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Nothing Monstrous Existed Here: Uncanny Nature in The Southern Reach Trilogy

Morgan Mundy
University of Mississippi

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“NOTHING MONSTROUS EXISTED HERE”: UNCANNY NATURE IN *THE SOUTHERN REACH TRILOGY*

by
Morgan Ellen Mundy

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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Approved by:

Advisor: Dr. Kate Lechler

Reader: Dr. Karen Raber

Reader: Dr. Derrick Harriell

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ABSTRACT

MORGAN ELLEN MUNDY: “Nothing monstrous existed here”: Uncanny Nature in *The Southern Reach* Trilogy
(Under the direction of Kate Lechler)

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the relationships between humans and their environments in Jeff VanderMeer’s *The Southern Reach* trilogy. VanderMeer, throughout the trilogy, uses the horror aesthetics of the New Weird genre to break down the barriers between human and nonhuman, natural and unnatural. By showing the characters as more aware of their status as human and the agency of the natural world around them as a result of the novels’ plot, *The Southern Reach* forces characters and readers alike to confront a world in which becoming something more than human might be possible and even necessary for survival. I argue that VanderMeer’s use of this posthumanist rhetoric in his novels makes for a larger commentary around environmentalism, the status of the “human,” and environmentalism in our own world today.

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INTRODUCTION

Philosopher Timothy Morton, in his 2013 book *Hyperobjects*, states, “The end of the world has already occurred.” When did this apocalypse happen and why have we not been able to see it? Morton contends that the end of the world correlates to the concept of the Anthropocene—the ecological era we occupy today, defined by humanity’s extreme influence over the environment around us. For Morton, “the inception of humanity as a geophysical force on a planetary scale” has brought about this “end of the world” (7); in the Anthropocene, the former balance between nature and humanity no longer applies, because humans are *changing* the world so rapidly. Morton’s book coins the term *hyperobjects* to describe the experience of being in this particular ecological moment. Hyperobjects are “assemblies of objects or phenomena whose diffusion in time or space makes them difficult to grasp—such as, for example, climate change” (Prendergast 341).

“[*Hyperobjects* have] become central to thinking about storytelling in the modern era, in my opinion,” says author Jeff VanderMeer. “The word [hyperobjects]... is a very important signifier for any fiction writer wishing to engage with the fragmented and diffuse issues related to the Anthropocene” (“Hauntings in the Anthropocene”). VanderMeer is an author of several successful fiction series, and he is also known for his editing work, alongside his wife Ann. However, he is best known for the award-winning *Southern Reach* trilogy. Blending gothic horror with science fiction tropes, *The Southern*

Reach grapples with the problems of the Anthropocene and show what could happen if a hyperobject was not so far off—if it was *right here*, with us, instead. In the reality of VanderMeer’s novels, hyperobjects—manifesting as an unsettling, monstrous version of nature—are directly present, enacting forces on the world that unsettle the balance of the Anthropocene.

The Southern Reach series, released over eight months in 2014, focuses on a mysterious site known only as “Area X”. Described as a “pristine wilderness” (*Annihilation* 95) along a stretch of “forgotten coast” somewhere in the United States (*Authority* 35), Area X is an uninhabited site in which, thirty years before the first book, a strange occurrence took place that enclosed it in a seemingly-impenetrable border and caused all humans caught within its confines to disappear. Area X is monitored by the shadowy Southern Reach, a government organization which has covered Area X’s existence up by claiming it is the site of an environmental disaster. For years, the Southern Reach has been sending expeditions into Area X’s borders, hoping to find some answers about what it holds. The first book in the series, *Annihilation*, chronicles the twelfth expedition; it is told from the point of view of a character known only as “the biologist,” the wife of one of the previous expedition members. The biologist comes to realize Area X is not simply a “pristine wilderness,” and has actively been transforming the people caught inside its confines.

The sequel, *Authority*, is largely set inside the Southern Reach facility. After the death of the previous director, who traveled with the biologist’s expedition, a government agent named John Rodriguez (also known as Control) is brought in to attempt to learn the

secret of Area X's creation. He forms a bond with the person he assumes to be the biologist, who is in the Southern Reach's custody after returning from Area X. However, Control does not realize that Area X is already encroaching on the outside world; the woman who he assumes is the biologist, along with the other returned twelfth expedition members, is a doppelganger made by Area X. At the end of the novel, Area X's borders engulf the Southern Reach facility, while Ghost Bird (the biologist's double) and Control enter Area X itself.

Finally, *Acceptance* shows Ghost Bird and Control's travels through Area X and outlines its history, partly through flashbacks told from the points of view of Saul Evans—a lighthouse keeper who lived along the coast before Area X's arrival—and Gloria—the former director of the Southern Reach. *Acceptance* reveals that Area X is the byproduct of an alien civilization, advanced in genetic mimicry, apparently created to clean up the environmental waste created by humans. However, it does not appear that the aliens have any real understanding or contact with humanity. At the end of the novel, it is implied that Area X's borders continue to advance, leaving readers with the mystery of what will become of the world and the human race if it does.

Through the course of this thesis, I will show that *The Southern Reach* trilogy is an example of an emerging movement in fiction—dubbed “The New Weird”—which, when combined with ecological themes, can provide a fresh outlook on environmental problems. VanderMeer's books stress the New Weird philosophy of breaking down borders between the environment and humanity, the human and the nonhuman. I argue that *The Southern Reach* trilogy presents a world where becoming something more than human is inevitable in the time of the Anthropocene, and that VanderMeer presents the

shift away from the separation of the human from the environment as a necessity in order to preserve the natural world around us. VanderMeer is demonstrating, through the use of what ecocritics call the “ecological uncanny,” “the gradual realization by humans that they are not running the show, at the very moment of their most powerful technological mastery on a planetary scale”—a revelation which has come to define our current ecological moment (*Hyperobjects* 164).

The first chapter focuses on the environment of Area X and how it encapsulates the Freudian notion of the uncanny. While uncanniness has come to be synonymous with “unsettling” or “strange”, Freud conceived the idea of “the uncanny” as something frightening which recalls repressed beliefs about the world (20). When we experience the *ecological uncanny*, then, we are remembering the repressed knowledge that the world around us is not separate from us; it is a home we have forgotten *is* home. Timothy Morton, in his book *Ecological Thought*, states, “The uncanny exists because we’re always somewhere” (52). Morton highlights the ecological uncanny as an inevitable byproduct of realizing we live in an interconnected world—but he also stresses that realization is crucial for developing a better ecological awareness.

I show also that VanderMeer understands the experience of the ecological uncanny is central to living in the Anthropocene, which is why he uses it as a main point of horror in *The Southern Reach*. By making Area X into an agent in its own right, with sentience and a willpower which can even overtake humans’, he is both exposing the horror of the uncanny and breaking down the idea of a nature/culture barrier which has become prevalent in the time of humanism. In the novels, the concept of *terroir* is used to promote a better understanding of how Area X works. Simply put, *terroir* is the way an

environment influences the organisms inside said environment—and it is not hard to see that Area X enacts a particularly powerful *terroir* on the humans who enter it. I argue that VanderMeer, by emphasizing Area X's *terroir*, advocates for the idea prevalent in ecocriticism that the environment is its own organism and that a new kind of respect for environmental power and autonomy must become present in order for humanity to live on in the time of the Anthropocene.

Chapter 2 continues the theme of analyzing VanderMeer's focus on transcending boundaries between people and their environment. In particular, *The Southern Reach* shows the futility not only of a nature/culture divide but of a human/nonhuman one as well. Throughout the trilogy, characters find their bodies changed by the influence of Area X, and many of them become beings which can easily be considered monstrous. Saul Evans, the keeper of the lighthouse that would later become one of the central landmarks of Area X, is turned into the Crawler, a creature with the sole purpose of genetic mimicry. The Crawler creates a steady stream of plant-based words inside the "tower" (the other major structure of Area X); the same words that infect the biologist in *Annihilation*. The biologist, as it is revealed in *Acceptance*, spends thirty years trapped inside the border, before she is reborn as an enormous organism reminiscent of Cthulhu. However, that is not her only transformation. *Authority* shows that she, as all the other expedition members, has been copied by the Crawler in order to infect the outside world. The double Ghost Bird is taken to the Southern Reach's facility, but eventually returns to Area X along with Control. The final subject of metamorphosis in the series, Control abandons his hope of fighting the change Area X is beginning to impose on the

surrounding world in the climax of *Acceptance*, embodying the title of the novel and allowing himself to be turned into something new.

In most other contexts, particularly in works with a horror focus, we consider being changed from something human as a terrifying act. The entire genre of body horror stems from “the fear not of death but of one’s own body and its potential destruction” (Lopez Cruz 161). However, *The Southern Reach*’s monsters are not simply regulated to the realm of nightmares. VanderMeer uses these monsters to highlight the varying reactions to the breakdown of the human/nonhuman binary that has become society’s dominant approach. Each of the characters has a different environmental ethics, and each has a different response to the transformations of their bodies. VanderMeer ultimately *endorses* these transformations by having Control be transformed willingly, the only character to do so. Using Control and Ghost Bird as examples, VanderMeer advocates for a world of posthumanism—a philosophical model which decentralizes the human as the highest power, separate from the rest of the world. VanderMeer’s posthuman creatures point to an environmental code that embraces the idea of humans and nonhumans being bound with each other, and through them he stresses that caring for our environment is, in many ways, caring for ourselves.

In the beginning of Chapter 3, I discuss the wider literary movements that define *The Southern Reach* trilogy. In particular, I stress the series’ importance is an example of the New Weird. Jeff VanderMeer himself, along with his wife Ann, are steeped in the movement; in 2008, they published their anthology *The New Weird*, the introduction of which sought to bring solid definition to a genre which had not previously been given much attention by critics. The New Weird—taking its name from the “Old Weird,” the

Lovecraftian horror of the early 20th century—“focus[es] on the monsters and the grotesquery but not the ‘scare’, according to VanderMeer (“The New Weird: ‘It’s Alive?’” 19). Particularly in stories with an ecological focus, like *The Southern Reach*, this allows New Weird authors to study the horror the ecological uncanny inspires without reaffirming our separation from it.

