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Reading Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* in the Anthropocene

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In his ominously titled *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, Roy Scranton (2015) suggests that if humankind plans to endure our climate crisis in any sort of recognizable form, then "We're going to need new myths and new stories, a new conceptual understanding of reality" (p. 19). Indeed, much of the recent work involving humanities and climate change concerns itself with the insufficiency of previous narrative forms to appropriately capture the enormity of climate change. Amitav Ghosh (2016), in particular, laments that "climate change casts a much smaller shadow within the landscape of literary fiction than it does even in the public area" (p. 7). And while it's certainly true that literary fiction has been slow to take up the challenge of addressing climate change, authors within fields of "genre writing" have led the charge on this topic for quite some time. Science fiction author Jeff VanderMeer possesses an oeuvre verdant with deeply passionate—and frightening—ideas about the symbiosis between humankind and nature. His 2014 novel *Annihilation*, specifically, proves an invaluable tool for conceptualizing some of the most abstract, yet pressing, concepts about humankind's entanglement with climate.

VanderMeer's novel revolves around a team of scientists venturing into a mysteriously fecund area on the American Gulf Coast referred to as Area X. Ostensibly sent to document the way that local flora and fauna adapt to a clandestine "event," the crew quickly find themselves accosted by dolphins with eerily human eyes, wild boars seemingly capable of human calculation, vegetation mimicking human forms, and a sentient, prosaic plant that scrawls Jeremiad across the walls of an abandoned tunnel. These encounters, and countless others like them, force the explorers, and by extension readers, to fundamentally reorganize and conceptualize their ontological understanding of the environment.

We exist now in an epoch known as the Anthropocene. According to Timothy Morton (2018), "The Anthropocene is the name given to a geological period in which human-made stuff has created a layer in Earth's crust: all kinds of plastics, concretes and nucleotides, for example, have formed a discrete and obvious stratum" (p. 43). This, as Clark (2019) puts it, "weirdly science fiction scenario" (p. 17), challenges the notion of clear demarcations between humankind and nature, as one's detritus has become an integral component of the other's being. Much in line with this radical hybridity, VanderMeer posits circumstances that cleanly dispatch with easy conceptualizations of binaries.

The problem of perceived binaries has been at stake in environmental studies since at least Leo Marx's landmark work, *The Machine in the Garden* (1964), in which he explored how pastoralized myths of American spaces ran headlong into industrialized progress. Uneasy distinctions between man/nature, nature/industry, and human/inhuman animate much early environmental theory, but such distinctions have recently come under fire. As Grusin (2015) points out in his introduction to *The Nonhuman Turn*, recent environmental criticism "challenges some of the key assumptions of social constructivism, particularly insofar as it insists that the agency, meaning, and value of nature all derive from cultural, social, or ideological inscription or construction" (p. xi). In line with this mode of thinking, much of the eeriness and power of VanderMeer's novel emerges from its commitment to presenting nonhuman agents as autonomous beings capable of thought and action (though not always on levels that are comprehensible to its human characters). Upon discovering a journal left behind by her husband from a previous expedition into Area X, the protagonist, known only as the Biologist, learns that he had "grown suspicious of the entire idea of borders" toward the end of his experience within Area X (p. 166). At stake within this comment is the perceived safety embodied within concrete delineations. A clear distinction between human and animal, plant and conscious lifeform, would prove comforting, but

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VanderMeer denies his characters, and by extension readers, such easy binaries.

Ruminating on the overwhelming implications of these hybridities, the Biologist laments, "We had not been trained to encounter what appeared to be the uncanny" (p. 69). The concept of the uncanny, of things coexisting that conventional logical deems should not, undergirds much of the novel. Late in the text, the Biologist examines cells from Area X plantlife to learn that they are "composed of modified human cells" (160). As the Anthropocene has disrupted understandings about the delimitation between nature and refuse, so does VanderMeer destroy the line separating plant and human. Readers, then, must entertain the possibility of an ecology that refuses to play by the rules humans that have conceptualized for it, and, in turn, to confront the reality that such ideas are at the heart of Anthropocene thinking.

Near the end of *Annihilation*, the Biologist wonders, "What occurs after revelation and paralysis?" (179). The question refers to her specific plight, but applies equally well to current questions about (in) action regarding climate change. How do we and should we act following the irrefutable evidence of humankind's impact on the planet, our inextricable concatenate connection with all things, and the frightening prospect that our best efforts cannot lead us toward any sort of "sustainable" future? Bill McKibben (2011) argues that "The scientists have done their job—they've issued every possible warning, flashed every red light. Now it's time for the rest of us—for the economists, the psychologists, the theologians, and the artists, whose role is to help us understand what things *feel* like" (p. 3)—to do our parts. As if responding to McKibben's call, VanderMeer cogently and unnervingly prods readers to *feel* the discombobulation that comes with life in the Anthropocene, to *feel* the uneasiness engendered by a nature that refuses to adhere to humankind's expectations, and to *feel* the terror concomitant with the understanding that our best efforts will not save us, not in any recognizable way. As such, *Annihilation* proves not only an entertaining thriller into the depths of human understanding, but also a prescient warning of the conflicts of knowledge that we should be prepared to encounter.

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