

Accepting the X: Uncanny Encounters with Nature and the Wilderness in Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogyⁱ

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Abstract

This article examines the subversion of traditional human approaches to nature in Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy, and how the mysterious, uncanny nature at the heart of the books may, eventually, remain completely unexplainable in human terms. VanderMeer uses tropes from classic adventure fiction to question our human ability, based on rationality, and exemplified in the use of language and scientific tools, to comprehend, fight, or explain the trilogy's main space, Area X. The final, uncomfortable suggestion that the wild nature of Area X has to be accepted, not controlled or understood, is supplemented with the intimation that said nature and its animals may survive and transcend humanity and the Anthropocene itself. The triumph of uncanny, undomesticated and alien fauna becomes a symbol not of death but of life, even if it is a life that does not include humanity as its center or its organizing axis.

Keywords: Jeff VanderMeer, Southern Reach trilogy, uncanny, Anthropocene, space

Though published in 2014, the three novels in Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy (*Annihilation*, *Authority*, *Acceptance*) have already generated a large body of criticism from very different fields, probably due to the many literary genres (contemporary Gothic, cli-lit, ecocriticism, posthumanism, border studies, animal studies, and new weird fiction, among others) that VanderMeer seems to use, question, and transform. The many genres in the trilogy seem especially adequate in these novels about hybridization, adaptation, mutation, and the end of one domineering species (humankind)'s control over others.

In the following pages, I would like to discuss Area X (the predominant space in all three novels) as a liminal region, a heterotopia which is the only environment where authentic encounters with the utterly uncanny may happen. I will argue that the encounters are narrated using conventions from adventure fiction as a genre, connected with human (and thus, organized and rational) exploration on the one hand, and with scientific discoveries and interpretation on the other. For the last two centuries, with the closure of the age of discovery on Earth, the genre of adventure fiction seems to have mutated into the science-fictional subgenre of space exploration. And the final explanation for the appearance of Area X is that it is, indeed, of alien origin: it has been created by an advanced civilization so that the land can modify itself genetically and mutate to repair the environmental damage produced by humans. However, in its setting along the coast of Florida, in its use of characters that never leave Earth while trying to understand the area as simply a mutation of already-existing life on Earth and/or as the effect of human-produced degradation of natural spaces, the Southern Reach trilogy seems to be paradoxically very much anchored in reality, which in my opinion brings it closer to the classic configurations of adventure fiction than to other tropes associated with space exploration science fiction.

Area X is then, in these texts, configured as the contact zone (a term made popular by science fiction, but already present as a concept in early exploration narratives) where troubled encounters between representatives of the human and utterly abject (i.e. non-understandable in human terms) Others take place: these encounters are mediated by our awareness, as readers, of the deep changes produced in our surroundings by our species, with an understanding of our role in deeply modifying our environment and the Environment (with a capital E) during what has been called the Anthropocene.

In the novels, a part of Florida known as Area X is being reclaimed by nature after an unexplained accident, and the expeditions sent to make sense of the new space or to bring it back to civilization invariably fail in their endeavor. Nature seems to be fighting back against the colonizing and destructive actions of humanity: the domestication of the marsh lands, the extermination of Native Americans by successive waves of Spanish, French, and British inhabitants, the oil spills and the pollution. Thriving with new plants and mutated animals, and stubbornly unmappable, Area X resists interpretation: it refuses both the cartographic and the taxonomical efforts that have historically defined the encounters of human and nature, and its continuous expansion may also imply the collapse of civilization.

One after another, the members of the expeditions sent to Area X have not only failed in making sense out of this new nature, but also in “finding” themselves in it. The unknowable environment that VanderMeer presents unveils the pastoral genre as a human invention, a “safe” domestication and ordering of nature that satisfies humanity’s rational drives by repressing the real, untamed state of flora and fauna. Explorers in Area X are made insane by the unknowable surroundings and kill each other or are consumed and incorporated into Area X as new, monstrous organisms. The acts of recognition or, conversely, abjection by which human beings often relate to nature become, thus, useless.

While missing explorers of Area X are often incorporated into the area by being transformed into animals resembling local wildlife, there are a few examples of uncanny animals that emphasize the anthropocentric need to understand the animal Other in human terms. One of them is a creature resembling a boar, but with a (familiar) human face, a grotesque being that cannot be fully identified as human *or* non-human (hence its uncanniness). There are, similarly, dolphins with human eyes, and an owl that one of

the protagonists in *Acceptance* decides to charge with human intentions and motivations, trying to give human explanations for what may just be animal behavior.

