

**Imagining the Anthropocene: The Weird Ecology of  
Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy***

MA Literature Today: English and Comparative Literature

Christopher Margeson (6069037)

Thesis supervisor: dr. Kári Driscoll

Second reader: dr. Tom Idema

Date: 10 Aug. 2018

## Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
I. The Environmental Imagination	8
II. Space is the Place: The Alien	22
Ecology of Area X	
III. Care, Concern, Respons(e)ability	39
Conclusion	55
Works Cited	58

## Abstract

Some critics and writers have noted a scarcity of works of fiction dealing with climate change, and fewer confronting the challenges it poses for aesthetic representation. Some have gone so far as to argue that at the heart of the climate crisis lies a crisis of culture and of the imagination. This thesis explores the relationship between 21<sup>st</sup>-century environmental concerns and the imagination through the crucible of Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014), arguing that VanderMeer's experimentations in "weird" ecology work to create new narratives and metaphors for ecological thinking in the Anthropocene. The first chapter discusses environmental philosopher Lawrence Buell's concept of the environmental imagination and contextualizes that within the current climate crisis to which VanderMeer's trilogy is responding. The second focuses on the strange ecosystem presented in the trilogy, Area X, as a hyperbolized model for imagining ecological entanglement and the relationship between humans and the environment in the Anthropocene. The third explores the various modes of responding to contemporary environmental crises represented by the characters in VanderMeer's trilogy, and the role of the environmental imagination in these responses. I conclude that VanderMeer's trilogy is an example of contemporary eco-fiction which strives to overcome the traditional boundaries of how we imagine ecology and seeks to create new paths for the imagining of (and responding to) the environmental conditions of the Anthropocene.

## Introduction

Halfway through the first book in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*, a character known only as "the biologist" relates a phenomenologically-unnering encounter with a starfish lying in a tidal pool:

The longer I stared at it, the less comprehensible the creature became. The more it became something alien to me, and the more I had a sense that I knew nothing at all - about nature, about ecosystems. There was something about my mood [...] that made me see this creature, which had indeed been assigned a place in the taxonomy - catalogued, studied, and described - irreducible down to any of that. And if I kept looking, I knew that ultimately I would have to admit I knew less than nothing about myself as well, whether that was a lie or the truth." (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 175)

This short scene synthesizes much of what makes the "nature" of VanderMeer's trilogy so unsettling and unfamiliar. Consisting of the novels *Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance*, all published over the course of a few months in 2014, it tells the story of Area X: a mysterious, seemingly alien ecosystem colonizing a swatch of coastline in the southern USA. The trilogy's namesake, the Southern Reach, is a government organization tasked with studying and containing Area X, where the expeditions it organization forms to that end are met with an uncanny, seemingly-sentient ecosystem that baffles their mission time after time, eventually driving the expedition members to kill themselves or one another. Those few who return seem distant and different, and usually die shortly thereafter. Interestingly, the biologist's encounter

related above does not take place in Area X; it is a reminiscence of her doctoral fieldwork in the Pacific Northwest, in what we might call “ordinary” nature. But in this story of alien ecosystems and shadowy bureaucracies, one of VanderMeer’s primary narrative thrusts is to defamiliarize us even to that “ordinary” nature, showing us that it is itself very weird – and getting weirder.

At the heart of the *Southern Reach Trilogy* lies a concern with contemporary issues in environmentalism and ecology. Yet VanderMeer departs from the usual tropes and narratives surrounding these topics – or, rather, uses these same to new ends and new imaginings. His trilogy defamiliarizes the underlying assumptions of environmental writing and eco-fiction, in the process illustrating the way in which our world is itself becoming something unfamiliar, even vaguely alien, to us. In this the *Southern Reach Trilogy* is responding to the ontological and epistemological repercussions of a world in which human activity has begun to re-shape our environment in unmanageable and unpredictable ways. Encompassing these repercussions is the concept of the Anthropocene – a proposed geological era to replace the Holocene, in which humanity has become the dominant influencer of climate conditions on Earth. Taken seriously, the Anthropocene implies a shake-up in how we humans should be imagining our relation to the world. Amitav Ghosh speaks to these implications in an article from 2016, “Where is the Fiction About Climate Change?” In it he argues that “the Anthropocene presents a challenge [...] to our common-sense understandings and beyond that to contemporary culture in general,” that the climate crisis at the heart of this epoch is “also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination.” Diagnosing the lack of fiction dealing with the impending crises of the Anthropocene as “an aspect of the broader imaginative and cultural failure that lies at the heart of the climate crisis,” Ghosh argues that a true imaginative tackling of the representational challenges of climate

change “may well be the key to understanding why today’s culture finds it so hard to deal with climate change.”

There are, however, writers who are now attempting to bridge this imaginative gap and make up for the lack, and Jeff VanderMeer’s particularly weird brand of environmental fiction seems well suited to the task. Both the richness of his imaginative experiments, and the series’ popularity since its publishing, make the *Southern Reach Trilogy* an opportunity to explore what fiction *can* do when it takes on the Anthropocene’s challenges to our common-sense understandings of ecology. In the following thesis I will explore, through the *Southern Reach Trilogy*, some of the ways in which VanderMeer subverts expectations to create new images, narratives, and imaginative modes for the age of anthropogenic climate change. Throughout this thesis I will explore the role that our collective environmental narratives, tropes, and metaphors (what I will call, after Lawrence Buell, the environmental imagination) shape our attitudes toward the environment, and how this is reflected in environmental fiction. I will examine how the tropes of the environmental imagination have been subverted in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy* and explore contemporary eco-fiction’s potential for helping us re-imagine our relationship to the world, and better understand the imminent climate crises humanity is now staring down.

My first chapter will set up and explore a theoretical groundwork for what I mean by writing about “the environmental imagination,” with particular reference to Lawrence Buell’s ground-breaking work of eco-criticism of the same name. The second chapter will turn toward the role of Area X in the *Southern Reach Trilogy* as a new model for ecological entanglement and the *weirdness* of environmental awareness in the Anthropocene. This chapter will draw from recent works by environmental philosophers Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, and Timothy

Morton, drawing parallels between the concerns they associate with humanity's relationship to the environment in the Anthropocene and VanderMeer's imaginative representations of the same. The third and final chapter will switch gears again, focusing on questions of morality and the imagination in the face of the environmental concerns discussed up to this point. This chapter will focus on the journey of the characters in the *Southern Reach Trilogy* as they chart different responses to the challenges posed to them by Area X. While Stengers, Morton, and Buell remain an important foundation in this chapter it will focus more explicitly Latour and theorists Donna Haraway and Jane Bennett, who craft new models of morality and response from their own imaginative philosophies.

## I. The Environmental Imagination

“Oh, baby, baby, it’s a wild world.”

-Cat Stevens, “Wild World”

In his *New Yorker* review of Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy*, Joshua Rothman suggested a catchy appellation for the author, one that has stuck around to reappear in various essays and reviews: “the Weird Thoreau.” Rothman describes VanderMeer’s trilogy as combining “experiments in psychedelic nature writing, in the tradition of Thoreau, and meditations on the theme of epistemic pessimism, in the tradition of Kafka.” In the process, he writes, VanderMeer attempts to “imagine nature, both human and wild, in a new way.” This is a recurring trend in the critical reception of VanderMeer’s trilogy; readers are used to books with ecological themes, but this seemed to be something different. In the words of one reviewer, writing for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, VanderMeer’s is a “weird ecology” (Tompkins; emphasis added). In this review, David Tompkins cites a passage from *Annihilation*, in which one of VanderMeer’s characters encounters dolphins surprisingly far inland in Area X. “I knew that the dolphins here sometimes ventured in from the sea, had adapted to the freshwater,” she notes, “But when the mind expects a certain range of possibilities, any explanation that falls outside of that expectation can surprise” (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 98).

In reading reviews of the *Southern Reach Trilogy*, it seems clear that the presentation of ecological themes in VanderMeer’s writing falls far enough outside the expected range of possibilities to surprise. In this first chapter I hope to untangle why this is, by examining what our expectations might be when reading literature with environmental or ecological themes, and where these expectations come from. To that end I will borrow, employ, and with any luck express new possibilities for the concept of the “environmental imagination” popularized by



Lawrence Buell's ecocriticism in the mid-1990s. In doing so, I want to stress the link between VanderMeer's "weird ecology" clashing with imaginative expectations at the same historical moment in which the real climate conditions begin to clash with our expectation of the planet's stability, predictability, and even its future as a home for humanity. This chapter will construct a theoretical foundation from which to explore Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy* and its re-imagining of what eco-fiction can do for our understanding of ecology and our relationship to/within the environment. A good starting point might be to look at this strange moniker, "the Weird Thoreau," and unpack what it means to write like Thoreau (but weirdly so).

### **i. Imagination and Détournement**

Lawrence Buell first outlined the concept of the environmental imagination in *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, published in 1995. Buell's study is founded on the idea that, while "we do not think about our surroundings, and our relation to them, as much as we ought to" (Buell 261), the stories we do tell ourselves about the world around us profoundly influence our relationship with it.

Environmentally-focused literature offers readers an imaginative space to do this kind of thinking and tell this kind of story, its value lying in its effectiveness for "reanimating and redirecting the reader's transactions with nature" (97). Looking through the history of environmental writing, the project of focusing readers' attentions on the seldom-looked-on "object world" can be traced throughout – what is harder, Buell writes, is to "give a searching explanation of why someone would want to do this" (103). This is the task Buell set for himself, and the question I seek to answer before tracing a brief genealogy of certain key ingredients of the environmental imagination.

The most succinct argument for developing what Buell calls “environmental literacy” – i.e. an ecological awareness of our relationship to the natural world around us – is, he writes, “that it is [...] getting more important as it seems to grow less” (Buell 110). Our unexamined relationship with the environment, with its emphasis on our control of and separation from the natural world, has nurtured a blindness leading us to the present-day crisis of human and geological history, the Anthropocene. After all, Buell notes, mod-cons like air conditioning, that “have insulated us from confronting the scandal of our environmental dependence,” are at least partly the reason that we could turn a blind eye to the holes we burned in the ozone layer around Earth (110). Today the realities of climate change have become self-evident (at least for most in the scientific arena). We cannot help but think about the environment. But, as Andrew Kalaidjian argues in a 2017 article on the aesthetic representation of climate change, it also matters *how* we think about it, and what responses our stories provoke in us. He argues that while it takes “the arrival of a Hurricane Sandy or historic droughts to thrust society back into reality” it is also possible for art and literature to “promote an ecological *détournement*” and “to bring meaning, relief and compassion to change our contemporary condition” (Kalaidjian 23-24). *Détournement*, a term popularized by Guy Debord and the Situationist movement, refers to a technique of appropriating existing media artifacts and images and imbuing them with new, radical, and/or subversive ideas (“Definitions”). Ecological *détournement* would thus be a “tradition of environmental aesthetics that proposes an immersive and enmeshed view of human relationships to the surrounding world” (Kalaidjian 30). Against representations that aestheticize climate change issues and turn them into spectacles – issues that garner high-octane but short-lived attention – representations that aim for *détournement* encourage “a longer unsettling that leads to

sustained activism on environmental justice issues that cannot be conveniently resolved by the end of the episode” (32).

