby Raccoon, creating a hybrid understanding of not only fictional Jeff VanderMeer, but of the story itself. Through defining and applying the network, I hope to argue that because meaning and identity is hybrid and multiplicitous in the modern age, analysis of media should be as well.

Fictional VanderMeer as "X"

Jeff VanderMeer's Ambergris trilogy begins with a collection of novellas titled *City of Saints and Madmen* that closely resembles a network form. The Ambergris trilogy takes placed in the city of Ambergris, an absurdist location full of mushroom people and brutal violence. Each novella is set within the city of Ambergris, though readers are originally led to believe that one story, "The Strange Case of X," takes place in the real world. "The Strange Case of X" revolves around two characters, a psychologist ("I") and an inmate of an asylum within Ambergris ("X"). The story takes place in both first person and third person, becoming first person only when the psychologist converses with the inmate. X is clearly VanderMeer himself, institutionalized for, allegedly, his belief that Ambergris is real. Readers may think they know where the story leads, maybe even thinking the story fits into old cliches, only for the ending to reveal that the story has taken place in Ambergris all along, and VanderMeer, aka X, has become trapped in a world of his own making.

X is defined as a node of a fictionalized Jeff VanderMeer through nods to his factual, real life. X used to live in Tallahassee; VanderMeer is an active citizen of Florida who writes op-eds about the politics of the state. X desperately misses his wife. He obsesses about leaving the asylum because "[his] wife is waiting for

[him]" (330). In the same vein, VanderMeer dedicates all of his books to his wife, Ann. Both the location of X's home and his fervent love for his wife are references to recognizable elements of VandeMeer's public personality. Readers are meant to connect the actions of X to the greater context of VanderMeer; to link this fictional node, X, to the factual node, Jeff VanderMeer. He reinforces this link in the "About the Author" section of *City of Saints and Madmen*. A narrator claims, "in late October 2003, on the eve of the publication of this very edition, VanderMeer disappeared from his house" (3), and he has not been seen since. About the Author sections are expected to break the fourth wall of sorts, to step away from the fictional and speak as a real person. Instead of including elements of his real personality, VanderMeer presents an author directly connected to X. By pointing to these connections, the real VanderMeer asks his audience to apply the fictionalized version to himself, to view him as built of both fact and fiction. X gains credibility by being a fictional mask of the real VanderMeer; VanderMeer loses a bit of his reliable reality by making himself the assumed reality behind a fictional identity.

As a node, X builds on an absurdist portrayal of VanderMeer's success. An example of VanderMeer's hyperbolic description of his career comes from drawings of sentient mushrooms presented to X by the psychiatrist, I. X claims the images are "sample drawings from Disney…for the animated movie of my novella 'Dradin, In Love'" (287). "Dradin, In Love" depicts a night of hedonistic anarchy, with depictions of child corpses, murder, rape, and other horrific images dominating the last section of the story. The idea that "Dradin In Love"–in which a key scene occurs while the main character stands next to a nude man in a dog collar–would be optioned for an animated children's film by Disney is inherently absurd. Readers are meant to acknowledge the fictionality of X's career, while still recognizing the factual undercurrent. Unlike the About the Author section, however, this absurdity emphasizes the fictionality of X. Absurdity creates distance between X and VanderMeer, establishing X as his own being outside of VanderMeer, despite being built on key characteristics of the real-world VanderMeer. Distinction is drawn between the identity of the fictionalized VanderMeer and the identity of the VanderMeer we would meet at author events. VanderMeer uses humor to give X his own life separate from himself, defining him as a node not only of the real VanderMeer, but of a separate character, that of the fictionalized VanderMeer.

X also becomes a solitary identity, a person who can be seen as a whole network, through the validation of other characters within "The Strange Case of X." In Ambergris, other individuals consistently define his identity based on their own understanding of his actions. The narrator, I, remarks that X would not like being called a patient, because "patients often did not like being labeled patients" (279). X's identity becomes tied with mental instability because of the diagnosis from an outside source. Unlike the prior nodes, which focused on resembling the real VanderMeer or distancing from him, X's perceived instability contains itself within the fictional realm. Other fictional characters call X's sanity into question, not that of the real author VanderMeer. X's identity builds upon external action *within* the fictional world of Ambergris, rendering him a sort of tangibility as a fictional VanderMeer. Similarly, when X first enters Ambergris, children mistake him for a "Living Saint" (298), a specific occupation that VanderMeer creates in his city of Ambergris. When the fictionalized VanderMeer enters the fictional world of Ambergris, he is immediately perceived by other fictional beings. He is not limited to the interpretations of the author and the reader but is instead built out through different nodes and interpretations of himself by other characters. Other fictional characters attempt to fit X within their own understanding, perceiving him as a patient or a Living Saint because that fits the context of what they know. Interpretations of X by the citizens of Ambergris flesh out the network of X within the context of Ambergris.

