

# HUMAN-EYED DOLPHINS: HUMANIST NIGHTMARES AND POSTHUMANIST ECOSYSTEMS IN JEFF VANDERMEER'S *SOUTHERN REACH* TETRALOGY

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**ABSTRACT:** Ten years after the release of *The Southern Reach* trilogy, Jeff VanderMeer returns to the enigmatic realm of Area X with a fourth novel, *Absolution* (2024). This paper examines how the tetralogy's engagement with the posthuman continuum challenges traditional definitions of the human-non-human dichotomy. Drawing upon philosophical posthumanism as theorized by Rosi Braidotti, I argue that the novels in question not only resist conventional definitions of ecological disaster, but also redefine the concepts of existential continuity and agency in a posthuman context. In *The Southern Reach* novels, the portrayal of posthuman entities reflects a deliberate deconstruction of oppositional identity configurations. VanderMeer achieves this through two primary mechanisms: on the one hand, the transference of traditionally abhuman attributes from non-human animals and alien entities to the human focalizers, and, on the other hand, the presentation of posthuman beings as desirable ontological possibilities.

**RESUMEN:** Diez años después del lanzamiento de la trilogía *Southern Reach*, Jeff VanderMeer regresa al enigmático territorio del Área X con una cuarta novela, *Absolution* (2024). Este artículo analiza la manera en la que la representación del continuum posthumano cuestiona las definiciones tradicionales de la dicotomía humano/no-humano. A través del enfoque filosófico posthumanista teorizado por Rosi Braidotti, el análisis de las novelas en cuestión revela que éstas no sólo rechazan una definición convencional de desastre ecológico, sino

que también redefinen los conceptos de continuidad existencial y agencial en un contexto posthumano. En las novelas de *Southern Reach*, la representación de entidades posthumanas refleja una desconstrucción deliberada de configuraciones identitarias oposicionales. VanderMeer logra esto principalmente de dos maneras: por un lado, transfiriendo atributos tradicionalmente abhumanos de animales no humanos y entidades alienígenas a los focalizadores humanos; y por otro, presentando a los seres posthumanos como posibilidades ontológicas deseables.

### **A POSTHUMANIST PERSPECTIVE ON THE HUMAN, THE NON-HUMAN AND THE POSTHUMAN IN AREA X**

*As [the dolphins] slid by, the nearest one rolled slightly to the side, and it stared at me with an eye that did not, in that brief flash, resemble the eye of a dolphin to me. It was painfully human, almost familiar.* (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 96)

Area X is the name given to a portion of the U.S. coast after it has been suddenly sectioned off the rest of the landscape by the emergence of an invisible “Border.” An alien artifact has subsequently transformed the region into a perfect ecosystem, erasing all traces of pollution and accelerating the decomposition of man-made structures and objects. The detailed descriptions of the dense pine woods and marshes populated by alligators, dolphins and boars places it somewhere along the coast of Florida.<sup>1</sup> Yet, Area X functions by its own, often unintelligible rules, defying known physical, chemical and biological laws to the point that the intense beauty of its pristine flora and fauna can quickly become tinged with hues of horror. Ten years after the release of *Annihilation*, *Authority* and *Acceptance* in 2014, Jeff VanderMeer returns to the enigmatic Area X with *Absolution*, the fourth novel in *The Southern Reach* series. In the last novel of the series, VanderMeer expands the cosmic horror of Area X to further explore the fluidity of posthuman existence. One of the most acclaimed writers of new weird fiction, VanderMeer seems to prefer China Miéville’s approach to the idea of ‘awe’ (514) over H.P. Lovecraft’s, despite sharing a similar sense of the narrative potentialities of body horror with the latter. Discussing “weird fiction along the Lovecraftian

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview published on the online magazine *Time Out*, VanderMeer specifically mentions his hikes in North Florida as a source of inspiration for Area X.

model,” Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock states that it is “not about recognizing ourselves in the other, but rather the undoing of egocentrism” (181). Despite his arguably racist and, thus, essentialist views, Lovecraft’s definition of Anthropos (Steadman; Frye; Guardé Paz) is surprisingly closer than expected to a philosophical understanding of the posthuman in that both imply a decentering of (Hu)Man from the conceptual mapping of the universe. However, Lovecraft’s weird fiction and VanderMeer’s new weird fiction significantly differ in their discursive use of horror. While Lovecraftian monsters are intrinsically deployed as sources and agents of horror, VanderMeer’s use of monstrosity is, I contend, aimed at representing the philosophical deconstruction of dualism and hierarchy in western social processes.

The monstrous or idealized posthuman is thus part of, or motivation for and a symptom of, a politics of representation within the contemporary social process of posthumanization. [...] The ‘philosophers of difference’ and their critique of the dialectical relationship between ‘the same and the other’ [...] tend to stress radical difference and alterity, a move which serves to escape the Hegelian dialectic of (self)identity, in the form of attending to an indigestible remainder or as a necessary ‘outside.’ (Herbrechter 83-84)

Lovecraft and VanderMeer use monstrosity to “critique the dialectical relationship between ‘the same and the other’” because their monsters from outer space embody the “unhuman” that “is not a negation but a non-relation, [...] a rejection of the stifling non/human binary entrapment” (Mazurov 261-62). The ecosystems in Area X are not deployed as a metaphor for human relationships, but as rather literal descriptions of human embedment in non-human ecologies and of the non-dualist nature of ecological relationships. What to some—characters and readers alike—is a nightmare of cosmic proportions, to others is an opportunity for experiencing the full potential of ecologized identities. I contend that the former perception of Area X corresponds to a humanist approach, whereas the latter to a posthumanist one.