This chapter also emphasizes *The Southern Reach*’s themes of blurring binaries, but in a different context. I examine the ways in which environmental communication is handled in *The Southern Reach* and show how VanderMeer breaks down an us-vs.-them mentality present in how the characters talk about Area X. Many of VanderMeer’s characters default to defining Area X as an enemy to fight, something which is completely antithetical to humanity itself. They strive to find some kind of limit or weakness they can exploit, because they feel that Area X is seeking to destroy them. However, it is clear throughout the novels that Area X does not so much as care about humans, much less act in a purposefully malicious way towards them. It is simply another environment, forcing what enters it into adaptation. I argue that the inability for communication between Area X and the humans of the novel echoes the deficiency society has in environmental communication today. We do not listen to the world around us, instead actively polluting it and ignoring its state.

Through the course of my research, I hope to show that the importance of stories like *The Southern Reach* series for communicating the environmental problems facing humanity today and in the future. Instead of focusing on the fear or terror of environmental collapse or only taking the position that *something* needs to happen without offering a method for change, VanderMeer’s books show that a new kind of

notion of humanity's relationship to the environment can occur. Additionally, they acknowledge that this new interaction with the environment means facing uncomfortable truths about the world and our place inside it—coming face-to-face with ecological hyperobjects. While New Weird fiction, like *The Southern Reach*, has not gained as much notoriety as other genres, I believe that it *should*, because, by showing the breakdown of boundaries between humans and nature, it offers us a new way of environmental thought.

CHAPTER I: AREA X & THE ECOLOGICAL UNCANNY

Jeff VanderMeer, when asked where the inspiration came from for the landscape of *The Southern Reach*, has cited the marshes of North Florida—specifically the St. Marks Wildlife Refuge—as the closest approximation to a real-world Area X. “[T]he book’s very faithful to the topography and the ecosystems you can find there,” he stated of the hiking grounds which would eventually influence his work, “it’s a truly unique and valuable place... So I didn’t really make anything up in terms of the natural elements in the novel” (Slatterly). The idea of Area X having an analogy in our own world was also experienced by the filmmakers of Alex Garland’s adaptation of *Annihilation*, when they attempted to film there. VanderMeer revealed of the production, “One fascinating thing the filmmakers told me is that getting depth perception onto the screen in North Florida was impossible. That the camera, no matter what they did, registered a flat wall of vegetation because it’s all so dense and overwhelming—that, in fact, Area X was already there in a sense, subverting and contaminating the camera lens” (Hageman 47). Even if we have no Area X in our world, the filmmakers and VanderMeer both have experienced the power to “subvert” and “contaminate” which Area X wields so effectively.

The idea of Area X already existing—in a tangential way—is one VanderMeer subtly weaves into the series, making readers think more deeply about the world around them. What makes Area X (and the real life environments like it) so unsettling to us? *The Southern Reach* series implies the answer, in part, lies in its ability to subvert the expectation that nature and the man-made world are separate—a clear “inside” and

“outside”. The environment of Area X is embedded with the notion of the ecological uncanny: settings which upset our traditional thinking that nature is separate from “Mankind”. Throughout *The Southern Reach*, VanderMeer uses the uncanny nature of Area X to highlight the erosion of the boundaries between the inside and outside; this, in turn, causes readers to think more critically about the apparent lack of autonomy of the natural world around them. Though Area X might not exist in real life, the approach to it in *The Southern Reach* can tell us something about our own interactions with the environment and what we can do to improve them going forward.

Sigmund Freud’s 1919 essay defines the uncanny for its uses in psychology, particularly in psychosexual development. In “The Uncanny”, he states that uncanniness is generalized as “that class of the frightening which leads us back to what is known of old and long familiar” (20). According to Freud, uncanny experiences come from the re-affirmation of beliefs we have previously abandoned in childhood—such as the idea that the dead can come back to life. As such, the uncanny is entwined in cultural norms; society tells us what to abandon and what to retain as we continue in development. The *ecological* uncanny is particularly interested in humanity’s tendency to place firm boundaries between ideas such as nature and culture. It “expos[es] the human in the natural and *vice versa*” (“*The Terror and the Terroir*” 67).

Freud did not discuss the ecological uncanny outright in his paper. However, he does show that the notion of the *environment* having the capacity to be unsettling derives from the word “uncanny” itself. As Freud points out, the German linguistic root of *uncanny* (or *unheimlich*) does not come from “canniness” (which, in German and in English, can mean “pleasantness”); it derives from the word *homely* (or *heimlich*). The

uncanny, then, is both familiar and strange, because we have repressed the knowledge of it as something we once knew (47). The ecological uncanny, in particular, points to an environment which was once “homely” that has now become foreign, because society causes us to think of the environment as entirely separate from humanity.

VanderMeer’s novels, through Area X, show a clear example of the ecological uncanny’s ability to highlight the dysfunctional relationship between people and their environments. Almost every time they describe Area X, the characters refuse to acknowledge the possibility that it is a part of the world they inhabit; they separate it, closing it off from them. This is especially noticeable in the way the Southern Reach remains adamant that Area X has a definite end point. Control, when describing the circumstances that created Area X, says, “About thirty-two years ago... an Event had occurred that began to transform the landscape and simultaneously caused an invisible border or wall to appear.” He stresses the border’s “impenetrable limits” and notes the Southern Reach’s anxiety about a “break in containment” (*Authority* 34-35). Though there is no way for them to truly know if Area X *is* contained, the Southern Reach still acts as if they have established a quarantine; Control points out Area X’s “discrete boundaries” are “patrolled... ceaselessly” by the military (*Authority* 78). The Southern Reach’s very existence even reconfirms the idea of Area X as something separate; it acts as the kind of barrier between the rest of the world and Area X, filtering what is allowed to come in and out. It is as if the characters of *The Southern Reach* think of Area X as a warzone, or as occupying an otherworld completely unavailable to human society.

By stressing the importance of a border, Control, along with the rest of the Southern Reach, positions Area X as a kind of “there” to humanity’s “here”. The act of

believing in some “impenetrable limits” to Area X reconfirms the belief that society is the default *inside*. Nature, then, becomes something other than the “home” it once was; instead, it is only something we live alongside. However, this only works as long as nature remains unthreatening and we have a separate society to retreat to. Stacy Alaimo touches on this idea in her essay “Discomforting Creatures: Monstrous Natures in Recent Films.” According to Alaimo, a “monstrous nature” is an environment which “literally threatens human life and figuratively threatens the bounds of human subjectivity”—a place which refuses to let humanity become distinct from it. She points out the capacity for humans to do what she calls “border work” against monstrous natures, which “dramatically distinguish[es] ‘man’ from nature” (280). In her analysis, “The proximity of... monstrous nature to... humans makes... urgent the plot to demarcate firm boundaries” (286) in order for characters to avoid the experience of the uncanny realization that nature is no longer separate. The Southern Reach appears to be acting on this very impulse, designating Area X as a “monstrous nature,” designating it as an example of the ecological uncanny, and performing the “border work” of keeping at least the appearance of closing off Area X from the rest of the world. This reaction shows how deeply ingrained the concept of nature as separate has become in the Anthropocene—though, as VanderMeer shows, this idea turns out to be a lie.

Before the readers or characters of *The Southern Reach* trilogy even realize that Area X is slowly affecting the rest of the world, VanderMeer portrays Area X as defying manmade constraints. From its first descriptions, Area X is defined as “transitional” in a biological sense, comprised of “ecosystems that are neither of one or another sort, ecosystems that are somehow of two kinds at once and which are neither at once,

ecosystems that confront us with the multiplicity of the real in its disorder” (Tabas 13). The inside of Area X parallels what it will eventually become to the human outside: boundaryless. The biologist outlines Area X as being “home to a complexity of ecosystems... [W]ithin the space of walking only six or seven miles, you went from forest to swamp to salt marsh to beach.” The animal and plant life is also contradictory and unusual: “[The biologist] would find marine life that had adjusted to the brackish freshwater... sharing the same environment with otters and deer. If you walked along the beach, riddled through with the holes of fiddler crabs, you would sometimes look out to see one of the giant reptiles, for they, too, had adapted to their habitat” (*Annihilation* 12).

While these descriptions may seem like clinical scientific analyses of the landscape, the deeper the biologist (and the reader) goes into Area X, the more she believes “these habitats were transitional in a deeply *unnatural* way” (160). Why is that so? It might point to the biologist’s continued belief in man-made constraints inside Area X, though they may no longer be applicable. According to Brad Tabas, “[T]he ideas and representations that we have about... what we call ‘nature,’ are not identical with the real... In other words, the nature that we think, and think that we see, is a deformed version of the real, transformed by complex perceptual and cognitive processes” (2). Though the biologist is an expert in ecosystems, she experiences a “deformed version of the real” in her inability to fathom an environment which transitions in what she feels are too many ways to be “natural”. Area X works its ecological uncanniness on her in the realization that it does not abide by what even science considers normative; instead, it directly confronts the biologist and the reader with the fact that nature can and does adapt in different ways than we might expect.

Additionally, Area X also distorts the *physical* idea of what we might consider man-made versus natural—down to its actual structures. The most apparent example of this comes in the presence of what the biologist calls the Tower. The biologist maintains a fascination with this strange construction from the outset of her time in Area X, almost immediately giving it attributes of a human-built structure: “At first, only I saw it as a tower. I don’t know why the word tower came to me, given that it tunneled into the ground. I could as easily have considered it a bunker or a submerged building” (*Annihilation* 6). These descriptors—“tower,” “bunker,” and “submerged building”—make it seem as if the Tower is inherently a man-made structure, as those are not typically words we assign to natural formations. Even Control’s phrase of “topographical anomaly” implies something that is “not supposed to be there” (*Annihilation* 1)—in other words, something that does not fit with the natural world.