Further summarizing the context and rhetorical strategies of all three books would go beyond the intentions of this essay: the books follow a non-linear narrative, they have different narrative voices (a diary written in the first person in *Annihilation*; a third-person, past-tense, focalized narrator in *Authority*; and five different perspectives and timelines in *Acceptance*), but all have Area X, as quicksand, as an ever-mutating black hole, at their center. Since my focus will be on Area X, I feel that a description taken from the beginning of the second book, *Authority*, may help explain what the area looks like, at least objectively, from the outside:

[a]bout thirty-two years ago, along a remote southern stretch known by some as the “forgotten coast,” an Event had occurred that began to transform the landscape and simultaneously caused an invisible border or wall to appear. A kind of ghost or “permeable pre-border manifestation” as the files put it—light as fog, almost invisible except for a flickering quality—had quickly emanated out in all directions from an unknown epicenter and then suddenly stopped at its current impenetrable limits. (VanderMeer 2014c, 35)

The Event itself is never explained: it is interesting, however, that what is used to cover up the existence of the Area is an environmental disaster, and that the area is referred to as a disaster site. Both words, “event” and “disaster” seem to emphasize the accidental, one-time-only quality of whatever changed the area, while eluding direct, continuous human responsibility. However, VanderMeer—whom David Tompkins, in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, has referred to as a successor to H. D. Thoreau and Rachel Carson, as “keenly attuned to the ecological issues of his moment” (Tompkins 2014)—has often recognized his preoccupation with the long-lasting effects of our habitation as

a species on the planet. The official story from Southern Reach, the clandestine government agency created to study, monitor and control the region, is, however, that Area X is an oddity that is, paradoxically, both created by human negligence (an environmental disaster) and not a human responsibility (an accident). Area X is, indeed, the X, the mystery at the core of the trilogy: as readers, we plunge into it willing to solve the conundrum of its existence. What this area holds, what this area is, what the nature of this Nature is, whether it is a living entity or just a setting, are questions that are not dissimilar to those posed by the diaries of early explorers and adventurers in the 15th and 16th centuries. The trilogy itself is, then, an attempt at uncovering the enigma of Area X, and in trying to use rational, human thought, the characters and narrators turn to exploring, analyzing, and dissecting the space.

1. X Marks the Spot: Maps and Taxonomies in Area X.

Maps and charts are at the core of both land and sea exploration, with accompanying tools, such as compasses, being early and deeply useful technologies for humans to orient themselves, so as to take exploration beyond individual endeavors and to transform it into a communal, repeatable, scalable effort. The creation of maps only acquires full meaning when they can be passed on to explorers that will encounter the same land, and improve on those maps, in future travels.

At the beginning of *Annihilation*, we encounter the only survivor of the twelfth expedition: a woman referred to, simply, as the biologist. In the eleven previous expeditions technologies such as recorders, communicators, compasses, or the orientation provided by maps, have failed: explorers are required to keep their own travel diaries, in an attempt to reconstruct, given the lack of working objective

technological tools, a kind of multi-faceted, subjective explanation for the existence and ontology of Area X. Even the simplest of maps obtained from the observations of previous explorers (who systematically get sick and die soon after coming back from the area) becomes useless from one expedition to the next, or even in the course of just one expedition. Two towers, however, seem to be more or less stable as spatial markers for the area: one of them is a lighthouse, one of the few remains of human activity in the region; the other, a topographical anomaly, also confusingly referred to as “a tower” by the biologist, but as a tunnel by the other characters. The topographical anomaly is not found in maps, and it is described, very early in the first book, as something that seems *created* (though not necessarily by humans), but also as something that should not be there nor exist at all. When the members of the twelfth expedition find it, the biologist explains that

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. Yet as soon as I saw the staircase, I remembered the lighthouse on the coast. (VanderMeer 2014b, 5)