I specifically refer to the concept of the posthuman as theorized by Rosi Braidotti from the perspective of philosophical posthumanism: an anti-humanist, anti-anthropocentric, anti-dualist form of subjectivity that is not defined in exclusionary terms, but based on ontological embedment and relationality. In Francesca Ferrando’s

words, posthumanism opposes “the Cartesian body/mind dualism, according to which ‘I am my mind, while I have a body. [...] The famous *cogito* set the privilege of the mind over the body: ‘I think, therefore I am’” (37). On the contrary, Ferrando’s posthuman emerges from the acknowledgement of its embedment in materiality, as well as in the discursive context of a network of relative positions. In Braidotti’s words, “what constitutes subjectivity is a structural *relational* capacity coupled with the specific degree of force or power that any one entity is endowed with: their ability to extend towards and in proximity with others” (*The Posthuman* 42). I propose a reading of Area X as a space in which humans—the Ones—, terrestrial lifeforms—those Other than human—, and extra-terrestrial lifeforms—those entirely Alien to humanity—, affect one another to the point that they cannot be defined in oppositional terms—with Otherness drawing the constitutive restraints of Oneness, and Alien-ness those of Otherness—but through mutual contamination, as well as through contact, both in the sense of physical proximity and in the sense of communication. The literal death of human explorers of Area X is symbolic of the death of Mankind as envisioned by humanist, anthropocentric and dualist definitions of subjectivity. In fact, most human characters do not actually die in Area X, but transmorph into a different way of being, a different ontological state. Some turn into recognizable non-human animals like owls, boars and dolphins; others into never-before-seen creatures—an intergalactic, many-eyed cetacean, a gelatinous “Crawler”—that transgress the rigid boundaries of the One-Other dichotomy and are, consequently, perceived as monstrous. Others still become light, or simply disappear into the landscape. Even in those cases in which corpses are retrieved, these are “decomposing at an incredibly fast rate” (VanderMeer, *Authority* 35). The first remarkable aspect of Area X consists, thus, in its ability to dissolve the Nature-Human dichotomy not by deleting humanity, but by fusing it with every other way of being in a global ecosystem:

transformations were taking place here, and as much as I felt part of a “natural” landscape on my trek to the lighthouse, I could not deny that these habitats were transitional in a deeply *unnatural* way. (*Annihilation* 158)

Area X is not a metonymy for Nature-as-the-Enemy-of-Mankind—an enemy to be subjugated and exploited, or feared and survived. This is further clarified by the revelation that Area X is itself

an artifact, a piece of technology created by a lost alien civilization. To become one with the exuberant ecosystem of Area X is, at once, to become one with o/Other non-human earthlings—the flora and the fauna of coastal woods and marshes—and with non-human aliens, their technology, their story and, it follows, their culture. Area X is a space for hybridization, osmotic penetration, and cross-pollination, all of which are only scary, nightmarish concepts if approached from the purity-obsessed essentialism of anthropocentric, hierarchical humanism. On the contrary, and to circle back to a philosophical posthumanist conceptualization of the posthuman, “it rather envisages what I would call a transversal inter-connection or an ‘assemblage’ of human and non-human actors” (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 45). Likewise, Terrance MacDonald’s theorization of affective relationality challenges the boundaries of humanist definitions by exposing the interconnectivity of the organic and the inorganic—be it the result of spontaneous developments, or of the deliberate use of technology—as well as the interdependence and integration of organic beings with one another. Area X, “this machine or creature or combinations of both” (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 310), is technology that duplicates and merges DNA. Therefore, Area X showcases the inextricable coexistence of the human and the non-human, their mutual embedment in one another. In other words, words which I borrow from MacDonald,

taking into account relations between human subjects needs to be extended to include the many perceptible and non-perceptible nonhumans that enter into assemblages with us. This thinking immediately puts pressure on human exceptionality when we consider the many bodies within us that we cannot control yet depend on for our bodies to persevere. (38)

In the next two sections, I shall argue that the function that VanderMeer establishes for Area X is that of making visible the many ways in which humans are affected by and affect those (im)perceptible Other bodies and how this interaction generates ontological, biological, and technological assemblages that I interpret as literary/literal embodiments of the posthuman.

