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Monolithic, Invisible Walls: The Horror of Borders in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* Trilogy

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Abstract: Beneath the sleek veneer of Jeff VanderMeer's weird-fiction saga, *The Southern Reach*, lurks a potent critique of the unnatural horrors inherent in borders. Amidst the twisting, sensuous lyricism of VanderMeer's prose there exists an insistent, recurrent fear of colonization and control. Using the work of decolonial, indigenous critics like Robin Wall Kimmerer and Nick Estes as well as that of ecocritics such as Donna Haraway and Timothy Morton, I argue that the chief terror in *Annihilation, Authority, and Acceptance* is Area X itself and the way in which It centralizes colonization and control. What's more, I assert that the trilogy's anti-Edenic conclusion is not a moment of posthumanist nihilism, but rather a transhumanist vision of a decolonized, biocentric ecology rooted in communization that acknowledges what Timothy Morton deems the "symbiotic real," the intricate symbiosis of all lifeforms. I propose that *The Southern Reach* trilogy can ultimately be read as a work of speculative fiction that confronts the terror of borders and counters the hegemony of anthropocentrism with a just, biocentric alternative.

Keywords: borders, monsters, VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, kinship

Of all the cruel inventions devised to divide and segregate, borders are perhaps the most ubiquitous. Despite their relatively recent introduction to the realm of geopolitics, the biopower of borders has proven to be a useful tool of imperialism, white supremacy, and colonization in an ostensibly "postcolonial" world. What's more, the entirely fictitious borders that divide humanity from non-human animals are hegemonic manifestations of anthropocentrism. Dormant within every border—from the material to the ideal—is the implicit (and all-too-often explicit) threat of violence that manifests itself by restricting the movement of earthly critters while leaving the flow of capital uninhibited. Whether they are rendered visible through the technologies of control that have a vise-grip on geographic checkpoints or invisible through the illusory architecture of oppression expressed in state-power, borders bifurcate our biome, a phenomenon which has lead to the ongoing exploitation of the Global South at the hands of multinational corporations and capitalist states.

The ontology of borders is a recent phenomenon. As Harsha Walia (2013) demonstrates in *Undoing Border Imperialism*, borders have enjoyed a relatively short history in the political imagination. "Border imperialism encapsulates a dual critique of Western state-building within global empire," Walia writes, including "the role of Western imperialism in dispossessing communities in order to secure land and resources for state and capitalist interests, as well as the deliberately limited inclusion of migrant bodies into Western states through processes of criminalization and racialization that justify the commodification of their labor" (Walia, 2013, p. 22). Not only is border imperialism a monstrous edifice of twenty-first century state-power, but it is also the cruel process by which the gears of late-stage capitalism continue to exploit and disenfranchise those who exist outside of the imperial core.

To understand the unique anxieties afflicting a given culture's zeitgeist, one need look no further than the imaginary monsters conjured in works of popular culture. Horrors, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen proposes in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996), arise because "the monster's body is a cultural body" (Cohen, 1996, p. 4). These monsters emerge from the shadows of material, sociopolitical afflictions. By investigating the terrors, travesties, and tragedies plaguing contemporary geopolitics, we can illuminate their cultural saliency and challenge their hegemony simultane-

ously. Beneath the sleek veneer of Jeff VanderMeer's weird-fiction saga, The Southern Reach, lurks a potent critique of borders' unnatural horrors. Using the work of indigenous critics like Kimmerer (2013) and Walia (2013), I argue the chief terror in Annihilation, Authority, and Acceptance is Area X itself and the way in which it centralizes colonization and control. Nonetheless, the saga's triumphant conclusion ultimately offers readers a vision of a decolonized, biocentric ecology rooted in communization.