The Tower, however, is not only a product of Area X’s environment but also a creature in its own right. VanderMeer continually describes the Tower in a way that analogizes it to a living organism. After the biologist has become infected by Area X, she realizes, “The tower *breathed*, and the walls when I went to touch them carried the echo of a heartbeat... and they were not made of stone but of living tissue” (*Annihilation* 41). Control and Gloria (the former director of the Southern Reach and the psychologist from the biologist’s expedition) also both mention the idea of the Tower drawing breath; Control describes the wall as “like a manta ray from the aquarium: firm and smooth, with a serrated roughness but with more give, and behind it the sense of something vast, breathing in and out” (*Authority* 293-294). Gloria, however, takes this idea further, by creating the image of the Tower as a kind of *mouth* for Area X:

The tower is breathing. There is no ambiguity about it: The flesh of the circular top of the anomaly rises and falls with the regular rhythm of a person deep in sleep...

Will it wake up while you're inside it?

The opening leading into darkness resembles a maw more than a passageway...

The stairs form a curling snarl of crooked teeth, the air expelled smelling of thick rot. (*Acceptance* 55)

These descriptions of the Tower as a living and *breathing* organism give Area X life in its own right; it is neither a simple landscape painting of “pristine wilderness” nor something that can be equated to human civilization. Further, the idea of the Tower being Area X’s “maw” creates the precedent for Area X itself as an organism; if the Tower is the mouth, then the rest of Area X can be the rest of the body, and can have its own agendas and actions. The result of the realization that the Tower is a living organism with a kind of sentience upsets the idea that nature is beholden to human willpower; instead, it operates for itself, threatening humanity’s perception that nature is somehow *inferior*.

Control, after Area X’s boundaries have overtaken the Southern Reach facilities, realizes “that placing trust in a word like *border* had been a mistake, a trap” (*Authority* 297). Area X (though the characters do not realize this until much too late) begins exercising its power over the rest of the world quickly in the novels; it begins seeping out into the rest of the world, blurring the boundaries between human and nature. Though various characters admit to the “border... advancing... a little bit more every year” (*Annihilation* 157), they seem reluctant to see that Area X is unfurling its tendrils out to civilization long before—that it has turned humans into agents of its cause. This begins

with the members of the eleventh and twelfth expeditions, among the only people to escape Area X alive. Though they supposedly suffer from a kind of amnesia and later die from a cancer Area X has infected them with, it is revealed that they are all doubles of the original expedition members with the aim to “contaminate” both the world outside the border and, in particular “the Southern Reach itself” (*Authority* 304). The use of the doubles is the first clue that Area X will not be constrained by the ideas of nature being separate from humanity.

The other major character actively used by Area X for this purpose is Whitby, one of the Southern Reach scientists. Over the course of *Authority*, Control realizes that, before Gloria left on the twelfth expedition, the pair made an unsanctioned trip beyond the border. Slowly, Control and the reader come to understand Whitby did not escape unscathed; he becomes “a breach, a leak, a door into Area X” himself. As his behavior becomes increasingly erratic, his relation to Area X grows in Control’s and the reader’s mind. Finally, it is revealed that Whitby has been “calling out” to the director like a “human beacon”—drawing the double of the director and, by extension, Area X’s border, to the Southern Reach’s facilities (*Authority* 297). Whitby’s association with Area X shows the failure in thinking that there is a tangible barrier against the environment; he shows “what seems impermeable... in fact, over time [becomes] very permeable” (*Authority* 305). Gloria and Whitby fooled themselves into thinking they could walk out of Area X unscathed. Area X continues exploiting humans’ ego, our belief that we hold power over nature, in order to co-opt humans’ bodies for its cause of expansion (an idea I speak about more in Chapter 2). VanderMeer portrays the environment of Area X as

having *agency*—when humans have so long defaulted to the idea that nature is passive, a backdrop.

Area X’s agency is precisely why it is uncanny in an ecological sense; it becomes an active player in the plot and the lives of the characters, reminding us that humanity’s state for thousands of years was *dictated* by the environment, not vice versa. *The Southern Reach* directly addresses this notion of nature imposing its will on its subjects in the discussions of the term *terroir* that take place throughout *Authority* and *Acceptance*. Ironically, it is Whitby who first introduces the idea to Control, when they are visiting the border zone:

“A wine term,” Whitby said... “It means the specific characteristics of a place—the geography, geology, and climate that, in concert with the vine’s own genetic propensities, can create a startling, deep, original vintage.”

... “How does this apply to our work?”

“In all ways,” Whitby said, his enthusiasm doubled, if anything. “Terroir’s direct translation is ‘a sense of place,’ and what it means is the sum of the effects of a localized environment, inasmuch as they impact the qualities of a particular product. Yes, that can mean wine, but what if you applied these criteria to thinking about Area X? ... The point of terroir is that no two areas are the same. That no two wines can be exactly the same because no combination of elements can be exactly the same. That certain varieties cannot occur in certain places. But it requires a deep understanding of a region to reach conclusions.” (*Authority* 130-131)

Though Whitby applies his theory of terroir specifically to how Area X was formed—in that it could have been created in no other place, at no other time—terroir can also describe the way Area X “impact[s] the qualities” of both the land and the people around it. According to Siobhan Carroll in “*The Terror* and the Terroir: The Ecological Uncanny in New Weird Exploration Narratives”, “To speak of terroir in English is thus to speak of a relationship to the land that is similar to one’s relationship to one’s own unconscious; it refers to that in the land which cannot be wholly assimilated to language, cannot be fully perceived or understood, but that nevertheless shapes the identities with which it is connected” (81). Though the characters of *The Southern Reach* may not realize it, Area X seeps into them throughout the series, shaping them as a vineyard might shape a particular wine. Though the nature/culture divide tells us humans and the environment are distinct, nature in fact seeps into us all, shaping and adapting us to fit alongside it.

Carroll’s essay also explains that the word *terroir*’s “associations with agriculture ominously situate Area X as a *colony*” (80). The idea of the human being “colonized” by Area X returns again and again throughout the novel, and this theme poses an interesting contrast to the ways that *humans* are usually the ones doing the colonizing when it comes to natural habitats. When Control watches the video tape of the first expedition into Area X, noting the first time electronic communication is interfered with among the group, he thinks, “Listener and listened-to had begun to be colonized by some outside force but had not yet realized it” (*Authority* 190). The biologist also recognizes this effect: “That’s how the madness of the world tries to colonize you,” she says, “from the outside in, forcing you to live in its reality” (*Annihilation* 108). This idea of “colonization” personifies what

makes environmental agency uncanny to humans; we have always seen ourselves as the ones able to *use*.

The idea of the characters of *The Southern Reach* being unable to fathom a reality in which the environment influences them instead of the reverse is particularly present, because they (much like us) live in a world which is defined by humans' pollution of nature. When Control describes Area X for the first time, he emphasizes there is "no trace of human-created toxicity... Not a single trace. No heavy metals. No industrial runoff or agricultural runoff. No plastics." To Control, this seems "impossible," because man-made destruction of nature is implied to be an enormous problem for the world around him (*Authority* 125). Other instances of the environmental catastrophe's plaguing VanderMeer's world are mentioned briefly throughout the series. Saul, in *Acceptance*, relates that "the forgotten coast had suffered from a decade or two of lax [environmental] regulations" before Area X took over (97). Later, Control notices a report on "another garbage zone in the ocean" as if it is an everyday occurrence (*Authority* 147); and the Southern Reach itself is implied to be largely ignored by the populace because it is designated as an "environmental catastrophe [site]... one that wouldn't be cleaned up for a century" (29). For VanderMeer's characters, there is no precedent for an environment *untainted* by humans, and the existence of one is something they must fight against.

This brings us to the central problem of Area X for the characters: Instead of realizing Area X's nature is entwined with the human (just as all nature is) they see it as *taking away* humanity. Area X, to the characters, becomes a "colony" in the same vein as human colonies—something born from violence and destruction. This is shown especially in how characters respond to the destroyed human habitation inside Area X.

When Control and Ghost Bird are trapped in Area X during *Acceptance*, they find “the memory of carnage” in the remains of a military convoy, destroyed and decayed by Area X, making it “clear that command and control had been shattered into pieces” (108-109). Even the biologist, who is shown as more attuned with the natural environments around her and critical of humans’ treatment of them, describes as “unsettl[ing]” the sight of “eerie signs of human habitation: rotting cabins with sunken, red-tinged roofs, rusted wagon-wheel spokes half-buried in the dirt, and the barely seen outlines of what used to be enclosures for livestock, now mere ornament for layers of pine-needle loam” (5). These descriptions—of Area X “shatter[ing]” and “rotting” human influence, crumbling it away into dust—show the uncanniness of realizing that this is one environment humans cannot change permanently, cannot use to prop up a separate society. The characters, no matter how environmentally-conscious they seem, see Area X as having destroyed the possibility for human habitat—despite the fact that humans originally destroyed environments which would be analogous to Area X in the first place.

“It wasn’t true wilderness, was comfortingly close to civilization, but existed just enough apart to create a boundary,” Control says at one point in the novels, comparing his knowledge of Area X to a park near his home. “This was what most people wanted: to be *close to* but not *part of*. They didn’t want the fearful unknown of a ‘pristine wilderness.’ They didn’t want a soulless artificial life, either” (*Authority* 81). This quote is the basis for the ecological tension in the novels: the struggle between humans, who have designated nature as a thing only “close to” society but not “part of” it, and Area X, an active ecological force. Timothy Morton poses this idea of Nature as “an ideal image, a self-contained form suspended afar, shimmering and naked behind glass like an

expensive painting” (*The Ecological Thought* 5). Morton, along with VanderMeer, recognizes that humans, especially in the 21st century, have given nature either the designation of a passive backdrop or a resource to be mined and exploited. This distinction—not “true wilderness” but not “soulless” and “artificial”—is the definition of the “acceptable” versions of the natural world we have allowed to exist in an age where humans have been chipping away at its presence.