The concept of *détournement* is grounded in the belief that the images we view and the stories we tell ourselves profoundly influence our attitudes and actions; they can numb us to our environment, as media spectacles often do, or they can lead to a sustainable relationship with it. Lawrence Buell stresses the importance of these images and stories (he calls them “master metaphors”) that run through environmental writing, stating that “[w]e cannot begin to talk or even think about the nature of nature without resorting to them, whether or not we believe they are true; and our choice of metaphors can have major consequences” (281). Perhaps two of the most significant sets of these images, for western imaginations, would be pastoralism and Romanticism. But Buell also offers the cycle of the seasons (a relatively recent phenomenon, geo-historically speaking) as a further example: “Because season succession [...] has not (yet) been so affected more than marginally,” he writes, “to take it as a central point of reference is to risk perpetuating an old-fashioned picture of nature as a homeostasis that humanity can ignore but not change” (281). Long held as a symbol of eternal renewal, rebirth, and the stages of human life, seasonality as a trope in literature promotes Romantic notions of Nature<sup>1</sup> that perpetuate the myth of the world’s static nature and stymie re-evaluations of environmental agency occasioned by climate change.

The environmental imagination is that part of our orientation toward the world shaped by the stories we have told and been told about the environment, our relationship to and within it, its essential characteristics and possibilities. Our imagination is shaped throughout our lives by the

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis I will distinguish the Romantic notion of the natural world by referring to capital-N “Nature,” while reserving the lowercase variant for a more general sense of the world of all natural things (of which we are a part).

stories underlying the literature we read, our education, etc., and is built on certain key assumptions. The crucial element is that our possibilities for responding to the challenges of a changing climate are limited to what we can imagine – and, as Kalaidjian and others have pointed out, we are imagining with an outdated toolbox. If new stories can help us *détourne* our current, self-destructive style of sharing the world with one another (and everything else) then we need new tools with which to build them. I now turn my attention to tracing a (brief) path through some of the constituent metaphors and stories that define the environmental imagination; metaphors and stories which, in contemporary eco-fiction such as VanderMeer’s, have been upended in the name of reorganizing the toolbox.

## **ii. Romanticizing the Stone: Pastoralism and the Wilderness**

Buell’s focus on the works of Henry David Thoreau demonstrates why the dubbing of Jeff VanderMeer as “the weird Thoreau” is illuminating regarding VanderMeer’s stance toward literature and the environment. For Buell, Thoreau’s writing condenses the most formative elements of the American environmental imagination; he is, Buell argues, “the patron saint of American environmental writing” (Buell 115). Thoreau’s ecological and political views have turned him into a rare example of an American writer who has become “both a popular hero and a hero of high culture” (24). *Walden*, for Buell, is an influential and encyclopedic example of both the promising and the problematic in American ecological thought, “a record and model of a western sensibility working with and through the constraints of Eurocentric, androcentric, homocentric culture” in search of “an environmentally responsive vision” (23).

One of the most significant of these “constraints” is the pastoralizing impulse of the western imagination. “Pastoralism,” Buell writes, “is a species of cultural equipment that western

thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without” (Buell 32). It is, he argues, a crucial conceptual element of even the most progressive western-educated mind. Buell sees romantic pastoralism as a connective thread running through the history of European-occupied America, from the days of European colonization to the present: “Much colonial and early national literature was taken up with exploring, mapping, and celebrating the land. [...] American criticism has repeatedly stressed the historic importance of pastoral, frontier, and wilderness themes to the American imagination” (14-15). If the pastoral has, as Buell argues, “become almost synonymous with the idea of (re)turn to a less urbanized, more ‘natural’ state of existence” (34), it can be made to serve the ideological purposes of an urban America still imagining itself as a frontier land of untamed wilderness.

This abstract, Romantic image of Nature that pastoralism envisions finds a particularly New World pattern in the fascination with *wilderness* in American thought and fiction. In the American environmental imagination, the wilderness is alternately feared and embraced but remains a powerful force in the imagination in both manifestations. The wilderness is where Thoreau seeks refuge in his pilgrimage to Walden Pond, yet equally is it the force against which Captain Ahab struggles in *Moby-Dick*. As Buell points out, the pioneer antipathy of the wilderness of North America’s yet-untamed frontiers is a foundational story of the re-settled continent – so the rehabilitation of “wilderness” into a cherished element of American identity is an interesting phenomenon. In his book *Wilderness and the American Mind* (2001), Roderick Nash writes that with “the flowering of Romanticism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, wild country lost much of its repulsiveness [...] and gradually a few Americans, *in urban situations and with literary interests*, began to adopt favorable attitudes” (Nash 44; emphasis added). Here we see the thread of pastoralism present even in the wild, in that it still

garners its positive attributes from being *outside and apart from* civilization. Against the perceived superiority of Europe's cultural and urban history, America fashioned a self-image built on its vast, wild lands; true wilderness, Americans began to believe, had "no counterpart in the Old World" (67). This led to a revived fascination with the wilderness of North America, and this fascination runs through much of the continent's literature.

Jonah Raskin studies this fascination in *A Terrible Beauty: The Wilderness of American Literature* (2004). He too notes the term's popularity emerging in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a result of America feeling "bloated on civilization" and longing to "return to the wilderness in fiction" (100). With the actual frontier closed since the 1890s, writers began to pursue new visions of the wilderness they had claimed as essential to the American experience. Thoreau is an early example, but Raskin turns much of his attention to popular writers like Jack London, who provided legends of the wilderness as antithesis to society in novels like *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906). As both Nash and Raskin show, the centrality of "wilderness" as a counterbalance to its cities and civilization has been incredibly formative to the American sense of identity and the environmental imagination of its literature, from the works of Thoreau and London through to authors like Mary Austin, Aldo Leopold, and Marilynne Robinson – among (many) others.

The sad irony, Raskin points out, is that "Americans had turned the green breast of the new world into a landscape of lifelessness even as they held on to the illusion of a pristine wilderness" (104-5), and perhaps – as in the case of the A/C and the ozone holes – because of the illusion. For what do our stories of the untouched wilderness really teach us? Marilynne Robinson tackles the question in her 1998 essay "Surrendering Wilderness," writing that wilderness is "where things can be hidden" (Robinson 61), where we can behave as though

“actions would not have consequences” (61). The American government can afford to test nuclear weapons in Utah, for example, because that’s wilderness, i.e. *not* civilization – the risk of human injury (or accountability) is lower there because it is empty, disconnected from society. Indeed, the United States *Wilderness Act* of 1964 defines the wilderness in very similar terms:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain [...] which generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable. (2)

We have moved, for the most part, from bombing our areas of wilderness to preserving the few left, but the song remains the same: wilderness, understood as pristine Nature untouched by civilization, legitimizes our neglect of the environment not considered to be “true wilderness.” In her essay Robinson advocates that we “surrender the idea of wilderness” and “accept the fact that the consequences of human presence in the world are universal and ineluctable” (64) in the name of developing a relationship of care with the world. Yet she takes this step without confronting the foundational beliefs of both the pastoral vision and the ideal of wilderness: that of an independent realm of Nature, set apart from the human realm of Culture. In advocating for us to “invest our care and hope in civilization” (64) instead of the wilderness, Robinson replicates the same master metaphors that further alienate us from our environment.

The bifurcation of the world into separate realms of Nature and Culture is engrained in western environmental thought. The desire for pastoral landscapes and untouched wilderness

devised by urban humanity estrange us from the material realities and interconnectedness of the world we inhabit. Buell writes that “the promise of pastoral aesthetics as a stimulus to ecocentrism can fulfill itself completely only when pastoral aesthetics overcomes its instinctive reluctance to face head-on the practical obstacles to the green utopia it seeks to realize” (307), but as we will see, this “green utopia” (be it in the form of a pristine wilderness apart from society like Walden Pond, or the alien purity of Area X) is itself an untenable concept. Worse yet, it is a concept which impels readers to continue thinking with outmoded imaginative models that can become barriers to ethical relations and actions in the face of current environmental concerns.

Throughout the *Southern Reach Trilogy* Jeff VanderMeer détournes the pastoral penchant for idealizing Nature, turning the romantic notion of a “pristine wilderness” upside-down. Idyllic descriptions of Area X abound. Indeed, in *Authority*, the second book of the trilogy, the new director of the Southern Reach (who goes by the cypher “Control”) says of his first day on the job that he had “never heard the word *pristine* used so many times before today” (*Authority* 37). Area X presents as a “pristine wilderness,” completely devoid of anthropogenic toxins. It is a pastoral dreamscape followed to its logical extreme and shown to be a nightmare in disguise. Control muses along these lines in *Authority* while sitting in the riverside park of a small town near Area X: “It wasn’t true wilderness, was comfortingly close to civilization, but existed just enough apart to create a boundary. 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” (81). Much like the riverside park, imagining the environment in pastoral terms is a safe way for an urban America to imagine itself out of a “soulless artificial life” – without the threat of an actual incursion of nature. But when all evidence points to the fact that



we can no longer turn a blind eye to the here and now of our changing climate, we are forced to confront just such an intrusion, and forced to be a “*part of*” this thing called Nature.

### iii. What Does Climate Change?

Buell offers a compelling vision of the importance of our imagination – and the “master metaphors” that help shape it – as a stepping stone on the path to an eco-centric relationship with the environment. Many contemporary concerns are anticipated in Buell’s book, but in the decades since it was published many things have changed, as well. In his essay “Climate Changes Everything,” Matthew Griffith writes that “climate change disrupts and disturbs pastoral or Romantic conceptions of nature” (5), arguing that Buell makes the mistake of implicitly valorizing these same conceptions in his tradition-oriented take on the environmental imagination. Griffith argues that Buell attempts “to accommodate crisis within historic texts that accord with a particular conception of nature as a subject of representation” and thus fails to truly imagine “alternative visions of the nonhuman world” (14). Climate change requires that we rethink this relationship. As Griffiths puts it, our current ecological predicament demands that we “decompose ‘nature’ to get a better understanding of it, and of how and why institutionalized understanding of it has enabled the emergence of contemporary climate change” (16).

