

4-27-2023

A Call for Planetary Kinship: The Development of New Forms of Subjectivity in Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*

Jennifer Kinne
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/theses>



Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

ScholarWorks Citation

Kinne, Jennifer, "A Call for Planetary Kinship: The Development of New Forms of Subjectivity in Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*" (2023). *Masters Theses*. 1089.
<https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/theses/1089>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Research and Creative Practice at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

A Call for Planetary Kinship

The Development of New Forms of Subjectivity and Connection in Jeff VanderMeer's
Annihilation

Jennifer Kinne

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts in English Literature

Department of English

April 2023

Thesis Approval Form



The signatories of the committee below indicate that they have read and approved the thesis of Jennifer Kinne in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

Brian Deyo 3.21.23
Dr. Brian Deyo, Thesis committee chair Date

Kathleen Blumreich 3/21/23
Dr. Kathleen Blumreich, Committee member Date

David Alvarez 3/21/23
Dr. David Alvarez, Committee member Date

Sherry Johnson 3.21.23
Dr. Sherry Johnson, Director, MA Program Date

Accepted and approved on behalf of the
College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

Janet Doherty

Dean of the College

3/23/2023

Date

Accepted and approved on behalf of the
Graduate Faculty

Jeffrey D. Poff

Dean of The Graduate School

4/27/2023

Date

Dedication

This project took a village.

To June, for being there before I even knew you existed. I wrote through morning sickness and the early hours of breastfeeding. I finished this thesis to better the world for you and to become the best version of myself for you.

To Josh, for being my light at the end of a very long tunnel. I told you about this project on our very first date, and your support has never wavered.

To Mom and Dad, for instilling within me a love of books and a belief in my ability to do hard things.

To Brian, for showing me that this project and program could be done joyously and in pursuit of a more grand and passionate existence.

To my Books & Mortar family, for holding me up. As a young woman who always wanted to own a bookshop AND get a graduate degree, I am eternally grateful.

Abstract

This thesis joins a vibrant conversation on the importance of storytelling in an age of climate change through an analysis of Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*, a strange and prophetic novel whose environments and characters are confronted with significant ecological devastation and transformation. It explores the ways in which VanderMeer opens liminal spaces between the human and nonhuman through his usage of the New Weird genre, uncanny and abecanny imagery, and monstrous characters.

In my first chapter, I will explore the emerging world of New Weird fiction and argue that this genre is uniquely suited to addressing climate change, namely because of its experiments with conventional notions of setting and character development. Rather than being clearly defined and bordered, settings and characters within New Weird fiction are blurry, shape-shifting, and permeable. My second chapter will then look at the kinds of images and creatures that are produced in VanderMeer's *Annihilation*. I will use Freud's concept of the uncanny and Noys's and Murphy's abecanny to analyze how VanderMeer opens readers up to a world in which the human and nonhuman connect in uncomfortable but opportunity-rich ways.

In my final chapter, I will turn to *Annihilation*'s main character, the biologist, whose transformation throughout the novel signals to readers what we must do to survive and thrive in an age of ecological devastation¹. Through a physical and psychological evolution, the biologist develops a kinship with the entire world, human and nonhuman, and becomes a part of Area X. Ultimately, I argue that *Annihilation* creates a new kind of

¹ I will make use of the pronoun "we" throughout this thesis. I acknowledge that our individual identities affect the ways in which we interact with our environments and literature itself, so this "we" is not intended to erase the diversity of reading experiences that a novel like *Annihilation* elicits. Instead, this "we" is invitational. I invite us – readers, critics, scholars – to consider the ideas of this thesis as a community. At many points, I will use "we" to include nonhuman others, as the themes of this novel apply to all life.

human, or new kind of creature, who has the potential to recognize its connection to the rest of the natural world, making possible a healing of the wounds that threaten to obliterate so much life on this planet.

Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Approval Page	2
Dedication	3
Abstract	4
Table of Contents	6
Introduction: <i>Annihilation's</i> Pursuit of Planetary Kinship	7
Chapter One: Area X – A Weird Locale	13
Chapter Two: The Uncanny	27
Chapter Three: The Biologist's Transformation	43
Conclusion: Creating New Forms of Subjectivity	64
Bibliography	69

Introduction

Annihilation's Pursuit of Planetary Kinship

Something strange is happening in Florida. Here we find a world filled with weird creatures, biological and psychological mutations, and monsters that look uncannily familiar. It is dark, murky, swampy, and shapeshifting, as are its stories. Jeff VanderMeer is a writer who is undeniably Floridian; he lives and teaches in Tallahassee while being an avid environmentalist and observer of the fascinating landscapes in his backyard and beyond. In this thesis, I will take a close look at VanderMeer's landmark work, *Annihilation*, a wild and perplexing book that has entranced modern readers. This novel has made a mark on our cultural zeitgeist by bringing to light the challenges of life in an age of rapid climate change and ecological degradation. This era in which we find ourselves has been coined the Anthropocene, a unique geological period in which human beings have affected all life and will leave a permanent mark on the planet's fossil record. Living in the Anthropocene brings unique collective challenges, such as severe weather events, mass extinctions, shortages of food and water, and extreme inequality. It also brings personal challenges, and many of us are wondering how to exist in a world that is suffering. We seek connection or reconnection to the nonhuman world, a place taught to many of us as existing completely separately from our own realities.

In this thesis, I will argue that *Annihilation* brings to light the prophetic lessons of a place marred by climate change by tapping into the emerging literary form of New Weird Fiction, a genre that is uniquely suited to writing about issues that move beyond the scope of human understanding and reason. At the heart of *Annihilation* is a new kind of story, a new way of becoming that holds the complex, global reality of climate change

that Floridians, like VanderMeer, happen to find themselves confronted with in up-close and personal ways.²

Annihilation opens on a team of four female scientists staring down a geographic anomaly: Area X, a mysterious zone that seems to be tampering with human and nonhuman life at both macroscopic and microscopic levels. A biologist, an anthropologist, a surveyor, and a psychologist comprise an expedition of scientists sent here by an institution called the Southern Reach, a government agency that has sent a series of expeditions into the Area to uncover its secrets. Before going into further detail about Area X and the Southern Reach, it is important to understand that there will be no grand uncovering of secrets in this novel. The narrative style of *Annihilation* echoes the feeling of Area X; it does not offer up details about its environment or characters but instead creates a nonlinear, aesthetic, and visceral experience for readers. VanderMeer's writing is hard to pin down. Like the scientists sent to Area X, readers must draw conclusions about what is occurring in *Annihilation* as they make their way through Area X.

Here's what we do know: (1) No expedition member has returned from Area X and survived long, including the biologist's husband, who was on a previous expedition; (2) Area X is combining human and nonhuman DNA to create new kinds of hybrid creatures; (3) the borders of Area X are tenuous at best; (4) Area X resists scientific study as it seems to have some kind of sentience that makes it unpredictable; (5) the Southern Reach does not provide clear information on what Area X is or what their incentives are in entering the zone. From the start, the scientists, and by proxy the book's readers, lack

² Florida is among the most vulnerable of states in the country to severe weather events and the rising of seas. I followed the Miami Herald's "Stemming the Tide" climate change section closely as I was writing this thesis. The news outlet tracks the unique challenges that climate change poses to Floridians.

basic information on how Area X and the Southern Reach operate. What we do know is hard to grasp: evolution seems to work differently in Area X as human and nonhuman DNA blend to create new forms of life. Basic laws of science break down as the scientists attempt to analyze the internal workings of the area's biology and ecology. The Southern Reach, on its face, seems to be chiefly concerned with halting the spread of Area X and understanding why human life is altered, often fatally, within its bounds, but as we read, the agency's true motivation becomes less clear.

Throughout this thesis, I will argue that Area X represents the realities of life in the Anthropocene. Something has changed so drastically within the climate of Area X that humans have been driven out and new forms of nonhuman life are taking hold. The Southern Reach, in its human efforts to understand and control the spread of Area X, embodies today's misdirected institutional and collective actions to combat climate change. Individually, the scientists entering Area X are much like the book's readers: they are individuals who respond to their changing environment in different, often flawed, ways. Some go mad while others die at the hands of others or themselves. Some are cloned and escape as shadows of their former selves, while others change and merge with Area X. How to survive and thrive in this dangerous environment is a tricky question, as is deciphering how to survive and thrive as humans in the Anthropocene.

The entirety of *Annihilation* is told from the perspective of its main character, the biologist, a woman pathologically disconnected from her fellow humans but passionately connected to the nonhuman ecosystems she studies. I argue that the biologist changes over the course of the narrative, transforming from someone who is chronically cold and disconnected into someone who is seeking kinship with everything around her, including

humanity. Ultimately, the biologist provides readers with a model for how to build joyous, embodied, and connected lives in the Anthropocene.

The biologist's transformation does not happen all at once, and like Area X and the Southern Reach, it is not thoroughly detailed. Much of what happens to the biologist is left to the imagination. As the readers experience the aesthetic and visceral realities of Area X, we gain an emotional sense of how the biologist is transformed; however, specifics around her physical transformation are withheld. The biologist's transformation is both physical and psychological, and by the end of the novel, she has undergone a complete change, meaning that she is altered to the point of no longer being fully human. VanderMeer makes possible this transformation of the biologist's through three narrative maneuvers: (1) the utilization of the New Weird genre and its unique capacity to embrace mysterious environments and monstrous characters; (2) the usage of uncanny and abecanny imagery to break open the biologist's, and by proxy the reader's, expectations of human / nonhuman binaries; and (3) the development of the biologist, a character who embraces her own monstrous transformation, as well as the monstrous qualities of Area X, to become a hybrid creature more deeply connected with the world around her.

By positioning readers within an environment mirroring the Anthropocene, *Annihilation* allows us to reflect—through the biologist's eyes—on the ways in which life shifts and evolves as the nonhuman world becomes more consequential to our daily existence. As we prepare for the ramifications of climate change, we will need stories that not only speak to these realities but offer means of journeying through them without doing further harm to ourselves and others. Just like the biologist, many readers are craving a fundamental shift in the way we relate to the world around us. For those of us

taught to distance ourselves from the nonhuman world, asserting ourselves from young ages as the controllers and manipulators of natural environments, we need a new mindset, a new story to tell ourselves about how we can exist as beings who are no longer at odds with our nonhuman counterparts, but as beings who can coexist in connection and community.

Significant change must occur both personally and collectively to begin healing some of the harm humans have done to this planet. We must turn away from our hegemonic notions that humans, and white male humans specifically, exist at the center of all meaning and importance. Instead, we must assign importance to all life. This shift is particularly necessary in an era of climate change, where it is only through understanding our connection to the nonhuman that we can begin to bridge the divide we've created between humans and all other life. As Siobhan Carroll writes in "The Terror and the Terroir," *Annihilation* "ultimately suggests that embracing repressed ecological knowledge – and with it, one's own transformation into something other – represents humanity's only possible hope for the future" (Carroll, n.p.).

