Ecology without Civilization
Traumatic Restoration in VanderMeer’s Southern Reach Trilogy

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Abstract While Jeff VanderMeer’s Southern Reach Trilogy has been read through the uncan y human traumas and tropes of “contamination” in its first novel, Annihilation, the trilogy’s radical ecological thought emerges more clearly through cosmic and transformative trauma in the final novel, Acceptance. Rather than some contaminated space, Area X is restoring Earth’s ecosystems to a “pristine” state, but in a process of guided succession that traumatizes human life as lived under ecologically destructive neoliberal economies of extraction. Reading the twinned falls of Saul and Control, this article shows how Acceptance reimagines uncanny trauma for a new form that is painful but also familiar, human but also posthuman, and utterly necessary for planetary survival.

Keywords Jeff VanderMeer, Southern Reach Trilogy, Anthropocene, trauma, the uncanny

There’s nothing more to say, everything has to be destroyed.
—The Invisible Committee, The Coming Insurrection

The only solution to the environment is neglect, which requires our collapse.
—The biologist, excised sentence from her thesis, Acceptance

Ecotrauma’s Reach
When, because of criminal mismanagement and the market-driven efficiencies of neoliberal corner cutting, British Petroleum’s (BP) Macondo Prospect well blew in April 2010, it spewed oil and gas into the surrounding Gulf of Mexico, with a final spill in excess of 200 million gallons that affected sixteen thousand miles of coastline.1 The disaster ended up killing an estimated 1 million seabirds, 8.3 billion oysters, and 160,000 juvenile sea turtles; eleven human workers on the Deepwater Horizon rig died in the explosion.2 The National Commission report correctly concluded that this acute moment of disaster compounded “chronic [regional environmental}
crises that proceed insidiously,” such as the ongoing human destruction of Florida’s wetlands. As he reflected on “what irritant or issue or problem had lodged in my subconscious to force Area X out,” Jeff VanderMeer, editor extraordinaire of the New Weird, practitioner of the aesthetics of “weird biology,” and himself a pioneer of climate fiction (cli-fi), finally recognized that what “had created Area X” was precisely this disaster, the most profound environmental trauma in the already abominable history of the petrochemical industry.

In VanderMeer’s mind, the rushing, billowing oil clouds assumed the mental structure of a haunting ecotrauma, a sudden, violent physical breach followed by inescapable psychic repetition. “For many of us in the area,” he writes, “it was gushing in our minds, and we could not get away from it. It was haunting us day and night, always there—a phantom sound, a phantom thought.” The discrete catastrophe of the BP oil disaster also evokes via synecdoche the planetary condition of ongoing environmental devastation, the “irritant” always in the mind that knows that somewhere out of sight chemicals dump into waterways, species vanish, ice caps melt, oceans rise, their salinity increases. Near the end of *Acceptance* (2014), the final novel of the Southern Reach Trilogy, this spectral persistence of ecotrauma literally haunts the lighthouse keeper Saul in something of a ghostly apparition. After recovering from the fall and his confrontation with Henry at the lighthouse, Saul tries to recover at the shoreline tidal pools, whose tranquility had once induced in him a “comforting oblivion.” Instead, as he looks out to sea, “there came the stench of oil and gasoline and chemicals, the sea coming almost up to his feet now. He could see that the beach was strewn with plastic and garbage and tarred bits of metal, barrels and culverts clotted with seaweed and barnacles. The remains of ships rising, too. Detritus that had never touched this coast but was here now” (*Acceptance*, 322–23). Even when the Macondo well was finally “capped” eighty-seven days later, VanderMeer found that, like a trauma, “it was still somewhere in the back of my mind, and eventually that dark swirl coalesced into a dark tunnel with words on the wall, and an invisible border and Area X.”

It might be easy enough, because of VanderMeer’s description of images of darkness and swirling, to read Area X as itself figuring the trauma of the spill, especially if one reads *Annihilation* (2014), the text that has received the most critical attention, in isolation from the rest of the trilogy. Kate Marshall, for instance, commits an innocent—if indicative—confusion when she refers to the trilogy as “VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* series.” Consciously or unconsciously interpreting the novels through *Annihilation* can reduce the dialogic complexity of the trilogy’s many narrators and narrative voices to the singularity of the biologist’s account, a narrative voice whose own unity is undone by her division into the discrete but related parts of the narrative we read in *Annihilation*, her double in Ghost Bird, and her changed new form in the many-eyed creature of *Acceptance*. To read the series through *Annihilation* is to grasp only one incomplete part of the trilogy’s radical ecological possibilities, how it seeks to upend anthropocentrically shaped expectations about the potential of the uncanny and trauma. If read in isolation, the humanly mediated, anthropocentric uncanny trauma of the first novel annihilates, as it were, the radical reworkings and cosmic implications of these affective responses and states in the remainder of the trilogy. When read as a whole, the trilogy instead explores how
uncanny trauma, as a human and also posthuman response to existence, can empower a radical ecological politics for our planet, even in the face of seemingly hopeless environmental destruction.

I argue that *Acceptance*, the less-studied final novel of the trilogy, affords a better understanding of its ultimate, radical ecological thought, which invites a revolutionary environmental consciousness by reconceiving trauma within and beyond the human as well as beyond the enduring idea of trauma as an unproductive and destructive rupture. In the first part of this article I explore how the humans of *Annihilation* cannot see beyond trauma as an individual anthropocentric event or fully understand the meaning of their trauma within Area X’s larger purpose of ecosystem restoration, a purpose revealed more fully in *Acceptance*. In the second part I show how the final novel revises this misunderstanding and stages that painful but necessary human traumatic transformation by aligning two falls (the act of falling a frequent figure associated with trauma): Saul’s fall from the lighthouse and Control’s self-sacrificing fall into Area X. Rather than negative trauma without regeneration, these falls are figured as an uncanny trauma, both unfamiliar and familiar, where the element of familiarity ultimately points toward restoration and transformation. This familiarity is not a return or repetition of the once-known in an unfamiliar way, as in the Freudian uncanny. It is instead an uncanny where something new, a totally new way of being, feels somehow right and familiar. This “uncanny” works by retaining an element of human subjectivity in the desire for a feeling of home even as the very conceptions of home and the human are radically transformed by trauma. The shape of the affective response, as it were, is the same, while the content is radically transformed.