However, by choosing to portray Area X as blurring the boundaries between nature and culture, Jeff VanderMeer shows “... nature as an active, purposeful force—neither a benign landscape for quiet contemplation nor a passive, empty resource for human consumption” (“Discomfiting Creatures” 293). VanderMeer himself is no stranger to voicing his concerns about how humanity interacts with the natural world, stating,

... I do think we often look at nature as being alien or we romanticize it, or we see ourselves, to be charitable, as stewards, or, less charitably, as having the right to take and despoil whatever we like. And yet... the natural world is incredibly complex, to the point that it often makes our smartphones and other advanced technology look incredibly basic and clumsy. (Slatterly)

By making Area X an active agent and by showing its *terroir* over human society surrounding it, VanderMeer rejects this idea of only seeing nature as “alien,” “romanticize[d],” or something we “have the right to take and despoil.” *The Southern Reach*, through breaking down the barriers between the human and the natural, exposes a new way of thinking about the environment in the Anthropocene—one in which we recognize that the environment is deeply connected with ourselves. VanderMeer is exposing “the intertwined human and natural histories ‘pushed down’ into the ecological

unconsciousness, which nevertheless continue to shape [the] present” (“*The Terror and the Terroir*” 78). While this exposure of the interconnectedness of the human and the natural leads to the experience of the ecological uncanny, VanderMeer shows it is necessary for understanding the world around us and moving beyond seeing it as only something separate for humanity’s use.

CHAPTER II: TRANSFORMATIONS & POSTHUMANISM

Of all the unsettling scenes in *Annihilation*, perhaps one of the most beautiful and unnerving is not actually portrayed in the books. In director Alex Garland's 2018 film adaptation of the novel, the biologist (played by Natalie Portman, named Lena in the film) sits inside Area X (known in the film as "the Shimmer") with Josie Radek (played by Tessa Thompson), a physicist and one of the members of the expedition, following a terrifying encounter with a bear/human hybrid. While hiding from the bear in an abandoned house, the group makes a horrible realization: the bear has the voice of one of the former expedition members, implying that the woman has become a *part* of the monster. About whatever force is turning the expedition members into creatures inside the Shimmer's perimeter, Josie says, "Ventress [the psychologist in the film] wants to face it. You want to fight it... But I don't think I want either of those things." Josie turns, slowly walking away from Lena and the viewer. As Lena follows her, calling her name, we see what look like leaves sprouting from Josie's arms. Lena ducks past an overhanging of vines, looking for Josie—only to come into a clearing full of what looks like bushes in the shape of humans. Though we don't see her transformation, Garland makes it clear that rather than fight the influence of whatever is changing the people inside the Shimmer, Josie has chosen to instead become a part of it.

Though the film adaptation has significant variations from Jeff VanderMeer's book series, this scene underlies one of the central themes of horror throughout the trilogy: the transformation of humanity into something else. Not only is Area X a strange

and uncanny environment, but also it changes humans *themselves* into things which are strange and uncanny. The biologist, at one point in *Annihilation*, examines cells she has taken from herself, the (by then dead) psychologist, and other creatures in Area X.

The cells of the psychologist, both from her unaffected shoulder and her wound, appeared to be normal human cells. So did the cells I examined from my own sample... I was convinced that when I wasn't looking at them, these cells became something else, that the very act of observation changed everything... Then I examined the samples from the village... The moss and the fox ... were composed of modified human cells. (*Annihilation* 159)

The implication is clear: Area X is fundamentally changing what *is or could be human* on a cellular level. The various creatures the expeditions come across are most, if not all, implied or suspected to have been people at one time or another—from the “moaning creature” with the human face that terrorizes the twelfth expedition, to the owl which accompanies the biologist during her lonely years inside Area X, which she suspects is her husband in a new form. Just as Josie and other members of the expedition are ultimately changed by the Shimmer in the movie, most of the main characters in *The Southern Reach* are transformed by Area X into something decidedly *not human*.

According to Siobhan Carroll, “*Annihilation* asks whether ‘the human’ is a stable category to begin with” (“Ecological Uncanny”). The monstrous transformations in the novel play directly into fears of the collapse of a human/nature binary which humanity has come to recognize as empirical fact when it, in reality, is only a construct.

Throughout the trilogy, VanderMeer examines whether *being human* in the way we think of it in the Anthropocene is either good or desirable in a world that has been defined and

is being destroyed by humanity's waste and overconsumption. Several of *The Southern Reach*'s characters—particularly Saul Evans, the biologist, Ghost Bird, and Control—go through physical transformations inside Area X that show specific reactions to nature's influence over the human body. These transformations reveal the reality (which we as readers are also experiencing in today's world of environmental destruction) that a revolution of the concept of the separate "human" can, will, and even *must* occur in order to create a new kind of human-environment relationship.

Cary Wolfe's book *What Is Posthumanism?* directly confronts the distinction of the human vs. nonhuman by examining the philosophical movement that directly opposes it: posthumanism. According to Wolfe, traditional humanist thought stresses that "the human' is achieved by escaping or repressing not just its animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment altogether" (xv). Humanism stresses the distinctions between the nonhuman and the human, as well as the human and the natural, positing that we, by virtue of being people, have superiority and dominion over animals, environment, and intelligent thought in general. However, Wolfe's book focuses on the recently emerging discipline of posthumanism, a movement which seeks to further both a "mode of thought" that decentralizes the human and a way to tackle "directly the problem of anthropocentrism and speciesism" (xix). The posthuman, then, becomes a way to deal with the unique problems of the Anthropocene—problems at the forefront of *The Southern Reach* books.

Posthumanism shows that the human/nonhuman separation, while powerful in a culture that values the supposed superiority of the human, turns out to be a lie. The

realization of this lie—the realization that they are living in a posthuman world—is what leads to much of the terror characters and readers experience throughout *The Southern Reach*. Steven Schneider harkens back to Freud’s concept of the uncanny when he states that “paradigmatic horror narratives work by *reconfirming* for audiences infantile beliefs that were abandoned long ago” (3). In Freud’s framework, uncanniness comes from both the “return of the repressed” and the “reconfirmation” of surmounted beliefs. The return of the repressed represents that “which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it” (Freud 47); a classic Freudian example is the repression of the knowledge that we will one day die. The “return of the repressed” lines up with the re-realization of nature’s autonomy that I discussed in Chapter 1. The idea of being turned into something inhuman, however, comes from the “reconfirmation of surmounted beliefs”. As children, we move beyond thinking that we can be transformed into anything but human. *The Southern Reach*, however, becomes terrifying (and, using Freud’s views, falls into the realm of “uncanny”), because it forces its characters to confront this fear as their reality.

Chronologically, the first character both to encounter Area X and to be mutated by it is Saul Evans, the keeper of the lighthouse along the “forgotten coast” before the border appears. Saul himself is a product of a bygone era of environmental relationships characterized by an appreciation for the surrounding world, but one that still ultimately keeps the surrounding world *separate*. About both himself and the other citizens of the coastline, Saul says, “People weren’t ignorant here, but they were superstitious... Interlopers trying to make sense of things, trying to ‘analyze and survey’ as Suzanne had put it, turned people off because it trivialized the tragedies to come” (*Acceptance* 16).

The reason Saul distrusts the Séance & Science Brigade, who have come to examine the lighthouse and who seem wrapped up in the events that are prelude to Area X, is indicative of how he views the environment; he opposes it being “trivialized” by scientific investigation, does not want to “make sense of” it. Even as the environment around him becomes slowly stranger because (the reader knows) Area X is beginning to infect it, Saul does not seek to understand, only affording it a kind of mysticism related to his religion: “He needed no greater mysteries now than those moments when the world seemed as miraculous as in his old sermons” (18). Saul’s relationship to the world around him is characterized by the regulation, which I discussed in Chapter 1, of the environment to a backdrop, a serene picture into which he has gone into exile following his failures as a preacher.

Saul’s transformation represents the terror of understanding that the world is *not* a separate place, the first inkling that the environment around us might have some sort of sentience of its own that will not align to a human will. One day, Saul sees “something glittering from the lawn—half hidden by a plant rising from a tuft of weeds” (*Acceptance* 24). It is only at the end of *Acceptance* that the reader realizes Saul this “glittering” object has caused Saul to become the Crawler, the creature which has been slowly creating the living words in the tower. The biologist describes the Crawler as “a wall of flesh that resembled light, with sharp, curving elements within it and textures like ice when it has frozen from flowing water” (*Annihilation* 177), and, only later, recognizes it as Saul:

Staring back at me amid that profusion of selves generated by the Crawler, I saw, barely visible, the face of a man, hooded in shadow and orbited by indescribable things I could think of only as his jailers... I saw on those features the endurance

of an unending pain and sorrow, yes, but shining through as well a kind of grim satisfaction and *ecstasy*... Trapped within the Crawler, the last lighthouse keeper stared out at me... (186-187)

Saul has been absorbed into the Crawler, “trapped” in its confines. The description of Saul’s “unending pain and sorrow” as well as his “grim satisfaction and ecstasy” is an unsettling one, uncanny in its dualism. In the last flashback sequence in *Acceptance*, when he is turning into the Crawler, Saul says, “He felt the thing within anchor him to the ground, as alien as any sensation he’d ever felt and yet as familiar as if it had happened a hundred times before... He was never going to understand it, even as it took him over” (*Acceptance* 325). Just as Saul did not seek to understand the environment before it took him over, Saul does not understand his transfiguration into something nonhuman, still clinging to the duality—making it a profoundly terrifying experience for him and for the reader.

Ghost Bird describes the Crawler to Control as “nothing but a horror show,” and Saul’s transformation is arguably the most terrifying in the novels (*Acceptance* 286). Not only can he not escape it, but he does not understand it; and, in fact, it seems the Crawler is not capable of much comprehension at all, its only function is “to perform a vast and preordained function” of genetic mimicry (287). According to Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui, “monsters... represent our collective nightmares” (4). The “nightmare” Saul represents is that of being unable to stop the encroachment of the nonhuman on the human. Saul’s failing is that of not understanding and embracing the nonhuman before it is too late, and his is a warning of the confusion and pain that could occur if there is a continued refusal to give the natural world its own autonomy beyond being a backdrop.