Bruno Latour has dedicated the better part of his career “decomposing” the habitual patterns through which we conceptualize, define, and relate to the world around us. For Latour, climate change is less a *crisis*, through which we could comfort ourselves by saying “this too will pass,” the crisis “will soon be behind us,” and more so a “*profound mutation in our relation to the world*” (Latour, *Facing* 7). (It thus seems significant that mutation figures so prominently in VanderMeer’s environmental imagination – it is, in a sense, what Area X does best.) But

Latour's point is that a changing climate does not require that we rethink our relation to the world *for now*. The environmental imagination, long hitched to a set of western tropes and ideologies, requires a permanent recalibration. Latour differentiates this project from previous eco-minded re-wirings of the environmental imagination by pointing out that their mission has historically been "presented as the eternally renewed discovery that 'man *belongs to nature*'" despite the fact that in "the Western tradition [...] most definitions of the human stress the extent to which it is *distinguished* from nature" (13). These projects suffer from the same ambiguity that Thoreau's and Robinson's literary projects do: the portrayal of Nature as a realm kept distant geographically and ontologically. So, when Buell writes of Thoreau that he "spent his entire career laboriously trying to sort out the competing claims of nature and culture" (Buell 115), there is in the statement a fundamental disconnect with reality, the root of which lies in its very wording.

Latour writes that "the bad news with which we are bombarded every day about the state of the planet incites us to become aware of a *new instability of nature*. But since we don't manage to evaluate these warnings, or really even to take them into account, they drive us crazy in several ways. At which point we notice the existence of yet another instability, this time in *the very notion of 'nature'*" (Latour, *Facing* 34). This notion of "nature" is predicated on the false binary between Nature and Culture – in which Nature is imagined as the eternal, unchanging world opposed to the dynamics of human culture and history. Latour's proposition is that to speak of Nature and Culture is not to speak of two distinct "domains" but rather "one and the same *concept* divided into two parts" (15). The shock to the environmental imagination is thus the loss of one of its central organizing principles: the idea of a domain of Nature, separate from human Culture, that was "universal, stratified, incontrovertible, systematic, deanimated, global,

and indifferent to our fate” (142). The challenge and purpose in updating our shared environmental imagination is in finding a more honest and ethical mode of representing “the otherness of the world to which we must open ourselves,” something to replace a traditional concept of nature which now feels “truncated, simplified, exaggeratedly moralistic, excessively polemical, and prematurely political” (36).

The dynamics of the Anthropocene necessitate a change in how we think, a call-to-arms to which art and scholarship are only recently beginning to respond. Buell noted this lack in 1995, claiming that “newer scholarship stresses even more than the older scholarship did nature’s function as an ideological theater for acting out desires that have very little to do with bonding to nature as such and that subtly or not so subtly valorize its unrepresented opposite (complex society)” (Buell 35). Criticism and literature which does so remains stuck in the Nature/Culture binary that now seems an elaborate hoax. Matthew Griffith echoes this disenchantment with the critical reaction to the Anthropocene, hearkening back to the ideas of our “master metaphors” like seasonality and pastoralism when he writes that “[r]ather than being seen as necessitating fresh engagement with the phenomenal world, climate change has too often been taken as a reason to retrench and confirm cherished, nostalgic views of natural stability” (Griffith 5). We require new stories, new metaphors of interrelation, if we hope to finally explore the capacity of literature to articulate material agencies and nonhuman environments, to raise our awareness and, perhaps, increase our empathic connection with those nonhuman actors that we share our world with.

VanderMeer’s writing is just such a fresh engagement, as he opts for surreality over detached objectivity, and for a weird sense of ecology over a nostalgic view back on Nature. In her 2016 article titled “Brave New Weird,” Gry Ulstein suggests that ecofiction which

emphasizes the inherent *weirdness* of the natural world (specifically the amorphous category of contemporary writing known as the New Weird, works of contemporary Lovecraftian fiction of which VanderMeer has edited anthologies) is a promising literary stage for representing the world of the “Anthropo(s)cene” as it “lays bare and challenges the limits of imagination, and explores how to expand, transform, and evolve beyond those limits” (Ulstein 94). This echoes the sentiments of environmental philosopher Timothy Morton, who claims as axiomatic that “ecological awareness is weird,” and that true ecological awareness must realize “we live in a universe of finitude and fragility, a world in which objects are suffused with and surrounded by mysterious hermeneutical clouds of unknowing” (Morton, *Dark* 6). Latour similarly signals the weirdness of Anthropocene ecology when he describes seeing a photograph of a lava flow in Hawaii made of half molten rock and half molten plastic that has been swept up in the flow: hybrid objects like this force us to “*redistribute* entirely what had formerly been called natural and what had been called social or symbolic” (Latour, *Facing* 120). This is a radical extension of what Buell describes as ecology’s “founding premise of interrelatedness,” that there exist “no discrete entities” (Buell 200). When the biologist in VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* examines a series of samples from Area X, for example, and finds that the moss and the fox she collected were not made of “moss” and “fox” but were rather “composed of modified human cells” (159) “interrelation” takes on dramatic and unsettling new connotations.

In *The Environmental Imagination* Buell asks “[w]hat literary inventions might be expected from an age of unprecedented, albeit somewhat ragged, sense of the interlinkage between humans and other creatures?” (Buell 204). Now, over two decades since Buell posed this question, we can extend the line of thought further: what literary inventions might be expected when all the former boundaries – between human and nonhuman, Nature and Culture,

subject and object, myself and my environment – have been blurred and made, if not irrelevant, at least stranger and murkier than previously imagined? How are we to imagine a world like this? The stories we have been telling – of pastoral daydreams and unspoilt wilderness just outside of town – are being dismantled (critically, if not popularly). In the presence of pyroclastic plastic, the “return to Nature” rings hollow as a concept; there *is* no Nature to return to. Humanity never left the world, and the world never left us – even in the bustle of our biggest cities. The task at hand – for art, literature, criticism, etc. – is to *recompose* a sense of worldliness along the lines of an imaginative understanding of the environment as dynamic, agential, both responsive and active, promoting a sense of empathy and care despite our inability to grasp and understand it completely. In the following two chapters I hope to show how a writer like VanderMeer strives to defamiliarize the world around us to rebuild, from the ground up, an environmental imagination that could do just that.

## II. Space is the Place: The Alien Ecology of Area X

“If this is paradise

I wish I had a lawn mower.”

-Talking Heads, “[Nothing But] Flowers”

Several decades before the events of *Annihilation* and the twelfth expedition’s ill-fated journey into Area X, a lighthouse keeper (by the name of Saul Evans) on a stretch of land known as “the forgotten coast” reaches out and touches what appears to be a shard of glass from his lighthouse’s antique beacon. When Saul touches the glinting piece of glass and realizes it is not glass after all, but rather a splinter of light that leaps into his finger, he sets in motion the events immediately leading up to the creation of Area X. I write that the lighthouse keeper sparks the events *immediately* prior to Area X’s creation because VanderMeer goes out of his way to stress the difficulty, even impossibility, of applying straightforward models of cause-and-effect to this story. In VanderMeer’s world there are no simple solutions to the mysteries confronting his characters. This is equally true for the vision of ecology presented in his writing. Saul understands this the moment he feels the splinter of light enter him, as his world begins to change: “It was just a tiny thing. A splinter. And yet it was as large as entire worlds, and he was never going to understand it, even as it took him over” (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 325).

Throughout the preceding chapter I have made a case for the importance of the environmental imagination, and the need for a re-examination of the stories and metaphors that have created it, where these have brought us, and why they deserve an update. In this chapter I turn my attention to an arena in which VanderMeer challenges and détournes traditional models of ecological thought, one which I touched on briefly in the last chapter: the concept of Nature, and of ecological awareness as a process of getting back in touch with the places that constitute

this realm of Nature. In doing so I will draw on some of the images and metaphors employed in contemporary environmental scholarship, most notably the rejuvenation of the Gaia hypothesis by theorists like Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers, and the concept of the hyperobject theorized by Timothy Morton. These concepts draw on a sense that current models are not enough, that they allow for only a limited ecological understanding; VanderMeer, I argue, channels similar concerns, giving voice to the affective response of those sensitive to the experience of living on a warming globe, and what that means for our relationship to the natural world around us. In *Area X* VanderMeer has created an image that resonates with the awe of the Anthropocene, with the sense of a powerful new agency making itself known to us on Earth. This chapter aims to explore this image in the context of the environmental and intellectual climate that gives it shape.

### **i. Re-Figuring the Environment: Area X and the Return of Gaia**

Though we never really learn what *Area X* is, it is helpful to ask what it seems to be, how it is described. In short, it is a stretch of the aforementioned “forgotten coast,” separated from the rest of the world by an invisible “border” created after Saul’s encounter with the splinter. Hints of hidden connections, even alien consciousness, pervade *Area X*, never really coagulating into a discernible whole. The biologist – the last remaining expedition member by the end of *Annihilation* – can only vaguely conceptualize what she is encountering: “What do I believe manifested? Think of it as a thorn, perhaps, a long, thick thorn so large it is buried deep in the side of the world [...] Perhaps it is a creature living in perfect symbiosis with a host of other creatures. Perhaps it is ‘merely’ a machine. But in either instance, if it has intelligence, that intelligence is far different from our own” (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 190).

Descriptions of Area X are often couched in Romantic language – but for all the pastoral tropes a daffodil in Area X is as likely to conjure up Lovecraft as Wordsworth. Area X is vaguely, but definitively, menacing, with eerie intimations of alien consciousness and seemingly misanthropic agency underlying everything within its borders, and this landscape is a major thrust of the ecological *détournement* in VanderMeer’s trilogy. Area X may be a conscious entity, or it may be, as the biologist muses, “‘merely’ a machine,” but what it is *not* is a friendly reminder for humanity to reconnect with Nature. Sci-fi elements aside, the reader is left to wonder if this is a more realistic depiction of what a “return to Nature” would *really* feel like. Area X, taken as emblematic of VanderMeer’s ecological vision in the text, is an illustration of distant Nature’s eruption onto the stage, through the motionless backdrop on which humanity had painted an easygoing, passive Nature against which to play out its dramas. Throughout VanderMeer’s trilogy Area X serves as an imaginative arena in which he can experiment with new images, metaphors, stories and feelings, testing these against readers’ expectations of what eco-fiction should be and do, and what environmental realism looks like.