## **AREA X AS A HUMANIST NIGHTMARE**

Area X emerged abruptly; it was not there until it was. The third novel in the series, *Acceptance*, suggests that there are at least two distinct phenomena that concurred in the emergence of Area X. On the one hand, a “border or wall” (*Authority* 35) of some sort descended—or, for all we know, ascended—making the inside invisible to the outside and vice versa. All the reports available to the researchers at the Southern Reach, the secret governmental agency investigating Area X, consistently call the Border “impenetrable” (35), and insist that it is impervious to “advanced instrumentation or radar or sonar” (75). The word “Border” suggests that the consequences—perhaps, even the purpose of its existence—are exclusion and division. Yet, “once you touched it, it pulled you in (or across?)” (*Acceptance* 131). It follows that the Border is paradoxically the opposite of what dichotomous thinking would expect of a border, for it is not a barrier, but the means to cross over, to go through and into and beyond. What is more, its invisibility, like that of the emperor’s new clothes, suggests an absence rather than a presence, as though it only became “something” in the mind of the viewer. If so, however, the implication is that it could become *anything, everything*, even, a limitless expanse of potentiality, or a conduit to an/Other place, an/Other plane of existence. In *Acceptance*, the non-binary nature of the Border is brought to the front as the question “what does the Border look like?” is quickly dismissed as “childish,” for “there is nothing but border. There is no border” (4). Yet, the Border is not purely in the mind of the beholder although the latter’s interpretation is. Its ability to seemingly dematerialize the bodies that enter it makes the Border tantamount to a devouring monster, one particularly horrifying, for, like a Black Hole, it does not promise a swift death, but an uncertain end that may, perhaps, be worse than death itself.

Monsters, denizens of the borderlands, have always represented the extremities of transgression and the limits of the order of things. In the works of Jacques Derrida, the figure of the monster embodies a means of thinking otherwise—a means of passing “beyond man and humanism” and reaching for other posthuman futures—that has travelled under the name of deconstruction. The event of the Derridean text, signaling a “rupture” with the discourses in which it gestated, terrifies with its unprecedented deformation of the normal and its threat to the boundaries of conventional thought. (Milburn 603)

VanderMeer personifies the dichotomist use of limits and boundaries in a literal monster—the Border. Yet, by making it a devouring monster, one that lurks unseen by its prey until it is too late, VanderMeer is also materializing and monstifying the act of transgressing a boundary. Transgression itself displays the vulnerability of humanist dichotomous thinking as defined by posthumanist philosopher Roberto Marchesini (33). Vanishing through the Border unfurls a form of existence that is neither one thing nor the other, but that still exists *relatively* to both, thus effectively dissolving both ideals: that of humanity and that of monstrosity.

Ultimately, the only thing to which the Border is impenetrable is advanced technology, the kind that is wielded as the epitome of human civilization. To the naked eye, the nature beyond it looked like “wilderness in apparent real time, nothing out of the ordinary” (VanderMeer, *Authority* 75); yet, this wilderness has the extraordinary ability to render the sophisticated weapons brought into it by the first expedition ineffective or even deadly to humans, so that the Southern Reach quickly learns to avoid their use altogether (*Annihilation* 31–130). Area X is shut to what Braidotti refers to as the technologies of *thanatos*—the instruments of death produced by industries that commodify military and civil conflicts (*The Posthuman* 109–11)—, but it may be open to *zoe*, “the non-human, vital force of Life” (60). The military and governmental staff do not even contemplate this possibility since they are determined to see the Border as an impenetrable barrier akin to that of the boundaries that inscribe the Vitruvian ideal of *Anthropos*. The Border is perceived as a geographical frontier equivalent to the discursive *fin*es that de-*fine* “the humanist ideal of ‘Man’ as the alleged ‘measure of all things’” (Braidotti, “Preface” xii). However, in VanderMeer’s own words, “the madness of this world tries to colonize you [...] from the outside in” (*Annihilation* 108). If we look at the relative positions of Area X and the Southern Reach, it is the latter that is on the *outside* trying to penetrate both the physical and the metaphysical space of the former. If anything, Area X expands from the inside out. It began as a sparkle trapped inside the lens of a lighthouse—inside human technology, that is—and it then expanded from its epicentre as a “ghost or ‘permeable pre-border manifestation’, [...] light as fog, almost invisible except for a flickering quality,” which had then “quickly emanated *out in all directions*” [emphasis added] (*Authority* 34). In fact, while the experience of staying within Area X is recounted as horror-inducing by some members of the expeditions,

others found it to have been full of beauty, and others still to have been a rather neutral, ordinary, mundane sojourn. What the hegemonic forces at the Southern Reach call an “optical lie” (76), one of the many tricks used by an alien enemy, could as easily be due to the fact that every human individual penetrating Area X brings their own madness and horror, their own beauty, or their own ordinariness with them.

The last part of *Absolution* (312-449) is written in the form of a deranged stream of consciousness that reveals that James Lowry, chosen member of the first mission into Area X and, later, totalitarian head of the Southern Reach, was already all but insane before his ingress into Area X, his fragile ego prey to a sadistic superego, to cognitive dissonance, to addiction, and to a ruinous fragmentation of the self (314-49). To the horror that Area X elicits in some of the members of the expeditions with its transmutations and weird phenomena, I compare the institutional horror of Central, a governmental organization which, in its quest for the means to take advantage of and/or destroy Area X, uses the staff at its secret Southern Reach branch as disposable tools or, worse, as involuntary guinea pigs subjected to unthinkable emotional torture or to torturous physical death (*Authority* 19-22; *Absolution* 41-73). From the point of view of those exploited and then discarded by the Jack, the head of the governmental secret organization, to be turned into an owl, a boar or a cosmic cetacean by Area X might seem a far more preferable fate than being “shoved [...] into barrels” full of chemicals, “like some kind of fucked-up nightmare” (*Absolution* 261), which is what happened to “mid-level Brute[s] from Central who Jack hadn’t liked” (*Absolution* 262). The institutions c/Central to the Anthropocene conceive the Border as an enemy to be tortured for information or summarily killed. Lowry, to whom Jack gives absolute control over the Southern Reach, becomes more powerful with every expedition he sends into Area X, accumulating wealth and discarding multiple wives in a spiral of narcissistic grandeur. Within this frame of mind, there is no room for affective relationality, which VanderMeer expresses in the literal impossibility of *seeing* beyond the border and into Area X, and more significantly by describing those who had lived in the few villages within its circumference as trapped and forever lost to the rest of humanity. The Southern Reach expeditions could find no trace of the inhabitants of the region. Only the Biologist of the last expedition, with her weird connection to *zoe*, found them in the