VanderMeer's prose, I propose, is best read in the proper context. In order to fully understand *The Southern Reach* trilogy, I'd contend that readers must consider all three of the novels in tandem—*Annihilation, Authority, and Acceptance*. I suspect it is no mistake that VanderMeer's publishers decided to ultimately release all three novels contained in a single, hefty volume simply titled, *Area X: The Southern Reach Trilogy*. *Annihilation* follows the journals of the Biologist, who plunges into a weird new frontier of unreal wilderness that comprises Area X. *Authority* picks up the thread with Control, a bumbling fail-son and former intelligence operative for the U.S. government who is tasked with "controlling" Area X and keeping it from growing in size. *Acceptance* unites the saga's cast of characters in a non-linear, time-skipping, extra-dimensional journey as they continue to plunge into the phantasmagoria of Area X in search for answers. Each of the novels contributes its own unique perspective to this analysis. While the themes of colonization, control, and communization percolate all throughout the trilogy, the chronology of the novels affords a useful lens to interrogate these three themes in conjunction with one another. Thus, we first turn to *Annihilation* and the subject of colonization.

Colonization

"That's how the madness of this world tries to colonize you," VanderMeer writes in *Annihilation*, "from the outside in, forcing you to live in its reality" (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 109). In biology, a "colony" has an entirely different connotation than the imperialist notions that one might associate with history. To biologists, a "colony" occurs when two or more individuals live in close association with—and are often connected to—one another. This ecological basis for understanding "colonization" is integral to understanding the duality of this term that VanderMeer employs throughout the text, an essential dialectic that mediates not only the characters' experiences but also the story's sociopolitical implications.

Area X, reaching across the cosmos through space and time, exerts its control over the biome of the Forgotten Coast (and, eventually, the entire planet) through the steady imposition of kaleidoscopic hyperreality, distorting the material world in order to serve its unknowable purpose. Area X magnifies the beauty and strangeness of the natural flora and fauna, exaggerating and mutating wildlife. Just as H.P. Lovecraft used his chaotic, eldritch horrors to explore the unknown, VanderMeer's evolutionary manifestations perfectly capture the way in which capitalist hegemony insinuates its tendrils across the world. Where Area X creates lavish life and color, capitalist enterprise ruthlessly exploits the biome in an endless quest for infinite profit. Yet, either way, the function is essentially the same: colonization which leads, inexorably, to control. As Frederic Jameson remarked, "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (Fisher, 2009, p. 8). Beneath its often colorful and tantalizing veneer, colonization is so total that it has dominated our very minds, locking shackles about our wrists even as it builds walls around our psyches.

When characters enter the weirdly exaggerated biome of Area X, the strange hyperreality begins to infest their psyches. At times, Area X veritably possesses the unlucky explorers who have perforated its border. Only the Biologist seems to be capable of really resisting Area X's power. However, as we discover by the end of the trilogy, this is only because of the Biologist's masochistic propensity for self-mutilation. Moreover, ecological collapse and rebirth are on full display in *The Southern Reach* trilogy and any Marxist or decolonial critique would be woefully incomplete without the application of an ecofeminist

lens. It is worth pausing to consider the characters who survive until the novel's conclusion: Grace, the former director, who is an indigenous woman; Ghost Bird, who is a clone of the Biologist created by Area X; and Control—who, up until this point, has been utterly controlled by the Southern Reach's hypnotic suggestions. It certainly is not inconsequential that the series begins from the perspective of the Biologist. She is able to recognize an ephemeral beauty in Area X. "When you see beauty inside of desolation it changes something in you," VanderMeer writes. "Desolation tries to colonize you" (2014, p. 6). Ultimately, this is precisely what happens to the Biologist. By the time that *Acceptance* draws to a close, the Biologist has transformed into a mountain of flesh and eyes, lurching wildly through the wilderness of the Forgotten Coast. Yet, when given the chance to destroy her clone, Ghost Bird, as well as Control and former director Grace, the Biologist demurs. I wager that this is because the Biologist understands the hidden truth behind the hyperreality of Area X, which is a transcendental vision of humanity's place in the biome.