The tower/tunnel thus becomes another crack in the ontological security of the explorers: not only because it should not exist since it is not in the official maps, but also because it is not semantically stable: it should be either a tunnel or a tower, but it cannot be both. Likewise, the lighthouse, which as a beacon of light is one of the staples of sea navigation, marking a safe, stable haven, is imagined as “a glowing flower in a hole at the bottom of the sea” (VanderMeer 2014a, 56), not fit to provide guidance as to the limits of Area X. Jon Hegglund has indicated that the narrative “presents a plausible, realist spatiality on the sentence level,” but the mental map of what is narrated “undermines any notion of a normative ‘real world’ from which mimetic representation

may or may not be derived” (2020, 36). Gry Ulstein has referred to the “intensely real spatiality” of the area as “creating Escheresque spatial ruptures” (2019, 139). And just as Escher’s engravings emphasize the discordance between what is seen by the eyes and what is interpreted by the brain, Area X’s continuous mutation, its geographical indeterminacy, makes the process of creating and reading maps futile. Another main feature of maps, that of scale, which helps travelers orient themselves in space through the abstract representation of a given territory, is also denied by the existence of Area X, which as an area that “has no borders and produces creatures of unfathomable dimensions” (Tesselaar 2019, 2), and where the same trip may take a night or half a week, with characters inside the area attesting to having stayed there for only two days while they have been gone for three years following external time. Orientation provided by stable markers, by maps, by compasses, by recognizable borders and landmarks, is one of the ways in which humans apply reason to, and make sense of, a space: in its troubling and ultimately unknowable existence, Area X is a space of utter disorientation.

Another way in which human beings try to make sense of reality is writing: even writing to oneself works as a way to solidify knowledge, to give stability to our understanding of our surroundings. The task given to the members of all expeditions is two-fold: on the one hand, writing in their field diaries may help them, individually, to come to terms with Area X, an uncanny landscape that not only affects the senses, but also creates, as Amaris E. Montes has described, a deep “ontological instability” (2018, 79). On the other hand, the Southern Reach hopes to be able to create some kind of collaborative version of what the expeditions encounter that is more objective than isolated individual accounts.

Field journals are recognizable artifacts in adventure narratives: they emphasize analytical thinking, which is supposed to be one of the strengths of the protagonists and narrators of such tales, while also allowing the reader to witness the progressive fall into madness of the writer of the journal when confronted with the unknown or the uncanny. Just as Area X challenged scientific capture, with technological equipment being disturbed by the space and failing to work the moment it enters the area, providing readings that are undecipherable, as if Area X “declines to be interpreted” (VanderMeer 2014a, 44), writing about the experience in the diaries is also an insufficient tool, since Area X disturbs one of the main instruments human have to understand the world and communicate it to others: language. Area X “confuses normal human abilities to speak about a place” (Mundy 2019, 52): the instability of the signifier/signified relationship when referring to the topographical anomaly, at the same time tower and tunnel, would be a good example. The biologist’s diary shows her growing absorption by and acceptance of Area X, an acceptance that is, however, not rational and which cannot be explained in rational terms through writing. The characters do not have the words to talk about Area X: even if, in our Romantic assumptions about Nature with a capital N, we often insist that Nature should be experienced, not described, writing still remains one of our main ways of relating to nature. Not having the words to describe Area X creates a “cumulative confusion” that, to Brad Tabas, seems to be suggesting that whatever that nature 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” (2015, 12). Area X is beautiful, thriving, but scary to humans mostly because it cannot be described, what produces a continuous stream of “failures of language to signify, failures of mediation and translation and even perception” (Doane 2019, 26). The biologist, just as “centuries of explorers encountering alien land before her . . . cannot

make sense of this exotic terrain, even while relying on the maps and journals of her predecessors” (Hogue 2016, 159).

Just as the biologist (and, later, the protagonist of the second book, John “Control” Rodriguez) ends up mutating, accepting and becoming a part of a space she cannot understand rationally, the diaries are found at the end of book one to be part of the lighthouse, turned into a decomposing pile that can be interpreted as “dead bodies, a rotting mound that documents a history of unnamed expeditions gone awry” (Kortekallio 2019, 68). As the biologist notes, “from below, the way the midden spilled out in ripples and hillocks of paper became more apparent. Torn pages, crushed pages, journal covers warped and damp. Slowly the history of *exploring* Area X could be said to be *turning* into Area X” (VanderMeer 2014b, 112; emphasis added).