peculiar eruptions of moss or lichen [...] the vegetative matter forming an approximation of limbs and heads and torsos [...] one "standing" and three decomposed to the point of "sitting" in what must once have been a living room with a coffee table and a couch. (*Annihilation* 96)

From a humanist point of view, the 'reduction' of human life to anthropomorphic fungal compositions is a double source of horror. On the one hand, the decomposition of human bodies is quite difficult to reconcile with the idea of the human body as a single, unified, homogenous entity. On the other hand, it visibilizes the fact that, for a body that is construed—according to the Biblical Genesis and Brandon Carter's strong anthropic principle—as the apex of creation/evolution, it is uncannily easy to reconfigure itself as a multitude of "inferior" lifeforms. VanderMeer is thus making a subversive use of deconstruction as a mechanism for establishing the fact that human life is ontologically and biologically connected with and expanded through non-human organisms, and that this is *de facto* a means for its continued existence.

The very idea of decomposition opens the door to a more poignant form of body horror: the re-composition of non-human and human elements into hybrid monsters: "a vast phantasmagoria of grotesque monsters with human faces" (*Authority* 271). As mentioned, some of the humans that dare enter Area X are transformed into non-human animals, whose former humanity may still be traced in "a dolphin with an uncanny eye," or in "a wild boar that acted as if it were new to its body" (*Annihilation* 162). Other human explorers turn into abhuman monsters that, to the humanist eye, elicit downright horror, rather than the shiver of the uncanny. There is the "moaning creature" (*Annihilation* 140), who<sup>2</sup> "looked uncannily like the confluence of a giant hog and a human being" (*Acceptance* 33), whose still recognizably human face cannot utter words anymore, but only moan. There is also the Crawler, thus dubbed because of the way in which it moves about on its triangular appendices, its translucent mass tremulously blurring in and out of vision until "all that remained constant was a suggestion of an arm and the impression of the words being written" (*Annihilation* 177). Saul the lighthouse keeper turned into the Crawler after coming in contact with the alien technology and is now more than the sum of his parts. Neither merely half human nor

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<sup>2</sup> I use the relative pronoun "who" to stress the equalizing effect of Area X, where personhood is no longer an exclusively human property.

half something else, he is not a hybrid in the sense that the creature in Lovecraft's "The Dunwich horror" was, with all its implied criticism of racial miscegenation. The Crawler is an evolved form of Saul: it is *past* Saul<sup>3</sup> and, thus, *post* the human phase thereof. The reason why the Biologist "would not end its misery" when she had the opportunity, is that she acknowledges the fact that misery, too, may be in eye of the beholder; that she "worked from incomplete data;" that, as a human, she "could not be sure of what it represented or what it was going through," "it" being the posthuman creatures moaning or crawling in Area X: "beneath what seemed to be pain might lie ecstasy" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 162).

A different sort of *métissage* is also possible. Area X reconfigures itself to mirror the habitat, the flora and the fauna—humans included—of the Forgotten Coast. The function of the alien artifact, of this "one *made* organism" (*Acceptance* 286), seems to be that of cloning the organic and duplicating the inorganic elements of that region of the Earth and, with them, to create life again on a devastated alien planet. From the point of view of the phalo-logocentric patriarchal elite embodied by Jack and Lowry, these alien-to-Earthling formations are seen as posthuman in the "techno-teratological" sense that Braidotti discusses (*The Posthuman* 64; *Metamorphoses*), that is, as a "dystopian reflection of the bio-genetic structure" that is the 'monstrous' result of the alien technology at work in Area X. On the contrary, from the point of view of the dead alien civilization and its

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<sup>3</sup> While I use the word 'past' here as a preposition indicating Saul's state *beyond* the limitations of his previous identity as a human, it is worth noting that the phrase "past Saul" also works if interpreted as meaning that the Crawler is a previous incarnation of Saul's, a version of Saul *from the past*. Given that the fourth *Southern Reach* novel recounts the events that took place before and immediately after the emergence of the Border, the future is "acting on the past" (*Absolution* 308) both diegetically and narratively. Given also that, as Francesca Ferrando puts it, "humans have always been posthuman" (*Humans* 243), VanderMeer's deliberate use of Area X as a force that blurs, disrupts and warps time can also be read as a reminder of the fact that "the posthuman extends over the boundaries of the academic, technological and scientific domains, and can be genealogically traced in different types of spiritual knowledges and understandings" (Ferrando, *Humans* 243). That Saul the lighthouse keeper once used to be an evangelical preacher in what felt to him as another life (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 93) contributes to my interpretation of this character as having always been 'posthuman'. In this sense, his existence as the Crawler is but a manifestation of what has always been there spiritually. I take Ferrando's views on "the significance of spirituality as a genealogical source of the posthuman" (*Humans* 243) as an epistemological framework for a genealogy of posthuman 'Sauls' that simultaneously precede and succeed his transformation into the Crawler.