Fiction plays a vital role in the shifting of thought and culture. Novels have the power to restructure our relationships to the nonhuman world, and VanderMeer's *Annihilation* seems acutely aware of the potential it has to change readers' perceptions.³ VanderMeer writes a new kind of story that dramatically shifts traditional notions of the

³ While I devote this thesis to an environmental analysis of *Annihilation*, there is a great need for scholars to examine how this text handles (or fails to handle) race and gender. In my reading of *Annihilation*, VanderMeer ignores race and only mentions gender a few times. I analyze the conclusion of this novel from a feminist perspective, but this novel deserves a thorough investigation of its use of gender. Similarly, the potentially problematic absence of race, compounded by a lack of recognition of indigenous people, begs scholarly attention.

human / nonhuman binary, and in the process of reading *Annihilation*, we as readers begin to change; we leave the novel thinking differently about life in the Anthropocene.

Annihilation provides a model that may just help us understand how we, as earthly creatures, can move forward into a world more deeply connected to itself. This is not a text concerned with solving the climate crisis or finding a way for humans to come out on top; it is instead concerned with how we accept the fall of anthropocentrism and embrace a nonhuman part of ourselves that has been dormant, a part that may feel monstrous but is indeed natural and joyful. By unsettling our understanding of what it means to be human, VanderMeer makes way for a new story that more accurately reflects the interconnectedness of everything on our planet. This novel treats all life, human and nonhuman, as kin, and the result is both weirdly magical and fundamental to our existence.

Chapter One

Area X: A Weird Locale

Area X presents a profound challenge to humanity: it is pristine wilderness with a seemingly sinister agency that obliterates all logic, measurement, and categorization, and it is expanding beyond human control. In the beginning, an inexplicable force envelops a small geographic area, and entire human communities disappear into a rapidly changing and alien ecosystem. In an “ill-defined Event,” Area X was “locked behind the border thirty years ago” (VanderMeer, 94). *Event* is given emphasis as a proper noun here, possibly to highlight the ramifications of a moment that changed everything, although it is unclear what the Event was, or even whether the *Event* occurred in one moment or over a series of moments. Prior to the *Event*, the biologist describes the area as follows:

People had still lived there, on what amounted to a wildlife refuge, but not many, and they tended to be the tight-lipped descendants of fisherfolk. Their disappearance might have seemed to some a simple intensifying of a process begun generations before (94).

To the outside world, the disappearance of these people and the formation of Area X is officially attributed to “a localized environmental catastrophe stemming from experimental military research” (94). A few things can be pulled from these observations of the biologist: first, the world in which she lives is like our own in the sense that people who have been living in protected spaces while relying on those environments for their livelihoods are disappearing. Second, the government’s version of what happened in Area X does recognize environmental catastrophe, albeit in a very limited way. The biologist does not trust the government’s version of events, and she fears that “people found the

news entering their consciousness gradually as part of the general daily noise of media oversaturation about ongoing ecological devastation” (94). People, she worries, have not thought about Area X at all. “We had so many other problems,” she writes (94). To many modern readers, this last thought rings hauntingly true. How—in a world filled with so much strife—are we supposed to pay attention to an environmental anomaly, even if it is happening in our own backyards?

Striking here is the biologist’s description of how this all happens: “people found the news entering their consciousness gradually,” as if people have no control over the information that enters their minds in the modern era and perhaps even less control of how that information takes hold in their psyches and constructs their realities. The theme of control is central to this text and becomes especially important in the biologist’s relationship to Area X. She will constantly call into question her, and by extension the reader’s, ability to control what is happening within us and our environments. We will need to dig deeper into the biologist’s experience to learn how this theme unfolds, but it is important to note that she is already sorting through the limitations of human objectivity and control, even before entering Area X.

Some sort of environmental change is occurring in Area X, although the description of this change as a catastrophe in official government accounts is thoroughly questioned by the biologist. Where the government accounts for a “localized environmental catastrophe,” the biologist ponders the possibility that Area X is not a strictly bordered area; she sees its boundaries are permeable, with life moving in and out of the area and being changed in the process. This offers up a possibility: the Southern Reach’s attempts to control the expansion of Area X are ill-fated from the start because

the very premise of an expanding, bordered area is false. Area X may instead be a small part of a global reality.

Even with its global implications and permeable borders, Area X is a real place. It is the ground, air, and life that the biologist and her team interact with throughout this narrative. It is a place that deeply affects the biologist and sets her on an evolutionary path from which she emerges completely changed. So, what is it about this place that awakens something in the biologist, and by extension, the reader?

The New Weird

Area X is a strange setting. Unlike many narratives, *Annihilation* does not provide a setting that is clearly defined. Because its geographic borders are in question, readers cannot trust any fundamental assumption that the environment is finite, measurable, knowable. This lends Area X a sense of mystery and unease, and readers and characters must exist within the discomfort of not knowing how their environment works. These feelings arising from the undefined qualities of Area X open the narrative to vital questions of how humans order their worlds and what happens when their worlds become disordered. In a conversation with Timothy Morton, VanderMeer explains:

We can't really establish in advance the tightness and impermeability of that boundary unless we're being very anthropocentric – and look how that's been working for the last 12,000 years (Hageman 46).

Borders are arbitrary lines created by humans to separate themselves from one another and establish order. Boundary-making is an anthropocentric act, VanderMeer asserts. By making the parameters of Area X permeable and perhaps even nonexistent, VanderMeer

is questioning humanity's ability to control the area through the act of geographical mapping. He extends this questioning further by also breaking down barriers among the creatures residing in Area X. Borders between the human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate, also fall.

The borderless treatment of place is an essential component of New Weird fiction. In many ways, Jeff VanderMeer is the father of the New Weird genre, and he and his wife, Ann, have worked to bring conversations about this emerging genre into the public sphere.⁴ To understand *Annihilation* and all that it is working to accomplish, we must first understand this genre. VanderMeer writes:

New Weird is a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy, largely by choosing realistic, complex, real-world models as the jumping-off point for creation of setting that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy. New Weird has a visceral, in-the-moment quality that often uses elements of surreal or transgressive horror for its tone, style, and effects [. . .] New Weird fictions are acutely aware of the modern world, even if in disguise, but always overtly political. As part of this awareness of the modern world, New Weird relies for its visionary power on a “surrender to the weird” that isn't, for example, hermetically sealed in a haunted house on the moors or in a cave in Antarctica (21).

First, New Weird fiction “subverts romanticized ideas about place,” meaning that it creates spaces like Area X that are inspired by the real world but lack the conventional borders that we associate with “place.” I will spend the majority of this first chapter

⁴ Their anthology, *The New Weird*, has been particularly influential in making the New Weird genre popularly accessible.

focusing on the New Weird's unique treatment of place. Second, New Weird stories have a "visceral, in-the-moment quality," so its narratives are experienced as a set of aesthetic encounters; environments and characters are not explained in conventional or detailed ways. Third, New Weird is "overtly political," meaning that it has something to say about the world of its readers. New Weird asks that we, as readers, cipher how its stories can be applied to our individual and collective lives in a political sense. Finally, New Weird relies on a "surrender to the weird" that is not "hermetically sealed." In *Annihilation*, spooky and strange things are not confined to specific spaces or creatures but instead infuse the entirety of the narrative. Like the biologist, readers must surrender to the all-encompassing weirdness of Area X, since attempts to make sense of it and apply logic to its inner workings will fail.

Another key element of New Weird fiction is the unique way in which the genre handles its monsters, or monstrous characters, not as creatures defeated in a conclusion but as rich characters who are active participants in the story. VanderMeer writes:

The starting point [of New Weird fiction] is the acceptance of a monster or a transformation and the story is what comes after. Transgressive horror, then, repurposed to focus on the monsters and grotesquery but not the 'scare,' forms the beating heart of the New Weird (22).

As we shall see, these aspects of New Weird fiction will become particularly important to an analysis of grotesquerie and the biologist's monstrous transformation. New Weird's unique ability to infuse monstrosity and grotesquerie into its narratives is deeply connected to its ability to mess with conventional notions of place. Settings and characters within New Weird don't exist apart from one another; the inherent eeriness of

New Weird locales is contagious and colonizes its characters. As Stacy Alaimo writes in *Bodily Natures*: “The environment is not located somewhere out there but is always the very substance of ourselves” (4). There is no escaping the weird in *Annihilation* or in real life: everything is connected.

As an emerging form, New Weird fiction adapts key elements of traditional science fiction, fantasy, and horror to tell new stories about the world we find ourselves occupying. It is a slippery form. In his article on weird fiction, Luckhurst argues that if what Derrida said is in fact true, and genre holds a secret law “that is a law of impurity or principle of contamination,” then New Weird “thematizes this secret law at every level: it is fiction of strange zones and borderscapes, its monstrous boundary-crawlers slime all over generic quarantines, making borders less lines of separation than promiscuous contact zones” (1055). This argument is particularly pertinent to a reading of *Annihilation*, a novel where all boundaries are fluid. New Weird as a genre seems to be a contradiction in terms; it defies the very idea of genre and makes the lines between various genres slimy, “promiscuous border zones.” New Weird contains elements of horror, fantasy, and science fiction, but VanderMeer’s *Annihilation*, at its core, belongs to the murky and shifting territory of the New Weird.

Scholarly attention has been given to the emerging world of New Weird fiction. Many scholars argue that it is uniquely suited to an age of climate change. As Witzel states: “When the enormity of climate crisis dwarfs human agency, it makes sense that weird fiction, with its world-shattering run-ins with sublime and lethal forms of alterity, should resurface” (565). In other words, New Weird’s interactions with forms of otherness make possible an accurate and relatable telling of life in an age of climate

change. Through a rendering of alterity, New Weird fiction approaches the massive reality of the climate crisis in a new way. This is a major way in which New Weird fiction, particularly *Annihilation*, is political: it has something to say about climate change and how we should react to and live within it.

Eco-philosopher Timothy Morton coined the term *hyperobject*, an idea that is particularly helpful in understanding and discussing the enormity of the climate crisis we find ourselves in. Morton uses the term to explain objects so massively distributed in time and space as to transcend localization, meaning they affect all of us, human and nonhuman simultaneously, and cannot be confined to a certain time or space. For Morton, climate change is one such object, and it requires “thinking at temporal and spatial scales that are unfamiliar, even monstrously gigantic” (Morton, *Dark Ecologies* 25). As a thinker, Morton has been particularly consumed with how fiction can approach the hyperobject of climate change in ways that influence readers’ abilities to respond to the crisis. VanderMeer is pondering similar ideas through his fiction. He writes:

Global warming makes such a mockery of what our five senses can perceive. The ‘fixed laws of nature’ seem more and more, through, for example, extreme weather events, to have become un-fixed, the compass spinning wildly. The laws of science, which seem resolute, begin to seem less so, even if this is just our faulty perception (VanderMeer, “Hauntings of the Anthropocene”).

He goes on to argue that “mapping elements of the Anthropocene via weird fiction may create a greater and more visceral understanding” of climate change “precisely because so many of the effects of this era are felt in and under the skin, as well as in the subconscious” (VanderMeer, “Hauntings of the Anthropocene”). In other words, getting

at climate change requires a literature that will help readers viscerally experience what it means to live in this moment. We need more than statistics and data, particularly because the facts surrounding climate change are far too grand for our senses to absorb. We require a new form of storytelling that can bring us into the reality of this hyperobject through intuition and feeling. In his conversation with VanderMeer, Morton shares this sentiment, saying: “We desperately need to start dreaming [climate change] [. . .] Try to allow it to be spoken is probably a better way to put it. Again, we’re discussing an awareness of things that we find extremely hard to think” (Hageman 55). He continues: “The feeling of being in global warming is a feeling of unreality” (55). We must turn to forms of dreaming and writing that welcome the unknown, the mystery, or—as Morton and VanderMeer would say, the haunting qualities of global climate change (61).