Even the sermon he repeats on the walls of the Tower speaks to his desire to cling to some human part of him

While Saul's transformation represents the horror and confusion that can happen in the face of the breakdown of human/nonhuman boundaries, the biologist's transformation is something different. She embraces the nonhuman and accepts being transformed by Area X, but her change goes too far—it abandons the human entirely, reinforcing the binary. From the beginning, the biologist shows she has never been attached to humanity in general; “solitude... was all [she] ever craved during [her] studies” as a scientist (*Annihilation* 108). The biologist's continual desire for “solitude” (in particular, solitude *with nature*) reveals that she, more than most of the other characters, rejects the established rules of her status as *human*—rules such as the desire for companionship and separation from the natural world. Instead, she insists, “Sustenance for me was tied to ecosystem and habitat, orgasm the sudden realization of the interconnectivity of living things. Observation had always meant more to me than interaction” (110). By making a distinction about “sustenance” for her versus the others around her (such as her husband or the other expedition members), she draws a line between her own behavior and behavior expected by (specifically *human*) society. Additionally, she distances herself from the environmental ethics of the culture around her; it is revealed that she was once an environmental activist, the director labeling it with the more extremist “tree-hugger terrorism” (*Acceptance* 272). When the director questions about her activism and its predisposition to violence, the biologist replies she has harmful thoughts “[o]nly toward human animals” (271); this shows that even the biologist's efforts towards environmentalism point to her animosity to the human.

Through both her tendency to distance and her approach to environmental ethics, the biologist draws distinctions between herself and humanity as a whole; she, as the director once notes, holds a “sense of alienation from other people” in order to embrace nature instead (293).

Because the biologist rejects human bonds and society in favor of enmeshing herself in “ecosystem and habitat”, we might think that her notion of the environment is healthier than Saul’s or the members of the Southern Reach; and VanderMeer *does* endorse her aversion to human exploitation of the environment throughout the novels. However, she still reinforces the human/nature binary because she eventually gives herself over completely to the nonhuman, rejecting her humanity entirely. After reading the biologist’s last journal and learning that, following the events of *Annihilation*, she was trapped in Area X for thirty years, Ghost Bird, Control, and Grace realize that Area X has transformed her into something new:

Ghost Bird saw it from the landing window. How the biologist coalesced out of the night, her body flickering and stitching its way into existence... The mountain that was the biologist came up almost to the windowsill, so close she could have jumped down onto what served as its back. The suggestion of a flat, broad head plunging directly into torso. The suggestion, far to the east, already overshooting the lighthouse, of a vast curve and curl of the mouth, and the flanks carved by dark ridges like a whale’s... It had many, many glowing eyes that were also like flowers or sea anemones spread open... An animal, an organism that had never existed before... (*Acceptance* 193-196)

The creature, on the surface, bears nothing in resemblance to the old biologist; she has become “an animal, an organism” with only connections to the biologist’s love of water habitats. Grace reveals the biologist-creature was the cause of destruction for a military convoy and has been seeking out the places Grace herself has been inhabiting, actively been working *against* human occupation of Area X. When Control comes into contact with the transformed biologist—the biologist “*reading* him from across a vast expanse of space”—he notes that she “withdrew, spit him out” and “rejected him” (207). The act of “spitting out” Control not only spurns Control’s mind but positions the biologist as now having chosen to be fully on the side of the nonhuman. She “[chose] her fate,” as Ghost Bird says, and that fate “rejected” humanity (*Acceptance* 212).

The biologist, then, represents a scientific failure that is still haunting us today: the failure to emphasize human-nonhuman relationships in a way that does not spurn the human. Though de-emphasizing the human is a necessity in our current age of environmental collapse, it can “lead to hopelessness or disinterest in environmental problems” (Prendergast 336). It is not hard to see the effects of this in our real lives; recent decades have shown the hesitance to enact policies that will protect future generations from environmental decay and disaster brought on by climate change, extreme weather conditions, and the erosion of natural environments. The biologist represents the current failure of science to communicate environmental problems effectively in ways that do not inspire apathy. Because she becomes “alienated” to other people outright, she, just like the Crawler, can only instill terror in humans, reinforcing the idea of an us-vs.-them mentality in regards to human/nonhuman distinctions.

However, there is *one* person who can both recognize and understand both humans of the story and the transformed monsters such as the Crawler and the biologist: Ghost Bird. Originally thought to be the biologist herself, it is revealed that Ghost Bird is in fact a clone of the biologist created by Area X, just as all the other returned expedition members were doubles as well. While Ghost Bird is technically another monster, she represents perhaps the most fully blurred line between the human and the nonhuman in the novels; and her journey is that of reconciling both worlds and discovering her place as something *new*. Originally, during the course of *Authority*, she is trying to make sense of her relationship to the biologist and makes an effort to fit into the human world. She lets the Southern Reach believe she is the biologist returned and allows them to interview her, answering as if she was the biologist. Still, her transition is by no means seamless. Though he does not realize she's a copy until the end of *Authority*, Control describes her as "trying out personalities," as if she is unsure what her own persona *should* be or how she should act as human (*Authority* 173). Additionally, it is telling that she becomes physically ill after being trapped in the Southern Reach facility for a while, manifesting similar symptoms and a "brightness" just as the biologist had in Area X—as if their bodies were both trying to fight off the unusual human and nonhuman environments respectively. Later Ghost Bird describes, while she was still realizing she was not the biologist, she "had thought she was dead, that she was in purgatory, even though she didn't believe in an afterlife" (*Acceptance* 30). Ghost Bird feels lost in the "purgatory" of the human world because she does not belong fully there, cannot be trapped on the "human" side of the boundary.

While Ghost Bird cannot be considered fully human, she also is not something *purposefully* made by Area X, and she is able to navigate both the nonhuman world of Area X and the human world of the Southern Reach. There is no indication that any of the other doubles have distinct personalities beyond their vague memories of their originals. “Their faces all retained the same expression, or could be said not to retain any expression,” describes Control (*Authority* 6). The biologist says even the clone of her husband seemed to recognize her “only through a kind of fog” (*Annihilation* 57). Ghost Bird, however, has sentience and willpower, acting beyond her purpose of spreading Area X to the outside world—to the point of going back *into* Area X instead. This points to something being inherently different about Ghost Bird compared to the other doubles. As she puts it, she might be a “mistake” by Area X; however, “she had become a viable mistake—a mutation” (*Acceptance* 185). It is never revealed why this might be the case, but it does allow Ghost Bird to interact with and understand both the human and nonhuman beings around her. Though she sees humans’ “lack of imagination, because [they] couldn’t even put themselves in the mind of a cormorant or an owl or a whale or a bumblebee,” she wonders if she even has a “choice” in “ally[ing] herself” with them (*Acceptance* 190); it seems she is already their ally to begin with, helping Control and Grace as they travel through Area X. In the same vein, she is able to communicate with the nonhuman and seemingly-monstrous. She is the only one to touch the transformed biologist, for instance, and when she does she realizes, “She might be observing an incarnation of herself she could not quite comprehend, and yet... there was connection, there was *recognition*” (196). While Ghost Bird herself might tread the line between human and nonhuman, she can “recognize” both.

In his analysis of monstrosity and *The Southern Reach*, Gry Ulstein states, “Ghost Bird’s existence, and her ‘improved’ imagination regarding empathy or connectedness with other organisms, suggests that Ghost Bird is the enhanced version of *Homo Sapiens*” (87). This idea of Ghost Bird being “enhanced”—something beyond and above normal human bounds—proves to be an interesting one combined with the fact that Ghost Bird exists on both sides of the human/nonhuman binary. I contend that Ghost Bird’s ability for “empathy or connectedness” makes her a vision for a possible future of humanity, one that fully blurs the human-nonhuman boundary and advocates for environmental ethics that promote *both* humanity and the environment. Ghost Bird at one point considers, “She might also be a message incarnate, a signal in the flesh, even if she hadn’t yet figured out what story she was supposed to tell” (*Acceptance* 37). By having Ghost Bird be a version of the human which can empathize with and understand nature, VanderMeer points to Ghost Bird’s “signal in the flesh” being a future defined by posthumanism, in which humankind is able to become something *new* in order to save itself and the world around it.

If Ghost Bird points to a true enmeshment of human and nonhuman, a kind of balance between dichotomies that could lead to a better understanding of the environment, then Control is an indication of what the world in the present moment must go through in order to move beyond anthropocentric thinking. Control is described as someone seemingly antithetical to the weirdness of Area X, almost aggressively human; he comes into the Southern Reach as a “fixer” (*Authority* 9) with the “frenetic need to analyze, to atomize the day or the week” (327). He is sent to the Southern Reach to live up to his name, as an operative that might reveal some way for Central to gain agency

over Area X. However, he also confesses a desire “to know[,] to go beyond the veil” of the mysteries surrounding him (195)—a desire which he will, to his own distress, finally see through. During the course of *Authority*, Area X slowly seeps into his awareness, until he is finally thrust into the place itself during *Acceptance*, lost inside the border with Grace and Ghost Bird. Control’s journey, ironically, is of him *relinquishing* the power he thinks he has, realizing that the mission to contain Area X has become futile. “He was back in control, but control was meaningless,” he thinks as the monstrous form of the biologist retreats from probing into his mind—representing the slow decay of his will to resist the nonhuman encroaching upon him (*Acceptance* 208).

Control’s transformation is his final act of giving up the power he believes he has over Area X, over his own fate, and over his perception of the human and the nonhuman as being separate. When he travels with Ghost Bird into the tower, he says to her and to Grace that it is to subdue the Crawler; however, he is actually aiming for the bright light at the bottom of the tower, the same light the biologist reached for but never made it to in *Annihilation*. VanderMeer, interestingly, does not describe what kind of creature Control becomes but emphasizes only the *act* of change:

Now “Control” fell away again. Now he was the son of a man who had been a sculptor and of a woman who lived in a byzantine realm of secrets...

He sniffed the air, felt under his paws the burning and heat, the intensity.

This was all that was left to him, and he would not now die on the steps; he would not suffer that final defeat.

John Rodriguez elongated down the final stairs, jumped into the light.