Throughout *The Southern Reach* trilogy, VanderMeer's characters consistently refer to the bordered demarcations of Area X. In their anthropocentric hubris, the staff of the Southern Reach came to think "of the border as this monolithic, invisible wall" (2014, p. 157). Only the Director realized that the border was not static and fixed, but transitory, even sentient. "The border is advancing," the Psychologist/Director/Cynthia/Gloria tells the Biologist at the climax of *Annihilation*. "For now, slowly, a little bit more every year. In ways you wouldn't expect. But maybe soon it'll eat a mile or two at a time" (2014, p. 129). We can see that this is precisely how borders operate, in general: gobbling up land for resource extraction and the immiseration of the indigenous peoples and non-human animals who dwell there. This sort of imperialism is distinct from the national liberation sort, in that its object is to dominate and exploit rather than emancipate.

The apartheid wall in Palestine is perhaps the preeminent example of the function of border imperialism: imposing the will of one state—in this case, Israel—upon a dispossessed populace. Many Palestinians are forced off of their ancestral lands, only to watch as bulldozers level their homes and Israeli settlers move in and construct tenement halls. (Lubell, 2012).

Jasbir Puar has noted that the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) has been known to deliberately aim for Palestinian marchers' knees with the explicit intention to maim. Her conclusion is that the Israeli state maims Palestinian populations in order to render their resistance "perpetually debilitated, and yet alive, in order to control them" (Puar 2017, p. x). We see the same thing happen in *The Southern Reach* trilogy as Area X twists and mangles the bodies of those It colonizes. The Moaning Creature that the Biologist encounters, we soon learn, is comprised of the mutated, amalgamated bodies of previous expedition members.

The Israeli apartheid wall is heavily surveilled. The IDF uses surveillance and reconnaissance drones to note the movements of Palestinian men and women. Towers capable of monitoring the movements of every life form within a seven and half mile radius loom over the border. Throughout *The Southern Reach* trilogy, the novels' characters routinely refer to a similar phenomenon, the terrible "regard" of Area X, and the way its gaze reduces them to their constituent atoms. This is precisely how *Annihilation* draws to a close. "I felt the impression from behind me of hundreds of eyes beginning to turn in my direction, staring at me," the Biologist recounts. "I was the prey the starfish had reached up and pulled down into the tidal pool… my skull crushed to dust and reassembled, mote by mote" (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 180). With its vast surveillance technologies, its ability to maim and contort, borders in the twenty-first century truly evoke a sense of Lovecraftian cruelty and otherness. The logic of border imperialism invariably tends towards establishing (and, subsequently, enforcing) control over a given population. So now we turn to the second

horror that dominates Area X and, indeed, haunts our own biome: control.

Control

If *Annihilation* is all about the loss of control, *Authority* concerns the Southern Reach's (futile) attempt to reassert their dominance. John Rodriguez, the novel's main protagonist, literally calls himself "Control," despite the fact that he is very rarely in full possession of his own mental faculties. "He was Control," VanderMeer writes, "and he was in control" (2014, p. 194). But Control's attempts to assure himself of his sanity are just as fruitless as his project of directing the Southern Reach. For much of the novel, Control is being manipulated by the Voice through hypnotic suggestion. It isn't until later that we realize the "Voice" is Lowry, the lone survivor of the ill-fated first expedition into Area X.

Before the novel's rather apocalyptic conclusion, *Authority* finds VanderMeer investigating what Hannah Arendt (1963) deemed the "banality of evil," or what we might refer to as the obstinate obfuscation of bourgeois bureaucracy. "Institutions," VanderMeer writes, "were the concrete embodiments of not just ideas or opinions but also of attitudes and emotions" (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 228). The impulse behind the Southern Reach was to not only understand Area X, but also to harness and redirect It. Lowry, the man behind the Voice, became obsessed with manipulating others in the way that Area X had manipulated the first expedition, "to punish nature for having punished him" (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 441). Unfortunately, the institution bit off more than it could chew. As *Authority* progresses, the sanity of the Southern Reach's workers slowly erodes until nothing is left but madness and misery.