This is important, as the reality of our environment is itself rapidly changing – perhaps the reason why environmental philosopher Isabelle Stengers has chosen a figurehead for the Anthropocene that *intrudes* into our lives: Gaia. And Stengers, whose book on this “intrusion of Gaia” appeared in English in 2015 as *In Catastrophic Times*, is not alone in envisioning our changing world as the return of this primordial Greek god. Bruno Latour’s latest book also deals with the representation of the Anthropocene and was published as *Facing Gaia* in 2017. Both take the figuring and naming of the Anthropocene as their point of departure, characterizing our complex (if unofficial) geo-historical epoch in an attempt “to confer on what is named the power to make us feel and think in the mode that the name calls for” (Stengers 43). Though the two



draw different conclusions from their understandings of Gaia, they share a faith in the ability of the image of Gaia to do just that.

Both philosophers are drawing from the “Gaia hypothesis” conceived in the 1970s by biologists James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis as a model to encapsulate “the dense set of relations that scientific disciplines were in the habit of dealing with separately” (Stengers 44). Contentious from the start, the hypothesis’ familial ties to New Age philosophies and mysticism may have contributed to its being often misunderstood as a pseudoscientific update of animism. Recent attempts at revitalizing Lovelock’s Gaia – despite its potentially discrediting New Age relations – points to the need for imagining the world anew as it changes around us, as a “being” in that it is endowed with both a history and “its own regime of activity and sensitivity, resulting from the manner in which the processes that constitute it are coupled with one another in multiple and entangled manners, the variation of one having multiple repercussions that affect the others” (45). Gaia as an “intrusion” into our lives represents the impersonality of this responsiveness, specifically regarding human activity. Though the name risks conjuring up images of a willfully vengeful, justice-seeking god, for Stengers (and this she shares with Latour) Gaia is simply “an assemblage of material processes” (48). She likens the potentially catastrophic effects of global warming as akin to Gaia shrugging her shoulder at the tickle of an alighting fly. The response need not be proportional to the provocation, nor should it be taken personally – but it *must* be taken seriously. For although Gaia may be indifferent to us, we can no longer afford the same luxury toward Her: “The intrusion of this type of transcendence, which I am calling Gaia, makes a major unknown, which is here to stay, exist at the heart of our lives” (47).

What Stengers and Latour channel through the image of Gaia is an awareness which VanderMeer's trilogy is also sensitive to: that of the world around us evolving into something unpredictable, vaguely menacing, and suddenly full of uncertainty. As one expedition member points out to another in response to his incredulity at how "normal" Area X looks: "You've never walked through an ecosystem that wasn't compromised or dysfunctional, have you? You may think you have, but you haven't. So you might mistake what's right for what's wrong anyway" (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 32). But there is also a deeper sense of coming face-to-face with a new and powerful force – what Stengers and Latour represent as Gaia. Gaia hearkens from a time "before the Greeks conferred on their gods a sense of the just and the unjust," when it was more simply "a matter instead of paying attention, of not offending them, not abusing them" (Stengers 45). We can only imagine the awe, in the face of such mysterious and powerful natural forces, that led the ancient Greeks to figure their environment as such an impersonal and authoritative god. It may be something like what VanderMeer's characters feel toward Area X, or what present-day residents of New Orleans experience as lengthening hurricane seasons keep them on the cusp of catastrophic flooding for increasingly extended parts of the year.

In Gaia, as in VanderMeer's writing, there is a feeling of unease that the world which once felt so familiar has become alien. For those in Area X, the alienness manifests in the way the environment simulates familiar nature but "without surrendering the foundations of its *otherness* as it becomes what it encounters" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, 191). There is a sense that the "natural world around [the biologist] had become a kind of camouflage" (98), and that, though one might feel like a "part of a 'natural' landscape" while trekking through Area X, it is undeniable that "these habitats were transitional in a deeply *unnatural* way" (160). This powerful and impersonal "*otherness*" is a quintessential ingredient in VanderMeer's imagination, and the

mounting defamiliarization VanderMeer’s characters experience in their environment is something we can extend to recent environmental scholarship and, increasingly, our own lives. VanderMeer’s Thoreauvian attentions to the landscape and wildlife of Area X are jarring for readers’ expectations, defamiliarizing our assumptions about what ecology and eco-fiction are. Imagining the world as an impersonal God of antiquity, or as an alien ecosystem masking its otherness in familiarity, defamiliarizes us to our taken-for-granted stories, helping us see the situation with fresh eyes – an important task, as climate change assures us that the world we think we know will be defamiliarizing itself in the (near) future.

## ii. Gaia Stories and the Terror of Terroir

Bruno Latour takes care to untangle the web of agencies that is Gaia, showing us how Earth’s environment could be a “being” without having to be an animistic entity, writing that “[Lovelock’s] problem is indeed to understand in what respect the Earth is active but *without endowing it with a soul*” (Latour, *Facing* 86). He argues that, “contrary to what Lovelock’s detractors claim, [Gaia] is made up of agents that are not *prematurely unified* in a single acting totality” (87). It is a bottom-up assemblage, “composed of agents that are neither *deanimated* or *overanimated*” but rather acknowledged at last as active participants in a complex mess of interrelation (87), and in keeping with Latour’s goal of breaking-down false subject-object binaries these agents are as likely to be human as nonhuman, living as nonliving. In the Anthropocene we are forced to accept that we are as much a part of what Stengers calls this “assemblage of material processes” as the trees, the soil, the animals that we share the planet with. Therefore, Latour writes, ecology “is not the irruption of nature into the public space but the *end of ‘nature’* as a concept that would allow us to sum up our relations to the world and

pacify them” (Latour, *Facing* 35-6). Ecology is our realization of the vast extent of these relations. Gaia can thus be thought of as acting and reacting as a “being,” not because of any unified survival instinct or top-down designs but because of the individual actions of all the myriad agencies (organisms, objects, systems, etc.) that constitute it. “For Lovelock, organisms, taken as the point of departure for a biochemical reaction, do not develop ‘in’ an environment,” writes Latour, “each one *bends* the environment around itself, as it were, the better to develop [...] Each agency modifies its neighbors, however slightly, so as to make its own survival slightly less improbable” (98).

The Southern Reach’s new director, Control, experiences a dissolution into this strange composite-unity of the environment at the end of *Acceptance*, leaping into a light (reminiscent of the one which Saul encountered at the lighthouse) which evokes “an overwhelming feeling of connection, that nothing was truly *apart* in the same way that he had found even the most random scrawl in the director’s notes joined some greater pattern” (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 310). He becomes another uncannily human element in the pristine wilderness. Like Control’s dissolution into the landscape of Area X, the dissolution of traditional binaries (Nature/Culture, subject/object) in ecological thinking is less an elevating of what was once considered inert to the privileged status of subject and more a humbling of the human subject back into the muck with everything else. As Latour puts it, “[b]eing a subject does not mean acting in an autonomous fashion in relation to an objective context; rather, it means *sharing* agency with other subjects that have lost their autonomy” (Latour, *Facing* 62). The realization that “the capacity of humans to rearrange everything around themselves is a *general property of living things*” (99) is key to understanding the environmental dynamics that shape the world changing around us.

Amidst the manifestations of all these various agencies at work constructing their environment as best they can there is “no way to distinguish between the environment to which the organism is adapting and the point at which its own action begins” (100). This boundary is certainly blurry in VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy*. It manifests in those subliminal processes the characters sense throughout Area X, and in the way that everything (and everyone) Area X has absorbed is still layered into the landscape, “communicating in whatever way is left to them” (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 191). We can think of Area X as an example of what Latour means when he writes that the ontological repercussions of the Anthropocene play out in the environmental imagination as if “the décor had gotten up on stage to share the drama with the actors,” that “[f]rom this moment on, everything changes in the way stories are told, so much so that the political order now includes everything which previously belonged to nature – a figure that, in an ongoing backlash effect, becomes an *ever more undecipherable enigma*” (Latour, *Facing* 3; emphasis added). This is what it means to tell Gaia stories, or what Donna Haraway calls “geostories” – narratives that “eschew the dubious pleasures of transcendent plots of modernity and the purifying division of society and nature” (Haraway 41) – stories, like VanderMeer’s, that make room for the return of everything once rendered invisible and inoperative by Western civilization’s confidence that Nature was an independent realm conforming to the tenets of positivist science.

This brings us back to the beginning of this chapter, to the lighthouse keeper whose misadventure on the “forgotten coast” is ostensibly the spark that sets Area X’s expansion into effect. This could be a relatively simple scenario – but Area X is a landscape of the Anthropocene, its story a Gaia story. The story begins well before Saul moves to the lighthouse, with VanderMeer delivering hints that it may have something to do with the “forgotten coast”

itself suffering from “a decade or two of lax regulations in what was an ‘unincorporated area,’” where the “wilderness hid its share of rotten barrels” – presumably of the radioactive variety (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 97). It may also have to do with the lighthouse lens itself, which, through intermittent passages of explication, we come to realize has its own complex history – involving its mysterious origins, convoluted shipment history, its years underground during the American Civil War and eventual reappearance on the coast, and the fascination it holds for a mysterious occult/science group, the Séance and Science Brigade – leading up to the moment that the splinter of light seems to leap from a crack in its surface into Saul’s finger. A lighthouse keeper, an antique lens, civil war, lax environmental regulations, the politics of land incorporation, a stretch of land known as “the forgotten coast” and its inhabitants – all of this deserves equal status in VanderMeer’s story as a potential agent in causing, or at least creating the conditions for, Area X, but none can really be said to be *it*. As the biologist notes, it never becomes clear if Saul was the catalyst, spark, engine, the “grit that made the pearl,” or “merely an unwilling passenger” in the creation of Area X (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 191).

Hence the Southern Reach’s ineffectiveness in discovering the purpose and origins of Area X, and the vagueness of their best attempts. See, for example, the checklist of “Conditions required for Area X to exist” compiled by the scientists at the Southern Reach:

- An isolated place.
- An inert but volatile trigger.
- A catalyst to pull the trigger.
- An element of luck or chance in how the trigger was deployed.
- A context we do not understand.

- An attitude toward energy that we do not understand.
- An approach to language that we do not understand. (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 42-3)

This is imprecise science, to say the least. The “*undecipherable enigma*” of storytelling in the Anthropocene, when the décor takes its rightful place in the limelight, is not conducive to simplistic narratives of causality favouring traditional subjects. Crafting Gaia stories means reckoning with criteria like those stated above – with a healthy dose of “we do not understand” thrown in for good measure. In the moment when Control dissipates into Area X, for example, he becomes a trigger for a massive expansion of Area X – much like Saul had been, decades earlier – prompting one of the two remaining humans around to recognize that “[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” (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 328). (And indeed, the reader can practically see VanderMeer slyly winking as the end of the man called “Control” signals the last great expansion of Area X’s pristine wilderness.)