Naming and classifying, finding specific words for specific objects, could be said to be the original, and also ultimate, rational motion of individuation produced by humans. Whitby, one of the characters working for the Southern Reach, gets obsessed with taxonomizing Area X and its constituent parts: naming is solving the mystery. The instability of Area X and what it holds, its existence as “not a being but a becoming” (Sendur 2019, 52), does not keep Whitby from creating a “grotesque museum” that Brian Onishi has connected with cabinets of curiosities that became prevalent in the 16th century and which were connected to the age of exploration, “constructed from a collection of strange and wondrous objects . . . a means of organizing, cataloguing, and representing the breadth and interconnectedness of reality” (2017, 69). Just as the biologist’s efforts to *read* Area X, when she is penetrated by nature after approaching fluorescent lichen and leaning in “closer, like a fool, like someone who had not had months of survival training or ever studied biology. Someone tricked into thinking that words should be read” (VanderMeer 2014b, 25), the fruitless efforts by Whitby to make

sense of the objects and incomplete or incongruous scientific data displayed in his cabinet of curiosities end up having the uncanniness of Area X enter his mind and drive him to insanity (a fate common to other fictional explorers). The incomprehensibility of Area X thus ends up spilling into the agency exploring it, something that is especially relevant as the agency is at first described as a model of static officialdom, sunk by the “byzantine depths of its crumbling bureaucracy” (Magnone 2016), a place where power plays are seen in terms of control of the space, with characters trying to impose on each other’s “territory, to show . . . [they are] comfortable there” (VanderMeer 2014c, 159), something that Siobhan Carroll connects to “the history of imperialism” (2016, 79) also found in Florida. The Southern Reach as a space is shown as deteriorating, clearly suggesting that it is a failing space for a failing task: understanding Area X.

As I have mentioned, the encounter between the Southern Reach and Area X can be read as a “first contact” narrative, one that has its precedents in adventure narratives and which has lately been almost solidified in the encounters, through outer space exploration, of alien civilizations in science fiction. Early first contact narratives such as the Indies chronicles already emphasized what has become a staple of the genre: the sense of wonder, the mystery that a brave new world and its peoples produce in the explorer. Area X could, then, be read as the ultimate mystery: its origin is unknown, its possibilities and capabilities ever-mutating and incomprehensible, and even its existence as a place is hard to conceptualize (how long does it reach for, why is it that usual time-space coordinates seem not to work inside the area itself). Something that is noticeable about the Southern Reach trilogy as a first contact text, however, is that it often lacks the utter horror that is often found in narratives about adventure and exploration, such as *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936), by H. P. Lovecraft. There is, rather, an acceptance, even an exhilaration at the possibilities of this utterly distinct

reality and its thriving existence, once the characters are relieved of the rational need to *understand* it imposed by the Southern Reach. In the encounter with Area X, characters (not only, but significantly, the one dubbed “Control”) need to let go of their own controlling attitudes, of trying to understand nature in order to feel at ease with it, an attitude that Benjamin Robertson connects with the need for the protagonists to come out of “assumptions about the objectivity of science . . . [and trying to come to terms with] the extent to which they are not the centers of their worlds or the masters of their destinies in the ways they previously believed” (2019, 31).

It is certainly significant that VanderMeer places Area X near the coast of Florida, a land that has been subjected to cycles of (Spanish, French, British) colonization, possession and repossession described by Bev Hogue: “contested terrain since the moment Europeans first touched on its shores and began the long history of battles . . . that resulted in historical traumas that many would prefer to forget: displacement and destruction of Native American tribes, slavery followed by entrenched racial injustice, and struggles for control of land and natural resources” (2016, 149). To Hogue, the way Area X is portrayed turns “Florida itself into a monster reflecting, mimicking, and consuming human explorers . . . [echoing] the experiences of the early European explorers who encountered in Florida terrifyingly unfamiliar terrain and creatures” (158). Area X had previously been just part of human-inhabited space, and signs of that previous possession of the now unpossessable land can be found in “eerie signs of human habitation: rotting cabins with sunken, red-tinged roofs, rusted wagon-wheels 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” (VanderMeer 2014b, 5). The recognizable quality of these images make the expeditioners to Area X and the readers think of the space and life in it as familiar, and

thus maybe close to what they know, as a house that could easily be rebuilt into a home, but the reality of the place is that it is dominated by its un-homeliness (*unheimlich*) uncanniness, something I will develop in the second part of my essay.