Despite their pain, these human traumas of the trilogy can be newly understood as optimistically ordered to ecological restoration and personal change when they are read along with calls from Derrick Jensen and the Invisible Committee for the revolutionary dismantling of the “omnicidal culture” of “Western Civilization” (Jensen) and “an entire anthropology,” “the very idea of man” (Invisible Committee). While VanderMeer’s trilogy has been productively read through its affinities with the ecological thought of Timothy Morton and his conception of “hyperobjects,” as well as through debates about the genre features and possibilities of the New Weird, less attention has been paid to the sources of thought that VanderMeer himself lists in the acknowledgments at the end of the trilogy, which include Jensen and *The Coming Insurrection* by the Invisible Committee (*Acceptance*, 340)—VanderMeer elsewhere calls *The Coming Insurrection* “a huge influence” on the trilogy. These two sources of thought align in their critique of the way of being human enforced by “Western Civilization,” one committed to a narrow anthropocentrism, instrumental scientific reason, technological progress, militaristic violence, and petrochemically driven global economies of extraction, consumption, and disposability. As with Jensen's and the Invisible Committee's calls to overthrow that way of being human along with the institutions that promote and protect it, Area X impacts the “idea of man” in “Western Civilization” traumatically, but it also ultimately points to that trauma as part of a restorative process designed to achieve ecological flourishing, which a new humanity can join by willingly embracing such painful transformation.
Rather than H. P. Lovecraft’s cosmic indifference, *Acceptance* finally stages a moment of mutual recognition of shared trauma between the human and Area X to gesture toward future possibilities even in the face of total traumatic loss. In so doing, the trilogy expands our understanding of trauma, radically deanthropocentrizing it for a universal, even cosmic, conception of trauma as a common reality of existence, one that helps continue to explore trauma beyond its early Freudian formations as a human psychic repetition of a shock or rupture that negatively destroys selfhood and erodes and resists representation through language. By the end of the Southern Reach Trilogy, individual human “trauma” emerges as the subjective form of an encounter with the cosmic reality of trauma, which can be experienced by beings other than the human. Such a process is not a projection of human categories onto the cosmos. It is instead the reverse: the recognition that our traumas—and the potential for restoration—are part of the more universal experience of material beings and their susceptibility to trauma. This recognition of trauma’s potential universality further contributes to what Tony M. Vinci calls the “radical posthuman ethics of expansive vulnerability,” which he reads in Philip K. Dick’s exploration of the human and nonhuman in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968).

While we mediate our subjective human reaction to such experiences through the term trauma, VanderMeer explores how this term is but our signifier for a broader cosmic condition, one that has also afflicted Area X in the loss of its own biosphere and the loss of its reason for existence. This shared experience of trauma and the possibility that such trauma can become meaningful when we respond to it by seeking restoration, even a painful restoration at the cost of ourselves or our “way of life,” will serve as the grounds for recognition across the vast difference between Area X and the human. In *Ghost Bird* and Control/John, Area X will recognize that humanity can change, that it can embrace traumatic restoration and sacrifice its past forms of selfish existence to open up new ways of being human that are no longer so ecologically damaging. Trauma, then, is both human but also posthuman, individual but also cosmic, traumatic but also generative of restoration through painful transformation.

Against Amitav Ghosh’s argument that “the Anthropocene resists science fiction,” VanderMeer’s uncanny cosmic trauma also shows why the generic mixture of realism and the weird in cli-fi is in fact best suited not only to make visible climate change and its effects but, in the neglected and more important follow-up to that predominating aesthetic issue, also to offer political possibilities for action in the present. As Benjamin J. Robertson argues, the weird “takes for granted . . . the possibility of other norms” beyond the assumptions of human “logics and patterns of behavior,” in nonanthropocentric, politically generative “histories, epistemologies, metaphysics, ontologies, ethics, phenomenologies, aesthetics, or materialities.” Robertson compellingly finds in VanderMeer’s fictions themselves, and in their place in the weird, a way to “see possibilities beyond the norms we know,” where the weird can “make clear that something else might be possible” (N, 3). Through these more capacious possibilities of the weird to manipulate time and space, VanderMeer’s novels compellingly scale the temporal and spatial scope of the Anthropocene to the level of fiction while they equally resonate at the level of
individual life through the interiority afforded by the psychological techniques of the realist novel. The weird expands concepts such as trauma, thought, and meaning beyond their realist and anthropocentric frame, even as the narrative intimacy of the novel’s form retains the capacity to mourn the individual loss of human life that the trilogy stages as part of a process of greater ecological restoration. Such a representational balance of necessary, painful change alongside the individual mourning that accompanies it places trauma at the heart of ecological transformation but reorients it from individual human unmaking to planetary and even cosmic remaking.

**Traumatizing Anthropocentrism: Toward a “Truthful Seeing”**

The first novel in the trilogy, *Annihilation*, seems to present a biologically transformed world surrounded by a “border” that demarcates a space often deeply traumatizing for the human members of the Southern Reach’s expeditions, who treat the area as dangerous and are “to attempt no outside contact, for fear of some irreparable contamination.” The biologist relates that when the area first appeared, the official government story “emphasized a localized environmental catastrophe stemming from experimental military research” (94). Cancers, suicides, murders, the “moaning” creature (3), the odd boar’s “cry of anguish” (17), the “painfully human” dolphin (97); each of these encounters with Area X is figured through tropes of the polluted, the uncanny and weird, as well as the psychologically and physically traumatized human mind and body. Such descriptions intimate that these animals somehow are or were human—Alex Garland’s film adaptation of *Annihilation* (2018) quite memorably consolidates them in the screaming skull bear.