Control is consistently blindsided by the absurdity of the border. While on a jog, for instance, Control can't help but be mesmerized by the weirdness of the border, that it could exist in the same world as "the town he was running through, the music he was listening to" (2014, p. 182). Here, VanderMeer invites readers to consider the weirdness of borders more generally. "The border was invisible," VanderMeer goes on. "It did not allow half measures: Once you touched it, it pulled you in (or across)" (2014, p. 182). 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. Both the "us" and the "them" are polarized, ostracized from each other and alienated from the very conditions that engender their immiseration. The logic of colonization is to conquer all and this is exactly how *Authority* concludes.

"The Southern Reach hadn't been a redoubt," Control realizes with horror, "but some kind of slow incubator…Placing trust in a word like border had been a mistake, a trap. A slow unraveling of terms unrecognized until too late" (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 329). Given time, the border creeps until it becomes ubiquitous. Nation-states in the twenty-first century represent a similar network of control, with the privileging of certain nations over others entirely dependent upon the hegemony of the ruling class. Global trade deals such as the North American Free Trade Agreement have led to the immiseration of the Global South not just because of colonization, but because of capitalists' ability to restrict the flow of labor while capital itself remains unimpeded.

The end result of colonization is depicted as a nightmarish horror, captured in Whitby's depraved mural, painted on the walls of the Southern Reach. "A vast phantasmagoria of grotesque monsters with human faces," VanderMeer writes, "The pixelated faces were blown-up security headshots of South Reach staff. One image dominated, extending up the wall with the head peering down…There was a border, too: a ring of red fire that transformed at the ends into a two-headed monster, and Area X in its belly" (VanderMeer 2014, p. 312). All of the Southern Reach is caught within the "constellation" of this vicious, macabre painting, the two-headed monster asphyxiating them all in a catastrophic circle (not unlike a snake encircling its prey.) As Area X's colonization becomes

complete, and it assumes control over not just the Forgotten Coast but the entire biome. Gloria reveals that the Biologist's question, "What does the border look like?" is infantile. "A child's question," VanderMeer writes. "A question whose answer means nothing. There is nothing but border. There is no border" (VanderMeer 2014, p. 362). But all is not lost.

Communization

Acceptance, simultaneously the most horrific and hopeful of the three novels, immediately disrupts the relative simplicity of the preceding two books. Unlike *Annihilation* and *Authority*, which are told almost entirely from the limited perspective of a single character, *Authority* adopts the voices and perspectives of four different characters: the Director/Cynthia/Gloria/Psychologist, Saul Evans, John "Control" Rodriguez, and Ghost Bird. Just as the fractured narrative represents the eroding sanity of the novel's characters, this type of story-telling reinforces another crucial theme: *Acceptance* is about the transhuman act of decolonization and the triumph of relationality, reciprocity, and the symbiotic real. What's more, VanderMeer's choice to write the Director's chapters in second-person indicts the reader, forcing us to question our own culpability in anthropocentric ways of thinking while simultaneously inviting us to envision biocentric alternatives.

In *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-human People* (2017), Timothy Morton asserts that the only strategy capable of defeating the fascist impulse to exclude and demonize the Other is by reckoning with the symbiotic real—that is, the material reality of life's multifold interconnections (p. 11). Morton demonstrates that humanity is inextricably linked in symbiosis with the rest of the planet. Only by including every living being and all of nature within this new framework can we truly abolish the arbitrary borders that demarcate our cosmos. Fascism is rooted in creating an "explosive holistic," in which the Other is necessarily pushed to the margins, dehumanized, and ultimately annihilated (Morton, 2017, p. 33). The bug of Marxism, Morton contends, is that it has traditionally excluded the non-human. But this bug can be deprogrammed through anarchistic approaches that shatter the "lingering theisms" dormant in communist philosophy (Morton, 2017, p. 33). Instead of venerating the human, Morton argues, human beings must transcend the narrow limitations of anthropocentrism and grapple with the symbiotic real.

Eyes unclouded by the Southern Reach, Control realizes that "the yearnings in him went 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" (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 341). Slowly but surely, Control begins to realize the danger of human hubris thanks, in no small part, to Ghost Bird. "A whale is as intelligent as we are," Ghost Bird explains to Control, "just in a way we can't quite measure or understand. Because we're these incredibly blunt instruments" (Vandermeer, 2014, p. 414). The madness of the world has colonized Control and led him to believe that humanity is somehow superior to the rest of the biome. In order to survive within Area X, Control must debug his brain, which has been colonized by anthropocentric vanity.