2. Encounters with the Uncanny: Otherness in the Late Anthropocene.

I have previously referred to the Southern Reach trilogy as using the trope of the contact zone, a liminal place where the Other is encountered. Nature in Area X is completely alien—not necessarily, though it will prove to be the big reveal in the last novel, because of its out-of-Earth origin, but because it is mostly inexplicable by humans, both the explorers in the books and the readers of the novels. The encounters with the Other in the trilogy partake of what Darko Suvin identifies as a specific kind of cognitive estrangement in science fiction, dealing with “an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (1979, 4). Mundy refers to the world in VanderMeer’s books as part of what she dubs the “ecological uncanny,” which forces us to remember “the repressed knowledge that the world around us is not separate from us; it is a home that we have forgotten is home” (2019, 4). Area X is an environment that used to be “homely” (i.e. domesticated, made into a home, a *domos*) and that is now foreign precisely because it is separate from humanity and non-understandable in human terms. Often referred to as a “pristine wilderness” in the books (and thus expressing a nostalgic but absolutely artificial idea of what nature may have been before it was observed by humans), nature in Area X is far from what Onishi claims we desire as human beings: “carefully manicured gardens, trees that line our freeways, and ‘pristine wilderness’ with a gift shop” (2017, 69). Gardens are safe, controlled, and organized in accordance to human needs, desires, and tastes, “safe . . . for cultivating

nature as we see fit” versus Area X, a “dangerous garden full of wildness that . . . expels the totalizing knowledge of human project” (65). One of the main tasks of colonizers throughout history was to make a home in their new territory, a process that can be only undertaken, as Sara Crosby states, “by making it like them . . . embark[ing] on a self-conscious program to turn the ‘wilderness’ into a ‘garden’” (2014, 516). Area X does not, however, comply with the awe produced by the sublime Nature, with a capital N, celebrated by the Romantics; it is not, either, compliant with the fallacy of a benign, nurturing mother found in Emerson, or with the pastoral idea of a simpler time where nature and humans could be in communion.

Many of the ways in which Area X is unhomely, uncanny, vaguely familiar but ultimately causing abjection, is the inability by the expeditioners to make sense of the fauna that they encounter. Most of the cognitive estrangement that Suvin refers to takes place in the world-creating effort in the first book of the series, *Annihilation*, through the field journal of the biologist. The biologist has been specifically selected for the mission because of her training, and her knowledge and recognition of fauna and flora in their natural environments. As the narrative advances, both the biologist and her journal are “contaminated” by Area X (thus negating any possibility of objective scientific analysis, which must keep the observer and the observed—except in the case of the process of participant observation much more common in anthropological and sociological studies—, as two separate entities). The biologist’s early astonishment at not being able to categorize the animals that she encounters turns into an acceptance of a different nature with its own laws and, maybe, intentions. VanderMeer uses animals belonging to what has been called “megafauna” (i.e., big, “smart” animals in human terms, which are more likely to produce empathy and a sense of protection in humans, such as panda bears, whales, dolphins, or big cats) to create a sense of cognitive

estrangement and uncanniness that would be more difficult to provoke using animals that humans often have more problems with seeing as in need of protection (such as insects). Thus, the biologist encounters a pod of dolphins, and one of them rolls “slightly to the side, and it stared at me with an eye that did not, in that brief flash, resemble a dolphin eye . . . it was painfully human, almost familiar” (VanderMeer 2014b, 97). The uncanniness of the dolphin is multiplied by the abjection produced by recognizing a human body part in an animal that, though recognized as smart, is supposed to be, rationally, *below* humans and thus in need of being protected. Area X has fused and mutated the genetic code of both dolphin and human, and created a new kind of animal, part of what Sophia B. Magnone calls an “uncanny menagerie” (2016) that is neither human nor dolphin, and which can also not be considered to be part of a process of evolution, i.e. an “improvement” on both species, in human terms.