New Weird welcomes these “haunting qualities.” In “Second Skins,” Sperling argues that “weird fiction’s refusal to ‘scare’ itself might also be understood as a haunting, the presence of a monstrosity that doesn’t amount to a single, identifiable moment of horror, but rather as a prolonged experience of dread” (215). *Annihilation* does just this. By infusing haunting qualities into his entire narrative, VanderMeer is duplicating a feeling of the modern moment, an apprehension over the swift change occurring in our environments and the dread that such change creates. Unlike a traditional horror writer, VanderMeer also creates monsters without boundaries, so readers become attuned to confronting monsters that defy any capacity to logically understand them.

There is something deviously political in VanderMeer’s writing of monsters and haunted places. Scholars Noys and Murphy define the New Weird as a genre that “welcomes the alien and monstrous as sites of affirmation and becoming” (“Abcanny

Waters” 564). Through the creation of monsters that are ever-present and not confined to certain portions of the narrative, as well as a refusal to adhere to “romanticized ideas about place,” VanderMeer produces uncanny possibilities for what life can become when writers “surrender to the weird.” Carroll argues:

New Weird as a subgenre strives to model new forms of ‘ecological thought’ for readers, undoing narrative conventions that reinforce the Nature-Society binary in favor of new narratives that advocate the transformation of the power structures undergirding humanity’s geophysical transformation of the planet.

Ultimately, New Weird gives readers a new way to think about life on this planet. It breaks open our notions of a “Nature-Society binary” and causes us to question human supremacy over the nonhuman world. This, as Carroll aptly observes, constitutes a fundamental shift in ecological thought. Over the course of this thesis, I will explore many of the central themes of New Weird fiction, and I will zoom in most closely on VanderMeer’s use of weird geography and monstrosity to analyze what is occurring in *Annihilation*. Both aspects affect the way readers relate to the world, both inside and outside of the text itself. To begin, I will dive deeper into the strange happenings of Area X, the primary locale of the novel, as a setting that defies romanticized notions of place and creates a disorienting effect for readers who cannot depend on consistency or logic to guide them. In many ways, Area X can be understood as a hyperobject in and of itself: attempts to localize it fail as its inhabitants struggle to grasp its scope, laws, and lack of boundaries.

A Weird Locale

Area X appears straightforward at an initial glance; it is a rich and diverse environment. In describing it, the biologist writes:

In few other places could you still find habitat where, within the space of walking only six or seven miles, you went from forest to swamp to salt marsh to beach. In Area X, I had been told, I would find marine life that had adjusted to the brackish freshwater and which at low tide swam far up the natural canals formed by the reeds, sharing the same environment with otters and deer (VanderMeer 12).

This description mirrors the Florida landscape that inspired VanderMeer to write *Annihilation*, and it is clear why a biologist would be drawn to such a full and untarnished landscape.⁵ The biologist writes: “The air was so clean, so fresh, while the world back beyond the border was what it had always been during the modern era: dirty, tired, imperfect, winding down, at war with itself” (30). The biologist is mourning the ecological violence wrought by humans on the world outside of Area X, and despite the Southern Reach’s mission to halt the spread of the area, she cannot help but see the beauty in a world free from human violence. Humans do not have primacy in Area X, so other creatures can live freely and adapt in new ways that are not governed by anthropocentric interests.

The biologist is similarly fascinated by the dynamic nature of Area X. The wide variety of ecosystems that live harmoniously appeals to her passion as a biologist to understand and observe spaces that exist in the “promiscuous border zones” that are New Weird’s forte (Luckhurst 1055). As the biologist will discover over the course of *Annihilation*, Area X is a transitional environment in a variety of ways: (1) it is connected

⁵ *Annihilation*’s Area X is inspired by VanderMeer’s frequent walks in St. Marks National Wildlife Rescue in Jefferson County, Florida.

to the human world but has undergone a significant change that has begun setting it apart from that world; (2) its landscape moves from forest to swamp to marshland to ocean, creating new forms of life; (3) mutations are occurring within Area X, resulting in hybrid creatures that are neither fully human nor nonhuman, plant nor animal.

The biologist sees a certain power in transitional environments. She recalls in her journal:

The psychologist had said, 'The border is advancing [. . .] a little bit more every year.' But I found that statement too limiting, too ignorant. There were thousands of 'dead' spaces like the lot I had observed, thousands of transitional environments that no one saw, that had been rendered invisible because they were not 'of use.' Anything could inhabit them for a time without anyone noticing.

(VanderMeer 157)

The biologist is writing about an urban parking lot that she becomes obsessed with prior to the expedition. She often sneaks away to observe this abandoned place where all sorts of surprising life has taken hold. By virtue of its transitional nature, the lot is designated a dead space, meaning that it holds no utility for humans, so it is left to evolve without human interference. The biologist sees that the lot is anything but dead, and, in the absence of human intervention, is being used by many nonhuman creatures. Not only is this ecosystem powerful because of its scrappy nature, but it is also powerful because evolution is occurring within it that makes possible a new kind of wilderness, one that exists alongside human society and fills in its empty and ignored spaces.

The biologist compares Area X to the transitional environment of the parking lot. In her view, Area X is a much larger version of it, a space that has changed over time and

become something new. By the time Area X becomes consequential enough to humans to warrant observation, it has evolved in ways preventing humans from controlling it.

The problem with Area X, in the view of the Southern Reach, is not that humans are being harmed. The problem with Area X is that it is changing humans and undermining their dominion over the natural world. The true danger of Area X is that its transitional nature is contagious: it is expanding, or, as the biologist predicts, colonizing various parts of the world that have gone unnoticed. Additionally, something strange is happening with DNA within its bounds, so it is changing any life that crosses its mysterious borders. Nothing is what it appears to be on the surface. The mutations occurring within Area X mean that life cannot be forced into strict categories or taxonomies, and for the Southern Reach, this is a particularly terrifying reality. Indeed, Area X is a prime example of a New Weird locale, as is its apparent capacity to evade observation and understanding.

The first line of *Annihilation* alerts readers to the disorienting nature Area X: “The tower, which was not supposed to be there, plunges into the earth in a place just before the black pine forest begins to give way to swamps and then the reeds and the wind-gnarled trees of the marsh flats” (3). Readers only have one fact about the environment at the beginning of that sentence: there is a tower. The second thing we learn is that it’s not supposed to be there. Already, our environment defies logic. We don’t yet know why the tower isn’t supposed to exist, but we understand that something is off here, something has gone wrong, and now the only structure present in the narrative feels impossible. Contributing to this sense of unreality is the fact that the tower is plunged into the earth, which is something that towers simply don’t do.

Readers are also made aware of a threat that permeates the area, visible to the biologist only in hindsight. The biologist's mind fills with premonitions, unease, and self-proclaimed irrational thoughts once she arrives in Area X. For example, looking back on her warped memory of crossing the border, the biologist remembers seeing "vast cities, peculiar animals, and once, during a period of illness, an enormous monster that rose from the waves to bear down on our camp" (8). This memory, like Area X itself, eschews reason. The biologist's premonitions point toward something important happening within her mind and within this environment. She senses something lurking beneath the surface of Area X; she is already getting the sense that a monster or monsters live here, and she is also imagining "vast cities," which are impossible to account for in the context of the area's 30-year-long history. Her instincts tell her that there is more to Area X and the tower than the official Southern Reach offers.

From the moment the biologist spots the tower, she knows something is off. She writes:

At first, only I saw it as a tower. I don't know why the word tower came to me, given that it tunneled into the ground. I could easily have considered it a bunker or a submerged building. Yet as soon as I saw the staircase, I remembered the lighthouse on the coast and had a sudden vision of the last expedition drifting off, one by one, and sometime thereafter the ground shifting in a uniform and preplanned way to leave the lighthouse standing where it had always been but depositing it under this underground part of it inland. I saw this in vast and intricate detail as we all stood there, and, looking back, I mark it as the first irrational thought I had once we had reached our destination (7).

Later, the biologist will recall this as the first in a long series of irrational thoughts. From her first moments in Area X, the biologist is, on some level, aware that her traditional notions of how places work, as well as her ability to scientifically catalog places, are being thrown into question.

Returning to VanderMeer's definition of New Weird fiction, he writes of its "visceral, in-the-moment" quality (VanderMeer, *The New Weird: "It's Alive?"* 21). In *Annihilation*, Area X must be experienced viscerally and in-the-moment because so much of it escapes reason. The only way readers experience Area X is through the biologist's eyes, and from the beginning, she can only explain the eerie and haunting qualities of the landscape through her feelings and premonitions. Reading *Annihilation* is disorienting. It's supposed to be.

By forcing readers to either embrace or uncomfortably sit within a mysterious environment from the outset, *Annihilation* is priming us for characters and creatures that are equally mysterious. From here, we can embark on a journey through another tenet of New Weird fiction: its embrace of monstrosity, grotesquerie and the uncanny.

Chapter Two

The Uncanny

The uncanny is a site of interest for New Weird and climate fiction alike. The concept originates from Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny," which explores the eerie feelings that arise when boundaries between the animate and inanimate are blurred. Freud argues that hybrid beings merging the animate and inanimate represent one's repressed feelings or fantasies taking physical form. Das Unheimliche, or the uncanny, is translated literally as unhomely, and it has become a topic of interest for psychoanalysts and writers alike. The uncanny is inherently unsettling because it upends our expectations for certain beings and objects. VanderMeer employs uncanny imagery throughout *Annihilation*, lending to it the creepy, uneasy feeling discussed within my first chapter. The uncanny also becomes particularly important in his development of monstrous characters, which is why I have dedicated this chapter to observing how the uncanny functions within the narrative. When an uncanny being or environment appears, how are *Annihilation*'s characters and readers affected? To begin answering these questions, I must start with Freud.

Freud was particularly interested in the uncanniness of dolls, ghosts, severed limbs, mirrors and doppelgängers, all of which blur the line between animate and inanimate, human and nonhuman, living and dead. Take, for example, the uncanniness of a mirror. Its reflection is both real and unreal. It is real in the sense that we can see it; a reflection exists as light bouncing off a smooth surface. At the same time, it is not real because what appears in the mirror is simply an echo of the real, physical being that is standing before it. Freud might argue that there lives within us a latent fear that a mirror's

image will break free from mimicry and take on a life of its own and that this fear originates in our earliest days of childhood. What happens within the uncanny is that we are presented with imaginings from our childhoods and forced to reckon with them as adults. For example, if you believe as a child that you can communicate with animals, the appearance of an animal, particularly one that appears uncannily capable of communication, in your adulthood would lift a repressed belief. As Freud put it, you can experience “a conflict of judgment as to whether things which had been surmounted [childhood beliefs] and are regarded as incredible may, after all, be possible” (Freud, n.p.). If as a child, you see a man in a mirror who is not there, a similar experience in adulthood will automatically trigger that memory and the belief. This can lead to a terrifying, mysterious, sickening and curiosity-soaked response.