deserted planet, those formations simply constitute a second chance at life. They are lifeforms; nothing more, nothing less. Horror, once again, is in the eyes of the beholder. This is proved, on the one hand, by the fact that, in the eyes of the members from the last expedition, the alien entity that animates Area X eventually erupts into clones of humans that are indistinguishable from the original, just as it is almost impossible to tell the aforementioned boar apart from ordinary members of its species. On the other hand, in the eyes of Lowry, the clones are monstrous mockeries of the humans they mirror.

They were uggos from way back, because they'd mimicked most of the expedition in their gallivanting bipedal numbers. But not just like naked people.

No, it was slinky-dinky pinky-winky shit, loopy and looping, and the flexibility of them at the joints and how they swung around and stared upside down felt like something out of a tube of toothpaste. (VanderMeer, *Absolution* 394)

They are “uggos” because they do not meet a specific standard of bodily configuration. They are denied status as people because they are more “flexible” than Lowry reckons they should be. Their fluidity is perceived as monstrous because it makes them, at once, too similar to, and too dissimilar from the “proper” members of the expedition. Yet, these monstrous doppelgängers do not cause any harm to the human explorers. It is Lowry who attacks the deviant Other, firm in his belief that “what he was supposed to do was kill the shitheads. Kill all the shitheads to protect the expedition” (*Absolution* 394).

Alongside the emergence of the Border, the second phenomenon that concurred in the establishment of Area X is the opening of a “Door” somewhere along the perimeter of Area X. In the fourth novel, it is revealed that going through the Door may be akin to time travelling: those who cross—e.g., the rabbits in *Authority* (55)—are transported to the same *where*, the Forgotten Coast, but to a different *when* (*Absolution* 42). It follows that the interior of Area X is an ecosystem composed of earthly fauna and flora on alien ground, while its Border is a passage to an/Other point in human history. Thus, the descriptions of “a place just before the forest became waterlogged and then turned to salt marsh” (*Annihilation* 4) make Area X a transitional habitat not only in the sense that the landscape transitions from woods to marshes to the seashore, but also in the sense that Area X is liminally cocooned between the earthly and the

alien, the human and the non-human; what is more, it is a space that abridges the distance between opposites, a space that erases, in fact, distance altogether, bringing our planet and an/Other one in such close proximity that they effectually overlap and even merge. The fact that the passage from the Door to the actual threshold of Area X elongates into a tunnel to whose sides lie scenes from collapsed civilizations, landscapes devastated by war, corpses upon corpses of decimated lives is a further indicator of the symbolic role of Area X as an antidote to the destructive effects of a hierarchical and dualist world-view.

The recurrent descriptions of the devastation surrounding the corridor between the Door and Area X are designed to represent the path that has brought humanity to an existential epiphany. The journey to Area X exposes the similarities between Central and the alien civilization that annihilated itself by engaging in extremely exploitative and destructive behaviors. Central and, it follows, Central's secret offshoot known as the Southern Reach embody the sadistic, narcissistic greed of institutionalized patriarchy at the heart of the Anthropocene. In Central's *éminences grises*, Jack Severance and James Lowry, VanderMeer has condensed the consequences of a severely diminished ability to affect and to be affected. They "had invested other people's blood and sweat in the idea of the expeditions, and implied by that the idea of the border as an impenetrable barrier, which means [they're] safe on the right side of the divide" (*Acceptance* 44). Their characterization highlights the way in which "patriarchal hierarchies and ideals of toxic masculinities caus[e] affective intensities to become dull and reduced" (MacDonald 37). As we shall see later, *Annihilation* provides the reader with a posthumanist perspective of Area X. In *Authority*, the second novel in the series, we are presented with the humanist perspective on Area X, which is mainly focalized through the newly appointed director of the Southern Reach, John Rodriguez, or "Control," as Jack Severance, his grandfather and powerful overlord of the U.S. intelligence services, has nicknamed him. As Control exposes the many secrets of the Southern Reach, we learn that Central is not only lying to the public and the Government as to the extent of the past, present and future impact of Area X on the U.S. and the whole planet, but it is also lying to its own agents and scientists. Consequently, Central consists as much in an embodiment of the Derridean concept of the discursive Centre, as in a clear manifestation of the Anthropocene. Area X is not the monster; Central is. Where Central illustrates the horrific consequences of "the

Vitruvian metric that views the human as a measure and synthesis of the world,” Area X is conceived as a lens through which to “draw our attention to hybridization, that fundamental principle of hospitality that makes the human a chiasmic point of contamination” (Marchesini 2).