Area X’s human traumas take the shape both of the traditional Freudian model of trauma, a sudden violent shock or event that, following repression, symptomatically manifests in repetition and resists linguistic representation, as well as in more gradual forms, such as the slow death and slow violence developed out of earlier models of trauma by Lauren Berlant and Rob Nixon, who seek to explore the traumatic effects of destructive social structures such as neoliberalism and the slow toxicity of pollution. Area X itself can even seem to function as the traumatically instantiating event, described by the biologist as “the ill-defined Event” (*Annihilation*, 94). Its immediate violence against humans manifests as physical trauma in, for instance, the destroyed, burned body of the anthropologist (60–61), her jaw “wrenched . . . open in a single act of brutality” with “a torrent of green ash that sat on her chest in a mound” (61). In a similar instance, the psychologist’s dead body is later revealed to have “been colonized by a fibrous green-gold fuzziness,” a “disastrous” result of contact with the Crawler (133). The biologist thinks that the psychologist’s mind was likely “unhinged” by that encounter (133). As the expedition continues, the trauma of the anthropologist’s death extends out psychologically in waves, with the biologist later thinking, “The horror of what had happened to her was still hitting me” (69).

Returning members from past expeditions exhibit signs of psychic and physical trauma, specifically manifesting as the dissociative subtype of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is characterized by “derealization and depersonaliza-
tion,” loss of awareness and time, and “psychogenic amnesia” (amnesia without a neurological pathology). When the biologist’s husband returns, she finds “an odd calm about him, punctured only by moments of remote panic when, in asking him what had happened, he recognized that his amnesia was unnatural” (Annihilation, 56). He cannot remember their collapsing marriage; seems emptied of the “passionate,” “outgoing,” and “impetuous” person she had known (57); and is instead uncharacteristically “mournful or melancholy” (79). As for his physical trauma, it is an “inoperable, systemic cancer,” which he reacts to with “a slightly puzzled expression” (57). The “sheer directionless anonymity of his distress” seems to traumatize her in turn (81). This distress aligns with classic trauma theory’s repetition of the initial shock through the “repetitious sadness” of the lines her husband keeps repeating and their sense of dissociation, “I am not me but just something that has been walking for a very long time” (82).

But in what could be called “anthropocentric misreading,” these uncanny human traumas in Annihilation detract from the frequent descriptions of the wilderness of Area X, which is, in a word repeated throughout the novel to describe its ecosystems, “pristine.” “I understood why no one lived in Area X now, that it was pristine because of that reason” (12), the biologist states, using pristine in the sense of “unspoil by human interference.” The first expedition “reported nothing unusual in Area X, just pristine, empty wilderness” (55). The term recurs when the biologist relates the first expedition’s findings about Area X: it was “a pristine wilderness devoid of any human life” (95). The biologist also describes the “richness of Area X’s biosphere” (30) in terms that echo the “richness of that place,” her description of the “microworld” of the pool reclaimed by nature at her parents’ home (46, 45). Rather than a juxtaposition of pristine world and traumatized human, one that would invite the question of why the human experiences the naturally pristine as uncanny and traumatic, critics have largely interpreted this restored natural wilderness through its effects on or perception through human categories, where what is right (a pristine natural world) can appear wrong. In short, they have, following the Southern Reach’s propaganda and the biologist’s early misreading through human categories in Annihilation, misread Area X as itself wrong or contaminated, when it is precisely the opposite.

Joshua Rothman’s “Weird Thoreau” review of the trilogy in the New Yorker—an instance of relying heavily on the first novel to understand the whole series—observes these lush, verdant descriptions of a restored nature but asserts that “over the course of many expeditions, it becomes clear that Area X is, in a subtle way, wrong.” Finola Anne Prendergast writes that in Annihilation “the landscape’s ineffability forces [the biologist] into an epistemological crisis” and that it is an “unreal landscape.” She asserts that “the biologist notices the complexity of the ecosystems present in Area X, in contrast to the overdeveloped homogeneity of human civilization” and that VanderMeer’s romantic prose “evokes the density of biodiversity in the landscape,” but such complexity and dense biodiversity were at one time normal for our ecosystems, as are VanderMeer’s descriptions of much of Area X. Bethany Doane states that Area X’s “biology adheres to no known natural laws and cannot be properly measured or documented,” that it “infests” expedition members
and “other biological forms.” Of Area X Alison Sperling writes, “The ecosystem, and, in turn, all forms of life and nonlife, are mutations that reflect the damaged world of the Anthropocene.”

But Area X is neither damaged nor contaminated; VanderMeer has instead stated that “everything not uncanny in Annihilation... is lived-in experience and detail from my life in North Florida” (Hageman, 53). His descriptions inspired by St. Mark’s Wildlife Refuge, specifically, in the terms of its website’s “Area X” page, “the Refuge’s 12-mile Deep Creek trail re-imagined to locate the lighthouse at its end.” (You can even buy a cool T-shirt from their website that says “Area X, St. Mark’s National Wildlife Refuge, Florida.”) In the acknowledgments to the series, VanderMeer lists St. Mark’s along with other regions that inspired the natural descriptions in the trilogy: “Apalachicola, rural Florida and Georgia, Botanical Beach Provincial Park and the Pacific Rim National Park Reserve on Vancouver Island, the coast of Northern California, and the Fiji Islands,” where he saw the starfish that features in Annihilation (Acceptance, 340). St. Mark’s website even uses the biologist’s language of the “pristine” in its summary of the trilogy: “The novels explore the mystery of ‘Area X,’ a pristine wilderness in which something strange has happened, something inexplicable and transformative.” Rather than some sort of damaged or unreal terrain, Area X is largely natural, though what appears to be a process of guided ecological succession (likely the “transformative” of the website blurb) is occurring. Succession describes a temporal rather than spatial transitional ecosystem that moves from destruction to rapid restoration and then eventual stability. Area X is inducing, manipulating, guiding, and accelerating something akin to that process. After looking at samples under her microscope, the biologist concludes that although Area X’s wilderness feels “natural,” it is “transitional in a deeply unnatural way” (Annihilation, 160). The biologist is not describing contamination; Area X is instead undergoing a natural process (transition) in an unnatural way, as in an accelerated and more complex way, one that appears to be splicing human and nonhuman DNA in an attempt to create stability (160). The origins of Area X in a plant, the first stage of organic life to return after the initial trauma that begins succession, suggest in Acceptance that this is indeed the case.