The uncanny is pivotal to what occurs in *Annihilation*. It doesn't just assign a label to the biologist's experiences; it also creates a rich ground from which VanderMeer builds a plot rife with moments that blur the boundaries between self and other, human and nonhuman, sentient and inanimate. This blurring may be the main challenge and aspiration of climate fiction. In a world ripped apart by notions of human exceptionalism, we must find ways of blurring the divides between society and nature, human and nonhuman, as these divisions have justified and intensified ecological destruction. In this task, the uncanny is quite effective, and as a result, modern scholars have taken up an interest in the ecological uncanny and its unique capacity to alter the way we perceive and experience our relationships to the nonhuman world.

In *The Ecological Thought*, Timothy Morton claims that Sigmund Freud's essay “The Uncanny” is essential for grasping “the ecological” (Morton 4). In order to

understand why uncanny feelings arise in encounters with the natural world, we must first remember that we have been trained to repress the interconnectivity of all things. The division of the human and nonhuman, a binary that Latour famously called our “modern constitution,” is reinforced from a young age, so when we see the nonhuman world reflecting ourselves, we are disturbed (Morton 4). Siobhan Carroll posits that “if traditional Nature discourse works to detail the differences between man and nature, ‘the ecological uncanny’ undoes this cultural work, exposing the human in the natural and vice versa.” This argument is echoed by Guy Witzel in “Abcanny Waters,” where he writes: “In the context of the ‘environmental uncanny’ the disavowed are ‘nonhuman interlocutors,’ nature itself” (563). In other words, nature is the thing that has been repressed, and when its power and relationship to us become prominent in narrative, we as readers experience the ecological uncanny. The idea of the ecological uncanny is originally defined by Timothy Morton as an expansion of Freud’s original concept of the uncanny. Morton, along with other scholars included in this thesis, see the uncanny as a vital part of confronting our connection to the nonhuman world. As characters are “confronted by a nonhuman world that has been repressed in the ontology of the moderns,” so are we (Andersen 861).

While Carroll is correct in observing that *Annihilation* is “rife with doppelgängers and other classic Freudian manifestations of the uncanny,” there is something more happening here. Witzel effectively argues that there is something new happening within Weird Fiction that is a departure from Freud’s understanding of the uncanny (Witzel 563). Considering in tandem Morton’s turn to Freud in defining the “ecological uncanny” and Vandermeer’s observation that the New Weird “subverts romanticized ideas about

place,” Witzel posits a new presence in the weird horror of climate change fiction: the abcanny (563). Unlike the uncanny, the abcanny is not housed in repressed memory but is a feeling that arises when something brand new pulls at everything one has known to be true. This concept may explain some of the moments in *Annihilation* that do not seem couched in memory but instead seem like manifestations of something mysterious and unknown. Witzel uses the concept of the abcanny in his study of New Weird writer, China Miéville. His observations translate well to a reading of VanderMeer. He writes this about Miéville’s weird plots:

These scenarios do not lead us back to some disavowed square one; one’s conception of the world simply disintegrates. Out goes the implicit moralism of the uncanny; in its place materializes a more complicated scenario, a reckoning with one’s place in a ‘chaotic, amoral, anthropipheral universe (564).

Like Miéville, VanderMeer builds a “chaotic, amoral, anthropipheral universe,” meaning Witzel is right to argue that Freud’s concept of the uncanny is not quite wide enough to handle the diverse array of happenings within weird fiction.

I will be using concepts of the uncanny and abcanny to dissect moments in VanderMeer’s narrative that break down barriers between the human and nonhuman. Carroll writes that *Annihilation* “ultimately suggests that embracing repressed ecological knowledge—and with it, one’s own transformation into something other—represents humanity’s only possible hope for the future.” This transformation is made possible through encounters with the uncanny and abcanny, and who better to face these encounters than a biologist well-versed in transitional ecosystems? To shed light on how

the uncanny and abecanny are creating opportunities for transformation in *Annihilation*, let's turn to the biologist's experiences in Area X.

The Biologist and the Uncanny

In growing accustomed to her surroundings, the biologist quickly notices that something is amiss in Area X. She can't quite put her finger on what is wrong, but she is overwhelmed by an uncomfortable sensation. She writes: "It was a feeling I often had in the wilderness: that things were not quite what they seemed. I had to fight against the sensation because it could overwhelm my scientific objectivity" (VanderMeer, 30). This is not the first time the biologist has felt this way. Her tendencies to approach ecosystems as an unconventional observer make her an idiosyncratic scientist who is uniquely suited to encounters with the uncanny. For example, as a child, the biologist develops a close bond with an abandoned pool in her backyard. "I could easily lose myself in the microworld of the pool," she remembers (45). She grows obsessed with the life proliferating in a place that adults have forgotten, and she marvels at the durability of creatures, both plant and animal, who evolve and thrive in such an environment. It is here that she develops her first bond with the nonhuman world and experiences the childhood joy of making nonhuman creatures her friends. When her family moves away, she grieves the possibility that new owners will ignore the cornucopia of life within the abandoned pool and return it to its original, utilitarian purpose.

As an adult, the biologist remains obsessed with environments like her childhood pool. As described in the previous chapter, she cultivates a love for an abandoned lot down the street from her house, where she sees life appearing and evolving amid a busy

urban center, with humans too busy to notice the miraculous ecosystem developing in their own backyards. Similarly, in her time as a paid biologist, she travels to the “farthest extremity from civilization [. . .] an area that teetered between temperate and arctic climates,” where her research goes off the rails as her obsessions with the ecosystem skew her objectivity and distract from her grant directives (108). She writes: “My research methods could be eccentric” (108). By eccentric, she means that her research takes on a life of its own as she develops relationships with the ecosystems themselves. “I melted into my surroundings,” she writes, “could not remain separate from, apart from, objectivity a foreign land to me” (173).

I give all this background to argue that what readers may expect from a biologist—a scientist who observes ecosystems at an academic distance—is not who *Annihilation*'s biologist is at all. She has a biologist's training and sometimes berates herself when she slips into emotionality, but she recognizes the impossibility of total objectivity. “I despise anthropomorphizing animals,” she exclaims while in the process of doing just that upon entering Area X (78). She is contradictory as a character, and she is also aware of her own unaccountability. She admits to readers that she “neglect[s] to mention some details” (150). “My reason for this,” she writes, “is the hope that any reader's initial opinion in judging my objectivity might not be influenced by these details” (150). The biologist not only questions her own objectivity; she questions objectivity altogether, and since Area X eludes reason, it is this denial of pure objectivity that allows her to create a unique bond with her environment. Unlike her fellow explorers, she does not fight against Area X's chaos.

The biologist personally connects with and immerses herself in environments. She lives for it. “Sustenance for me was tied to ecosystem and habitat, orgasm the sudden realization of the interconnectivity of all things,” she writes (110). For this reason, she is a perfect character for the weird and uncanny world of Area X. She can observe the strange happenings of an ecosystem without denying her own feelings and connection to it all. For example, as a scientist the biologist observes “a few peculiar eruptions of moss or lichen, rising four, five feet tall, misshapen, the vegetative matter forming an approximation of limbs and heads and torsos” (96). Then she adds her own take on the environment as a subjective human being: “No sense of peace emanated from the place, only a feeling of something left unresolved or still in progress” (97). This gives us as readers a sense of what Area X feels like, and now, rather than just seeing moss shaped like humans, we can sense an energy cooped up in these growths. We can understand, alongside the biologist, that something strange is emanating from the area that cannot be objectively accounted for.

Run-ins with the uncanny happen throughout the biologist’s journey into Area X, but two moments seem to bear the most significance in the conclusion of the narrative. Fairly early in her journey, the biologist encounters a pod of dolphins. “As they slid by,” she observes, “the nearest one rolled slightly to the side, and it stared at me with an eye that did not, in that brief flash, resemble a dolphin eye to me. It was painfully human, almost familiar” (97). This is a clear example of the Freudian uncanny, and the biologist is deeply affected by the experience. Toward the close of her story, she wonders whether the dolphin’s eye had been familiar after all (168). She theorizes that her husband, or parts of him, may live within that dolphin, but she recognizes that it is just as possible for

him to have melted into the landscape of Area X in other ways. Still, there is something undeniably moving and revolting about her encounter with this dolphin, and in her dreams, she imagines that she too has become a sea creature who future explorers observe from their human vantage points. She feels lonely in these moments and grieves connection, both to her fellow human explorers and to the nonhuman world of which she is not yet wholly a part.

Here, the uncanny remains uncomfortable. It is a place of intrigue but also one consumed with fear and solitude. The biologist fights it. She writes: “Transformations were taking place here, and as much as I had felt part of a ‘natural’ landscape [. . .] I could not deny that these habitats were transitional in a deeply unnatural way” (179). Even though the biologist is more comfortable with strangeness than most, it takes the entirety of *Annihilation* for her to embrace the uncanny and let go of her desire to make sense of and control it. On one hand, she experiences a desire to connect with the natural world of Area X, and on the other, she feels fear and disgust over the uncanny changes occurring within its bounds. This is the rich tension on which *Annihilation* is built, and it is this tension that makes the biologist’s ultimate encounter with the uncanny and abuncanny so meaningful.

An abuncanny monster named the Crawler resides at the center of Area X. It appears to be a combination of human, slug, and machine, and it writes chaotic sentences on the walls of its home, the tower. The Crawler contains classically uncanny qualities, namely that its use of mimicry forces its viewers to see parts of themselves within its blurred and monstrous depths, much like a mirror or doppelganger. It is also an abuncanny creature, meaning that its terror is not necessarily derived from memory—unlike its uncanny

qualities—but from something brand new that eludes human reason. I will go into greater detail about the Crawler in my final chapter, but for now, it is important to note that this Crawler represents “the most beautiful, the most terrible thing” that the biologist has ever seen (178). With no frame of reference for her encounter with the Crawler, the biologist must turn to memories to process what she sees before her, so she calls up another uncanny creature from her past.

Some years before, the biologist is living in Rock Bay to study the life of its tidal pools, and she became deeply immersed in her observations. Like in Area X, the biologist “melted into [her] surroundings, could not remain separate from, apart from, objectivity a foreign land to [her]” (173). She becomes convinced that the tidal pools hold more than what they are revealing to her scientific gaze. She senses something uncanny, something beyond objective observation, in the depths of the water. One night in a drunken fit, she drives out to the tidal pools seeking a miracle, “even though what she found during the day was miraculous enough” (174). When she glimpses a glow emanating from one of the pools, she reflects, “Did I really want to discover something or just think I did?” (174). These are beautiful and rare moments of reflection for the biologist. Remember, she is recalling this story while meeting the Crawler for the first time, so her memory is undoubtedly affected by this life-or-death moment. She is asking herself some important questions here: first, why is she so hellbent on discovering a miraculous secret when her world of tidal pools is already so filled with wonder? Second, is her real motivation to discover something, and if it is, does she want to discover something new? Is she ready for that?