### **AREA X AS THE PRIMORDIAL SOUP FOR (WEIRD) NEW ASSEMBLAGES**

The hospitality of Area X produces posthuman creatures whose existence expands beyond the limits of this, as well as of any other world. Ghost Bird, a human-looking alien, is the result of one of the cloning processes by Area X. Yet, she does not identify as either alien or human (VanderMeer, *Authority* 334). In turn, the human from which Ghost Bird was molded, the nameless Biologist and autodiegetic narrator of *Annihilation*, eventually transforms into a gigantic form of cosmic marine life that can swim across time and space through the multiverse and in whose posthuman body “nothing monstrous existed [...]—only beauty, only the glory of good design” (*Acceptance* 195). A third posthuman character, the Rogue, exists simultaneously in the body of a cloned human and in that of an alligator, so that biological and intellectual properties of the non-human animal, such as the ability to molt, are passed on to the human/alien hybrid (*Absolution* 307), and, vice versa, human empathy and the ability of the alien entity to move between alternative temporal and material dimensions are now shared by Tyrant the alligator (*Absolution* 302-08). The Biologist, Ghost Bird and the Rogue embrace change and even welcome the reconfiguration of their identity into an/Other form, one that allows a deeper embedment in the fabric of the universe; they accept the fact that only through the sublimation of corporal solidity into the ethereal, or the dissolution of the solid body into flexible forms of existence can the self extend its existence. After John “Control” Rodriguez walked down the subterranean Tower and past the sleeping Crawler, “Control,” the label his monstrous grandfather had given him, “fell away”; “his father’s carving fell from his hand,” too, and he emerged symbolically and ontologically naked, stripped of imposed categorizations of identity and of the weight of ancestral bonds (*Acceptance* 311). In the darkness of the organic, hollow creature dubbed as “the Tower,” the character who has willingly given up

c/Control, “elongated down the final stairs, jumped into the light” (311). Contrary to the narrative spun and spread by the Southern Reach that “the Area is deadly” (Clapp 414), Area X provides characters with the means to move along an ontological continuum from one life stage to another, from one *lifeform* to another. In the womb-like pulsating darkness of the Tower, John understands that “he would not now die on the steps; he would not suffer that final defeat” (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 311). By crossing the threshold at the bottom of the alien tunnel/tower-like creature and stepping into the light beyond, the character “without c/Control” is rebirthed into a new lifeform, who, before merging into the light, “sniffed the air” and “felt under his paws the burning and heat, the intensity.” It does not matter whether those are the paws of one of the hundreds of white rabbits with which he had been obsessed after learning they were used by the Southern Reach in an experimental attempt to “‘overload’ the ‘mechanism’ behind the border” (*Authority* 54), or those of the cat he had inherited from his father and whose image had been carved in the wooden piece he had just dropped. In either case, Area X is granting him his wish of becoming Other than his old human self, to “melt into this landscape, [...] become no more or less than the spray against the bow, the foam against the shore, the wind against his face” (324). His metamorphosis could very well be a literal somatization of the rabbit or cat that have become metaphors, in his mind, for this longed-for Otherness, this “elongation” into a more enlightened dimension of the self yet another indication of the continuity of life beyond the apparent boundaries of individual existence, of its seamlessness, of its fluid spilling into endlessness.

According to Pearson Bolt, the narrative and discursive function of Area X is that of embodying all borders,

for this is precisely what all borders do: in their demarcations, they pull us into accepting the concept of two distinct categories: us and them, human and animal, the subject and the Other. (28)

I contend, on the contrary, that Area X is much more than a border, *if* it is a border at all. In the fourth novel of the series, which had not yet been released when Bolt published his interpretation, Area X finally reveals itself to be a portal, a material means of transportation through time and across space, and a psychological means of moving inwardly towards the inner self and outwardly towards the aforementioned “many perceptible and non-perceptible nonhumans

that enter into assemblages with us" (MacDonald 38). Area X erases boundaries by allowing the expansion of the self into others. The need to become Other in order to stay the Same is spelled out by the eponymous concepts in the novels: in order to avoid "annihilation," one must subject one's self to the one "authority," the one unavoidable law in the multiverse: change. "Acceptance" of one's transient nature is, paradoxically, the means through which ontological continuity is achieved. Such radical acceptance "absolves" the posthuman characters of the original sin of anthropocentrism and frees them from the need to choose between being human and not being at all. The continuity between human and non-human animals, between organic and inorganic personhood dilutes the boundaries of Cartesian dichotomies into an existential dynamism akin to that of the Harawayian cyborg. Just as Area X had begun as a fog that then "quickly emanated *out in all directions*" [emphasis added] (34), "the yearnings" in Control go "in all directions and no direction at all. It was an odd kind of *affection* that needed no subject, that emanated from him like invisible rays meant for everyone and everything" [my emphasis] (VanderMeer, *Authority* 313). What came instinctive to the Biologist Control had to learn, but even he, who started his journey at the Derridean Centre of hegemonic power as Jack's grandson, eventually allows himself to be affected. The posthuman beings that emerge in the cosmos of the Southern Reach tetralogy illustrate the conditions of fluidity, dynamism and, most importantly, continuity of the posthuman construct as seen from the perspective of philosophical posthumanism. Nothing in the universe is destroyed. The idea of annihilation, so ostensibly central to the first novel, is ironically dismissed in the last section, aptly titled "Dissolution." As the Biologist eventually discovers, there is no such thing as heading *ad nihil* unless reality is filtered through an essentialist prism and being anything else but the One is read as being no one at all.