As he continues to explain how the BP oil disaster motivated Area X, VanderMeer confirms this reading of Area X as a restorative process returning nature to a pristine state without anthropogenic destruction. He imagines the enigmatic Area X not as the oil spill itself or as an ontologically and biologically contaminated ecology but as a sort of answer to the ecological trauma of the spill, one whose strangeness serves natural ends, “a strange place in which nature was always becoming more what it had always been without human interference: less contaminated, less compromised. Safe. Where the oil was being taken out.” In a word, where nature was becoming “pristine.” This process of restoring the land would so radically upend the logic of anthropogenic climate destruction that it would seem like pollution to Western eyes, which is exactly how the Southern Reach reacts to it. By the end of Annihilation VanderMeer even has the biologist describe her suspicions about Area X in terms that invert his own mental ecotrauma at the thought of the BP oil disaster. While VanderMeer asked himself “what irritant or issue or problem had lodged in
my subconscious to force Area X out,” the biologist finds that “the terrible thing, the thought I cannot dislodge after all I have seen, is that I can no longer say with conviction that this is a bad thing. Not when looking at the pristine nature of Area X and then the world beyond, which we have altered so much” (Annihilation, 192; my emphases). The pristine restoration of nature strikes her as a kind of trauma to the human, “the terrible thing,” but one that she honestly confronts. This looking is a “truthful seeing” (90), where VanderMeer ethically challenges us to confront the “terrible thing,” the undeniable reality that the subtraction of a way of being human from our world’s ecosystems would save them and that such subtraction would likely be painful, traumatic, and transformative for us. But rather than the annihilation of the human suggested by the title of the first novel, and its suicide-inducing hypnotic command, the final novel, Acceptance, optimistically suggests a dual acceptance between Area X and the human, one based on the recognition of trauma’s universal, cosmic condition and the possibilities that humans might embrace the need for painful transformation through acts of self-sacrifice and change.

Remaking Trauma: The Fall of Man

Acceptance reframes the human traumas of Annihilation and Authority, expanding them beyond their anthropocentric frameworks to resituate trauma as not only a human but also a cosmic condition that, though individually tragic, can be part of a larger-scale process of planetary restoration. Two falls separated across time, those of Saul and Control, suggest such acceptance of the painful trauma of ecological restoration, figuring it as a revision of the Christian Fall of man. As Eleanor Kaufman observes, falling in twentieth-century trauma discourse impacts in both “its physical and its metaphysical senses.” She finds that “there is both a literal fear of falling from a height and a spiritual angst about falling, generally through no agency of one’s own, from one station in life to another,” or, in the case of Acceptance, from one form of life into another. Instead of the theologically imagined destruction, error, or decline of a Christian “fall from grace,” these two falls are figured in terms that are simultaneously traumatic and restorative or transformative to gesture toward an uncanny traumatic restoration, one that, by changing the human, restores both the human and our home in natural environments. Rather than offer an inhuman or nonhuman other that rejects the human tout court, the novel directly and allegorically traumatizes the ratioscientific, violent, acquisitive, consumptive-based model of the human constructed by “Western Civilization.” Acceptance advances self-sacrifice, willing transformation, recognition of the painful truth, and the link of love across time (Saul and Charlie, Gloria’s letter to Saul) as those aspects of the human that would allow us to live nonviolently within Earth’s ecosystems.

Acceptance suggests that the advent of Area X begins in part with a mysterious splinter or sliver that enters Saul’s finger when he examines a visually enticing, even vaguely hypnotic, plant, an echo and more ambiguous version of the opening visuals of the title sequence from Invasion of the Body Snatchers (dir. Philip Kaufman, 1978) with their sinister music montage of an extraterrestrial voyage down to Earth’s plants. Saul’s moment of initial encounter is figured as an uncanny trauma, a familiar/unfamiliar breach of the skin (trauma, wound) by a splinter or sliver that isn’t quite a
splinter or sliver from a familiar/unfamiliar object, a plant described in uncanny, mesmerizing ways. While Saul's transformation suggests the strange conditions explored in body horror, rather than a David Cronenberg abject bodily unmaking, Saul undergoes an uncanny trauma that is both familiar and unfamiliar, both painful and somehow also positive. As he reflects on the ways “a man could fall apart,” Saul feels that “something was wrong” but that there was equally “the sense of something sliding more completely into place, and the feeling confused and frightened him” (*Acceptance*, 101). This dual nature of his fall, both traumatic and uncannily familiar, uses the uncanny to modify the traumatic, so that Saul's uncanny trauma also suggests the potential for a restorative transformation, with its element of the familiar even amid frightening unfamiliarity.

VanderMeer continues to figure Saul's transformations in this way, as a fall that is both traumatic and, uncannily, equally reassuring, relieving, and familiar. When, near the end of *Acceptance*, Saul discovers that the rug above the lighthouse trapdoor has been removed, and as he investigates, he sees, in the space below, the uncanny image of “a pure white blossom with eight petals, which had unfurled from the top of a familiar plant, whose roots disappeared into the papers below” (305). The encounter that follows mixes the uncanny and the traumatic with the restorative and the consoling to indicate that the uncanny trauma is also perhaps a healing one. Saul feels an “almost holy intensity” but one that is also “a dizziness” (306). As he stares down into the “swirl of petals,” he then “could resist no more, was falling into the pure white corona of a circle of fire, in a congregation of flames, a burning so pure that turning to ash was a kind of relief, engulfed by light that consecrated not just him but everything around him, anchoring receiver and received” (306; my emphasis). The figure of being turned to ash evokes the memory of historical traumas, often associated with destruction by fire (the Holocaust, Hiroshima, 9/11), but here the trauma of being turned to ash is reimagined as also a “kind of relief” and a consecration, even a communion, between “receiver and received” (306). The trauma is visually uncanny, a weird plant with its roots down into journals, but that uncanny quality helps repurpose the affective meaning from wholly negative to potentially positive: burning destruction by fire, long a symbol not just of trauma but also of painful transformation, simultaneously occurs with the familiar sensation of relief. As his subsequent literal fall from the lighthouse while confronting the doppelgänger Henry further implies, such falling is a falling away of a particular part of the human: “Saul plummeted beside him [Henry] through the cold empty air—falling too fast, too far, while a part of him still looked down from above” (309). Such a splitting, where Saul sees a part of himself, aligns with the duality of the traumatic experience of the human in Area X, a kind of painful splitting of the potentially redeemable human from the destructive human construct made from “Western Civilization.”