There is something unnerving about simultaneously realizing that one is enmeshed in a vast, complex web of existence and agency on earth – so extensive, in fact, that it seems the very earth is itself reacting to our provocations – *and* that this web is so vast and complex that it is on some level unfathomable. VanderMeer clearly senses this and puts the feeling to good use crafting a consistent atmosphere of unease throughout the *Southern Reach Trilogy*. The connection between fear and ecology in VanderMeer’s trilogy is perhaps best demonstrated through an idea that one of the scientists at the Southern Reach, Whitby, proposes in studying Area X: “terroir” (tellingly misheard early on as “terror” by Control). Terroir is a term borrowed from the vocabulary of French viniculture, defined by Merriam-Webster as “the combination of

factors including soil, climate, and sunlight that gives wine grapes their distinctive character.”

Whitby points out that “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” (VanderMeer, *Authority* 131). It is a concept usually reserved for the discussion of vintage sauvignons and merlots but, Whitby asks, “what if you applied these criteria to thinking about Area X?” (131). This would include studying “everything about the history – natural and human – of that stretch of coast, in addition to all other elements” in the hopes that they might “find an answer in the confluence” (131).

“Terroir” is a temporarily promising concept for the characters in VanderMeer’s trilogy – especially *Control*. It becomes a staple in his vocabulary, his heuristic for viewing and making sense of the world and explaining the situation unfolding around him, and he finds himself mapping terroirs of both places and human beings. He attempts to “build a true terroir vision of the director” from the myriad receipts, notes, etc. he finds around her office (154), and of his hometown as well, taking into consideration the history of the town’s liquor store, the indigenous settlement that had once been there, the limestone labyrinths deep under the ground and the aquifers that tie that stretch of land to the sea (240). In simpler times this would qualify as ‘thinking ecologically,’ with due respect for the particularities of a truly grounded “sense of place.” For VanderMeer, however, even this kind of grounded-ness falls short, unable to induce the kind of environmental awareness called for by the Anthropocene. It remains a dead-end as far as Area X is concerned. Indeed, *Control* later discovers that when you “trained an eye that did not skim” on Whitby’s terroir manifesto “it began to fall apart” (280). He senses that, despite the usefulness of terroir as a heuristic of interconnectivity, the manifesto “hid a core where the imagination became unhinged, unconcerned with the words that had tried to fence it in,” full of



monstrous associations despite the “sobering and deliberate” rationalism with which Whitby wrote (280). Even earlier than this Control gets the feeling that “Whitby’s terroir theory [...] might apply more to the Southern Reach than to Area X, perhaps framed by a single mind” (157).

It is important that terroir vision is rooted *viniculture*. It proposes a view onto the world, onto Nature, from a separate domain, a realm of Culture from which humans can observe and quantify Nature without accounting for our own entanglement in that which we study – which includes the act of studying itself. Much like Thoreau’s environmental imagination strove to read Nature as a poem, terroir ecology posits the possibility of reading the environment like a mystery text: gather all the clues and you can solve the riddle, or trace backward from the vintage and arrive at the set of discrete conditions that allowed for it. Accepting the truths of Gaia, Latour writes, means that the Earth “can no longer be kept at a distance,” that we must accept that “[h]uman action is visible everywhere in the construction of knowledge as well as in the generation of the phenomena to which the sciences are called upon to attest” (Latour, *Facing* 62). Whitby’s treatise on Area X cannot be held separately from his own point of view – in this case, that of a mind compromised by an earlier run in with (and infection by) Area X. VanderMeer’s *détournement* of the more traditional means by which we imagine interconnectivity on Earth reveals the terror of seeing how bottomless a complete “sense of place” really is.

A terroir map is always necessarily built from a vantage point *within* that terroir, and always necessarily incomplete. This is the state of cause-and-effect narratives in a world where the binaries of Nature/Culture and subject/object have been revealed as illusions; where a “sense of place” is a borderless concept under continuous construction by the web of agencies that make

it up, each shaping the environment in its own way, everything inextricably linked and affected by the agency of everything else. To stay with the metaphor, Gaia stories are not narratives to be swished briefly through the reader's mouth, spat into a bucket, and described briefly in wine list-length synopses; the environmental imagination, like those venturing into Area X, must learn to live with a little mystery in its midst. Just as scientists and expedition members are wrong to put their faith in the border that separates Area X from the rest of the world, we would be misguided in putting too much faith in prematurely erected borders between seemingly distinct events, places, etc. – a state of affairs that becomes more evident as we explore the ecological basis of the *weirdness* underlying VanderMeer's Area X.

### iii. Subjects and (Hyper)Objects

These extremities of ecological interconnectedness are the focus for another influential environmental philosopher, Timothy Morton, in his 2013 book *Hyperobjects*. Morton's "hyperobjects" offer a figure for appreciating the strangeness of the *Southern Reach Trilogy*, and why the mystery of Area X must remain unsolved and unsolvable. The term "hyperobject" refers generally to "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans" (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 1). Many things can be said to fall under Morton's amorphous definition of the hyperobject, including both the climate and climate change, systems such as capitalism, or something like the stock market. Another example Morton gives in an essay for *High Country News* is Styrofoam – and "not just a Styrofoam cup or two, but *all the Styrofoam on Earth, ever*" (Morton, "Introducing"). Ecosystems are certainly hyperobjects – as is VanderMeer's Area X. In a sense, a hyperobject is partly defined by the inability to pin it down; there are signs and symptoms of hyperobjects, but they aren't the *hyperobject* itself.

This characteristic Morton refers to as the hyperobject's "inter-objectivity." Due to their size and complexity, hyperobjects magnify for closer inspection the fundamental "weirdness of things," the sense that "things are themselves, but we can't point to them directly" (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 12). Morton provides a meteorological example: "The wet stuff falling on my head in Northern California in early 2011 could have been an effect of the tsunami churning up La Niña in the Pacific and dumping it on the land, La Niña being a manifestation of global warming in any case" (47). These are manifestations of objects that are hugely dispersed, reflected in their individual symptoms but by no means confined to them. They exist non-locally. In fact, hyperobjects like the climate assure us that "there is no such thing, at a deep level, as the local" (47). In the *High Country News* article cited above Morton asserts that "[t]hinking ecologically about global warming requires a kind of mental upgrade, to cope with something that is so big and so powerful that until now we had no real word for it" (Morton, "Introducing"). Therefore, the Gaia stories of the Anthropocene must consider larger scales, more intricate networks of interconnectivity, and open systems of cause-and-effect in their re-imagining of the relationship between their protagonists – human or otherwise – and the environment around them. Simple narratives about stopping evil corporations polluting the local river, or of personal awakening through local immersion (like *Walden*) are not unimportant, but nevertheless not representative of the increasing complexity of Anthropocene ecology.

The concept of hyperobjects highlights the depths of interdependence tying the world together – but not in the traditional "*order of nature*" sense. Recalling Latour and Stengers, Morton writes that the "ecological thought that thinks hyperobjects is not one in which individuals are embedded in a nebulous overarching system, or conversely, one in which something vaster than individuals extrudes itself into the temporary shapes of individuals" (19).

Morton himself is quick to point out this idea's divergence from traditional conceptions of Nature when he writes that "[t]hinking things as Nature is thinking them as a more or less static, or metastable, continuity bounded by time and space," likening the concept to a "Romantic or picturesque painting of a landscape," something always "over yonder" (70). But the environment, conceived as a hyperobject, is not static – it just appears so on an Anthropoc timescale.

VanderMeer's is an environment that channels the unease accompanying the loss of Nature. It exposes, along the same lines as Morton's theoretical hyperobjects, the increasing complexity involved in thinking ecology in the Anthropocene. Morton points out that the "sense of being 'in' a time and of inhabiting a 'place' depends on forms of regularity" (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 69). When climate change disrupts the static nature of Nature, "place" loses its cultural/ecological meaning with that regularity. Consider, by way of example, the Florida Everglades, which Morton suggests have existed as they are for about five thousand years. "Some call them Nature because that is that they are used to," he writes, "but beyond this, they are a hyperobject, massively distributed in time and space in ways that baffle humans and make interacting with them fascinating, disturbing, problematic, and wondrous" (58). The uncanny feeling, the *weirdness*, of our lost locality and Nature in the Anthropocene, is a reservoir from which a writer like VanderMeer can draw for his own exploration of the phenomenon. This is perhaps why, as William J. Hugel points out in his article "Developing Weirdness Through Cartographic Destabilization in Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*," the writers of "weird literature" – authors of a Lovecraftian lineage, like VanderMeer – are particularly adept at creating a sense of unease by rejecting any attempts at "finding a sense of place during the reading" (Hugel).

Places that we synecdochize as being Nature – like the Florida Everglades – are manifestations of a larger (hyper)object that we may misdiagnose as that object itself. Places can and do change, and with increasing speed as temperatures and water levels rise; what is particularly *weird* is how this now has as much to do with industrial development and factory farming halfway across the globe as it does with local causes, and how quickly it happens. Area X is certainly a hyperobject in its ability to make us feel acutely the weird and unsettling nature of Nature slipping away beneath our feet, leaving us with no truly *local* places that we can hide away in to escape the global, sensitive, and reactive force of our globe gone Gaia. Far from being an ahistorical place of refuge from the hullabaloo of the human world, Morton shows that “[t]here is no ‘*pristine*,’ no Nature, *only history*” (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 58; emphasis added). The way in which the world around us is revealing its unfamiliarity is a sign of the times, something which VanderMeer taps into through the mysteries and terrors of Area X (which is itself a product of its intricate, mysterious history); the familiarity of these themes and feelings, their resonance throughout contemporary scholarship dealing with the Anthropocene, is proof that an environment need not be extraterrestrial in order to be alien.

We can see VanderMeer’s Area X as a hyperobject, and his treatment of the story around it as a kind of Gaia (or geo-) story – new concepts for new phenomena. The concepts and images mentioned in this chapter signal a move away from the master metaphors of traditional environmental thought, toward new imaginative paradigms: from cut-and-dry terroirs to global webs of causality, from the benign refuge of Nature to the irritated, unpredictable shrugging of Gaia, and from Anthropocentric anecdotes to open-ended Gaia stories. These are metaphors and ways of storytelling that encourage us to imagine our world in greater depth and complexity than traditional narratives do. Telling stories that implicate more in their narratives – human and

nonhuman, biotic and abiotic players, all with agency and all shaping the turn of events – can help us develop stories leading us to more questions, and a deeper imaginative understanding of our increasingly weird environment. In the following chapter, I turn my attention to the characters of the *Southern Reach Trilogy*, the inhabitants and co-creators of these places, and examine what kinds of storytelling can be done in the name of these new models of ecological awareness, and what that might imply for how we respond to the Anthropocene.