The biologist is questioning her own instincts to discover, make sense of, categorize, and claim as her own what she finds in the natural world, both in her experience at the tidal pool and in her encounter with the Crawler. She is also growing aware that what she finds may throw everything she knows into question. Nevertheless, she forges ahead. She finds “something miraculous, something that uncovered itself with its own light [. . .] [a] colossal starfish, six-armed [. . .] ‘destroyer of worlds’” (174). She is spellbound by this creature and writes:

The longer I stared at it, the less comprehensible it became. There was something about my mood and its dark glow that eclipsed sense, that made me see this creature, which had indeed been assigned a place in the taxonomy - catalogued, studied, and described - irreducible down to any of that. And if I kept looking, I knew that ultimately I would have to admit I knew less than nothing about myself as well, whether that was a lie or the truth. (175)

Note the uncanny nature of the starfish—it is a “colossal, six-armed” creature with an oxymoronic “dark glow.” It is beautiful while being nightmarish. Its name, “destroyer of worlds,” is chilling not just because of danger suggested in the name itself, but also because it recalls a line from the Bhagavad-Gita famously used by Oppenheimer to describe his experience as the father of the atomic bomb: “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds” (Temperton). The “destroyer of worlds” can be understood as something containing death, but also god, awe, terror and overwhelming light and power. In the case of Oppenheimer, the bomb has made him a “destroyer of worlds,” giving him power over the human and nonhuman world. Conversely, the “destroyer of worlds” in *Annihilation* is given to a nonhuman entity that has power over the biologist. This shift in

power dynamics emphasizes, once again, that humans do not reign supreme in Area X, and their belief in human supremacy outside of Area X is both dangerous and ignorant. This starfish, the destroyer of worlds, is an obvious cousin to Area X's Crawler—and like the Crawler, it awes and terrifies the biologist.

Both the starfish and the Crawler eclipse sense and reveal the inadequacy of the biologist's scientific tools of observation. Even though the starfish has been cataloged in the taxonomy of living species, the biologist's interaction with it confirms her suspicion that such a creature is irreducible to any category. The biologist observes that the Crawler is an organic being, but she is also aware that any attempt to study and categorize it will not give her the answers she seeks. She will remain forever baffled by the power and mystery of this creature. This leads the biologist to question what she knows of herself: is she just as mysterious as these creatures? The uncanny qualities of these creatures, or the qualities for which she has no context in her lived experience, create a choice. She must either accept and embrace creatures that defy reason and categorization or strive harder for control and deny the mystery pulling at her objectivity.

This choice is pivotal to the biologist's transformation at the conclusion of *Annihilation*. Ultimately, she decides to embrace the uncanny and uncanny, and in the process, she becomes something new. It is vital that we look at another philosophical framework that can help us make sense of the biologist's evolution. There is a strong relationship between the uncanny/uncanny and the concept of the 'monster' or 'monstrous character' within a variety of literary traditions. As VanderMeer explains, monsters are a central theme within New Weird literature. Many writers, including VanderMeer, put the uncanny and uncanny to use as they create their monstrous

characters. So how does the concept of the monster figure into *Annihilation*? In my final chapter, I will argue the biologist transforms into a monster as she interacts with other monstrous characters throughout the narrative. I will also argue that this transformation reveals the true power of New Weird fiction to create a new kind of monster, one that serves as a model for hybridity and interconnectivity with the natural world. To make this argument, I first turn to two philosophers who have made way for the type of monster that the biologist becomes in *Annihilation*: Julia Kristeva and Donna Haraway.

The Feminine Monster: Horror or Possibility?

In *Annihilation*, the biologist's body changes in what can conventionally be understood as monstrous ways: she becomes colonized by a strange form of fungus and begins to glow and adapt in ways that make her senses stronger and more agile. Though the end of the novel is vague, she continues to transform into something not-human, into a creature that is more closely bound to the nonhuman landscape of Area X. In this process, her body becomes a site of a change that is both beautiful and terrifying. The fact that her body is a feminine one should not be ignored. VanderMeer made a deliberate choice that the biologist, as well as her entire team, are female. In fact, she is a part of the first all-female team to be sent into Area X. This is far from the first time a female body has become a site of fear and possibility in fiction, and I argue that VanderMeer is tapping into this history knowingly and making deliberate adjustments to how the feminine monster has been historically viewed.

There is growing scholarship on the monstrous feminine and how it has been used historically—often in horror literature and film—to reflect individual and societal fears,

as well as how the monstrous feminine lives on in our contemporary imaginations. For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on Julia Kristeva and Donna Haraway, two thinkers who have undoubtedly left marks in our collective imagination regarding the feminine monster. I also believe that these thinkers have played a vital role in making literature like *Annihilation* possible and popular.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva focuses on a feeling often found within the horror genre: “abjection,” or an all-consuming awareness of danger and one’s own vulnerability (4). To reiterate from my first chapter, the New Weird and horror genres are close cousins, as are the concepts of abjection and the uncanny, and while there are major differences between the two genres and concepts, it is helpful to investigate the traditions of horror and its emphasis on abjection to better understand New Weird fiction and its uncanny monsters. In horror, abject fear can become so ever-present that it can be experienced, Kristeva writes, as a “fluid haze” and an “hallucinatory, ghostly glimmer” (2). In *The Thinking Woman*, Julienne Van Loon observes that the feeling of abjection is “both unapproachable and intimate” (Van Loon 119). Kristeva’s concept of abjection has been used to make sense of horror genres, which often exhibit “the female body or other symbolic references to the feminine [as] sites of horror” (120). Van Loon aptly points to the film *Alien* (1979) as a classic example of how women become monstrous through the morphing and pulling apart of the female body. She even cites Aristotle, who infamously claimed that “woman is literally a monster: a failed and botched male who is only born female due to an excess of moisture and of coldness during the process of conception” (120). And what is the purpose of a monster? As Barbara Creed writes in *The Monstrous Feminine*: “The function of the monstrous [is] to bring about an encounter between the

symbolic order and that which threatens its stability” (Creed 67). According to the dominant symbolic order, women hold less power than men, so when a female character starts exhibiting greater power than her male counterparts, she challenges that order and becomes, according to Creed, monstrous.

In many ways, it is impossible to separate the female body from fear. Historical narratives have long cast women as others to be controlled lest they become monstrous. Additionally, a woman grows up with an acute awareness of how vulnerable her body makes her; she carries with her the trauma of countless generations of bodily violence. It is no surprise that female bodies often experience and elicit feelings of fear and have become primary subjects in horror genres.

Abjection, like the uncanny, brings one right up to the boundary between self and other. When experiencing abject fear during moments of violence, we recognize that our bodily autonomy is a myth, and the divide between ourselves and others is fiction. Abjection also rears its head into our lives when we encounter the grotesque—Kristeva gives the examples of blood, vomit, pus, feces, and corpses—which make us aware of the vulnerability and permeability of embodied life. Abjection happens when we try to separate the “I” from the rest and fail.

Like the uncanny, abjection can occur when lines are blurred between human and animal, sentient and non-sentient, living and the dead, self and other. In fact, Freud’s concept of the uncanny has played a pivotal role in both Kristeva’s and Haraway’s understandings of how abjection has contributed to the creation of feminine monsters. Unlike Freud, however, both Kristeva and Haraway ask important questions about what may lie on the other side of abject fear.

Is there something beyond the abject horror that can occur when lines between the human and nonhuman are blurred? When we experience a breach of bodily autonomy or of our notions of human supremacy and instead see ourselves reflected in the natural world, is there a feeling that resides on the other side of horror? Are opportunities created for connection in these liminal spaces? In her introduction to *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, Haraway gives voice to this question that occupies much of her philosophy and activism: “How can our ‘natural’ bodies be reimagined—and relived—in ways that transform the relations of same and different, self and other, inner and outer, recognition and misrecognition into guiding maps for inappropriate/d other?” (Haraway 3-4). Like Kristeva, Haraway focuses on monstrous boundary characters who hold a “destabilizing place in the great Western evolutionary, technological, and biological narratives”: simians, cyborgs, and women (12). She believes that these characters reveal the boundaries that exist between human/nature, human/technology, man/woman for exactly what they are: constructions that benefit certain historical narratives, particularly the narratives of patriarchal, capitalistic cultures. These inventions then set the stage for a new kind of existence. She asks her fellow cyborgs and women in what feels like a battle cry: “As monsters, can we demonstrate another order of signification?” (12).

Haraway is imagining new possibilities. Rather than remaining a site of abject fear, monsters can show us a new way forward. For example, beings who have experienced the liminal spaces between human and nature can guide us into a future more suited to the reality of global climate change. I argue that *Annihilation* is telling a story of such boundary creatures.

As previously mentioned, the horror genre has focused on the female body as a site of fear. Women become (or are shown as already being) monsters through bodily mutation, and in doing so, they play at our fears of losing control. Often, the story stops there: the feminine monster is either defeated or destroys her surroundings. But VanderMeer is doing something altogether different. He is engaging tropes of horror within his New Weird style by transforming the female body into a monstrous form and then using that monstrosity to blur lines between self and other. Unlike traditional horror, his story does not end there. Initial feelings of abjection fall away as the biologist accepts her monstrosity and subjectivity, and she becomes comfortable—perhaps even more authentic—in the liminal space between self and other. She is drawn into a boundary space, and that space becomes a site of freedom and possibility.

For this reason, *Annihilation* is liberating. It frees readers from patriarchal and capitalist notions of the self-versus-other and dives headfirst into new territory—territory often beyond language—in which autonomous selves come undone, and new life that we cannot understand or fully predict begins. In the words of Haraway, characters become “multiply heterogenous, inhomogeneous, accountable, and connected human agents” (8). This process of becoming multiply heterogenous is beautiful, but it is not clear and simple. In fact, it is often painful, grotesque, and—you guessed it—monstrous. In the coming chapter, I will detail the ways in which the biologist transforms. In her transformation, the biologist experiences the uncanny and abjection, but she also finds her way into the possibilities imagined by Haraway.

Chapter Three

The Biologist's Transformation

The biologist's transformation in *Annihilation* signals to readers the ways in which we can become, in the words of Haraway, "connected human agents" (8). As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the end of the *Annihilation* reveals the biologist to have evolved beyond her human form both physically and psychologically. Her transformation is total, and how and when she transforms is pivotal to understanding the lessons VanderMeer is imparting to readers.

At the very beginning of *Annihilation*, the biologist and her fellow expedition members climb down into the tower, or tunnel, that did not appear in the Southern Rach's official account of Area X. While observing the tower, the biologist inhales spores emitted from its walls. Nearly immediately, her senses grow sharper. She writes:

The wind picked up, and it began to rain. I saw each drop fall as a perfect, faceted liquid diamond [. . .] The wind was like something alive; it entered every pore of me and it, too, had a smell, carrying with it the earthiness of the marsh reeds. I had tried to ignore the change in the confined space of the tower, but my senses still seemed too acute, too sharp. I was adapting to it, but at times like this, I remembered that just a day ago, I had been someone else (VanderMeer 75).

The biologist's heightened perception brings her closer to the natural processes of Area X, meaning that she can feel and not just observe her ecosystem. Notice that she becomes keenly aware of her senses - she can see each individual raindrop, feel the wind on her skin, smell the marshy air. As a scientist trained in a more distant and sterilized form of observation, this sensory data changes the way she sees her environment and herself as a

participant within that environment. “Just a day ago, I had been someone else,” she writes, remembering the scientist who had entered Area X (42). This person, she theorizes, no longer exists. Instead, she has become someone else, someone who has absorbed some part of Area X and undergone a transformation of perception.