This dual figuration of trauma as painful and positively transformative is rhetorically encapsulated by VanderMeer later in *Acceptance*, as Saul continues to undergo a kind of change from his encounter with the plant, a duality figured by the *And yet* that follows the terms of Saul's initial trauma: “A splinter. *And yet* it was as large as entire worlds, and he was never going to understand it, even as it took him
over” (325; my emphasis). While Saul still metaphorically understands his mysterious change as “the sickness” (324), a figure of death, he finds that “some vital transaction was complete” (325), vital figuring life. Then he describes a final surrender to “the thing” in terms of another uncanny traumatic fall, both familiar and unfamiliar, again through the duality of a rhetorical and yet: “Finally, in that wilderness, Saul could go no further, he was done, and he knew it, and he wept as he fell, as he felt the thing within anchor him to the ground, as alien as any sensation he’d ever felt and yet as familiar as if it had happened a hundred times before” (325; my emphasis). VanderMeer then movingly repeats in italics two paragraphs from the novel’s initial description of Saul (11–12).

While this repetition, had it ended the novel, might have suggested Saul’s imprisonment in a kind of looping eternity, a traumatic ouroboros made from his life, VanderMeer instead pairs Saul’s traumatic, transformative fall with Control’s willing fall (“jump”) into the light at the heart of Area X. Control’s gesture of self-sacrifice effects a kind of change within Area X through an encounter with the possibilities of a human willing to traumatically transform so as to enter into an integral relationship with the natural world, an act that Siobhan Carroll compellingly reads as signaling the adoption of “a new ecological perspective, one whose willingness to embrace self-annihilating transformation offers the trilogy’s most telling expression of hope for the survival of humanity in the Anthropocene.” 31 Rather than passively undergo the foreign “and yet” familiar experience of traumatic transformation that changes Saul, Control actively seeks the traumatic movement of falling to embrace such transformation. His encounter with the Crawler in Acceptance is described in the terms of trauma as “a moment of extremity” (310), but one that continues the duality of traumatic transformation by mixing pain with the harmonies of music and “connection”:

There came to Control in that moment of extremity—almost unable to move, unable to speak—an overwhelming feeling of connection, that nothing was truly apart in the same way that he had found even the most random scrawl in the director’s notes joined some greater pattern. And although the pressure was increasing and he was in a great deal of pain, the kind of pain that would not leave him soon, if ever, there arose a powerful music within him that he did not fully understand as he slipped and slid down the curving stairs, pulling himself at times. . . . He was slipping in part because he was changing, he knew that, could tell that he was no longer entirely human. (310)

Like the “and yet” rhetorical trope that characterized Saul’s trauma, Control experiences a “pressure” and “great deal of pain,” but combined with an “although” that connects “pain” to “powerful music.” Control is then hurt by the Crawler but, again in a further duality, in such a way that “even in that hurting somehow Control knew that pain was incidental, not the Crawler’s intent, but nothing about language, about communication, could bridge the divide between human beings and Area X” (311). 32 Control’s further descent amid his rapid, painful transformation continues to be figured as a fall: “‘Control’ fell away again” and “his father’s carving fell
from his hand” (311–12). Before this, the rhetoric of falling, like Control himself, is transformed: “John Rodriguez . . . jumped into the light” (312; my emphasis).

John’s leap into Area X as an embrace of the other recalls the moment of self-surrender at the conclusion of Ursula K. Le Guin’s “Vaster than Empires and More Slow,” where the empathetic Sensor Osden gives himself to the plant sentience of World 4470 in a sacrificial gesture that exceeds those categories of reason valued by his expedition colleague Tomiko:

> Rational, and valuing reason more highly after an intolerable experience of the immortal mindless, Tomiko tried to understand rationally what Osden had done. But the words escaped her control. He had taken the fear into himself, and, accepting, had transcended it. He had given up his self to the alien, an unreserved surrender, that left no place for evil. He had learned the love of the Other, and thereby had been given his whole self.—But this is not the vocabulary of reason.33

Le Guin prefigures VanderMeer’s restorative fall when she pushes the human beyond control and rationality and into a willing surrender to the radical alterity of the nonhuman in an act of self-sacrificial love. Like John’s acceptance, Osden’s “accepting” accomplishes a restoration where one willingly relinquishes a past, destructive form of life (Osden’s defensive hostility to his colleagues) in a moment of decision: John jumps into the light; Osden leaps into the dark. Osden’s surrender accomplishes a restoration, but in a new form. He “had given up his self” and “thereby had been given his whole self.”34 For his part, John surrenders himself to Area X, which then learns that the human can change, can give and sacrifice through acts of love, that we are capable of better things than ruining our own world through self-destructive ecocide, if, that is, we learn how to be human differently.