### III. Care, Concern, Respons(e)ability

“The trouble with the people on this planet is they refuse to think they refuse to believe anything except what they know.”

Sun Ra, *Prophetika Book One*

It is perhaps the unexplainable mysteries of Area X, and passages like the starfish-encounter related in the introduction to this thesis, that led novelist Neel Mukherjee to ask himself the questions he relates in his review of the *Southern Reach Trilogy*: “How should we be when faced with phenomena we don’t or cannot understand? Can we imagine morality on the scale of the human species as a whole? What is the moral imperative of the imagination?” A glance at the titles that make up VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy* suggests that he intends to tell the reader a story as much about an inward journey as one full of action and intrigue. From *Annihilation* to *Acceptance*, VanderMeer concerns himself with both rethinking the environment and with our relationship to it and to one another within it.

In the previous chapter I explored the connotations of VanderMeer’s re-imagining of the environment, arguing for Area X as a hyperbolized depiction of the real concerns and fears of those paying attention to the world changing around us. In this chapter, I turn my attention to the various models of response and morality that VanderMeer presents through the foci of the characters who confront the mysteries of Area X. VanderMeer’s characters are faced with moral dilemmas, and ultimately with the question of how best to *respond* to this new presence in their lives. I hope to show that, although VanderMeer portrays various characters representing various attitudes toward the environment, there is one arc to which he devotes more careful attention, and which may be the most representative of what VanderMeer conceives as a genuine and conscientious response to Gaia, to the Anthropocene. To this end I will turn first to the Southern

Reach and its clunky, bureaucratic view of the world, to demonstrate what it is that VanderMeer is setting his critique against. I will then be devoting the rest of the chapter to tracing the development of the biologist (and the closely related character, Ghost Bird) to illuminate how the *Southern Reach Trilogy* helps envision new imaginative models to encourage our responding to the world around us with care and concern – responses which find theoretical kinship with the theorists previously mentioned (in particular Latour) but equally with philosophers like Donna Haraway and Jane Bennett, whose works I will also be thinking with in the following chapter.

### **i. Thinking Inside the Box: The Southern Reach**

The shadowy Southern Reach is in many ways a window into the ideological and imaginative inheritances that have shaped western attitudes toward the environment. Its bumbling bureaucracy and blinkered outlook seem a crystallization of why present-day humanity appears, in Latour's words, "so ill-adapted" to confront climate change and the intrusion of Gaia (Latour, *Facing* 107). Latour argues that under the yoke of globalization and late-stage capitalism, humankind – or *homo oeconomicus*, as he has it – has been "reduced to a very small number of intellectual competences, [...] capable of making simple calculations of capitalization and consumption" – a people "who have finally been persuaded to view themselves as individuals, in the atomic sense of the word" (107). As Ghost Bird (one of the characters to whom we will be returning) laments, the Southern Reach clings to its limited responses in the face of disaster "because of a lack of imagination, because human beings couldn't even put themselves in the mind of a cormorant or an owl or a whale or a bumblebee" (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 189-90). The argument from both would be the same put forward by Ghosh: that we are not imaginatively equipped to survive what Latour calls this "New Climate Regime."



Every strategy the Southern Reach employs is grounded in the kind of imaginative banality Ghost Bird decries: the useless and intrusive expeditions, the endless gathering of data. It calls to mind a scene in which Control sits absent-mindedly watching television and recalling a lecture, the gist of which had been “that institutions [...] were the concrete embodiments of not just ideas or opinions but also of attitudes and emotions” (VanderMeer, *Authority* 147). If the objective of the Southern Reach is to “investigate (and contain) Area X” (148), what emotion or attitude exists at the core of that mission? Control cannot put his finger on it; it is “as if he needed another sense, or sensitivity,” to find the truth of the organizations’ mission, or that he was already “too indoctrinated to perceive it” at all (148). Only as VanderMeer begins to present alternate points of view, throwing the institutional mindset of the Southern Reach into relief, can the reader begin to tease out what shapes the trilogy’s namesake organization: an attitude focused on humanity’s conquest of, separation from, and superiority over Nature. When Control describes the scaled-down model of Area X built by a former expedition member (and current director at Central, the department responsible for creating the Southern Reach) as a “miniaturized world of ever-decreasing wonder” (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 294), he might have been describing the environmental zeitgeist of *homo oeconomicus*.

The expeditions into Area X focus on data, and the hope that they will be able to catalogue and quantify Area X provides a degree of comfort to many of these characters, as in *Annihilation*’s early scenes with “the beast in the marshes.” Faced with the distant moans of this unfamiliar creature, the expedition members comfort themselves with the belief “that eventually we would photograph it, document its behavior, tag it, and assign it a place in the taxonomy of living things” (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 31-2). Throughout the trilogy the characters (with few notable exceptions) remain true to what Grace, the director’s assistant, calls “the critical

question”: discovering “the *purpose* of this organism or organisms” (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 188). The desire to know becomes more urgent even as it is rebuffed: “He had seen wonders and he had seen terrible things,” Control reassures himself in Area X, “[h]e had to believe that this was one more and that it was true and that it was knowable” (VanderMeer, *Authority* 339). For these characters, the horror underlying the terrible beauty of Area X is a fear of “[n]o answers, no solution, no end in sight” (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 56) – a particular fear of minds raised to require a place for everything (and everything in its place) as far as nature is concerned.

The salve for this fear is identifying, labeling, and – in other words – limiting these phenomena; for every phenomenon a fixed boundary, a clear causality, and a place in the taxonomy. This might explain the near-obsession with naming that runs through the books, as when Control decides to refer to Area X as “the enemy”: “Area X was just a phenomenon visited upon humanity, like a weather event,” he thinks, “but an *enemy* created intent and focus” (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 81). Admitting that they do not know, and perhaps *cannot* know, exactly what they are encountering – that it might lie outside of the logic of taxonomies and knowledge, per se – is tantamount to admitting defeat. In this way the objects and organisms of Area X – the obviously alien and the less so – are just graphic examples of this phenomenological gap between knowing a thing and *knowing* it. “The more data we have about lifeforms,” Morton writes, “the more we realize we can never truly know them” (Morton, *Hyperobjects* 56). The realization that thinking taxonomically might prevent the expedition members from approaching the truth of Area X occurs early on to the biologist. She ruminates on the fact that each member is known only by their profession (an abstraction usually reserved for non-human players in a story) and wonders if the information given them on things in Area X was “a kind of distraction from asking certain questions that could only be reached through

knowing specific details. But the *right* specific details, not, for example, that there were six species of poisonous snakes in Area X” (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 67). Control ruminates on the same subject in *Authority*: “what if when you accreted personality and other details around mere function, a different picture emerged?” (VanderMeer, *Authority* 135). It seems strange to boil a human being’s personality down to their “function,” yet we do this every day to nonhuman beings – every crow is just a crow, a specimen of the species to which it belongs, but I am surely much more than just an M.A. student. Area X seems to take issue with this mindset.

When we Romanticize the environment, we call it Nature (or Wilderness) and set it – in fear or adoration – apart from our lives; when we taxonomize it, we break its multitudes down into discrete chunks, and for those chunks we have a variety of sciences to explain their phenomena independently. The expeditions contain biologists, anthropologists, psychologists, etc., in the hopes of gaining a full, ecological view of the terrain – but these knowledge-sets rarely meet or cooperate in the *Southern Reach Trilogy*. Importantly, they also grant little importance to other professions, such as the linguists. Indeed, at one point Control himself, concerned about the fact that only biologists have been allowed to view the samples from Area X, wonders “what [the non-biologists] might have read in the striations of a dead swamp rat or in the vacant glass eye of a marsh hawk [...] What susurrations or utterances might verbalize all unexpected from a cross section of tree moss or cypress bark” (VanderMeer, *Authority* 126). What individual differences exist across phyla that we reduce to a set of common functions and traits? The climate is changing for every living thing on the planet; to learn to respond to the situation, and to one another, requires that we see beyond the confines of our taxonomical approach to the environment, and give it back its voice.

This is the muteness that Latour refers to when he writes that it is “the material world that we have rendered mute” via a system, operating “*in language and by meanings of language*,” which has deprived much of the world of its agency (Latour, *Facing* 67). Hierarchies of taxonomy are an abstraction “through which we purport to *simplify* the distribution of actors by proceeding to designate some as animate and others as inanimate,” argues Latour (67-8). Under the spell of this logic we end up imagining the world as a realm in which material, nonhuman players have been deanimated – classified into inertia – and we humans positioned as the sole guardians of “freedom, consciousness, reflexivity, a moral sense, and so on” (68). Thus, when the planet begins to demonstrate a clear “reflexivity” to the actions of humankind, we have to consider that our imaginative models may be outdated. This brings us back to Buell’s question for the eco-fiction of today: “what sort of literature remains possible if we relinquish the myth of human apartness?” (Buell 145). Buell states that it must be “a literature that abandons, or at least questions, what would seem to be literature’s most basic foci: character, persona, narrative consciousness” (145). While VanderMeer does not abandon these foci per se, he does put them to fresh use, constructs a detournement with them, taking them beyond the kind of mentality the Southern Reach stands for and toward a condition that might possibly coexist with(in) Area X by way of something he calls “the brightness.”

## **ii. Thinking Outside the Box: The Brightness**

Mutation is a central motif in the *Southern Reach Trilogy*, and one of the transformations VanderMeer is most invested in is that undergone by the biologist as she changes and, in a sense, becomes an entirely different person: Ghost Bird. Hers is the arc in which the journey from *Annihilation* to *Acceptance* is most fully realized. From the beginning the biologist is an

anomaly; her recruitment report describes her as being “[e]mpathic more toward environments than people” and as someone who “becomes embedded to an extraordinary extent” (VanderMeer, *Authority* 156-7). Her attitude toward the environment, and subsequently Area X, sets her apart from the Southern Reach. Having learned to move in the natural world through experience and connection before picking up a textbook to learn names and facts she is “[n]ot a very good biologist” in the “traditional sense” (156). Describing herself, she claims that “[s]ustenance for me was tied to ecosystem and habitat, orgasm the sudden realization of the interconnectivity of living things” (110), and that “[m]y sole gift or talent [...] was that places could impress themselves upon me, and I could become part of them with ease” (110). These are the skills which allow the biologist to survive in Area X. “I am just the biologist,” she says, “I don’t require any of this to have a deeper meaning” (192). Nonetheless, the biologist carries some of the same baggage as her fellow expedition members, still makes assumptions about the world around her. She assumes, for example, that various entities she encounters in Area X are not intelligent “in the sense of *possessing free will*” (93).