The ways in which the biologist changes here may feel insignificant to some readers. After all, can a change in sensory perception really alter us that much? Can smell and sight change the ways we live within our ecosystems? Many thinkers and scholars, including VanderMeer himself, seem to think so. In a conversation with Timothy Morton, VanderMeer reflects that “the distinction between inside and outside becomes corrupted” in his writing (Hageman 45). He talks about how living in Florida has made him acutely aware of the false nature of the human / nonhuman binary. Because Florida’s landscape is so lush and intrusive, meaning that animals and plants invade human environments on a regular basis, the divide between inside and outside feels tenuous at best. Morton responds to this observation of VanderMeer’s and how he sees it reflected in

Annihilation:

This idea that you were the master of everything that you could see and that you were the decider who made it all real and that you were above it has now evaporated and you can’t have it anymore, because you suddenly realized that you’re sewn, macramé, into the coral reef (64).

Here, Morton is referring to the moment discussed in Chapter Two when the Biologist becomes fascinated with the inner workings of a coral reef, home of the Destroyer of Worlds. Morton hypothesizes that a difference of perception is created when the inside and outside are “corrupted,” as VanderMeer puts it. This corruption brings humans into

the nonhuman landscape and displaces them from notions that they are the deciders, the masters of everything, when it comes to the nonhuman world. This change is a fundamental alteration in how the biologist, and by proxy the reader, perceive themselves within their ecosystems.

While her own sensory transformation is taking place, the biologist is also noticing the ways in which other bodies have been altered in Area X. As discussed in previous chapters, the very DNA of some creatures are being changed by the environment of Area X. The biologist observes: “The wood was indeed wood. The rat was indeed a rat. The moss and the fox [. . .] were composed of modified human cells” (159). Area X is altering the internal fabric of some organic life.

Readers must come to understand, or at least accept, this reality to effectively take in the monstrous creatures residing in Area X. VanderMeer is asking that we—like the biologist—open our senses to make room for new forms of life. Taking this information in is, in many ways, a prerequisite for accepting the other uncanny creatures that the biologist encounters. One of the more monstrous and uncanny creatures of Area X is a moaning creature who can be heard in the reeds of the marshland late at night from the expedition’s basecamp. She writes about meeting this creature: “I saw more detritus from a kind of molting: a long trail of skin-like debris, husks, and sloughings. Clearly I might soon meet what had shed this material, and just as clearly the moaning creature was, or had once been, human” (140). The creature races at her, desperate in its desire to contact the biologist in some way, and when she runs from its touch, the creature calls to her, “pleading with [her] to return, to see it entire, to acknowledge its existence” (143). At first sight, the biologist recognizes the molting face of this creature as the psychologist

from the eleventh expedition. This creature is clearly living a tortured existence. Partly human, or perhaps once-human, it is now trapped within a molting body that is unable to create connection with the biologist except to cry out in anguish.

Here, it is important to note that the transformation of human characters within Area X is not a sanitary and peaceful process. VanderMeer intentionally uses language like colonization and annihilation to describe the physical and emotional effects of these transformations. Even when the biologist accepts her own process of change, it is not a gentle one; it is hard and often violent.

Area X is entering these characters through the body and igniting a biological process of both erasure and evolution, meaning that characters' static humanness is being stripped from them to make way for new forms of being. The fact that these transformations are occurring at the level of the skin opens the bodies of characters to Area X itself. As Sperling writes in "Second Skins": "The skin itself might be understood as a site of trans-corporeality, not so much an organ maintaining the fixity of the body but opening it up and embroiling it with other bodies" (229). From the beginning of *Annihilation*, when the biologist inhales spores from the tower's walls, we become aware that her body has been invaded by another form of life. Her body is not "maintaining fixity," but is being opened to a host of other lifeforms that will commingle and change her from the inside. Like the biologist's sensory transformation, this too makes us think differently about what it means to be human. As Haraway asks in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*: "Why should bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by the skin?" (178). Many of us may feel quite uncomfortable with the idea that our bodies do not belong solely to us, or that our very concept of "us" as static individuals is

too limited for our biological realities. The violent processes that bodies undergo in Area X - the environmental colonization of the skin—feel scary, so it is no wonder that the bodies themselves feel monstrous. They ignite, as Kristeva would argue, a sense of abject fear, a feeling that I have argued is closely tied to Freud’s concept of the uncanny.

The true power of *Annihilation* lies not within its ability to create horrifying monsters, but in its efforts to make readers identify themselves with the monsters in the text, dissect why such monsters breed discomfort, and then bring us to the potential borne of such discomfort. Because the biologist’s transformation is a violent, visceral, and physical process, we as readers see everything that scares us laid bare. We watch grotesque bodies form, change, and evolve, all the while paying attention to the feelings and thoughts ignited within ourselves as they do. Many scholars argue that grotesquery, as a literary tool, opens all sorts of avenues for readers to connect more deeply with the world beyond the human. In “Subversive Metropolis,” Malcolm-Clarke argues:

The grotesquery points to the artificiality of everything ideology wishes us to see as natural. Because weird bodies hold this subversive potential, the monstrous or grotesque form is often symbolically vanquished in cultural expression, to reaffirm the supposed inexorability of the symbolic order and to naturalize the human body as the signifier of normative subjectivity (141).

This is a dense but important argument that sheds light on what is happening in *Annihilation*. Beginning with “grotesquery points to the artificiality of everything ideology wishes us to see as natural,” let us consider the effects of a grotesque image on our psyches (141.). Imagine a body opened to the outside world. If you have seen the film *Annihilation*, imagine the dissection scene, where a character’s abdomen is cut into,

revealing the writhing and pulsing organs beneath the surface of the skin. These images feel deeply unnatural to us, particularly if something is revealed within the body that should not be there under normal, or what we perceive as natural circumstances, and yet, they are appearing before our eyes. These images cause us to question what we perceive as natural or real within our worlds. By subverting our expectation of the natural, grotesque images disgust us and, in many cases, lead us to repress them, which is why, as Malcolm-Clarke argues: “the monstrous or grotesque form is often symbolically vanquished” (141). In our minds and art, we tend to kill off or defeat the grotesque. As discussed in the last chapter, this reaffirms our symbolic order, meaning that we can maintain our idea of the autonomous, fixed, and superior human body as the center of all subjectivity.

But what happens when we don’t kill off or defeat the grotesque? What happens when we, like the biologist, decide to observe rather than repress grotesquery? As Haraway asks: “What narrative possibilities might lie in monstrous linguistic figures?” (3). In *Becoming Nonhuman*, Jennifer Conrad pays close attention to Bakhtin’s concept of the grotesque body. She describes Bakhtin’s idea of the grotesque body as:

[A body] not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress laid on those parts of the body are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world (138-9).

What I love here is the sense of potential that is opened through the grotesque body.

Because the grotesque body is interacting with the outside world in a more intense way,

meaning that it is either being cut open and made vulnerable to the external world or that it is being changed from within by external forces, it is less isolated within itself. It is “not separated from the rest of the world” and can “meet the world” in a new way (139). The grotesque body is more closely connected with its environment and nonhuman surroundings.

As discussed in my second chapter, it is hardly a coincidence that female bodies are often chosen as sites of grotesquerie and monstrosity. Historically, we fear the female body, and there is no question that this fear lives on today. Since it is not simply true that we center the “human body as the signifier of normative subjectivity,” but rather the white, male human body, female bodies as subjects are automatically consigned to some level of abnormality or monstrosity. This ignites what Malcolm-Clarke calls a desire to vanquish the bodies of female characters that are centered in narrative, as they fall outside the norm of human subjectivity. Adding further monstrous qualities to female characters increases this discomfort and ignites a historic desire to suppress such characters.

The biologist, being a woman existing in and merging with a monstrous environment, ignites all these fears and desires. In many ways, the institution of the Southern Reach attempts to de-individualize and de-sex members of the expedition, stripping them of their gendered names and encouraging them to withhold personal information from their fellow travelers. When the biologist’s body begins to change, we are reminded as readers that she is in fact an individual and a woman with sensual experiences. As her sensory sensitivity grows, her memories come flooding back to her, and we are also reminded that she is a daughter and a wife. Her womanhood becomes

apparent where it wasn't before. It is vital that we as readers remember that the biologist is already seen by us and others as inherently more monstrous than her male counterparts. This makes her transformation more meaningful and challenging. Desires to suppress feminine transformation are strong, so the biologist's decision to embrace such transformation is subversive on even more metaphorical fronts.

When the biologist begins to transform, her bodily changes are a source of fear for herself and her fellow explorers, but as she continues to change, so does her thinking. She grows more connected with the world around her, and she starts to embrace what is happening inside and outside of her body. By the time we reach the climax of *Annihilation*, the biologist is contemplating a complete transformation, one that will forever enmesh her in the ecosystem of Area X and bring her into a life that stretches and transcends her human form. Before fully analyzing this transition, we must look at the novel's climax. In *Annihilation*'s last pages, the biologist meets the Crawler, a creature embodying the uncanny, abecanny, and monstrous qualities of Area X. It is in this meeting that the biologist must confront her transformation and decide what to do within it.

The meeting of the biologist and the Crawler is set up as a climactic inevitability, a point of no return. The biologist has set herself on an inescapable course: "You understand, I could no more have turned back than gone back in time" (VanderMeer 172). Part of this inevitability certainly comes from the biologist's desperate curiosity to understand what is happening within the tower, a site whose mystery has intrigued her since entering Area X. Another part of this inevitability comes from the tower being the original place where the biologist's body started to change; it seems to have a magnetic

and intoxicating quality for the biologist, as if she is already being called into a part of the landscape of Area X.

When the biologist first meets the Crawler, she thinks of finding the starfish—the Destroyer of Worlds—not only because the creatures bear physical similarities, but also because she sees a replication of her original pursuit of discovery at the tidal pools. As a scientist, she is drawn to the pools, just as she is to the tower, because she wants to understand what is happening there, but she is also drawn to the pools as an emotional human being seeking mystery and meaning beyond the scope of her scientific gaze. Despite the known dangers of drunkenly climbing sharp rocks or descending into a tower to meet a mysterious and powerful creature, the biologist persists. She goes beyond a point of no return: “I passed the threshold. I descended into the light” (172).

The very language of “descending into the light” is unsettling. Normally, one ascends into light, so VanderMeer seems to suggest that this is a different kind of light altogether. This light is not borne of the sun, and it does not carry the same metaphorical meaning that light often does in narrative, such as optimism, happiness, awakening. There is something sinister about this light; whatever it is emanating from is dangerous and potentially annihilating.

When the biologist turns the corner and sees the Crawler for the first time, she is completely disoriented: “I could not tell stairs from ceiling” (175). She immediately recognizes the impossibility of understanding or describing the Crawler, and she wrestles with the inadequacies of her senses when she writes: “It is difficult to tell what blanks my mind might be filling in just to remove the weight of so many unknowns” (176). The Crawler won’t sit still. The biologist cannot grasp it. For a “single infinitesimal moment”

she is able to recognize the Crawler as an organism, but even then, it seems to be reflecting that image “as a form of camouflage,” so her categorization dissolves as quickly as it comes (179).

The Crawler’s annihilation of logic is complete once it enters the biologist’s body. She describes the experience as “a burning inside my own head and there came a moment when I screamed, my skull crushed to dust and reassembled, mote by mote” (181). Her mind is literally rebuilt by the Crawler as it colonizes her body. Freedom and agency no longer exist, nor does any faith in the power of her mind to sort fact from fiction, fantasy from reality. All hope of logical analysis and scientific categorization is annihilated in that moment.