External involvement with X's performance defines X's identity, emphasizing the lack of control VanderMeer has on his identity. After writing about Ambergris, X experiences repeated instances when "[he is] continually surrounded by the products of [his] imagination, often given physical form by other people" (288). What was an internal part of X's mind becomes an external part of his identity. X is stuck within a performed identity that he created but has no control over. In a moment symbolic of this, the narrator says that he "had to help [X] lift the typewriter" (283), signaling the way that others carry X's creativity. X's creative identity is dictated by how his performance is perceived. Interpreting X through his creativity reminds the reader once more of the real-life author VanderMeer. VanderMeer adjusts how others perceive his identity through a fictional version of himself, which highlights the way his fictional writing adjusts his external perception. Everything VanderMeer writes changes based on its context, and those writings change the way people understand VanderMeer's identity.

X combines the factual and fictional VanderMeer. X acts as a node himself, but also as a network split into two nodes–the fictional side, defined by absurdist success and the validation of other fictional characters, and the factual side, based on Jeff VanderMeer's tangible experiences. X exists successfully because of both sides, which only emphasizes the lack of control that comes from creative endeavors. His stories will outlive him and continue even if X becomes trapped in his mind. X as a node, then, functions as a blurring of what is real and unreal and mimics a relinquishing of control over one's identity and creativity in the digital age. To focus so heavily on what is true or untrue about a person one can only interact with online, instead of what partially fictional persona the audience perceives, leads to dissonance and discomfort. Relinquishing control and allowing characters, creativity, and personas to have a split existence frees creators from exerting unnecessary effort in trying to limit the boundaries of their creation.

Fictional VanderMeer as "Baby Raccoon"

Now I turn once more to the online persona of Jeff VanderMeer, specifically his focus on using Twitter as an activist space to teach others about the process of rewilding. Rewilding is the process of cultivating the natural spaces in your home such as your garden, backyard, or front porches, in a way that allows nature to reclaim them. By not having a lawn, or specific landscaping, you can allow local plants, insects, and animals to thrive. Daily, he posts updates from his backyard, which he has rewilded– or, brought back to its natural state. VanderMeer frequently documents the interesting plants and animals that populate his yard. Often, that animal is a baby raccoon, such as when he tweeted a few photos of the raccoons throughout his yard with the caption "Some baby raccoon still shots. #VanderWild" (VanderMeer). Before Baby Raccoon was a piece of VanderMeer's identity, he was a vehicle for environmental activism.

The fictional identity of "Baby Raccoon" started out as an inside joke for the #VanderWild community. To reference his self-identification as a baby raccoon, on April Fool's VanderMeer posted the cover of a new book with the caption "So so happy today to reveal the cover for my new book, I, BABY RACCOON" (VanderMeer). The April Fool's Joke was on the heels of the prior year when he announced children's editions of his Southern Reach Trilogy. The post was well received, with users such as @loufreshwater replying, "I need this T-Shirt Jeff!" (Freshwater). Baby Raccoon beginning as a joke lends to his position as a node of

fictionalized VanderMeer– inside jokes require a surrounding audience to interact with a performance. The need for audience perception continues the issue raised by X, which is whether an online persona is fictional or factual. Here, VanderMeer utilized the inherent fictionality of online identity to create a fictionalized version of himself that existed through his Twitter audience's suspension of disbelief. Humor acts as a vehicle with which to emphasize audience perception and interaction. To be part of the joke requires a certain suspension of disbelief, a sort of ironic perception of the joke as something as real. The joke then gains real force, and that real force translates into the solidification of Baby Raccoon as an identity. When others accept the identity as real and actively appear to believe in it by joining in on the joke, Baby Raccoon gains traction and tangibility. Others outside of the circle may not understand the joke, but will comprehend that, for some reason, Jeff VanderMeer is also called Baby Raccoon. Because of an inside joke, others outside of that joke will interpret Baby Raccoon as a persona, a node that exists as whole within VanderMeer.

The outside interpretation of the joke made Baby Raccoon a complete node and a split fictional identity when VanderMeer brought "Baby Raccoon" into the professional world outside of Twitter. VanderMeer was not the first individual to push Baby Raccoon into the spotlight. Early in 2023, due to his profile picture being a raccoon, "a website quoted one of [VanderMeer's] novels and used [the raccoon picture] as a headshot alongside the quote" (VanderMeer). A professional individual, who was not a part of the in-group on Twitter, viewed the Baby Raccoon persona and assumed it to be a real, key part of VanderMeer's identity. His fictional persona gained real force, affecting the way his physical identity was believed and performed by others. Later in 2023, VanderMeer continued this joke, writing an author bio for a convention that described himself as "A baby raccoon who lives in a ravine" (VanderMeer). VanderMeer was called out by his wife over email, but only responded with "Should I add more detail about the ravine? Is that the problem?" (VanderMeer). An inside joke only understood by VanderMeer's Twitter followers now became key to VanderMeer's self-promotion. The presence of Baby Raccoon to promote the works of factual Jeff VanderMeer blurs the lines between the fictional and the factual, superimposing Baby Raccoon onto the live Jeff VanderMeer, the way that identity is constituted not only by the real, but by the unreal. No node online is completely real– they are more often self-contained fictional identities which can expand the real individual's identity.