The concept of “terroir,” which is introduced in the second book to talk about the creatures and space produced by Area X, may help us understand what is being said about the existence of a new, inapprehensible, natural world beyond the Southern Reach. Whitby explains terroir as “a wine term . . . 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” (VanderMeer 2014c, 130–131). As Whitby develops, the direct translation of “terroir” is “a sense of place” (131); also, the similar sound of terroir and terror (one of the dominant emotions in the encounters with Area X) though not etymologically related, hint at a possible connection in the mind of the reader. Furthermore, if Area X is to be thought of as a vineyard, the implication is that it can be cultivated, i.e. domesticated, farmed, turned into something that can be used for and by humans. One of the main causes of transformations in terroir is, precisely, climate change, which is by now agreed on by

the scientific community to have been caused by human technological developments: be it either by the direct action of domestication, or by the work of centuries produced by the Anthropocene, human efforts centralized in the Southern Reach attempt to explain the changes as somehow connected to human action.

Area X, however, defies apprehension in human measurements: as Andrew Strombeck argues, “it warps landscape, animals, and humans alike, and the expeditions sent into it fail to learn anything, other than ‘something happened’” (2019, 352). This will lead some of the characters, most notably Control, to be convinced that, even if Area X cannot be understood, it must have a purpose: “to kill us, to transform us, to get rid of us” (VanderMeer 2014a, 188). Control describes the land between the Southern Reach building and Area X’s border as a war zone, “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 mean to be there, and fences and barbed wire and trenches and pits” (VanderMeer 2014c, 28), while Whitby refers to the area as “an organism . . . with a million greedy mouths . . . a murderer we’re trying to catch” (VanderMeer 2014a, 43). This understanding of Area X as the villain, as the enemy, as having some kind of “monstrous nature” (Mundy 2019, 12), a destructive element that has to be contained and quarantined, is radically different from both the understanding of Ghost Bird (one of the mutations of the biologist produced by Area X) and Control’s final yield into the land. Efforts by the Southern Reach to understand the area, however, always have to do with its being treated as either machine or organic Other, such as the ludicrous moment when two thousand white rabbits are left near the border: there is the hope by the scientists that this excess of input may produce as its output an “overload” of the system which will short-circuit the border or the area. Area X is, paradoxically, seen there both as a mechanism which can be forced to shut itself off, and as a thinking enemy with its

own evil intentions. The result of the experiment is disappointing: rabbits, an invasive species, do not seem to propagate or exist inside Area X, and they just disappear “as they hit the edge of the border. There was no ripple, no explosion of blood or organs. They just disappeared” (VanderMeer 2014c, 56). The border and Area X do not “react” with any purpose (the rabbits are not killed, nor rejected) that can be understood in rational terms, contradicting the Southern Reach’s assumption that it must either have an intention or be inherently dangerous, something that Magnone identifies as “embedded in broad-based cultural norms of sickness and health, contamination versus purity . . . overflowing its boundaries and mixing with the outside world, it is considered suspect—improper, diseased, and potentially dangerous” (2016). It is worth noting at this point that the border itself, in the novels, is invisible and the expeditioners are put under some kind of hypnosis so that they will not remember the act of crossing it, but just appear somewhere in the middle of Area X with no memory of how they crossed it. The contrast between the border himself, hinted at as permeable and fluid, and the complex technical procedure to enter or leave the area hints at Area X as artificially separated *from* humanity *by* humans, not by a desire of this alien nature to be disconnected from its surroundings. The unclear border of Area X can also be seen as a heterotopia in Foucauldian terms, where different realities and interpretations of what the space is are forced to coexist. Much of the trilogy can be read as “a story about borders: about the order and security they promise, the function of the divisions they uphold, and most bewitchingly, about what happens when they are breached” (2016). Area X does, when it expands, end human life as we know it, by absorbing and mutating both humans and human-made artifacts. There is a suggestion at the end of the third book that Area X may have, in fact, already absorbed most of the Earth: as W.

Andrew Shephard suggests, this can be read as suggestive that the Anthropocene, “like all eras, will eventually come to an end” (2019, 41).