Rather than annihilate the human as such, for a kind of inhuman, nonhuman, or antihuman world, VanderMeer’s traumatic transformations retain a sense of mourning at individual human loss and valorize human connections of love and friendship. During his painful descent, Control brings with him his “old friend” Whitby as well as his father’s carving and the empowering knowledge that he has forgiven his mother (*Acceptance*, 310–11). This sequence figures his act of self-sacrifice as an act of love, a kind of *falling in love* or into love just as Osden’s leap from the ship is an act that teaches him “the love of the Other.” Such love is not a sentimentalized emotional state but a dynamic embrace of self-sacrifice for the good of others. To draw on the refigured theological resonances throughout *Acceptance*, such love would be *agape*, or selfless, self-giving love. John’s self-giving action aligns with what Area X is itself doing: selflessly restoring the damaged ecosystems of Earth even though it will gain nothing by doing so, since its very reason for existing is gone. Area X’s work is a kind of loving act beyond any individual calculation. As John descends toward the light, the narrative speaks movingly of Area X’s lost “homeland, to which it can never return because it no longer exists” (311). The common shape of this loving action, that of John and that of Area X, offers another ground of recognition, a recognition that humanity, like Area X, is capable of self-giving love without regard for itself or its own interests.
After John is gone, Ghost Bird “knew only that his absence was a loss, a sadness, to her” but that his presence in her life had “still meant something” (Acceptance, 327–28). In Saul’s death, he tries to project out “toward the sea” not even the name Charlie but “the three simple words”—I love you, words the novel leaves unsaid. Among the novel’s own final words, in the form of Gloria’s letter to Saul, are love and true (the book’s last word). Even as VanderMeer uses the more capacious possibilities of weird fiction to situate human trauma within potentially anonymizing geological timescales and the widened scope of ecological succession, and even as it looks to trauma as the painful process by which humans must change to enter into new relationships with Earth’s ecosystems, the trilogy, particularly Acceptance, retains the novel form’s ability to represent the inner transformations of an individual human life and to valorize our sufferings and forms of connection. Such a balance finally suggests that human trauma still “means something,” even if it is part of a painful transformation to a more ecologically sustainable world.

Rather than place the vastness of ecological time and the individual human in oppositional and formal tension, then, VanderMeer uses the more capacious space afforded by the weird novel to finally bring them together in a shared recognition of the universal condition of trauma, but a trauma that can be oriented to new possibilities and purpose. Ghost Bird’s encounter with Area X, when it “peered in at her” (Acceptance, 286), suggests this capacity for recognition. Rather than the “indifference” that Lowry ascribes to Area X and that some critics have read into the trilogy via H. P. Lovecraft’s cosmic indifferentism and Eugene Thacker’s cosmic pessimism, Ghost Bird’s later encounter belies such indifference through recognition and shared trauma (129).35 The “monstrous” Lowry had (299), instead, claimed earlier in Acceptance that moral terms “go unrecognized” by Area X and that it should be approached with “indifference”; “Evil advances with good. But these terms have no meaning in Area X. Or to Area X. So why should they always apply to us in pursuit of an enemy to whom they go unrecognized? An indifferent context deserves equal indifference from us—if we want to survive” (129). In an ironic twist, VanderMeer has Lowry unconsciously paraphrase and totally invert the meaning of a section from The Coming Insurrection, where the Invisible Committee applies this quotation not to an ecosystem but to contemporary neoliberal capitalism. The Invisible Committee’s wording reads: “Never has a context been so indifferent, and demanded in return—as the price of survival—such an equal indifference from us” (75). Through this repurposing and ironic inversion, VanderMeer invites us to reject Lowry’s reading of Area X as “indifferent”; it is our human institutions, particularly neoliberal capital, that are profoundly indifferent to us.

Ghost Bird’s encounter with Area X rejects readings of cosmic indifference into the trilogy when VanderMeer has her witness how Area X’s own biosphere had been “annihilated” and how it, a “made organism,” had come to earth and begun to change what it found despite “the terrible truth” that its “purpose” was gone, along with its creators and the death of their biosphere (Acceptance, 287). Ghost Bird describes this encounter in terms that directly contradict those of Lowry, as Area X’s “recognition of her” (287), in a scene that, as with John’s encounter with Area X, draws on those moving moments of human and nonhuman recognition as
when Ender sees through the hive queen’s eyes in Orson Scott Card’s novel *Ender’s Game* (1985). In a passage replete with the language of trauma to describe the experience of Area X—*cataclysm, witnessed, terrible, regeneration*—VanderMeer expands trauma beyond the human to include the experience of Area X itself, so that trauma is not a strictly human experience but a cosmic condition, one in which, like Area X, transformation can still occur, even at the cost of destruction and loss of purpose. While the commonality of shared eyes is the material ground that allows mutual recognition between Ender and the hive queen, “recognition” between Area X and Ghost Bird occurs because of their common experience of trauma, where Area X’s “traumas” are mediated for us through the human terms of Ghost Bird, so that they resonate with her, and humanity’s, own traumas. Given the annihilation of its own home and mission, Area X’s indifference—were it indifferent—could be excused; instead, “best as it could,” it continues on a mission whose only outcome is altruistic benefiting of the ecosystems it restores (287). Such a repudiation of Lovecraft’s “cosmic indifferentism” through shared recognition and hope in the face of traumatic desolation comports with VanderMeer’s rejection of him as an influence on the trilogy. “I’m not a huge fan of Lovecraft,” VanderMeer has stated, “especially not with regard to this trilogy because I think the trilogy embodies the antithesis of what Lovecraft valued.”

Trauma and restoration as the common cosmic ground of recognition across vast difference qualifies Robertson’s reading of the trilogy, which sees the human experience of Area X as a “measureless gap of abdifference against the background of a materiality that does not condition a potential for sameness” (N, 140). For Robertson, abdifference describes “a constantly renewed flight from difference and from everything particular and toward nothing in particular,” where abdifference is “a nonattitude, a nonrelation, a means of identifying the measureless gap between the human with its knowledge practices and the weird planet without a capacity to be known” (134–35). This development beyond the relational logic of Lovecraftian indifferent (an attitude) to the “nonrelation” of abdifference (a nonattitude), leads Robertson to absolutize the gap between Area X and the human, so that he sees no “possibility of communication,” neither the possibility to “negotiate with nonlife, with the weird planet,” nor even the possibility to “interact with it” (140). “The results of any interaction with it,” he continues, “could never be meaningful” (140). This position leads him to read what interactions there might be between Area X and humanity as “monodirectional visibility and tangibility, to be sure” (14).