(*Acceptance* 311-312)

Control's transformation is not one of terror and pain, like Saul's, or complete relinquishment of the human, like the biologist's. Though he has had to struggle for it, unlike Ghost Bird, Control describes "in that moment of extremity... an overwhelming feeling of connection, that nothing was truly *apart*" (310). Control finally gains this "feeling of connection" through means that are painful but do not strip him of his humanity completely and even allows him some influence over the seemingly impassive Area X. As Ghost Bird muses in the final chapter of *Acceptance*, "[Area X] could be changed, it could change, and that Control had added or subtracted something from an equation that was too complex for anyone to see the whole of" (328).

Control's ability to add or subtract from the "equation" that is Area X and his final act of willing surrender demonstrate that positive steps towards change are not impossible—that the human can blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman *itself*. He is not made by Area X, like Ghost Bird, or forced (however willingly or unwillingly) into a change like Saul and the biologist; he aims for the light at the bottom of the tower knowingly, with full understanding that he will undergo a physical transformation. His change is not by any means painless, but, by causing him to "change" Area X, VanderMeer shows the change was *imperative*. Finola Anne Prendergast, discussing *The Southern Reach*, says VanderMeer "[avoids] disingenuous optimism about the sacrifices necessitated by the acceptance of environmental ethics, while still communicating the ethical necessity of those sacrifices" (336). Control's "sacrifice" of the human/nonhuman boundary is an "ethical necessity"—just as our own rejection of that boundary must be.

Each of the transformed humans VanderMeer presents are, by definition, monsters of the Anthropocene; they represent the repressed knowledge that we are not enclosed beings, that our bodies can be transformed by the environment around us, and that there exists no real distinction between the human and the nonhuman. However, VanderMeer questions whether the traditional negative associations with monstrosity, in the case of the transformations inside Area X, are warranted. If “life in the twenty-first century constructs monstrosity not just as a representational category, but also as ontology—a way of being, or a way of becoming” (Levina and Bui 6), then monsters are not only showing us fears we have repressed in order to continue humanity’s supposed mastery over the environment; they are representing ways in which we can “become” the nonhuman.

Stacy Alaimo, author of the feminist ecocritical book *Bodily Natures*, uses the term “trans-corporeality” to define the way human bodies and nonhuman nature interconnect. According to Alaimo, “the human body is never a rigidly enclosed, protected entity, but it is vulnerable to the substances and flows of its environments” (28) and “‘the environment’ is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves” (4). In the time of anthropogenic environmental destruction, it is important to recognize that the environment already *is* changing us. Alaimo uses the example of the environmental sickness known as Multiple Chemical Sensitivity to show that, just as we have impacted the natural world, the natural world can turn around and impact us as well. Though not as extreme as Area X’s genetic reshuffling, precedent exists for the physical world changing humans on a chemical level, crossing over the

human-nature line to transform us into something different—and that is only growing in the age of the Anthropocene.

The Southern Reach, through its portrayals of a changing humanity, embraces what Alaimo calls a “posthumanist environmental ethics that refuses to see the delineated shape of the human as distinct from the background of nature, and instead focuses on interfaces, interchanges, and transformative material” (142). By creating this view of the human-nonhuman relationship, VanderMeer is advocating a worldview in which we take care of the environment as we take care of ourselves—because we are bound up inexorably inside of it. Additionally, he stresses that we can make *proactive* change. Like Control, instead of being transformed by our environment unwillingly, because it is too late otherwise to have a distinct “humanity,” we can instead *choose* to give up the binary. According to Siobhan Carroll, “The triumph of characters like Control is not that they save the human race, but that they are able to understand and accept a world that is profoundly *not* under human control” (“The Terror and the Terroir” 81-82). VanderMeer, through his monstrous transformations, is showing us a new, posthumanist way of embracing the environment—as something part of us, until we, like Ghost Bird, confront the nonhuman and realize “nothing monstrous exist[s] here” (*Acceptance* 196).

CHAPTER III: COMMUNICATION & ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Jeff VanderMeer, in a 2016 interview for *Paradoxa* alongside Timothy Morton, stated, “After I wrote *Annihilation* and started seeing reviews that mentioned your work in connection with it, I picked up *Hyperobjects*... It made me understand what I had written better, because the very term *hyperobject* kind of encapsulated what was going on organically in *Annihilation*” (Hageman 43). Though he hadn’t read Morton’s book beforehand, he suggested that both Morton’s philosophical theory and his own work of speculative fiction were touching on the same phenomena: that humanity has entered a time of uncertainty in its place in the universe and the Anthropocene has caused us to come face-to-face with enormous, existentially terrifying concepts, such as climate change, that could forever shape our interactions with each other and with the planet.

Morton’s *Hyperobjects*, VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach*, and ecocritical conversation in recent years in general have become particularly fascinated with the topic of language—how we specifically describe environmental change and/or collapse and the solutions to those problems. When talking to VanderMeer about their respective works, Morton said, “I think we’re both dealing with trying to access internal things that are very, very hard to put into words.” This is a central problem with communicating environmental issues: How can you articulate concepts so big they can’t be seen except months, years, decades down the line? Morton’s phrase for this phenomena in regards to hyperobjects is “there is no metalanguage” (*Hyperobjects* 4)—meaning that there is not

even a way for us to communicate the enormous issues of environmental destruction and transformation. At least, there isn't yet a way.

VanderMeer's works are part of a literary movement that could provide some answers to this problem of expression. The genre of New Weird fiction is an unconventional one and much more nebulous than the sci-fi or speculative fiction it tends to be clumped together with. The term appeared in the early 2000s after the publication of China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, best captured by the message board written by M. John Harrison in *Third Alternative*'s public forum: "The New Weird. Who does it? What is it? Is it even anything?" ("It's Alive!" 19) While what the New Weird "is" has been parsed before by people such as VanderMeer and his wife, editor Ann VanderMeer, what it *does* is another story. New Weird stories center largely around what is strange about the world around us and, in large part, why we divide ourselves from that world. *The Southern Reach* novels, in particular, embody the environmental policies of the New Weird movement by critiquing the notion of nature as something to be "conquered" and by offering alternative ways of communicating our environment—all in order to preserve it from the havoc we are wreaking in the modern age.

Understanding VanderMeer's and *Southern Reach*'s place in the conversation about environmental ethics involves, first, understanding the genre of the New Weird. Though the term "New Weird" itself has only been around in the last decade or so, "weird fiction", in general, has been present since the late 19th century, namely with the launch of the literary pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in the 1930s. According to Benjamin Noys and Timothy Murphy, weird fiction is typified by its "estrangement of our sense of reality" (117); monsters like H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu inspired feelings of awe, terror,

and uncanniness, and expanded our sense of what is and what could be real. Lovecraft himself stated that the focus of his writing was on the “suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space” (120). Largely, this meant exposing the existential feelings of humans as small and powerless, especially in the face of great (often supernatural) power and change. Old Weird fiction in Lovecraft’s vein focused on what could be out there—and how what is “out there” is usually terrifying and threatening to human life.

Though Lovecraft and other writers like him have had both tremendous cultural popularity and influence on science fiction and fantasy writers in the modern day, the offspring of the weird fiction movement since the 1980s (appropriately named “the New Weird”) has consciously decided to transcend and even reject influences of the Old Weird. “The new weird has adopted the cosmic horror of the old weird, but typically approaches it in different ways,” writes Gry Ulstein, “often it is more about researching, articulating, and *embracing* the monster rather than escaping it” (75). While Lovecraft balked at the cosmic horror evoked by the entities in his stories, New Weird writers, such as VanderMeer, show sympathy to their creatures and seek to move beyond the fear. Additionally, the New Weird (and VanderMeer in particular) have sought to move away from the xenophobia that fueled writers like Lovecraft. In his article “Moving Past Lovecraft” for the website *Weird Fiction Review*, VanderMeer notes that, despite comparisons, he was not inspired by Lovecraft and “for all of the expansiveness of the idea of cosmic horror... [there is] also an ironic narrowness of vision and repetitive motion in [Lovecraft’s] work.” Though Lovecraft certainly has had influence on the

genre (VanderMeer even points out influential weird fiction authors like China Miéville have explicitly used Lovecraft as a reference point), VanderMeer stresses, “The point isn’t to reject Lovecraft, but to see Lovecraft with clear eyes and to acknowledge that weird fiction should not and simply cannot begin and end with one vision, created by a man who passed away in 1937.”

How, then, is the New Weird defined on its own, without using the parameters of the past? VanderMeer himself has had a large hand in solidifying the New Weird as a genre. In the introduction to the anthology *The New Weird*, edited by VanderMeer and his wife Ann, he defines the genre of New Weird as one that “has a visceral, in-the-moment quality that often uses elements of surreal or transgressive horror for its tone, style, and effects” and “that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy, largely by choosing realistic, complex real-world models as the jumping-off point” (“It’s Alive!” 21). He particularly emphasizes that the New Weird focuses on “the monsters and grotesquery but not the ‘scare’” (19). Rather than simply leaving readers to fear both the setting and the creatures created in their works, New Weird writers must transcend the normal boundaries of horror and seek to further a *message* through their horror—and that message, more often in New Weird fiction than most other genres, tends to speak to our relationships the environment and the non-human living beings around us.

Stacy Alaimo asserts human society has “dematerialized” nature to be formless, clinical, and an entirely separate entity than humans themselves. “The environment... is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use,” she says (*Bodily Natures* 2). Contemporary attitudes about the environment reflect this statement in myriad ways—from how we dump our trash in the oceans and expect it to never

reappear, to how we drill for oil as if it is an infinite resource, and even how we block off national and city parks as places where it is “acceptable” for nature to grow (at least somewhat) unhindered. Fiction—even weird fiction of old—has largely echoed this mindset, being products of its creators. Sara L. Crosby maintains that humans in the Anthropocene have become ecophobic; that is, we have neglected and outright harmed the planet because we are afraid of the *reality* of nature as being boundless and with an autonomy of its own. This is reflected in Old Weird works, which often ooze with xenophobia (both towards people and towards the metaphorical concept of nature). Even traditional nature writing, which seemingly would posit the opposite of a *phobia* to nature, is “vampiric” because it only allows us to project our own wishes and attitudes onto the environment (Crosby 514). Literature, largely, has not offered a mode of communication about nature that allows for its independence from human domination.