After the biologist’s mind is opened by the Crawler, she finds herself drowning in her own observation of this annihilation. She theorizes that she has two choices: “What occurs after revelation and paralysis? Either death or a slow and certain thawing. A return to the physical world” (179). The biologist is so deeply immersed in the tower and drawn to the uncontrollable mystery of the Crawler that it would not be surprising for her to stay in its presence until her own death, trying to “know everything” (194). She writes: “I might have watched it forever and never noticed the awful passage of the years” (179). Instead of staying in the horrible light of her discovery, the biologist does something surprising: “With an effort I could feel in the groan of my limbs, a dislocation in my bones, I managed to turn my back on the Crawler” (179). This is a “wrenching act,” a deliberate and painful pulling away from “the most beautiful, the most terrible thing [she] might ever experience” (178-9). She chooses to turn from discovery and the hope of knowledge, however small, to seek the sun’s light, realizing that “everything lay above,

and nothing now below” (185). She climbs up as fast as she can, but when she looks back for a last glimpse of the Crawler, she sees something she recognizes: the lighthouse keeper is trapped within the Crawler’s form in “unending pain and sorrow [. . .] as well as a kind of grim satisfaction and ecstasy” (186). The biologist relates to the lighthouse keeper’s paradoxical relationship to the Crawler, but she has already made her choice to climb aboveground and “[envies] him that journey not at all” (182, 187).

Even before reaching the surface, the biologist is changed. Confronting the Crawler is enough to set her on a new course. She writes: “I let go of Rock Bay, of the starfish in its pool. I thought instead about my husband’s journal” (185). Her husband, a man who has been treated with a kind of distant coldness throughout her narration, comes to the forefront. The biologist’s pursuit of knowledge falls away, and she finds herself uncharacteristically drawn to contact with the man she loves.

In her childhood, the biologist covets solitude as a means of escaping the world of human interaction. She writes of her absorption with an abandoned pool behind her parent’s rented home: “I could easily lose myself in the microworld of the pool” (45). Despite “useless lectures of worry over [her] chronic introversion” from her parents, the biologist continues her obsessive observations, removing herself further from human interaction (45). She remembers spending recess alone in abandoned fields behind her school “to hide from the bullies” and feeling as though she “had been placed with a family rather than born into one” (44-45). Although she never speaks poorly of her parents, she reveals that their relationship is distant and that she requires solitude as a form of self-protection. From her isolation springs a dream that determines her life course: “They had their lives, and I had mine. I liked most of all pretending to be a

biologist and pretending often leads to becoming a reasonable facsimile of what you mimic, even if only from a distance” (45). After achieving this dream in adulthood, her instinct to remain outside the world of human interaction strengthens. Even social outings provide an opportunity to observe people from afar: “I loved the late-night slow burn of being out, my mind turning over some problem, some piece of data, while able to appear sociable but still existing apart” (109).

After emerging from the tower, the biologist mourns not coming to Area X for her husband, just as she mourns the walls she has built between herself and other humans (189). At the end of *Annihilation*, the biologist decides to go out in search of her husband. Her final journal entry explains: “I want to feel him close, as if he is in the room” (194). Despite the biologist’s history of keeping other people at a distance and preferring independent observation to social contact, she chooses to spend what may be her final days in Area X pursuing love and companionship. She even writes a letter to her parents (193). This shift in priorities is just one of the transformations occurring within the biologist after her interaction with the Crawler.

When the biologist emerges from the tower, she delights in the physical pleasures of being alive: “I lay on my back atop the Tower, too exhausted to move, smiling for the simple, unexpected pleasure of the heat on my eyelids from the morning sun” (189). This biologist is a foil to the biologist of earlier journal entries who offers terse and emotionless information about her inner life and sensual experiences. While speaking with the psychologist before entering Area X, the biologist breaks down complex childhood experiences into simple words— “breakfast,” “normal,” “close enough” — that are completely devoid of personality (122). Most of the biologist’s early journal

entries are environmental observations that give little emotion away, and although she has a long history of hiding herself from others, this tendency may be exacerbated by the disappearance of her husband. A form of internal death is already taking place within the biologist when her husband disappears and her final connections to the human world are severed. Prior to entering Area X, she reflects on her desire for annihilation: “At the time, I was seeking oblivion, and I sought in those blank, anonymous faces, even the most painfully familiar, a kind of benign escape. A death that would not mean being dead” (35). This biologist, who is seeking erasure, is not the biologist who emerges from the tower. She instead transforms from someone with little to say about light, pleasure, and warmth into someone who delights in her own life and physicality. She gives in to her own body, and by extension embraces the physicality of everything around her, letting go of the tortured and impossible demands of her mind. Rather than seeking escape and death, she embraces an embodied life.

Earlier in the novel, the biologist learns that if she injures herself, she can quell her internal transformation. After meeting the Crawler, she writes: “Continually doing harm to myself to remain human seems somehow pathetic” (194). This change has a powerful effect on me as a reader. Humans hurt themselves in the pursuit of progress and intellectual superiority. The biologist rejects the myth of humanity’s supremacy and gives herself to the body of Area X. The foolish notion that she or any other person can rule as “queen of the tidal pools” disintegrates, and she recognizes herself as a physical part of nature rather than something intellectually apart and superior (173).

Underlying the biologist’s return to physicality is an acceptance of the unknown. The biologist emerges from the tower having let go of her determination to figure out

Area X or anything at all. She writes: “Observing all this has quelled the last ashes of the burning compulsion to know everything” (194). The Crawler has annihilated any possibility or desire to conclusively draw answers from Area X. In these moments of transformation, the biologist re-introduces herself: “I am the biologist; I don’t require any of this to have deeper meaning” (192). She has accepted the unknown and the possibility of an existence not ruled by logic and domination, and although her personality and role as a biologist makes this transition easier, it is not until her interaction with the Crawler that she achieves complete acquiescence.

By letting go of the desires of the mind for knowledge and mastery in favor of the desires of the body for love, physicality, and acquiescence to mystery, the biologist provides us with a reverse creation story. She sees her own desire for knowledge in her interaction with the Crawler and turns away from it (181). What she gains is bodily—it is emotional and sensuous. She writes of transcendence: “I’m well beyond you now, and traveling very fast” (194). If we ever hope to catch up, VanderMeer suggests that we must follow the biologist’s lead and embrace the parts of ourselves that are opening to the entire world, rather than those parts hellbent on erecting walls between humans and nonhumans.

The physical process of opening to the entire world is quite literal for the biologist. Although her body has already started changing prior to entering the tower, her interaction with the Crawler brings these transformations to a violent crescendo. She describes her entire body being broken open by the Crawler:

A raging waterfall crashed down on my mind, but the water was composed of fingers, a hundred fingers, probing and pressing down into the skin of my neck,

and then punching up through the bone of the back of my skull and into my brain (181).

Having somehow survived this invasion, the biologist hypothesizes that her physical transformation has made her “recognizable to the Crawler now,” unlike the explorers who perished before her (182). In fact, her physical transformation is so total that the biologist writes: “I wondered if my cells would long be able to hide their transformation from me” (182).

By the time she reaches the surface and emerges from the tower, the biologist has accepted her evolution. She believes that she will continue to merge with the landscape of Area X and wonders if she will meet any future explorers. She writes: “Have they seen me yet, or are they about to? Will I melt into this landscape, or look up from a stand of reeds of the waters of the canal to see some other explorer staring down in disbelief?” (194). Either way, the biologist leaves readers with one certainty. “I am not returning home,” she asserts (195).

Read simply, “I am not returning home” means that the biologist will not be leaving Area X, but considering the extent of her transformation, this last line takes on layers of meaning. Not only will the biologist not be returning to the world outside of Area X, but she will also not be returning to her human form. Her transformation will be mentally and physically total. As Sperling argues:

The biologist’s detailed account of her brightness and her encounter with the crawler in the tower, her transformation into Ghost Bird, and the ultimate return of the biologist as a vastly different, nonhuman form all seem to suggest some kind of death of the biologist’s original form (226).

VanderMeer does not provide readers with a detailed description of how the biologist will change or how she is already changing by the end of *Annihilation*. By the time we reach the Crawler, VanderMeer's language grows more and more opaque, as if he is writing toward something that is hard to define and grasp through language alone. He emerges from the grotesque imagery of the biologist's physical transformation into something new, but also, paradoxically, something pre-linguistic.

Physical descriptions of the biologist's transformation stop as she ponders what she has learned about Area X and where it will take her next. She writes:

Observing all of this has quelled the last ashes of the burning compulsion to know everything [. . .] and in its place remains the knowledge that the brightness is not done with me. It is just beginning [. . .] I will not be here when the thirteenth expedition reaches base camp. (Have they seen me yet, or are they about to? Will I melt into this landscape, or look up from a stand of reeds or the waters of the canal to see some other explorer staring down in disbelief? Will I be aware that anything is wrong or out of place?) (VanderMeer 194).

The biologist is done trying to logically assess Area X, and this change means she is opening to her physical transformation, or the "brightness," and the many questions that may or may not have answers. The biologist seems comfortable in this mysterious space. In writing "I am just the biologist; I don't require any of this to have a deeper meaning," she is further stripping herself of human identity (192). She fades into the environment, just like the other nonhuman plants and animals around her, and she wonders how she will be observed by future human explorers. She goes on to offer a final reflection to readers:

I am aware that all this speculation is incomplete, inexact, inaccurate, useless. If I don't have real answers, it is because we still don't know what questions to ask. Our instruments are useless, our methodology broken, our motivations selfish (192-3).

Language does not seem capable of reflecting the truth of the biologist's experiences in Area X. Language, along with all other modern forms of scientific inquiry, will not answer our questions about Area X, or, as the biologist speculates, we just haven't found the right questions to ask of Area X yet. We—humans—seem to be the problem in the biologist's mind. "Our motivations are selfish," she writes, and this makes perfect sense (193). The Southern Reach sends expeditions into Area X with purely anthropocentric missions in mind: how can humans tame, control, understand, and halt the spread of this mysterious place? The assumption is that this place can be known and controlled, but Area X upends this anthropocentric assumption. If motivations remain this selfish, the Southern Reach, and by extension the rest of the human world, will fail to understand the power of the nonhuman in Area X and the changes that nonhuman forces are rendering in human subjects.

By writing in this opaque way, with so many questions and uncertainties baked into the biologist's journal, VanderMeer opens a liminal space between the biologist and her environment in the final pages of *Annihilation*. Readers are no longer wrestling with the grotesque elements of the biologist's bodily transformation but are instead being brought into peaceful spaces of questioning that are being created by the biologist's merging with Area X. Writing through the senses and through the questions presented by a mysterious environment creates a rich site of opportunity for the biologist to integrate

more fully with her environment, and by extension, readers capture a hint of what it feels like to break open barriers between the human and nonhuman through lived experience and create a new form of kinship with one's environment.

Many theorists are considering the potential within writing and language to open such spaces of kinship. In *Becoming Nonhuman*, Conrad looks at VanderMeer's work, as well other writers such as Margaret Atwood, to digest how writing can open zones in which humans and nonhumans connect and merge. She argues that "the essential impossibility of inhabiting another's experience—human or animal— [is] anchored in the corporeal, pre- or nonlinguistic nature of existence" (7). To reach toward a place of understanding another's experience, writers must tap into the "corporeal," or the bodily, senses, and try to break free from linguistic restraints that favor ideas and logic over feelings and wisdom.