While Robertson’s remarkably searching exploration of Area X’s meaning rightly describes the limits of human rationality and scientific knowledge as discourses of capture and closure, it might overlook the possibility of a meaningful commonality and mutual recognition in the sufficient sameness afforded by human and posthuman trauma. This cosmic trauma affords the grounds for recognition beyond the anthropocentric capture of human scientific calculation, where encounters with Area X mediated by common trauma and openness to restoration produce meaningful, if limited, knowledge of Area X’s own past traumas and its current restorative intentions. Such encounters are “Area X functioning at its most primitive level,” to be sure, as Control later realizes (*Acceptance*, 311). These encounters
occur at the point of the particularities of nature—“A blade of grass. A blue heron. A velvet ant” (311)—where to experience restored nature is to experience Area X. And they are mediated by human narrators (Ghost Bird and Control).

But though they are mediated, they are still clearly meaningful. In his encounter with the Crawler, Control “somehow . . . knew” of the Crawler’s intention just as Ghost Bird “knew that something would survive, that she would survive” after Area X’s “recognition of her” (Acceptance, 311, 287; my emphasis). These encounters are beyond reason and scientific capture, occurring at the level of affect: Control’s “overwhelming feeling of connection” or Ghost Bird’s experience of Area X “in fragments through taste or smell or senses she didn’t entirely understand” (310, 287). VanderMeer’s description of that encounter between Ghost Bird and the light of Area X is a mutual seeing: “In that light she could see all that could be revealed even as Area X peered in at her” (286). These moments of mutual seeing amid trauma link up with other moments that emphasize recognition between the human and Area X. Gloria/the Director likewise pleads with Lowry that the “particular cell phone” found in Area X “indicates recognition and understanding of some kind,” that Area X “wants to talk,” “wants to ask you a question,” though she does not “know if this is true” (301–2; my emphasis). A similar human and posthuman mutual seeing occurs earlier in Acceptance when Ghost Bird sees the transformed being of the biologist, which she encounters as an “incarnation of herself she could not quite comprehend, and yet . . . there was connection, there was recognition” (196).

In a continuation of the motif of falling as traumatic restoration, as Ghost Bird and Grace begin their journey away from the tower/tunnel after John Rodriguez, formerly Control, has somehow “added or subtracted something” and induced some kind of change that seems to have allowed for a transformed human element within the restorative processes of Area X, Ghost Bird tells Grace not to be afraid, with the narrative voice stating, “The world went on, even as it fell apart, changed irrevocably, became something strange and different” (Acceptance, 328). As with Saul’s watching himself from above after his fall, VanderMeer’s description here splits “the world” into two versions, one of which, the destructive way of being human created by “Western Civilization,” must fall apart to make way for something strange to that version of humanity and different from its violent patterns. The trilogy’s final ecological thought, one that aligns with its more optimistic exploration of trauma, asserts that “although nothing could be reversed. . . . It could be changed, it could change” (328).

**Ecology without Civilization**

Rather than as an escapist fantasy of annihilation or empty otherworldly utopian gestures, VanderMeer’s Southern Reach Trilogy confronts us with the need to traumatically dismantle those logics of capital, management, consumption, domination, and control that not only have not solved the ecological crisis but are its very drivers. The trilogy invites us to accept the need for transformative pain, to mourn that pain even as we accept it, and to jump willingly into the Fall of man. This human embrace of traumatic transformation adds an optimism and willing participation to what Robertson identifies as “life after aftermath,” which he sees in VanderMeer’s
later novel *Borne* (2017) (*N*, 157). In Robertson’s reading, *Borne* and its companion novella, *The Strange Bird* (2017), “tell the story of what happens after aftermath, after the loss of solution no longer poses a problem because the form of life for whom such a loss represents a problem has become impossible” (*N*, 157). For Robertson, *Borne* explores what VanderMeer calls “life in the broken places,” that which “lives in the cracks” of “urbanized or industrialized” cities, which Robertson unpacks as “what lives on after another form of existence passes” (*N*, 147)—a form of life prefigured perhaps by the biologist’s encounter with the “transitional environments” of the nonhuman life of the “empty lot” where she lives in the city (*Annihilation*, 156–57). Robertson sees *Borne* as a novel of human disappointment, written amid the ecological despair of the Trump administration, where VanderMeer imagines a world where “life has become impossible not because this or that place is broken, but because for the human all places have become broken” (*N*, 146). What emerges instead is the possibility of “inhuman inheritance” (*N*, 154), of “new forms of life” beyond the human (*N*, 157), and a “deeper, planetary survival” (*N*, 147), where VanderMeer’s fictions can help show us “the planet saving itself” (*N*, 158).

The Southern Reach Trilogy imagines the possibility that human beings might participate willingly in this abandonment of a previous way of being human, that they might actively embrace the trauma of transformation in the short term rather than passively endure it as an eventual and total loss. Area X is an invitation to the human to enter willingly into brokenness, to break itself for the sake of other forms of life. Like Area X and its induced transitional ecosystems, we should work now to induce Robertson’s “life after aftermath” by actively breaking the ways of being human that today work to destroy our planet. The Southern Reach Trilogy warns that we can either willingly traumatize this way of being human through a radical ecological politics that dismantles civilization or that these ways of being human will end up breaking us anyway—and they will break the planet with us. As Robertson’s reading of *Borne* suggests, should we fail to make the right choice, the planet will find ways to generate new life beyond us. But while there is still hope, Area X remains, like the signal of a lighthouse, as an invitation to accept the trauma of our fall and find new ways of being human in the aftermath.

While a refrain from the Southern Reach in all three novels is the fear that Area X will spread beyond its borders, that indeed the border is expanding and already has expanded, *Acceptance’s* concluding sequences suggest that it has expanded and that expansion has achieved a restorative transformation of the natural world, along with the disappearance of those humans and their structures who would contain and resist such change. Pastoral passages resonant of Aldo Leopold, of wrens and yellow warblers, of marmots and storks and ibises, are contrasted with the abandoned tents and “army outpost” of the Southern Reach, “half pulled down and sunken in as if some giant creature had attacked it” (*Acceptance*, 330). Rather than mere indifference, a movement away from denial, or an ambiguous weirdness, the final expansion of Area X in *Acceptance* is an ecologically revolutionary gesture that aligns with the deep ecology calls of the Invisible Committee and Derrick Jensen for action that, in Jensen’s terms, seeks “to physically destroy the infrastructures that
allow dictators to stand, capitalism to metastasize, oppression to continue, species extinction and global warming to accelerate, dams to murder rivers."