New Weird fiction, however, has sought to bridge that gap by creating a mode through which authors and readers alike can confront the environmental problems of the Anthropocene. Timothy Morton, in *Hyperobjects*, says that “the notion that we are living ‘in’ a world—one that we can call Nature—no longer applies in any meaningful sense, except as nostalgia or in the temporary useful local language of pleas and petitions” (101); instead, we are forced to understand more and more that the world we live in has a mind and purpose of its own. New Weird fiction is simply a way to articulate that reality by breaking down the barriers of the human and nonhuman, the natural and manmade. VanderMeer perhaps puts it best when he writes, “Rather than creating escapism, mapping elements of the Anthropocene via weird fiction may create a greater and more visceral understanding (render *more* visible)—precisely because so many of the effects of

this era are felt in and under the skin, as well as in the subconscious” (“Hauntings in the Anthropocene”).

As its place in the tradition of weird fiction suggests, *The Southern Reach* focuses on what is strange or unusual about the world around us—and why, in fact, we see those factors *as* strange or unusual. It questions, as I have outlined in the previous two chapters, how we talk about the environment in passive ways and what causes us to classify someone or something as “monstrous”. However, further than that, the trilogy is also an example of how the New Weird challenges the *vocabulary* which society today uses to talk about our natural surroundings. VanderMeer shows that a natural ecosystem that we don’t understand communicated as something *antithetical* to the human—an enemy to fight against, that can be conquered and enslaved.

Area X is, in many instances, described in ways that highlight human repulsion and animosity towards that which they don’t understand. From people who have never been inside it, it is an almost mythical space, full of mystery and danger, but one that ultimately repels them. “The idea of Area X lingered in many people’s minds like a dark fairy tale, something they did not think about too closely. If they thought about it at all,” states the biologist in *Annihilation* (94). The novels indicate that to “think too closely” about somewhere that terrifying and incomprehensible could upset, perhaps forever, the balance of everyday life in the modern industrialized world. Control muses that the town of Hedley “as far as he could tell had forgotten there was a Southern Reach” (*Authority* 233)—which is ultimately indicative of the rest of the world, too unable or unwilling to look at the strangeness in front of them. Area X isn’t mentioned in public except as an

“ecological disaster”, even in the towns closest to it; it has become, more than ever before, the “forgotten coast” (*Annihilation* 1).

The Southern Reach’s tactics for monitoring and interacting with Area X as a landscape also asserts the idea that Area X is not only *somewhere* frightening that should be avoided by humanity but is also *something* that needs to be fought. Between the Southern Reach building and Area X’s border, Control describes “just thirty-five miles of paved road and then another fifteen unpaved beyond that, with ten checkpoints in all, and shoot-to-kill orders if you weren’t meant to be there, and fences and barbed wire and trenches and pits and more swamp” (*Authority* 28). The watchtowers, security clearances, and vast structure of the Southern Reach building itself call to mind modern border patrols and warzones. Even the way the scientists, who have dedicated their lives to studying and theorizing about Area X, talk about the place within the border evokes hatred, fear, and malice: “It acts a bit like an organism, like skin with a million greedy mouths instead of cells or pores,” says Whitby, “And the question isn’t what it is but is the motive. Think of Area X as a murderer we’re trying to catch” (*Acceptance* 43). Area X is the “murderer” of the current human condition—“another kind of enemy”, as Control calls it, but one that is ascribed the familiar motivations of familiar terrors, such as film monsters and murderers.

Because the people of *The Southern Reach* consider Area X an enemy, they allow the environment around them a human-like sentience—one which also affords it the ability to act and react with purpose, specifically for the cause of eradicating humanity. The dynamic between Area X and humans, particularly the Southern Reach itself, is

played out as if it is a war between people. Control points out this dichotomy in

Acceptance:

In your dreams you stand on the sidelines, holding the plant in one hand and the cell phone in the other, watching a war between Central and Area X. In some fundamental way, you feel, they have been in conflict for far longer than thirty years—for ages and ages, centuries in secret. Central the ultimate void to counteract Area X: impersonal, antiseptic, labyrinthine, and unknowable. (228)

In this scenario, Area X is seen as an enemy combatant who is using the same tricks and logic that human antagonists do in their pursuit of domination. Central has arisen to become a “void to counteract Area X.” The world itself becomes a battleground, and those who fall to Southern Reach’s borders can become martyrs. For example, he is given access to a tape of the disastrous first expedition, Control describes “a sobering moment when they encountered the sunken remains of a line of military trucks and tanks sent in before the border went down.” However, instead of recognizing the futility of the expeditions through this sight, he continues, “By the time of the fourth expedition... all traces of it would be gone. Area X would have requisitioned it for its own purposes, privilege of the victor” (*Authority* 189). People then can allow Area X and the Southern Reach (standing in for humanity as a whole) to become “winners” and “losers” in their minds—instead of realizing the whole duality is entirely pointless.

The fact that Area X is positioned as the adversary in this perpetual “war” is perhaps why the characters who believe they are fighting against it are obsessed with making the environment react to them; they send in everything from trucks to planes to

the expeditions themselves to see if anything will ruffle or interest Area X. The rabbits mentioned in *Authority* are clearest example of this:

As if in a reflexive act of frustration at the lack of progress, the scientists had let loose two thousand white rabbits about fifty feet from the border, in a clear-cut area, and herded them right into the border. In addition to the value of observing the rabbits' transition from here to there, the science division had had some hope that the simultaneous or near-simultaneous breaching of the border by so many "living bodies" might "overload" the "mechanism" behind the border, causing it to short-circuit, even if "just locally." This supposed that the border could be overloaded, like a power grid. (*Authority* 55)

Control recounts this "reflexive act" as if it is a show of defiance against Area X by the scientists—much like a strike back in a warzone by a defending party would be described. They wish to "overload" Area X, to cause *some* kind of verifiable transformation in its impenetrable border. Whitby says to the director, at one point, "Whatever we think of the border, it's important to recognize it as a *limitation* of Area X" (*Acceptance* 45). The people of the Southern Reach are desperate to find some kind of chink in the armor of what they consider their enemy, and they believe that any reaction from Area X would constitute a change *they* created—all in order to lessen their fear of complete helplessness.

What the scientists fail to realize, however, is that Area X does not react to them, not because it is fighting them, but because it *doesn't care* about them. Humans are no more an enemy than rocks to Area X. Control notes that, in the case of the rabbits, when they jumped through the border, "There was no ripple, no explosion of blood and organs.

They just disappeared” (*Authority* 56). Area X does not cause shock and awe with its retribution; it just swallows what comes into it. When Control is confronted with the fact that Area X is the product of some kind of alien creation during *Acceptance*, he immediately jumps to seeing it as a malicious force; humankind is being “condemned by an alien jury” (78). Ghost Bird, however, understands the truth:

“Have you not understood yet that whatever’s causing this can manipulate the genome, works miracles of mimicry and biology? ... That, to it, a smartphone, say, is as basic as a flint arrowhead... Perhaps it doesn’t even think that we have consciousness or free will—not in the ways it measures such things.”

“If that’s true, why does it pay us any attention at all?”

“It probably extends to us the least attention possible.” (80-81)

Ghost Bird understands that Area X (and, by extension, whichever extraterrestrials created it) does not care anything about becoming our enemy. Rather, Area X acts similarly to how humans do when *we* are the ones exerting influence over our environment—apathetic, without even a moment’s consideration of what effect we will have. In this way, VanderMeer flips the traditional narrative of environmental collapse; instead, the environment is catalyzing *humanity’s* collapse, and people are faced with the reality they ignore when *they* are the ones in control.

Lowry at one point exclaims to the director, “You want Area X to react? You want something to change? I’ll change it. I’ll coil things so far up inside Area X’s brain, things that’ll have a sting in the tail. That’ll draw blood. That’ll fucking make the enemy know we’re the resistance. That we’re on to them” (*Acceptance* 133). His anger comes from a place not of wanting to understand Area X or anything Area X has actually done

to him out of malice—but the sheer dread of not being *able* to do anything to stop it. As this shows, the impulse to see Area X as something malicious to fight against comes not from any direct action by Area X but as a protective mechanism. Humans, so used to having complete control over the natural world, feel powerless when that is no longer a reality. Sara Crosby, in her discussion of ecophobia/dangerous ecophilia, states of early American settlers, “If the colonists were going to love their new home, they would do so only by making it like them, and they embarked on a self-conscious program to transform the ‘wilderness’ into a ‘garden’” (516). The characters of *The Southern Reach*, so used to this ingrained way of thinking about the environment, find themselves angry and frustrated when that norm is denied to them and resort to fighting against the environment (or seeing themselves as a “resistance”, as Lowry puts it) in order to convince themselves that what they are doing is, in fact, right—and that humans still hold the power. As Control muses, “If something far beyond the experience of human beings had decided to embark upon a purpose that it did not intend to allow humans to recognize or understand, then terroir would simply be... a kind of admission of the limitations of human systems” (*Authority* 132).

However, (much like how Crosby’s settlers don’t realize that the “wilderness” they have encountered is only terrifying because of their perspective) VanderMeer shows that the idea of treating the environment as an adversary is not only foolish because Area X simply does not care, but also because humans are implied to have brought Area X on themselves in the first place. VanderMeer makes it clear that human neglect of the environment is what attracted whatever entity created the Crawler to the stretch of “forgotten coast” that became Area X. Saul Evans illustrates this in a dream, just after he

has been “infected” by the glowing flower that will turn him into the Crawler in *Acceptance*,

He was walking toward the lighthouse along the trail, but the moon was hemorrhaging blood into its silver circle, and he knew that terrible things must have happened to Earth for the moon to be dying, to be about to fall out of the heavens. The oceans were filled with graveyards of trash and every pollutant that had ever been loosed against the natural world. Wars for scant resources had left entire countries nothing but deserts of death and suffering. Disease had spread in its legions and life had begun to mutate into other forms, moaning and mewling in the filthy, burning remnants of once mighty cities, lit by roaring fires that crackled with the smoldering bones of strange, distorted cadavers.