Anthropocentrism is the ideology that causes Area X to germinate and flourish. In the flashbacks to Saul Evans' time as lighthouse keeper, we see that the lighthouse was infiltrated by the Science & Séance Brigade, an implicitly covert operation by the state. Saul's unassuming, humble life attending the lighthouse and spending time with his partner is interrupted by the machinations of the US government. Control's mother reappears in *Acceptance*, "long red scarf" and all, to oversee the investigation (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 497). Control's mother, a figure who has haunted the entire saga, is in many ways a stand-in for the state itself—the consolidation of power and centralized authority that haunts everything Control tries to do during his tenure as director. Control's mother thinks that she is cunning enough to control Area X. For her vanity, the Southern Reach staff are reduced to disturbing abominations—amalgamations,

half-transformed, lumbering piles of flesh that lurch zanily through the hyper-real wilderness of Area X.

Only Ghost Bird seems to truly understand the role of the human animal as an integral (but not central) part of the biosphere, as she is no longer fully human but something else. I contend that this otherness stems from her transhumanity, allowing Ghost Bird to see with eyes unclouded by anthropocentrism. Humans have to reach for "banal answers because of a lack of imagination, because human beings [can't] even put themselves in the mind of a cormorant or an owl or a whale or a bumblebee" (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 490). What's more, Ghost Bird, unlike her human companions, Grace and Control, accepts the existential meaningless of life. "You could know the what of something forever and never discover the why," VanderMeer writes (491). But instead of being paralyzed by this material reality—as Grace was, barricaded at the top of the Lighthouse—Ghost Bird understands that she does not need a "mission" in order to move forward.

What she needs is kinship. As Control suffers from a panic attack after reading the Biologist's last will and testament, Ghost Bird:

> placed her arms around Control and held him…He thrashed in Ghost Bird's arms, resisting, her feeling the preternatural warmth of him, and then eventually he subsided, stopped fighting, held her loosely, then held her tightly while she said not a word because to say anything—anything at all—would be to humiliate him, and she cared more about him than that. And it cost her nothing."
>
> (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 492)

I linger on this passage because it contains the answer that ought to animate any just response to the horrors of colonization and control: community. In a world devoid of purpose, it is our relationships that still possess the ability to give us joy in spite of our shared suffering. Ghost Bird realizes that love costs nothing. Or, stated another way: love cannot be commodified.

In her analysis of gift economies in *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, Robin Wall Kimmerer shows how love resists commodification by exploring gift economies. Gifts are transitory, passing from one set of hands to another. "That is the fundamental nature of gifts," Kimmerer writes, "they move, and their value increases with their passage" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 30). Gifts can take many forms. Kimmerer writes about strawberries and socks as examples. But a gift can also be the intimacy of touch, a gesture of solidarity—which is precisely the gift that Ghost Bird gives to Control.

Kinship allows us to become active participants in the ongoing project of universal liberation. "We can celebrate our kinship with the world," Kimmerer explains. "We can choose. If all the world is a commodity, how poor we grow. When all the world is a gift in motion, how wealthy we become" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 33). Rather than thinking of decolonization as merely reparations and land return, the indigenous historian Nick Estes contends that decolonization also entails a reconstruction of "the kinship relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous [peoples] and the lands we both inhabit. There is a capaciousness to Indigenous kinship that goes beyond the human and that fundamentally differs from the heteronuclear family or biological family" (Estes 2019, p. 256). In *Acceptance*'s anti-Edenic conclusion, Grace and Ghost Bird do not progress. Instead, they move laterally, shattering the heteronormativity of the rebirthing narrative with a queer alternative. Humanity is forever changed by the end of VanderMeer's work. Unlike many post-apocalyptic narratives, there are no Adam and Eve to repopulate the planet. Humankind has been forever altered and must reckon once and for all with its place in the cosmos.