VanderMeer used the fictional identity of "Baby Raccoon" as a running joke to present feelings of social estrangement in his professional life. Recent examples of this came when VanderMeer traveled to promote the reprint of one of his first novels, *Veniss Underground*. When reflecting on his experience traveling, VanderMeer noted that other authors tended to "[take] photos with their book and bookstore owners while traveling," which he did not do, because he was "still in the 'baby raccoon felt shy so signed a few books incognito and fled the scene' phase" (VanderMeer). When he referred to what he felt was his own deficiency as an author, he tied it to his identity as a Baby Raccoon. Baby Raccoon was meant to explain how uncomfortable VanderMeer felt in the social world around him. In many ways, Baby Raccoon is a self-contained fictional entity with which VanderMeer explores his feelings of distance to other human beings. By performing himself as an animal, he explores in a fictional realm his comfort within the natural world, and shares that with his audience. VanderMeer, as Baby Raccoon, is an anxious animal who does not wish to interact with the outside world, though he must for the sake of his own success. When VanderMeer officially returned home from traveling, before the previously mentioned reflection, he posted a photo of his backyard with the caption, "baby raccoon, back where he belongs" (VanderMeer). Baby Raccoon feels at home in the natural world, away from human creation and civilization. His backyard, brought back to its most natural state, is where Baby Raccoon feels the safest. Baby Raccoon, like VanderMeer's backyard, thrives when subsumed by nature, or rewilded.

Baby Raccoon is not just performed by VanderMeer, but by his audience, solidifying it as a node of the fictional VanderMeer persona. Returning to the example of the ReaderCon event, VanderMeer posted a list of his schedule for the convention and noted he forgot to change his bio for the program. Under this tweet, user Marion Deeds, @mariond_d, replied, "We think of you as a baby raccoon now" (Deeds). VanderMeer validated this response and continued in conversation with the user. The author bio was validated by outside voices, with an individual proudly buying into the joke and declaring they personally now could only imagine Jeff VanderMeer to be a baby raccoon. These responses call back to the earlier suspension of disbelief but move into a realm of belief. The audiences allow themselves to believe in VanderMeer as Baby Raccoon, to expect the fictional Baby Raccoon to appear at events and sign their books. Further, when VanderMeer later posted a picture of his ID card for the event, he was responded to with comments about his identity as Baby Raccoon, confused why

this would not be a part of his ID. VanderMeer reposted the ID card with "(and baby raccoon)" written in sharpie under his name, citing that he "fixed it due to comments" (VanderMeer). VanderMeer's identity as a "baby raccoon," which started as a joke relating to his rewilding efforts and social faux pas, became a persona others could recognize and identify. Not only this, but his audience was able to alter the choices of VanderMeer as Baby Raccoon due to their own interaction and enthusiasm. VanderMeer was expected to include the fictional node of himself within his factual performance of identity, his fractured self incomplete without its Twitter half. Whether or not VanderMeer took on his fictional Baby Raccoon identity was no longer solely in the real VanderMeer's control; the fictional node took on a tangible force.

Baby Raccoon represents a lack of control over not only VanderMeer's fictional world, but of the natural world. Baby Raccoon as a node is characterized by his inability to feel comfortable in man-made settings. Unlike X, Baby Raccoon is not his own character, but a fictional, comedic node of the technological hybrid that is VanderMeer's public identity. Baby Raccoon exists more freely in the real world because he is a node of VanderMeer that VanderMeer uses to interact with other individuals. The concept of rewilding fits well here, precisely because Baby Raccoon is a rewilding of VanderMeer. The human VanderMeer becomes subsumed by the animal Baby Raccoon, who runs his technological persona and does his professional work for him. X fights the wilding of his creation; Baby Raccoon is the wilding of VanderMeer himself.

The Strange Case of Baby Raccoon

Having now set the parameters of the identity network we're visualizing we can now turn back to "The Strange Case of X." The nodes of Baby Raccoon and X link together to create the image of a network of fictionalized VanderMeer. We then can reread "The Strange Case of X" through the lens of the identity network we've considered. This analysis reveals the crucial element of VanderMeer's story: the fictional VanderMeer relinquishes control of himself and his works to achieve a rewilding of his identity. Fictional VanderMeer, understood through X and Baby Raccoon, relinquishes himself to nature.