These bodies lay strewn across the grounds approaching the lighthouse. Visceral were their wounds, bright the red of their blood, loud the sound of their moans, as abrupt and useless as the violence they still visited upon one another. (105-107)

Saul’s dream makes clear that the “graveyards of trash” and “filthy, burning remnants” of what remains of the human world are clearly the outcome of environmental ethics that fails to take into account what can happen to both the world and to people themselves if we fail to recognize our impact on nature. In many ways, the larger events throughout *Acceptance* allow the characters and reader to recognize that the appearance of Area X is a direct consequence of human action (or, rather, *inaction* to protect the place in which we live). After Ghost Bird enters Area X without the hypnosis that has been granted to all other characters who have entered its borders, she remembers “the detritus and trash she had seen there, the bodies, and wondered if it might be real and not summoned from her

mind” (*Acceptance* 244). The characters in *The Southern Reach* must struggle to confront the reality that not only is Area X not directly challenging them, but that their way of communicating animosity towards the environment *in general* could have caused Area X’s formation.

The idea of Area X being an enemy—and how misguided that notion is proven to be—opens the doors to a wider theme throughout *The Southern Reach* series: that humans and the environment, in the current way they interact, cannot and will not ever effectively communicate with each other. Because humans are antagonistic towards Area X and Area X is seemingly ignorant of human sentience, a language barrier exists that would seemingly prevent them from ever living in harmony. VanderMeer uses this phenomenon as a larger metaphor for how we have failed to recognize and “read” or “listen to” the environment in the time of the Anthropocene. However, by VanderMeer’s own admission, his goal was not to promote nihilism about the current state of environmental communication. “I don’t see the Southern Reach novels as intrinsically pessimistic. To me, there are full of life and vigor in the sense of people trying to work their way through very complex issues and problems” (Hageman 58). *The Southern Reach*, instead of leaving us simply with the problem of language with and about the environment, focuses on *how* we create new ways of communicating with the natural world around us.

Even at the onset of *Annihilation*, language is seen as a problem and even a detriment that underscores every event of the plot. From the missing linguist, who is determined “the most expendable” by the biologist (10), to the unreliable narration that threads throughout all texts in the books—“It may be clear by now that I am not always

good at telling people things they feel they have a right to know,” explains the biologist about her failure to tell the reader of her journal about the brightness (150)—*Southern Reach* continually highlights the inability to maintain effective communication. Area X itself is seen, often, as something that confuses normal human abilities to speak about a place. The tower/tunnel/topographical anomaly is one of the most apparent instances of this. According to Brad Tabas,

... a tower is a thing that extends up out of the ground, and yet this ‘tower’ is said to plunge into the earth... The effect of this cumulative confusion is to suggest that whatever it is does not fit with any of our names or descriptions, that it is a thing with no proper analogue in our language and no proper precursor in our past perceptions. (12)

The tower’s status as something that has “no proper analogue” positions it as something indicative of the failure of language when it comes to Area X. If none of the characters are able to articulate something such as an indisputable physical feature of Area X—instead striking it from maps and giving it vague, formless names such as “topographical anomaly”—then how do they expect to communicate *anything* about or to Area X in a way that could provide solutions?

When the *Southern Reach*’s linguist, Hsyu, is discussing the Crawler’s writings with the other scientists, she points out this failure of their language:

“We keep saying ‘it’... is like this thing or like that thing. But it isn’t—it is only itself. Whatever it is. Because our minds process information almost solely through analogy and categorization, we are often defeated when presented with

something that fits no category and lies outside of the realm of our analogies.”

(*Authority* 113-114)

This idea of being “defeated” by uncategorizable concepts plays directly into the ecocritical concepts that surround *Southern Reach*’s themes. “[The Crawler’s] words defeated me somehow,” says the biologist when she is attempting to catalogue the writing on the tower’s walls (*Annihilation* 50), suggesting that the very fact that she does not understand the words themselves is foreign and demoralizing. Ecocritics (like Morton, with his “there is no metalanguage” statement) have typified this feeling of helplessness in the face of having no words as being a critical component of our problems in the Anthropocene. Samantha Clark writes, “‘Green’ rhetoric tells us that all beings are interconnected, and yet the global environmental crisis demonstrates that we remain in a fundamental state of alienation from the natural world, and from each other” (99). Not only physically, but linguistically, we are unable to demonstrate our environmental problems as a whole; we are too caught up in the hyperobject, as Morton might suggest. This linguistic separation—like the nature/culture and human/nonhuman separations I have outlined in the two previous chapters—keeps us from truly understanding the problematic hyperobjects of climate change, just as it keeps *The Southern Reach*’s characters from understanding Area X.

Control asserts that “nothing about language, about communication, could bridge the divide between human beings and Area X” (*Acceptance* 311). VanderMeer’s series, however, demonstrates a different kind of communication can be formed which can lead to the adoption of a new environmental ethics: the acceptance that we live in a place full of terror and danger, and that human dominance is a myth which has wreaked havoc on

the world around us. The biologist is the first to experience this when she inhales the spores released by the Crawler's words on her first expedition into the tower, spores which end up causing her "brightness." She considers the possibility that "the spores I had inhaled... pointed to a *truthful seeing*" (*Annihilation* 90). Not only seeing, but *understanding*, is what ultimately happens to the biologist; it is revealed in *Acceptance* that she spends her life in Area X. In her last will, found by Ghost Bird and Control, she says,

I learned to become so attuned to my environment that after a time no animal, natural or unnatural, shied away at my presence, and for this reason I no longer hunted anything but fish unless forced to, relying more and more on vegetables and fruit. Although I thought I grew attuned to their messages as well.

(*Acceptance* 177-178)

The biologist's "attunement" to her environment points to a new kind of communication—one that extends beyond words into a physical state. Just as Area X physically transforms her into the creature she becomes, breaking down the notions of human/nonhuman boundaries, it also shows the biologist how to communicate with action and *becoming*, instead of words. The biologist has transcended the complications of language in the time of hyperobjects, because she has let go of the idea that she is separate from the world around her.

The biologist is the vessel through which the other characters (namely Control and Ghost Bird) begin to understand Area X and realize that they, too, must change or embrace their own difference in order not to fight Area X but to become a part of it. In the same way, New Weird fiction allows us to embrace our own terror in the face of

changing environmental structures and break away from the old ideas of human supremacy. The language of the New Weird, by focusing on the uncanny around us but not the terror itself, lets us accept the strange and unusual in nature and take steps to both live with it and better the world around us. According to Gry Ulstein, “Area X forces the human species to become *part* of the monster by way of weird articulation” (91), and I believe New Weird fiction can do the same for the real world “monsters” we are grappling with today.

CONCLUSION

In 2010, the *Deepwater Horizon* oil spill shocked the United States' southern coast; starting in April of that year, the spill continued until September, causing previously unfathomable destruction to the ecosystems that relied on the Gulf's waters. I was 14 at the time, and I remember watching on the news the oil ooze across the blue of the ocean, spreading out like a stain. For Southerners, it was a terrifying look into the heart of the ecological destruction humanity could wreak, destruction we had been denying could ever happen—destruction we apparently *continue* to deny, because so little action or consequence has been seen in the spill's wake.

Jeff VanderMeer was living in Florida at the time of *Deepwater Horizon*, hiking at St. Marks Refuge and encountering firsthand the effect of the spill on his home state. Writing about *Annihilation* in a blog post, he reflects on the disaster's influence on his work:

... [F]or a long time I didn't realize what irritant or issue or problem had lodged in my subconscious to force Area X out. Finally, though, I realized that the Gulf Oil Spill had created Area X... By the time of the Gulf Oil Spill I had lived in North Florida for over 20 years and... I felt for the first time in a wandering life like I belonged in a place, in a landscape.

Then suddenly the oil was gushing out in the Gulf, and it couldn't be contained, and for many of us in the area it was gushing in our minds, and we could not get away from it...

But even after they capped the well, it was still somewhere in the back of my mind, and eventually that dark swirl coalesced into a dark tunnel with words on the wall, and an invisible border and Area X: a strange place in which nature was always becoming more what it had always been without human interference: less contaminated, less compromised. Safe. Where the oil was being taken out.

(“Hauntings in the Anthropocene”)

VanderMeer’s focus on this specific ecological disaster speaks to a larger truth found by studying *The Southern Reach* trilogy: that, even when it is not actively preaching a worldview, fiction can effect change, transforming the ways we think about our perspectives and our surroundings. *The Southern Reach* does not reassure us that we will be able to “contain” ecological disasters like the Gulf Oil Spill. On the contrary, it tells us that environmental destruction will *keep happening* if we continue on the path we have set ourselves—or, if it doesn’t, the Earth will find some way of making itself “more [of] what it had always been without human interference,” without our say in the matter.

Though they do not paint an overly optimistic picture of the future of our environmental reality, VanderMeer’s novels *do* provide an alternative approach: one focusing on cohesion with nature and an environmental ethics which does not separate the human from the natural, but realizes that they are tied inexorably with one another. *The Southern Reach* emphasizes breaking down the boundaries between culture and nature, as well as the human and the nonhuman. As I have shown, it presents to us a world in which being human might not be the ideal condition—because humanity has for so long been the harbinger of environmental destruction. Further, it reveals our failures of

communication with the environment and offers a new perspective for bridging the gap of language and understanding between humans and the environment in the 21st century.

Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene struggles with a world in which the problems of climate change, environmental disasters, and the rapid erosion of natural habitats are too often drowned out in the ocean of information we are presented with every day. Jeff VanderMeer, however, points out that “without complex viable ecosystems for nonhuman life... human life will not survive on this planet. And there is, practically speaking, no other place to go. So we need to think deeply about these issues and come up with complex solutions that do the most good and least harm” (“I’m Jeff VanderMeer”). In fact, VanderMeer himself actively attempts to help with the formation of these solutions, by partnering with environmental preservation groups such as the St. Marks Wildlife Refuge. In both his personal life and the fiction of *The Southern Reach* trilogy, Jeff VanderMeer poses that we should not run from the hyperobjects we are faced with—but recognize that they are here, they will change us, and *we* must adapt in order to form a new, more productive relationship with the environment.

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