In order to further expound on the relationship between affectivity and relationality as ontological conditions, I must resort, once again, to the concept of assemblages. As Herbrechter succinctly puts it, "a Deleuzian body is an assemblage of forces and emotions that congeal within time and space to a singular configuration, and which, in general, is referred to as 'individual'" (105). Such "assemblages" result of interior—emotional—and exterior—ecosystemic—forces collaborating to the process of "becoming-machine" (Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory* 15-54), which is not unlike nor separate from the concept of becoming animal, becoming (wo)man,

becoming human. In other words, the composite Harawayan cyborg, the Deleuzian assemblative bodies, and Braidotti's "transversal, relational, nomadic" subjects (*The Posthuman* 103) exist in affective contiguity inasmuch as there is no effective separation between the interior and the exterior, but a permanent osmotic flux. VanderMeer manages to represent this continuity through two primary mechanisms: on the one hand, the enmeshment of the human in the non-human animals and even the abhuman alien, and, on the other hand, the presentation of the posthuman as a consequence of affective relationality. In *Annihilation*, the nameless narrator is identified only by her role in the exploration of Area X: she is the Biologist. Her profession defines her not only because the reader has no other means of identification for her—not even the slightest description of her physical traits—but, most significantly, because the Biologist is entirely consumed in the observation of non-human ecosystems. Her internal monologue, memories of her past life outside of Area X, and her general thought-processes and interpersonal behavior display a conspicuous lack of interest in humans and an almost obsessive attraction towards species and spaces that are distinctively Other than humans and human society. The Biologist would become one with the non-human Other; she "melted into her surroundings, could not remain *separate from, apart from*" [emphasis added] (173) the ecosystems that she was assigned or chose to observe. For the Biologist, solitary confinement in Area X—where she would spend 30 years in peaceful coexistence with the flora and fauna before transforming into a cosmic cetacean—is closer to bliss than any other experience she had ever had in her previous life. Area X "has become [her] country" and she "need[s] no other" (*Acceptance* 176). The Biologist's last sentence in *Annihilation* is "I am not returning home" (198) because Area X is home for a person that defies humanist dualism by refusing to stay "*separate from.*" It was not confinement, and certainly not solitary, if her existence touched and was touched by those of so many other beings in a wide network of affective connectivity.

Area X also feels like "home"—the *óikos* part of an ecosystem—to another socially-awkward character and focalizer, Gloria, who grew up on the Forgotten Coast and has worked strenuously to be hired by the Southern Reach. As a child, Gloria is as profoundly embedded in the non-human wilderness of the Forgotten Coast as the Biologist is, yet, as an adult, she is less asocial than the latter. Gloria's desire to return to her childhood haunts—albeit now turned into Area X—is



spurred, in equal parts, by her desire to reconnect with its natural habitat, with her mother and with the father-figure of the lighthouse keeper. Even though she seems as disinterested in romantic love as the Biologist is, Gloria's hunger for affection—her ability to affect and be affected—extends to the human as well as to the non-human. The chapters in *Acceptance* that are focalized through Gloria make it clear that she could get as lost in a dive bar and its patrons' chatter as in the marshes and woods of the Forgotten Coast. She has a devoted friend in the Southern Reach, Grace, who refuses to forget her even after she has failed to come back from the latest mission into Area X. And Gloria is just as faithful a friend to Saul, the lighthouse keeper who disappeared in the depths of Area X after the Border emerged. Saul will go on to exist as the Crawler in the inverted lighthouse that Area X has created as an organic clone of the original one, "breathing [...] living tissue curling down the walls" (*Acceptance* 54), but Gloria will keep the connection alive with the posthuman version of her symbolic father: "don't forget me," he asks, and Gloria does not; she will always "remember the keeper of the light" (*Acceptance* 338), even as he crawls down his dark Tower. Gloria will herself evolve to become something Other than human in Area X, her disembodied self or, rather, her Otherbodied self, "floating over the reeds, down towards the beach, the surf beyond. The wind, the sun, the warmth": Gloria is no more, she is nowhere, and then, suddenly, she is "everywhere" (336).

The same affective connection with both the human and the Other-than-human is what motivates Whitby to evolve into the time-travelling, part-human-male, part-female-alligator Rogue on a mission (307), wounded "in the process of trying to change" (*Absolution* 305). A subaltern of Gloria's when she was the director of the Southern Reach and later of Control's when he replaced her after her disappearance in Area X, Whitby was first characterized as an overt embodiment of the weird at the center of the genre. In *Authority*, he is the character that, from a humanist dualist perspective, is responsible for transgressing the boundaries of abject alterity and bringing it back with him out of Area X and into the headquarters of the Southern Reach. In fact, like Renfield in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Whitby can be read as the traitor, the infiltrator that has come back from enemy territory carrying the virus of enemy propaganda, who has fallen prey to brainwashing and the insane rhetoric of the uncivilized, monstrous Other. Like Renfield, Whitby is in communication with whatever alien mastermind hides inside Area X and he is foreshadowing, with his

