

Worlds Without Us: The Horror of Indifference in The Southern Reach Trilogy

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In a 2014 article cluster in *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (*ISLE*), Stephen A Rust and Carter Soles define the concept of ecohorror beyond the common usage designating “revenge of nature narratives” (such as *Jaws*) in which “nature strikes back against humans as punishment for environmental disruption” (Rust and Soles 509). Instead of this reductive vision, they suggest horror can be used to analyze “texts in which humans do horrific things to the natural world, or in which horrific texts and tropes are used to promote ecological awareness, represent ecological crises, or blur human/non-human distinctions more broadly” (Rust and Soles 509–510). Their vision of ecohorror “assumes that environmental disruption is haunting humanity’s relationship to the non-human world” (Rust and Soles 510). Within this framework of haunting, I propose today to look at Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach Trilogy* as an example of ecohorror, but more specifically, one that follows H.P. Lovecraft’s outline for a “weird” horror to produce a kind of weird ecohorror in which the encounter with larger-than-human scales, in the case of the *Reach* trilogy an apparently prehuman stretch of the US’s Gulf of Mexico coast, is the object of horror itself. As I show, VanderMeer’s usage of the weird within the context of ecohorror reveals our deep imbrication with a

collapsing technomodernity and the linked production of an alien earth that we encounter as outsiders.

The three volumes of *Southern Reach*—*Annihilation*, *Authority*, *Acceptance* (all 2014)—document encounters with just such an alien ecology (in both meanings of that idea: the ecology at first appears to be restored to a pre-human state, and is later revealed as the product of an alien from outer-space) called Area X. This Area, on the Southern edge of the United State (VanderMeer’s biography suggests it is Florida, but it could just as easily be anywhere along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico) has begun to, for lack of a better term, behave weirdly following a series of mysterious incidents that took place 30 years before the beginning of the series, in which the inhabitants vanished, certain landscape features emerged (including a hole being bored in the ground by an alien creature that is only referred to as a “topographical anomaly” in the bureaucratic language of much of the book), and an old-style lighthouse that becomes invested with an ominous depth of psychic energy. Area X has been quarantined by shadowy forces within the vast, post-9/11 US intelligence bureaucracy and is managed by the quasi-scientific, quasi-spy agency called the Southern Reach. Over the three novels, VanderMeer spins a web of complex patterns touching a number of contemporary anxieties: a large number of characters discover they have been psychologically programmed by the intelligence agency they work for, the environments outside Area X are showing increasing effects of climate change, and the whole series is suffused with a sense of sneaking doom that parallels our anxieties about climate collapse and amok governmental intelligence gathering.

In my analysis of the trilogy, primarily the first volume *Annihilation* which documents one of a series of doomed expeditions sponsored by the Southern Reach into Area X, I privilege the moments where the aspects of Area X that appear to have reverted to a state prior to human arrival unsettle the scientists in a way that is, as I will suggest using Lovecraft's terms, "weird." This focus is not to say that there is not a lot of other strange and unsettling stuff at work in Area X (for instance, the dolphin with the human eyes that mysteriously hails the biologist narrator in *Annihilation*, the vanished rabbits who spectrally reappear throughout *Authority*, or the quivering flesh monsters of *Acceptance*); however, what most interests me in these novels is these moments where, in an environment that does not reference humans (beyond the occasional ruin), the characters are often unsettled simply by the wind, the rain, the trees, and the river water itself. These moments, for me, represent the emergence in VanderMeer of a weird ecohorror, a combination of Rust and Soles's haunted relationship with the non-human and Lovecraft's understanding of the weird.

In Lovecraft's essay, "Supernatural Horror in Literature," he defines his "weird" aesthetic as one beyond the "secret murders, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains" trappings of more mainstream horror. Instead in a weird tale,

A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space. [@, p. ???]