The biologist begins to undergo a perceptual transformation the moment she inhales some suspicious spores while investigating the inside of the “topographical anomaly” in Area X. Her senses heighten, sharpen into what she calls “a *truthful seeing*” (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 90). The passages of description she narrates change dramatically following the incident. For instance:

The wind picked up, and it began to rain. I saw each drop fall as a perfect, faceted liquid diamond, refracting light even in the gloom, and I could smell the sea and picture the roiling waves. The wind was like something alive; it entered every pore of me and it, too,

had a smell, carrying with it the earthiness of the marsh reeds. I had tried to ignore the change in the confined space of the tower, but my senses still seemed too acute, too sharp. I was adapting to it, but at times like this, I remembered that just a day ago I had been someone else. (194)

“The brightness” seems to remove the veil of abstraction cast over Nature, revealing its immanence and idiosyncrasies. The biologist’s sense of affinity with the inhabitants of Area X increases even as she comes to appreciate the incomprehensibility of even the seemingly familiar things. The sense is a sharpened variant of something she intuited, even before her encounter with Area X, while looking at the starfish on the west coast. Yet still she is driven to grasp her environment by discovering its meaning, trekking through Area X in search of clues as to her husband’s fate on a previous expedition: “I was still holding on to the idea of causality,” reads one of her diary entries, “of *purpose* as that word might be recognizable to the Southern Reach” (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 157).

The clash between the biologist’s *brightened* ecological vision and the epistemological assumptions of her profession recalls a question put forward by Donna Haraway in her recent book *Staying with the Trouble* (2016): what happens when thinking of the world as “bounded individuals plus contexts,” or “organisms plus environments,” no longer “sustains the overflowing richness of biological knowledges?” (Haraway 30). When “human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics, become unthinkable in the best sciences, whether natural or social” (30), how best do we respond? This is another way of phrasing Bruno Latour’s succinct question, “*what is the successor of Nature?*” (Latour, *Attempt* 477). Both thinkers suggest recalibrations of our

imaginative faculties, drawing on the same ontological and epistemological concerns as those discussed the previous chapter. Latour suggests a new attitude toward the world and its inhabitants, built on the tenets of Gaia, which he calls *compositionism*.

Compositionism accepts the irreducible heterogeneity of the world that the biologist only begins to see as Area X “infects” her; rather than seeking to contain that within set systems of knowledge, it “takes up the task of building a common world” with the proviso that “this common world has to be built from utterly heterogeneous parts that will never make a whole, but at best a fragile, revisable, and diverse composite material” (Latour, *Attempt* 474). The problem with anthropocentric or narrowly positivistic narratives in the Anthropocene, Latour argues, is that “as soon as you have decided which are the human and nonhuman characters that will be called upon [...] to play the ‘principal roles,’ politics will start to nose its way in” (Latour, *Facing* 91). The goal, then, is to “remain open to the dizzying otherness of existents, the list of which is not closed, and to the multiple ways they have of existing or relating among themselves, without regrouping them too quickly in some set, whatever it might be – and certainly not in ‘nature’” (35). Compositionism focuses its energies not on building matters of fact, with organized taxonomies and predetermined “principal roles,” but with matters of *concern*. This would be an orientation away from what VanderMeer’s biologist calls “the burning compulsion I had to *know everything*” (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 194), a critical attitude “associated with *more*, not with *less*, with *multiplication*, not *subtraction*” (Latour, “Critique” 248).

Matters of fact are settled products; matters of concern are works in progress, open-ended and in need of attention. This means that instead of treating the object – be it an organism, an ecosystem, Area X – as something which awaits its place in the taxonomy of things, we view it as something awaiting exploration and expansion. It means exploring from the inside-out how a

previously inert fact can crystallize an astounding number of ideas, influences, and associations within its deceptive stability – but without losing its realness as a unit in the process (much as a hyperobject can be present in its constituent parts and remain a unified, distributed whole). To do so, we must be willing to accept some level of *reality* and agency inherent in the objects we study; an ability to act and be acted on and create playing fields in which neither the subject nor the object becomes all-powerful. Organizations like the Southern Reach are concerned precisely with regrouping things into some set, distinguishing culpable actors from objects – this is the only way it knows how to respond to Area X, the “enemy.” Yet it is this attitude that throughout seems to be punished by Area X. In the *Southern Reach Trilogy* VanderMeer emphasizes the importance of open narratives full of complex webs of causality and a certain avoidance of easy answers: we see this in the threads of story relating the inception of Area X, and in the long passages of descriptive prose focalized through the biologist following her encounter with the brightness.

The way the biologist learns to see the world resembles the vision advocated throughout Jane Bennett’s explorations, in *Vibrant Matter* (2009), of what happens to political and moral accountability when we attempt to think beyond the story of traditional subject/object binaries. Bennett (who is often set, together with thinkers like Latour and Haraway, under the philosophical umbrella-term *speculative realism*) coins the term “*thing-power*” to recall our “childhood sense of the world as filled with all sorts of animate beings, some human, some not, some organic, some not,” as a means toward thinking ourselves out of the “life-matter binary,” which she calls the “dominant organizational principle of adult experience” (Bennett 21). Any situation, then – a changing climate, an encroaching alien transformation on the “forgotten coast” – would arise as a result of “a confederation of human and nonhuman elements” (22); that would



be treating these objects or events as matters of concern. It is something akin to *terroir* vision – though, as we have seen, in the Anthropocene we must accept that our matters of concern will be more labyrinthine, more global, and less controlled than ever before. To that end, we should not be surprised that VanderMeer avoids conclusive answers at the end of *Acceptance*; we may never know whether the cause of Area X was an alien organism, some effect of the environmental deterioration of the forgotten coast, or something else entirely. The *fact* of Area X is an entry point into questions *concerning* our relationship with the world: who gets a “primary role” in our stories, what master metaphors are they built on, and what concepts of morality and accountability do they engender in us?

The biologist in VanderMeer’s story wanders deeper into Area X, imbued with the knowledge of the brightness but still in search of answers. She finds her way to the island she sought, and there has a peculiar encounter with a particularly sociable owl. The owl becomes her sole companion over thirty years – the biologist even begins to sense a familiar presence, something that reminds her of her husband, in the bird. When the owl dies, the biologist overcomes her sample-taking instincts, realizing that “there was nothing a microscope could tell me about the owl that I had not learned from my many years of close interactions and observations” (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 181). In a trademark twist of VanderMeer’s weird imagination, the biologist-as-is fades from the landscape, becomes a kind of massive, eye-studded transdimensional leviathan haunting the time and space around the island, and coming back on one of her visits to encounter, face-to-face, herself – or, another instance of herself: Ghost Bird.

### iii. Matters of Concern, Matters of Care

The moment that Area X infects the biologist with the brightness it also creates something like a copy, or a clone, from what it learns about her. This doppelganger becomes Ghost Bird (after the semi-affectionate nickname given to the biologist by her husband), a copy with all the biologist's mannerisms and memories who is yet somehow *not* the biologist. She is found by the Southern Reach standing alone in an empty lot once frequented by the biologist and brought in for "debriefing." Area X had made doppelgangers before – the biologist's husband returned home, for example, but proved to be not quite himself before dying from an aggressive cancer contracted soon after returning – but something about the biologist results in hers being the first successful copy. She seems healthier than the biologist had been, and "the toxins present in most people today existed in her [...] at much lower levels than normal" (VanderMeer, *Authority* 23). Her attitude toward her interrogators at the Southern Reach is that of someone in on a secret, slyly dropping hints to test the cluelessness of those asking the questions. Crucially, one such hint arrives when she likens herself to a phorus snail, which "attaches the empty shells of other snails onto its own shell," making it "very clumsy" (92). The haphazard suit of shells offers the phorus snail "camouflage, but at a price" (92). The suggestion seems to be that in the process of creating a human doppelganger, Area X is forced to limit its own possibilities to fit into a human body, with human perceptions and abilities.

In spite (or because) of this, Ghost Bird becomes, in the words of one reviewer, "VanderMeer's one example of a way forward for humanity in the natural avalanche of Area X" (Rogers). Bridging the alien consciousness of Area X with the human faculties and sensitivities of the body she inhabits, Ghost Bird becomes a mediator between her human companions and the otherness of their environment and its inhabitants, gaining an insider-perspective on both

worlds. The scene most illustrative of this might Ghost Bird's encounter with the biologist-turned-leviathan mentioned above. Bursting onto the island they are camped out on, the biologist looks down on the humans with her many eyes, and in "the multiplicity of that regard, Ghost Bird saw what they saw": she sees herself through the eyes of the absolute *other*, and in that moment understands the biologist "in a way she had not before, despite their shared memories" (196). Despite the phenomenological gap between the two, the fact that Ghost Bird is "observing an incarnation of herself she could not quite comprehend," she still feels a connection, a "*recognition*" in the gaze (196). Something "wordless but deep" (196) is communicated between the two. The moment of recognition and response provokes a sense of kinship with what seemed so alien, even a kind of empathic connection. In a book where even the humans seem incapable of truly responding and connecting to one another, we have seen this kind of connection maybe once before, briefly, between the biologist and the owl.

Donna Haraway, in response to her own question cited above, proclaims that the task of our age is "to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response" (Haraway 1) – to become open to, and responsible for, the "dizzying otherness of existents" with whom we share the planet. She offers, as a new tool for the times, the word "sympoiesis," a "simple word" she defines as "making-with," responding to the demands of a world of "complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems" (58). Like Gaia, compositionism, and the weirdly deep (and deeply weird) brand of ecological storytelling VanderMeer practices, sympoietic thinking is not definitive, closed, hierarchical; it is open, open to building stories that deal with matters of concern and "cultivating response-ability" (34). The moment of recognition between the nonhuman, *other* world – as weird as it gets – and Ghost Bird is an example of the kind of open, two-way regard necessary for this connection to happy. The solution is the kind of

real *thinking* that only Ghost Bird and the biologist seem able to do – which is thinking outside the sphere of some of our most cherished master metaphors. As Haraway reminds us, “[i]t matters what thoughts think thoughts,” just as much as it “matters what stories tell stories” (35). Haraway’s mantra thus becomes “[t]hink we must; we must think” – and to her this means, “simply, we must change the story; the story must change” (40).