The experience of Area X by the biologist is completely opposite to its being an organic or mechanic enemy: she describes the natural surroundings as a space of possibility, “a blank surface that let us write so many things upon it” (VanderMeer 2014b, 9), what Hogue refer to as a “palimpsest” (2016, 159). As compared to the grey bureaucracy of the Southern Reach, Area X is obviously thriving, vibrant, with a most rich biosphere that cannot even be taxonomized in human terms. At the end of the trilogy, Ghost Bird believes in the need to observe the world outside Area X “through the eyes of Area X” (VanderMeer 2014a, 329), recognizing that understanding the new reality does not entail the creation of maps, and refusing to see Area X as enemy or machine, ceding human-centered control of the way space is to be interpreted. At the same time, we witness yet another mutation of the biologist by Area X that clearly emphasizes the borderlessness at the core of the space: the final form of this mutation is “an animal, an organism that had never existed before or that might belong to an alien ecology. That could transition not just from land to water but from one remote place to another, with no need for a door or a border” (VanderMeer 2014a, 196). Ghost Bird recognizes this new creature as both part and not part of her former and present self, while Control is able to imagine his own demise as “melt[ing] into this landscape, becom[ing] part of what he found here, try[ing] to forget what had happened before and become no more or less than the spray against the bow, the foam against the shore, the wind against his face” (VanderMeer 2014c, 327).

As a number of critics have analyzed, VanderMeer’s Southern Reach trilogy should be understood in the context of Morton’s hyperobjects, which are deeply connected to the study of our era as part of what has been dubbed the Anthropocene.

VanderMeer himself has recognized the link between his trilogy and hyperobjects *a posteriori*, i.e. he learnt about the term after having published the books. In his essay “Hauntings in the Anthropocene”, VanderMeer recognizes Morton’s concept of the hyperobject as “central to thinking about storytelling in the modern era . . . a very important signifier for any fiction writer wishing to engage with the fragmented and diffuse issues related to the Anthropocene” (2016). Hyperobjects have been defined by Morton as objects so massively distributed, either in space or time (or both), that they can be imagined or computed, but not touched or seen directly (2013, 37–39). It is easy to see Area X as a hyperobject: the area is distributed in space so that nobody knows exactly its size (at some point, the characters feel that, being in Area X, they may even be *outside* the Earth), but also its specific moment of origin, and the time of its eventual disappearance, are unknown. Also, as I have developed, any attempts at measuring or observing the area scientifically are doomed to failure. Recognizing the existence of the Anthropocene itself seems to be, today, beyond a scientific task, a deeply moral one. Scientists willing to accept that there is such thing as a geological era called Anthropocene do not quite agree on when such an era would have started: it could extend as far back as the beginnings of organized farming almost 12,000 years ago, or the age of discoveries, or the 19th century and industrialization, or the more recent phase of industrialization in the second half of the 20th century. But there is indeed a very recognizable (and mostly pernicious) influence of humankind and human-made technologies on nature and the planet, which may be connected to what is being termed the Holocene extinction or sixth mass extinction, an ongoing destruction of many species of the planet due to the dominance of humans as an unprecedented (even if unaware) global superpredator. As Hegglund asserts, “the recognition of the Anthropocene has prompted a reexamination of what may be possible in the natural

world . . . a Europe-sized patch of floating plastics in the Pacific, poison-resistant urban rats, post-Fukushima radioactive boars . . . such actually existing weird materialities blur clear distinctions between the natural and the unnatural” (2020, 29). Our recognition of the Anthropocene also comes at a time when humanity as a species is most strongly coming to question our place in the universe as a whole. The trilogy, however, seems to separate itself from the apocalyptic genre, as there is not so much lamentation for what will be lost, but a celebration of what may happen in that brave weird world defined by uncanny beauty when there are no human left to “understand” or “explain” the result. Yet, the books do emphasize the good in human nature, in a species that seems to be bound to disappear: the novels’ insistence on gender, ethnic, class and sexual orientation diversity seems not to unflinchingly celebrate the apocalypse as a final solution to the pernicious influence of the species, but maybe as a way to mutate and reconstruct what is positive in human beings, producing new species that can exist in a more balanced relationship with nature. As Doane has stated, the novels “offer readers a gentle, planetary euthanasia that is marked by some horror, yes, but also by fascination and wonder. Death by absorption. By transformation” (2019, 25). VanderMeer has recognized that at the core of his trilogies lies the idea 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” (2018). The task of the reader, then, lies in the recognition of VanderMeer’s texts as not simply escapist, or apocalyptic, but as a complex political artifact that, using adventure fiction as a genre and emphasizing the imprint and footprint of humans on the spaces we inhabit, may move us towards new ways of relating to the natural world and the planet.

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