In "Notes on Writing Weird Fiction," Lovecraft continues that the weird story seeks "to achieve, momentarily, the illusion of some strange suspension or violation of the galling limitations of time, space, and natural law which for ever imprison us and frustrate our

curiosity about the infinite cosmic spaces beyond the radius of our sight and analysis” [S, p. 100]. Lovecraft’s goal in weird fiction is not so much to scare as to give readers a glimpse of that which lies beyond our cognitive and sensual apparatus. Additionally, in Lovecraft’s understanding of the weird, the “infinite cosmic space” becomes the source of our anxiety, as he suggests in “Notes on Writing Weird Fiction,” “it is hard to create a convincing picture of shattered natural law or cosmic alienage or ‘outsideness’ without laying stress on the emotion of fear” [S, p. 100]. In a typical Lovecraft story, of which “The Call of Cthulhu” is probably the strongest example, the “cosmic alienage” is a seething reality of ancient alien gods, their continued worship in the present, and the imminent return of these beings (which signals our doom) when the stars are right. For Lovecraft, then, the “fixed laws of Nature” that “safeguard” us often take the form of scientific modernity in his weird fiction, the confidence in the scientific method and the machinic products of a modern society, and the revealed “assaults of chaos” take the form of this alien inhumanism.

What is striking, then, about VanderMeer’s version of the weird, his weird ecohorror, is that the alien reality comes from an ecological context free from human intervention. Rather than the radical geologic pre-histories of the Cthulhu mythos, we get slightly fictionalized accounts of hiking in the St. Mark’s National Wildlife Refuge outside of Tallahassee, Florida (Scharl, n.p.). Which is to say that the alien in VanderMeer is, first and foremost, the forest. Of course, Area X is no normal forest, if such a concept could exist. As Control, the spy narrator of the second novel, points out “it was a ‘pristine wilderness,’ after all, human-made toxins now absent,” the kind of environment that present-day humans could only ever access speculatively, one in which

no trace of human ecological intervention is present (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 59). This supposedly pristine ecology, however, is not comforting to its human visitors. As Control muses, “recent samples [from Area X] ... showed no trace of human-created toxicity remained in Area X. Not a single trace. No heavy metals. No industrial runoff or agricultural runoff. No plastics. Which was impossible” (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 125). Instead of finding joy in the creation of a supposedly untainted environment, an actually natural world, the scientists and functionaries of the Southern Reach take this as a symptom of the environment’s alienness, probably with good cause. An absence of the evidence of humans has to be a threat in the mind of the intelligence state, after all.

Accompanying the first description of the near constant moaning the expedition hears throughout *Annihilation* (which turns out to be coming from a member of a previous expedition who has turned into a wild boar), VanderMeer describes the haunting landscape of

black water that soaked the cypress trees. This water was so dark we could see our faces in it, and it never stirred, set like glass, reflecting the beards of gray moss that smothered the cypress trees. If you looked out through these areas, toward the ocean, all you saw was the black water, the gray of the cypress trunks, and the constant, motionless rain of moss flowing down. All you heard was the low moaning. The effect of this cannot be understood without being there. The beauty of it cannot be understood, either, and when you see beauty in desolation it changes something inside you. Desolation tries to colonize you. (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 5–6)

As the expedition continues and the characters spend more time amidst the forest in Area X, the characters begin to be tormented by the inhuman nature of the forest, its literal absence of the human as a referent. Of course, as the biologist’s tale of the doomed expedition unfolds, this metaphoric colonization by the “desolation” of the environment becomes literal, as Area X slowly changes the characters, infecting them with fungus and slowly copying and absorbing them into its more alien ecosystem.

In both the case of Lovecraft and VanderMeer, removing humans from the comforting environment of technological modernity is the key move in producing weird horror; however, VanderMeer's weird ecohorror is potentially more shocking because, as I mentioned, what we find in absence of modernity, if we were to imagine a scenario such as The Event that created Area X in which all evidence of humans suddenly ceased to exist, is a supposedly "natural" environment that we find horrifying in its very existence. As Graham Harman observes in his writing on horror and philosophy, we need, in our present moment, a "weird realism": "philosophy must be realist because its mandate is to unlock the structure of the world itself; it must be weird because reality is weird" (Harman, "On the Horror of Phenomenology" 4). For Harman, this weird realism is best exemplified by Lovecraft, whose weird fiction forms the ground of much of contemporary thinking in this time of ecological crisis. Harman sources two gestures from Lovecraft that contribute to this weird realism. Lovecraft's method, as Harman describes it, writes reality "by slicing an object into vast cross-sections of qualities, planes, or adumbrations, which even when added up do not exhaust the reality of the object they compose" while he also "laments the inability of mere language to depict the deep horrors his narrators confront" (Harman, *Weird Realism* 3–4). This kind of confrontation with the unspeakable, with a place beyond language, occurs in many of the descriptions of Area X in the *Southern Reach* trilogy: as the biologist describes the cypress trees that border the water, "the effect of this cannot be understood without being there."