A borderless world looks like a "commune of communes," of the sort currently modeled by the confederation of cantons in North East Syria, colloquially known as Rojava. To heal the scars we've cut into maps, the Earth, and to our own minds, we must begin to cultivate our relationality with the Earth, non-human

animals, and one another. This is why the word "commune" proves so useful. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a commune is a noun with two distinct meanings: "a group of people living together and sharing possessions and responsibilities" and "a state of being 'in intimate communication' with other lifeforms. But commune is also a verb, "an interchange of ideas or sentiments." In order to build communes, we must first commune with one another, with our non-human relatives, and with the Earth itself. To do so is to celebrate the heterogeneity of life, complex and diverse and multicultural. This is not just a theory of relationality, but a material reality capable of challenging anthropogenic climate change. If the human species is to survive on this planet, we must confront colonization and control and counter the death-drive of capitalism with communization by recognizing our kinship with all non-human beings.

In the Biologist's final notebook, she explains the kinship that evolves between her and an owl that haunts an island caught in Area X. One way that we can interpret the owl in the text is as an analogue for the Biologist's dead husband. But doing so, I would suggest, is ultimately a shallow reading of VanderMeer's project. Morton writes:

> An owl is an owl and the reason to care for her is not that she's a member of a keystone species; we don't need her to be a brick in a solid wall of world, we need to take care of her, play with her. This gives us a strong reason to care for one another, no matter who we are, and for other lifeforms. It gives us a leftist way of saying that we have things in common. We are humankind.
>
> (Morton 2017, p. 40).

The implosive whole of the symbiotic real is a totalizing system, a singularity drawing everyone and everything into its universality. Why should it matter if the owl is, indeed, the Biologist's transformed husband? If we accept the horizontality of the symbiotic real, then the owl is already the Biologist's kin.

"Maybe," Haraway suggest, "but only maybe, and only with intense commitment and collaborative work and play with other terrans, flourishing, rich, multispecies assemblages that include people will be possible" (Haraway 2016, p. 101). The critters that populate this planet are our kin. Only by unmaking the walls around our heads and hearts can we move past anthropocentrism. Moreover, this unmaking of borders cannot only be an ideal, but it must be a material struggle, as well. As the anarchist thinker Murray Bookchin observed, "Nearly all of our present ecological problems originate in deep-seated social problems. It follows, from this view, that these ecological problems cannot be understood, let alone solved, without a careful understanding of our existing society and the irrationalities that dominate it" (Bookchin 2006, p. 19). These irrationalities—these dark contradictions at the heart of artificial hierarchies and hegemonic social constructs—must be dismantled altogether in order to create a horizontal superstructure in harmony with the symbiotic real.

In *Annihilation,* the Biologist explains that over the course of time, her husband had "'grown suspicious of the entire idea of borders,' although he could not yet synthesize 'the intensity of this feeling' into a coherent theory" (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 166). Fortunately, VanderMeer provides a theory for us by the series' end. For this is how *Acceptance* concludes: with Grace, Ghost Bird, and Gloria accepting their place in the biome—not as the centerpiece, but as one crucial part of a larger whole. As Ghost Bird and Grace, the queer, anti-Edenic couple, march hand-in-hand into another ordinary summer day, they throw "pebbles to find the invisible outline of a border that might not exist anymore. They walked for a long time, throwing pebbles at the air" (VanderMeer, 2014, p. 587). We are left to ruminate upon the somber reminder that borders are not only invisible, they are at once intangible and permeable.

As befits a trilogy about decolonization, Gloria—the series' sole indigenous character—has the last word. Written from the second person, VanderMeer concludes, "You are nowhere…you are everywhere" (2014, p. 592). For Gloria, acceptance gradually moves past denial to ultimately become defiance. To

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accept a transhumanist place in our biome is to defy the cancer of white settler colonialism, to struggle to build a new world in the shell of the old. Like Gloria, may we all learn to live dangerously on this rock (VanderMeer, 2014).

Monolithic, Invisible Walls, continued

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