Before being trapped in Ambergris, Fictional VanderMeer attempts to control his world through his writing, but interactions with animals consistently unmoor his control. As attempts to write about Ambergris, he finds himself plagued by a

creature made of his own inner darkness, which he describes as a "sleek, black manta ray with cat-like amber-red eyes" (342). This fishlike creature plagues Fictional VanderMeer, and Fictional VanderMeer eventually decides he must "destroy the creature or be destroyed by it" (317). But in the end, the creature does destroy him in a way, as it takes him into Ambergris and traps him there. He works to control the world he creates, but an animal keeps him from that control. The natural world intervenes on his creations and keeps him from continuing forward. The node X must release control of his creativity almost through creating space for the node Baby Raccoon. He has an animal inside of him, reflected by the animals around him, and until he surrenders to that animal and allows it to be part of him, he cannot fully reach some sort of sanity.

"The Strange Case of X" exists in first and third person, reflecting the split nature of Fictional VanderMeer. The narrator, who we learn to be X himself, reflects that X "might even tell the story in first and third person, to both personalize and distance the events" (332). This distance and personalization comes from a feeling of being split through reality and insanity, but it also exemplifies his wrestling with control. Attempting to tell the story is an act of control, and one which similarly pushes against the process of rewilding. Arguably, Fictional VanderMeer wishes to write the story to suppress the wild Baby Raccoon persona, but the perspective splits in half, revealing the rewilded node of VanderMeer's identity nonetheless.

As such, the sterile world X inhabits cannot suppress the natural world of Baby Raccoon, pushing against external control on the Fictional VanderMeer. The asylum where X is kept is described as smelling like "mold and a sickly sweet sterility," (277) where "mushrooms [sprout] from the most unexpected places" (278). Though enough sterilizing chemicals are used that a "sickly sweet" smell is created by their abundance, the mold and mushrooms cannot be kept out. The wild creeps in, attempting to rewild the space of the asylum from the get-go. Not only this, but in the crack of the building, the narrator finds "a tiny rose" that has "blossomed, defiantly blood-red" (279). Once again, attempts were made by human beings to control Fictional VanderMeer and suppress his rewilded node, but the nature returns, revealing that the lack of control and perceived insanity becomes a sort of stability for Fictional VanderMeer. An external, persistent rewilding reflects the internal rewilding occurring with Fictional VanderMeer.

The moral here, then, is that no matter human intentions, the natural world will survive and grow. To fight nature is a losing battle, where plants and animals

will find space within the cracks. Whether that fight is internal or external, nature will still find its way in. The more an individual pushes against nature, the more split they will become. Nature will always overcome. The mold will grow over the sterility; the rose will become a rosebush. If we consider X and Baby Raccoon as the same person, we can speculate that in the universes of Ambergris and Fictional VanderMeer, X disappeared and genuinely was replaced by a raccoon version of himself to ran his Twitter account. It's certainly not the strangest thing to happen in the world of Ambergris. Baby Raccoon would then be a strange rewilding of X's life, where his human-made creations trap him, leaving only the animal behind.

Conclusion

Analyzing texts through the lens of identity networks allows a narrowing in on meaning that is potentially more potent for a modern audience. "The Strange Case of X" was published in 2001, and Baby Raccoon was created two decades later. None of the meaning found today was explicitly intended by VanderMeer but reveals a consistent them throughout his fractured persona and networked novels. By taking the new identity node and linking it to the old, we find meaning in VanderMeer's text that more closely resembles his goals in the current day. The seeds of rewilding were sown in VanderMeer's works far before he announced a book on rewilding.

Through performed identity networks, scholars can connect pieces of identity in nonlinear ways, applying modern conceptions to ancient texts and vice versa. We can move not only linearly through identity, but exponentially, expanding our knowledge of texts through the expansion of our conceptions of identity. What is considered a canonized characterization holds just as much sway as the headcanons of young readers on TikTok. With this communistic approach to identity, critics can better understand the tangible performative power of a text, whether that be literature, film, or any form of media. Defining a piece of a performed identity network reveals the way a text performs across time and space. One can see explicitly what elements of a character have stuck with audiences. Analysis can show where elements creators or original audiences did not expect became the core of a character.

Analysis of performed identity networks can be applied a myriad of ways in varying fields, such as pop culture studies or media arts studies. This kind of

analysis could work well in discussions of franchise, specifically in considering how the character exists as its own node from one text to another, and what links exist between those two nodes. Or, potentially, adaptation could use this to find what the full network of a character between the source material and adaptation looks like, and how the affirming reading of all versions of a character being real to that character changes the way the text is read. Or, better yet, one could consider how modern performances of the identity of characters in classic or canonized works create meanings that are central to modern understandings of older texts. The potential foci of this analysis are expansive and exponential. It provides a tangible way to consider characters in the fractured, networked era we are living and creating within.

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