Lovecraft's weird realism then moves us beyond a world composed of things we think we know and that comfort our knowledge; instead he points to a seething,

threatening world menaced by the inhuman. In the realm of these forces, we can see the limits of the encompassing, flattening term “nonhuman” to describe all this stuff that surrounds us. As occult media philosopher Eugene Thacker writes in *In the Dust of This Planet*, the term “nonhuman” is “vague... [having] a wide range of meanings, from the rock or the chair to the black depths of the cosmos itself” (Thacker 26). Further, Thacker develops the idea that outside the post-Kantian duality between the thing-in-itself and the thing-for-us, we need a third term to be able to speak the menace of the objects weird realism can describe, these more cosmic aspects of the nonhuman I’ve taken to referring to as “the inhuman.” He offers “the thing-without-us” as that third term, defining it as follows:

the world-without-us cannot co-exist with the human world-for-us; the world-without-us is the subtraction of the human from the world. To say that the world-without-us is antagonistic to the human is to attempt to put things in human terms, in the terms of the world-for-us. To say that the world-without-us is neutral with respect to the human, is to attempt to put things in the terms of the world-in-itself. The world-without-us lies somewhere in between, in a nebulous zone that is at once impersonal and horrific. The world-without-us is as much a cultural concept as it is a scientific one. (Thacker 5–6)

Thacker’s description of the world-without-us as a space between the thinking of a scientist and a humanist is important for thinking about our relationship with a putatively “natural” environment, especially as such an environment is dramatized in the *Southern Reach*. As VanderMeer dramatizes, Thacker’s concept of the world-without-us, a space between malevolence and indifference, is menacing because it does not contain us as a reference, in any fashion. VanderMeer drops his characters amongst a pristine environment, nominally the goal of certain dated models of environmental activism, and watches these characters driven insane by the indifference of Area X.

Moreover, *The Southern Reach* trilogy documents a dramatic failure of what philosopher Joanna Zylińska calls “the scalar derangement” of ontological thinking in *Minimal Ethics for the Anthropocene*. As she explains,

The world (or rather what we are calling the world) does of course unfold and act in a myriad ways outside and beyond us, many of which we are unable to see, experience and grasp. However, for us to be able to say anything about it, to engage in any kind of philosophizing, we are at the same time bringing forth this world in a necessarily cut-up, solidified and inadequate way, for which we furnish ourselves with concepts such as adequacy and truth in order to assess our efforts ... Many seem oblivious of this fact, engaging instead as they do in the construction of ontological edifices that float like palaces in the sky—and then passing them off as descriptions of reality on to others. (Zylińska 41–42)

In her vision, the only way to make claims about reality is through an ethical act: deciding how to cut up and present the flux of being. Any attempt to package this specific set of cuts as *the* nature of being is to forget that our scale (as individuals, as a species, as a society, as a planet) is not the only possible scale for measuring and capturing reality. In other words, ontology for Zylińska is a derangement, viewing *a* version of the world as the only system of the world’s operation.

This derangement is what produces the unease in VanderMeer’s weird ecohorror: while Zylińska is primarily invested in assigning a scalar derangement to academic philosophers, VanderMeer imbricates all humanity within this deranged vision of reality. Confronted with a world-without-us, a true embodiment of Thacker’s concept, the humans of *The Southern Reach Trilogy* enact the ritualized, tropic elements of the weird tale as Lovecraft wrote it: madness, insanity, self-destruction, apocalypse. The major difference is that unlike Lovecraft, who distances the world-without-us of beings like Cthulhu from humanity in time and space, VanderMeer situates it almost literally in our backyard, in a slightly intensified version of the remaining inhuman environments on Earth. In conclusion, I think if we read *Southern Reach* as an example of climate change

fiction (or “cli fi”), which I think we should, part of the lesson we learn from the inhuman scales of Area X is that a return to a pre-human environment is not only unlikely, as much contemporary ecology tells us, but that it is not particularly desirable. However, in dramatizing the failure of scalar derangement to confront this inhuman ecology, VanderMeer gestures to the alien Earth, what Bill McKibben calls Eaarth (with two “As”), that we may soon find ourselves in and hopefully capable of approaching with something other than just cosmic horror.

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