secret drawings of “grotesque monsters,” the ultimate fate of every last staff member in the Southern Reach once Area X resumes its advance on the rest of the planet. Yet, as Control himself will realize at the end of *Acceptance*, what essentialist and dualist thinking considers unspeakable deformations and horrible deaths are simply magnified visualizations of the everyday changes to which organic bodies are subjected as they transition from phase to phase of their life cycle, “in a creative synthesis of flows, energies and becomings” (Braidotti, *Transpositions* 235). All bodies will all either become maggots, mallows and mice, or smoke and ashes; to us all death is a “merging with the environment” (239). The question VanderMeer is asking through Whitby the Rogue is why those transformations would be any more natural than molting into a posthuman alligator-like version of one’s self. In a moment of climactic sublimity, Lowry realizes that the human husk he had devoured in an irrepressible spur of cannibalistic mania—“the urge to eat the molt, the utter ravenous desire to shove all of it into his mouth” (*Absolution* 434)—is Whitby’s; that he, Lowry, the quintessential conquering, trampling, stomping emissary of anthropocentric, capitalist, essentialist colonialism, has consumed not the flesh, but the molt of an individual who has evolved into someone else, someone incomprehensibly other *than* and Other *to* a human(ist).

As the Tyrant brought the Rogue close, Old Jim saw that he had lost his camouflage, breathing and yet not breathing, the red brittle starfish of two bullet wounds in the chest. The Rogue’s eyes were closed. The Rogue was dead-alive. The Rogue was staring at him from the belly of the beast, and he wondered now whether, in that connection, he had an audience with the Rogue or with the Tyrant, and whether it mattered.

The Rogue’s left eye opened. That cryptic eye, that alien regard. Staring at an organism become other than a man, but sheltering in a man’s body. What was this new thing that looked so old?

[...] The Rogue faded fully into the gold, deep into the gold and the water, enfolded in the Tyrant, who laid him to rest with a gentle affection. (*Absolution* 304–07)

In Area X, he who was once known as Whitby at the Southern Reach, is now the Rogue, “an organism become other than a man,” as well as the Tyrant, an organism become other than an alligator. Their mutual contamination enables them to see from within the body of the other. It makes them single and twofold at the same time, distinct and “enfolded” in each other. Together, immersed in their reciprocal “gentle

affection," they are part of the "affective assemblages that increase our power to affect and be affected" (MacDonald 38).

Affective relationality enables another agent of the Southern Reach, Old Jim, to eventually sever his allegiance to the secret governmental agency epitome of the Anthropocene and its toxic patriarchal masculinities. He does so because of his attachment to people who are, in turn, deeply embedded in Area X—either emotionally, or materially, once their bodies have died there. Old Jim allows himself to affect and be affected by Area X to the point that he follows in the footsteps of the Rogue and literally "molts" into a new version of himself (VanderMeer, *Absolution* 438). This is further evidence of the fact that VanderMeer's conception of the posthuman as embodied by Area X is not one in which humanity must be erased and nature prevail, for this would uphold an antagonistic relationship between Man and Nature that is still, necessarily, dualist. VanderMeer's posthuman is not *anti*-human. It has simply moved beyond the inscription of subjectivity within a single, rigid discursive framework. In this, Area X embodies the ultimate humanist nightmare, where human exceptionalism dissolves and ontological boundaries become porous and are eventually shed like old skin. Jeffrey Clapp provides an interesting interpretative summary of the dissolution of the black-and-white rhetoric in *The Southern Reach*, when he states that

VanderMeer depicts the relationship between the Southern Reach and Area X as an endless struggle in which the black hats come to resemble the white hats, the observer becomes the observed and cynicism replaces purposes. (415)

While I certainly agree that the parts of the novels set at the Southern Reach or Central are designed to question the ethics and even the rationality of patriarchal capitalist power structures, I interpret Old Jim's and Control's character arcs as a positive response to the destructiveness of James Lowry and of Jack Severance. VanderMeer counters the cynicism of Control and Old Jim in their pre-Area X era with their eventual embracing of Otherness as *zoe*. Central's use of violence, conceit, Machiavellianism and sadistic manipulation are powerless to prevent them from "jumping into the light" and being reborn, which effectively turns Area X into an eco-ontological 'primordial soup' from which new ways of being emerge.

## CONCLUSION: DISSOLUTION IN THE ECOSYSTEM.

Through focalizers such as the Biologist, Ghost Bird, Gloria, Saul, Control and Old Jim, VanderMeer is representing a posthumanist approach to Area X, one in which the uncanny beauty of its unpolluted nature is perceived and embraced, and one in which each character's identity is not in opposition to, but in relation with Area X and, within it, through it and beyond it, in relation with one another. The *Southern Reach* novels not only resist conventional definitions of ecological disaster, but also redefine the concepts of ontological continuity and agency in a posthuman context, reconfiguring traditional notions of humanity and non-humanity, and, in fact, challenging either categorization. What can only be perceived as a cataclysmic nightmare from a humanist perspective—the advent of Area X and its decomposition of human artifacts and human bodies—is represented as a regenerative ecological h(e)aven from a posthumanist one. The mechanisms by which VanderMeer queers the boundaries of characters and settings—bodily enmeshment and affective relationality—construct the new 'species-lessness' of the transmorphed characters not as a transcendental balance of the human and the non-human, but as an erasure of the hegemonic (Hu)Man construct itself. The *Southern Reach* novels propose a posthuman *ordo seclorum*, in which the breakdown of rigid humanist constructs within Area X symbolizes the shift toward a posthuman social order, understood not as an erasure—the annihilation of subjectivity—but as a radical departure from and, consequently, dissolution of the anthropocentric foundations of humanist identity.

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