The biologist *thinks*, as does Ghost Bird. The other characters also think, but for the most part only within the limits prescribed by the story they have been told, of enemies and taxonomies. Haraway draws a contentious historical parallel to the present-day dilemma of the Anthropocene, turning to Hannah Arendt’s investigation of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi war criminal and “architect of the Holocaust,” and how the banal evil of his actions lay in his “inability to think” (Haraway 36). Here Arendt (and Haraway) are not talking about thinking as “a process for evaluating information and argument, for being right or wrong” but rather the human inability “to make present to [oneself] what was absent, what was not himself, what the world in its sheer not-one-selfness is and what claims-to-be inhere in not-oneself” (36). Most of life on earth is a not-oneself to humanity; being incapable of recognition or empathy in the face of that is what “could make the disaster of the Anthropocene, with its ramped-up genocides and speciescides, come true” (36). Interestingly, Jane Bennett also draws a connection between ecology and Arendt’s analysis of the Eichmann trials, writing that the “notion of a confederate agency does attenuate the blame game, but it does not thereby abandon the project of identifying (what Arendt called) the sources of harmful effects” (Bennett 37); it simply broadens prematurely-settled matters of fact into matters of concern. In the *Southern Reach Trilogy* (as in life) villains with clear and dastardly motives are in frustratingly short supply; instead, VanderMeer offers a narrative of environmental reckoning that pays homage to the great webs of

causality that we are forced to unweave (or at least consider) before we can move forward and deal with our “sources of harmful effects.”

Chronologically-speaking, the last scene in the trilogy sees Grace (the former-director’s assistant) and Ghost Bird wandering through the newly-expanded Area X. “Why be afraid of what you could not prevent? Did not want to prevent,” Ghost Bird thinks, “Were they not evidence of survival? [...] The world went on, even as it fell apart, changed irrevocably, become something strange and different” (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 328). There is, I believe, evidence of hope, even optimism, at the end of VanderMeer’s trilogy. It is present in the image of Ghost Bird and Grace, walking past the ruined Southern Reach building, re-colonized with life, and realizing that “the time for expeditions was over” (331) as they move forward to see what has become of the world. It appears more explicitly in the final chapter, which though not the chronological end of the story is nonetheless how VanderMeer chose to close his trilogy. In it, the former director pens a heartfelt letter to Saul Evans, who she knew in her childhood on the forgotten coast, and the book truly ends with the end of her message to the lighthouse keeper. She admits that the world they now belong to is “difficult to accept, unimaginably difficult” (328), but in the face of this challenge acknowledges that “acceptance moves past denial, and maybe there’s defiance in that, too” (338).

There are cynical interpretations of the *Southern Reach Trilogy*’s ending – just as there are cynical forms of acceptance. Most of the humans in the trilogy never come to terms with Area X, with the world they are slowly coming to inhabit, and they seem to be done away with by Area X’s final expansion at the end of *Acceptance*. The end of one world (our world?) is as implied as the beginning of a new one. But perhaps the cynicism of VanderMeer’s vision lies not in the possibility but in the *probability* of adaptation and acceptance. Characters like the biologist

and *Ghost Bird* demonstrate the existence of a path forward; not, perhaps, toward a reversal of our Anthropocene condition and the intrusion of Gaia, but a path that allows us to learn from our mistakes, see the world around us anew, and build new stories to share that vision with others in the name of adaptation and survival. When we approach environmental topics, and eco-fictional narratives, as matters of concern, we can begin to see them as doorways into new lines of questioning and modes of thought. In this respect, VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy* demonstrates alternative metaphors, new images, and novel possibilities for readers seeking stories corresponding to their growing awareness of the world around them becoming "something strange and different."

## Conclusion

Donna Haraway identifies the most destructive and difficult to dismiss reaction to the realities of climate change as the “game over” position: “it’s too late, there’s no sense trying to make anything any better” (Haraway 3). On the other end of the spectrum lies the technofix: attempts to solve the crisis with more technology, more knowledge, more control. In the middle are those who maintain an “active trust in each other, in working and playing for a resurgent world” (3). This work can be done, is being done, on many fronts, and storytelling is one of them. A new kind of environmental imagination is creeping its way into fiction, journalism and scholarship. It is visible in the long-form reportage of speculative realist Ian Bogost, whose matter-of-concern journalism for *The Atlantic* (“Did Climate Change Ground Flights in Phoenix?” “Houston’s Flood Is a Design Problem”) underwrites monocausal climate change narratives in favour of open invitations to *think* about the intersections of culture, climate, biotic and abiotic agencies. We see it in recent re-imaginings of the boundaries between academic fields, as in Eduardo Kohn’s anthropological study of the nonhuman, *How Forests Think*, dismantling the tenets of his field which “have treated humans as exceptional – and thus as fundamentally separate from the rest of the world” (Kohn 7). And we see it in the speculative fictions of not only Jeff VanderMeer, but myriad novelists turning their attentions to the once-inanimate backdrop on which human stories used to play out as lonely actors – a working list of whom might include China Mieville, Maja Lunde, and Paolo Bacigalupi.

At the end of *Acceptance*, as the world becomes Area X, Ghost Bird ruminates on how the “hegemony of what was real had been altered, or broken, forever” (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 329). For centuries, *real* has meant something very specific to most western minds; in Latour’s

words, as a “portrait of humans parading against a background of things” (Latour, *Facing* 58) in which those “things” could be easily contained inside tidy taxonomical boxes. This was (and for many, still is) true for what we consider *realistic* imaginings of ecology and our place in the world. Much of the best and most progressive ecological thought of the twentieth-century stops short of pushing back against the imaginative borders we have inherited through our stories. But, as the *Southern Reach Trilogy* illustrates, borders are not always to be trusted.

For better or worse, readers and writers must approach the unprecedented conditions of the Anthropocene with an inherited inventory of images and metaphors, go-to narratives and assumptions that are beginning to feel dated, if not harmful. VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy* is an example of what fiction can achieve when those same tools are reconceived and rearranged toward a new end. There are familiar environmental tropes, themes of ecological interconnectedness, and of moral rebellion against the cold progress of our technocratic, positivist institutions – but all of it much stranger, more complex, and less certain than before. VanderMeer’s *weird* fiction strives to jar its readers, perhaps knocking them far enough off their feet that they might be forced to confront their assumptions: what they mean, where they come from. The success of the trilogy seems to indicate that this is something many readers are ready for.

Throughout this thesis I have endeavoured to explore below the surface of the weird ecology of the *Southern Reach Trilogy*, and to ask what that signals regarding the way we imagine our place in the increasingly complex relational webs of the world. For anyone interested in exploring these lines of inquiry further it would be interesting both to dig deeper into the concepts which I have had to be brief with here, and to cast a wider net to other literature. VanderMeer’s is a potent and popular imagination, but it would be necessary to read



more widely to discover the extent to which the ecological re-imaginings he employs in his trilogy have taken root in eco-fiction more widely, in other cultures and regions. Additionally, a deeper look into the history of western culture's imagined relationship with "Nature" and "wilderness," and how this comes to bear on the response to (and representation of) our present environmental troubles, would likely be an illuminating study. Anthropogenic climate change may be the most significant threat to continued existence that humanity has ever faced, and the challenges it poses to representation and storytelling are profound and urgent. The stories we tell ourselves shape the way we relate to the world, and the way we relate to the world has brought humanity to the precipice of a perilous situation. But if (to paraphrase Amitav Ghosh's sentiments quoted in my introduction) the climate crisis represents a failure of the imagination, perhaps it is possible the imagination can also lead us out of the crisis – if not toward a solution, then perhaps at least toward acceptance.

## Works Cited

- Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2010.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Debord, Guy. "Internationale Situationniste #1 (June 1958): Definitions." Trans. Ken Knabb. *Situationist International Online*, Situationist International, [www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/definitions.html](http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/definitions.html). Accessed 6 Apr. 2018.
- Dwyer, Jim. *Where the Wild Books Are: A Field Guide to Ecofiction*. University of Nevada Press, 2010.
- Ghosh, Amitav. "Where Is the Fiction About Climate Change?" *The Guardian*, 28 Oct. 2016.
- Griffiths, Matthew. "Climate Changes Everything." *The New Poetics of Climate Change: Modernist Aesthetics for a Warming World*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, pp. 1-28.
- Hageman, Andrew. "A Conversation Between Timothy Morton and Jeff VanderMeer." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 24 Dec. 2016.
- Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.
- Heise, Ursula K. *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Hugel, William J. "Developing Weirdness Through Cartographic Destabilization in Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*." *Inquiries*, vol. 7, no. 5, 2015.
- Kalaidjian, Andrew. "The Spectacular Anthropocene." *Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, vol. 22, 2017, pp. 19-34.

- Kohn, Eduardo. *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. University of California Press, 2013.
- Langer, Jessica. "Apocalypse Soon." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 10 March 2018.
- Latour, Bruno. "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifest.'" *New Literary History*, vol. 41, 2010, pp. 471-490.
- . *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Polity, 2017.
- Luckhurst, Roger. "The Weird: A Dis/Orientation." *Textual Practice*, vol. 31, no. 6, 2017, pp. 1041-1061.
- McIntosh, James. *Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist: His Shifting Stance Toward Nature*. Cornell University Press, 1974.
- Morton, Timothy. *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. Columbia University Press, 2016.
- . "Introducing the Idea of the Hyperobject." *High Country News*, 19 Jan. 2015.
- . *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- Mukherjee, Puloma. "Jeff VanderMeer: Life Apocalyptic." *Guernica*, 7 Aug. 2017.
- Rothman, Joshua. "The Weird Thoreau." *The New Yorker*, 14 Jan. 2015.
- Stengers, Isabelle. *In Catastrophic Times: Resisting the Coming Barbarism*. Trans. Andrew Goffey. Open Humanities Press, 2015.
- Szszynski, Bronislaw. "The End of the End of Nature: The Anthropocene and the Fate of the Human." *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 34 issue 2, 2012, pp. 165-184.
- Tompkins, David. "Weird Ecology: On the Southern Reach Trilogy." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 30 Sept. 2014.

Ulstein, Gry. "Brave New Weird: Anthropocene Monsters in Jeff VanderMeer's *The Southern Reach*." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2017, pp. 71-96.

VanderMeer, Jeff. *Acceptance: A Novel*. FSG Originals, 2014.

---. *Annihilation: A Novel*. FSG Originals, 2014.

---. *Authority: A Novel*. FSG Originals, 2014.

Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. 1976. Routledge, 2011.