In “The Environment Is an Industrial Challenge,” the ironic title to the sixth part of *The Coming Insurrection*, the Invisible Committee critiques a green capitalism and ecological managerialism that would deploy the very logics of control and industrial solution in a vain attempt to solve a problem they themselves created, an approach that both estranges the human from the land and unconsciously extrapolates the form of the metropolis, a place of management, discipline, and indifference, out onto the world (*CI*, 74–75). A “greener” version of neoliberal capitalism’s destructively expanding circle of extraction, production, and consumption—a kind of perverse Area X—makes for a false environmentalism, one that, paradoxically, “under the pretext of saving the planet from desolation . . . merely saves the causes of its desolation” (*CI*, 81). Instead, the Invisible Committee suggests the system should be allowed to collapse, that there should be “a loss of control” (*CI*, 81), in an alignment with the climactic scene of *Acceptance*, where “‘Control’ fell away” and John Rodriguez jumps (311–12).

As he did earlier, Lowry inverts this logic and applies to Area X what should be applied to the human world of “Western Civilization.” In what is a mixture of paraphrase and quotation from *The Coming Insurrection*, he states of Area X, “Only by identifying the dysfunction and disease within a system can we begin to marshal a response whose logic would be to abolish the problems themselves” (*Acceptance*, 336). The Director/Gloria, recalling this toward the end of the novel, states that Lowry was “unable to see the irony” (336). It is a double irony, given that Lowry applies to Area X what is, in *The Coming Insurrection*, a description of the human world that must be allowed to collapse. Engaging with these radical solutions suggests that instead of the postapocalyptic futurism that Ghosh decries in climate science fiction, VanderMeer’s trilogy advances a transformative and challenging ecology without civilization for the present.

After the border has expanded outward, Grace is still tethered to the anthropocentric anxiety to always be elsewhere and to constitute “the world” through the human. She breaks into worry: “What if there is no world out there? Not as we know it? Or no way out to the world?” Grace saying this, while existing in that moment in a world that was so rich and full” (*Acceptance*, 334). Rather than be inhuman or indifferent, Ghost Bird responds with connection and affirmation amid painful, uncanny, and traumatic change: she reaches out and affectionately squeezes Grace’s hand in a gesture of reassurance. They move out into the transformed world together, the question of whether anyone else has survived remaining provocatively unanswered. By concluding without answering that question, the question of whether there is any human “world” or any humans remaining beyond these two after the trauma of transformation, the novel challenges us to answer for ourselves the question of what kind of human the restorative, purifying processes of Area X would leave behind were the border to expand, spread across the world, and be applied to humanity. What would remain, what way of being human do we need to become, whatever the cost to our past way of life, so that we can begin to inhabit ecosystems without traumatizing them?
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Notes
1 A BP engineer, Brett Cocales, epitomized this attitude in an internal email: “But, who cares, it’s done, end of story, [we] will probably be fine” (quoted in National Commission, Deep Water, 116).
2 Denchak, “How Deep Were the Impacts of the BP Oil Disaster?”
4 VanderMeer, “Hauntings in the Anthropocene.”
5 VanderMeer, “Hauntings in the Anthropocene.”
7 VanderMeer, “Hauntings in the Anthropocene.”
9 On trauma and falling, see Caruth, “Falling Body and the Impact of Reference”; and Kaufman, “Falling from the Sky.”
10 Jensen, Derrick Jensen Reader; Invisible Committee, Coming Insurrection (hereafter cited as CI).
11 Litro, “Author Q&A with Jeff VanderMeer.” On hyperobjects, see Morton, Hyperobjects; and Hageman, “Conversation between Timothy Morton and Jeff VanderMeer.”
12 See Freud, Beyond the Pleasure Principle.
13 Vinci, “Posthuman Wounds,” 64.
14 Ghosh, Great Derangement, 72.
15 Robertson, None of This Is Normal, 2 (hereafter cited as N).
16 VanderMeer, Annihilation, 7 (hereafter cited by title in the text).
17 Berlant, Cruel Optimism; and Nixon, Slow Violence.
20 Rothman, “Weird Thoreau.”
26 Friends of St. Mark’s Wildlife Refuge, “Area X.”
27 Friends of St. Mark’s Wildlife Refuge, “Area X.”
28 VanderMeer, “Hauntings in the Anthropocene.”
29 Kaufman, “Falling from the Sky,” 44.
30 Kaufman, “Falling from the Sky,” 44.
31 Carroll, “The Terror and the Terroir,” 78.
32 These sections recall the recognition and forgiveness in Orson Scott Card’s Ender’s Game, when the hive queen speaks through Ender: “We did not mean to hurt you” (443).
33 Le Guin, “Vaster than Empires and More Slow,” 217. I am indebted to one of my anonymous peer reviewers for directing me to this story.
34 Le Guin, “Vaster than Empires and More Slow,” 217; my emphasis.
35 See, e.g., Thacker, In the Dust of This Planet, 9: “Here [in genre horror] culture is the terrain on which we find attempts to confront an impersonal and indifferent world-without-us.”
36 Doane’s analysis of the trilogy renders nature, Area X, and even language as “indifferent” (“Planetary Ecohorror and Sublime Annihilation,” esp. 52–54).
38 Bolf, “Nothing like Lovecraft.”
39 Jensen, Derrick Jensen Reader, 10.
40 Ghosh claims that “cli-fi is made up mostly of disaster stories set in the future” (Great Derangement, 72).

Works Cited


Robertson, Benjamin J. *None of This Is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.


Thacker, Eugene. *In the Dust of This Planet*. Alesford: Zero, 2011.