Conrad invokes a few theorists in her discussion of this shift. Calarco writes about "zones of indistinction," where divides between the human and nonhuman become blurry. Area X can be thought of as a zone of indistinction because of how difficult it is to tease out the boundaries between human and nonhuman beings within its bounds. Of these spaces, Calarco writes:

It is the task of thought that proceeds from within a zone of indistinction to show that the classic human / animal distinction serves to block access to seeing the world from the perspective of nonhuman others and seeks to limit in advance the potentiality of the animal and entire nonhuman world. Activists and theorists of indistinction aim to have us notice and attend to the fact that what our culture

takes to be ‘mere’ animals are capable of entering into modes of relation and ways of life that can never be fully anticipated (8).

In other words, zones of indistinction force those within them to think differently about the human / animal binary and consider the possibility that animals and the nonhuman world are active subjects who build relationships with one another and with humanity.

The concept of zones of indistinction can be applied to both real and fictional worlds. For example, many zones of indistinction were created over the course of the COVID-19 global pandemic as humanity was forced to reckon with spaces in which the human and nonhuman interacted in new and often scary ways. The nonhuman, a virus, became a very real actor in our lives, and many of our paradigms around the human / nonhuman divide were permanently challenged. Conveying this new reality through fiction requires a shift in storytelling. By virtue of the confusion and disorientation that they create, zones of indistinction are hard to render through language alone.

A new reality is being considered through narratives like *Annihilation*. Rather than merely comparing humans and nonhumans, a new being is created that blurs the lines between the two. Conrad writes:

It is no longer a question of resemblance between the comportment of an animal and that of a man. It is even less a question of simple wordplay. There is no longer man or animal, since each deterritorializes the other, in a conjunction of flux, in a continuum of reversible intensities. Instead, it is a question of becoming [...] the crossing of a barrier, a rising or a falling, a bending or an erecting, an accent on the word (36).

Conrad is making a complicated and beautiful point about language. When language is attempting to describe a type of life or being that is neither fully human nor fully animal, it must reach for something new; it must enter a space of becoming. When the assumption of static personhood or animality is stripped from narrative, language must focus on what is emerging rather than what already is, which is why it can feel as though the language is “crossing a barrier,” “rising,” “falling,” “bending,” “erecting,” and accenting.

Within zones of indistinction, it is possible for human characters to become other-than-human or more-than-human, meaning they can transform into nonhuman beings or merge with the nonhuman to become a new kind of creature. By shifting his language at the end of *Annihilation*, VanderMeer opens the biologist and Area X to transformations that may not feel logical to readers. The biologist takes on aspects of Area X, just as Area X mimics and absorbs qualities of the biologist. Consequently, the line between character and environment grows increasingly blurry. Within this blur, or this indistinction, lies the opportunity for kinship.

The biologist’s conclusion leads us to believe that she is approaching the death of her human form, but this is not something to be mourned. As I have argued, the biologist seems more at peace in these moments than in any others within *Annihilation*. She is finding community with the world around her, in Area X and beyond. She has no desire to return to what she has been before. Instead, she decides to move forward, seeking her husband, but also—I think—a new version of herself, one that is in constant connection to the world around her.

It is only through this personal transformation that the Biologist can continue to exist peacefully within the bounds of Area X. As I have argued, *Annihilation* is meant to teach readers something about living in an era of massive ecological upheaval. If we read Area X as a reflection of life within the Anthropocene, it seems that VanderMeer is telling us that to survive, we must evolve, and through this evolution, we can create a beautiful kinship with the nonhuman world.

Conclusion

Creating New Forms of Subjectivity

Ultimately, the biologist sheds her scientific self, the one who seeks answers, data, proof, and human supremacy over nonhuman environments, and embraces her animal self, the biologist who experiences the world through her senses and feelings. In doing so, she models for readers a new form of subjectivity that is not moored in notions of human supremacy but instead embraces the possibilities of a hybrid existence. It is unclear what exactly she becomes at the end of the novel; perhaps she becomes another kind of animal, a plant, or is absorbed by the environment of Area X in other ways. No matter what she becomes, the text suggests that a part of her human experience will remain, much like the dolphin who retains a human eye or the lighthouse keeper who is trapped within the Crawler's alien form. This hybridity is vital to the lessons of Area X—one's human form may change and adapt, and if that process is allowed to occur, survival and meaning are possible within that evolution. Expeditions are presented with a choice to either fear the deaths of their purely human forms or embrace hybridity. In choosing the latter, the biologist can experience what her fellow expedition members do not—a life beyond her human form in Area X.

Because Area X is a prime example of a New Weird environment, it plays a pivotal and active role in the Biologist's transformation. As a character who seeks what Luckhurst calls "promiscuous border zones," or places within the world that combine different ecosystems and defy expectation, like her childhood pool or her beloved tide pools, the biologist is particularly suited to New Weird settings (1055). VanderMeer defines New Weird fiction as a genre that subverts romanticized ideas about place,

meaning that settings are not conventionally defined but are instead fluid, borderless, and permeable. Despite the Southern Reach's best efforts to place borders around Area X, its spread cannot be halted, or, as the biologist theorizes, its colonization of various parts of the world cannot be contained. Area X can also be characterized as a promiscuous border zone because of its transitional nature. As the biologist writes, it moves from beach to marshland to swamp, making possible an exciting amalgamation of life that has evolved to thrive within a variety of ecosystems. These qualities of Area X excite the biologist, and as her environment shifts and changes, so does she. She comes to accept the brightness that has taken over her body as an inevitability of life within Area X and not as something to be feared and kept at bay. Area X enters the biologist's body just as the biologist enters Area X, and the two become molded together that seems entirely unique to the world of New Weird fiction.

Another aspect of New Weird fiction that VanderMeer pays close attention to is its acceptance of monsters. In fact, he calls the acceptance of monsters the starting point of New Weird fiction. Unlike traditional horror, New Weird sees the monster not as a being to conquer or destroy but as a site of possibility, which is why monsters serve as a launching-off point for many of *Annihilation's* core ideas. VanderMeer's monsters bring the biologist, and by proxy the reader, into up-close and personal meetings with the uncanny and abecanny. Both concepts describe a feeling of uneasiness and an awareness that something is off, either because they ignite a repressed memory (the uncanny) or introduce an entirely new and mysterious experience (the abecanny). Uncanny and abecanny creatures and environments set the general tone of *Annihilation* and lend to it an eerie and otherworldly aesthetic. Readers are immersed in these uncanny and abecanny

feelings from the start, and as a result, are primed for meeting monsters that defy explanation. In this thesis, I have paid particular attention to two monsters within the text: the moaning creature and the Crawler, both of whom have uncanny and abecanny qualities. Both creatures are hybrid figures—part human and part nonhuman—that dislodge the biologist's and readers notions of human supremacy and the human / nonhuman binary in Area X.

It is largely through an acceptance of the uncanny and abecanny qualities of Area X that the biologist begins to confront the transformations within herself. She recognizes that she and these monsters are becoming more alike in the sense that her body is evolving beyond its purely human form. At first, she fears this change, and she resists the uncanny and abecanny qualities of her environment and her own transformation. By the end of *Annihilation*, the biologist has found joy in her new, monstrous form, and she has no desire to return to the human world. In this way, the uncanny and abecanny become sites of potential rather than horror tropes alone.

In summation, Area X's unique New Weird qualities, when combined with a plethora of uncanny and abecanny creatures and environments, create fertile ground for the biologist's transformation into a hybrid creature. While many narratives may deem the biologist's evolution monstrous, *Annihilation* treats her as a heroic figure who will not only survive in Area X but thrive in her new form. To become something more than human—that is, to embrace nonhuman characteristics—makes the biologist a stronger figure who is more connected to herself, to human and nonhuman others, and to her environment.

VanderMeer clearly expects that this novel will have ripple effects beyond the fictional world of Area X. As he explains to Timothy Morton: “These novels [the Southern Reach trilogy] are in essence my nature doctrine” (Hageman 52). To write a nature doctrine in a time of climate change requires that VanderMeer give voice to the ways in which we, as humans, are changing and adapting, or failing to change and adapt, to an era of massive ecological upheaval. If *Annihilation* is to be read as a narrative describing life in the Anthropocene, the biologist gives readers a lot to think about in terms of how humans can orient themselves to an environment that is changing rapidly.

With the biologist as our guide, readers are encouraged to open themselves up to the uncanny and abecanny realities of Area X and by doing so, open themselves to those same qualities in their own worlds. If we step outside and take in the strange qualities of climate change, we too will sense a need for transformation within ourselves. For example, if we take time to notice the nonhuman animals that are being displaced from their natural habitats and moving into what we’ve thought of as places meant for humans alone, perhaps we can develop a new kind of relationship to these creatures that fosters connection and learning. This is just one example of how the biologist is modeling a new form of existence; *Annihilation* tells a far wider story of the transformations necessary in both our individual and collective lives and our storytelling if we are to change the course of our planet’s fate in the Anthropocene.

First, we must stop thinking of our environments as places that are controllable. Placing borders around our various environments and maintaining that we are ultimately in control of the nonhuman world is not just preposterously ignorant—it is a dangerous mythology that severs our connection to the nonhuman world, making it incredibly

difficult for us to see the ways we are hurting it and, just as importantly, the ways we can learn from it. If we were to begin viewing our environments as New Weird locales, or locales without boundaries that infuse human and nonhuman life, we can develop a deeper connection to the nonhuman parts of the world around us. Perhaps we will even find greater value in the nonhuman aspects of ourselves. As Alaimo posits:

“Understanding the substance of one’s self as interconnected with the wider environment makes a profound shift in subjectivity” (20).

Next, we must embrace monsters. Rather than run in fear from creatures who defy our expectations of human / nonhuman and sentient / non-sentient boundaries, we must bring these monsters into our lives and ask what we can learn from them. Like the biologist, we can make the choice to confront the monstrous inside and outside of ourselves. We can climb down the tower toward the Crawler and return to the world as different creatures. This may mean that we make individual efforts to spot the uncanny in the world around us and develop relationships with the portions of our environments that remind us, often in spooky ways, of ourselves. It may also mean that we tell different kinds of stories, ones in which creatures who do not occupy dominant and conventional forms of subjectivity are placed at the center of our narratives. Rather than centering white male narratives, what will happen if we bring women to the forefront of storytelling? And even more, what if these women embrace hybridity and become monstrous figures that combine the feminine, nonhuman, and non-sentient? The biologist is a perfect example of the type of character that will emerge from this new space, just as *Annihilation* is an example of a narrative that can come out of changes to our understandings of subjectivity.

Bibliography

- Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press, 2010.
- Andersen, Gregers. "Cli-Fi and the Uncanny." *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 23 no. 4, 2016, pp. 855-866.
- Bolt, Pearson. "Monolithic, Invisible Walls: The Horror of Borders in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*." *Journal of Science Fiction*, vol. 4 no. 1, 2020, pp. 25-34.
- Canavan, Gerry and Andrew Hageman, editors. "Introduction." *Global Weirding*, special issue of *Paradoxa*, no. 28, 2016, pp. 7-14.
- Carroll, Siobhan. "The Terror and the Terroir: The Ecological Uncanny in New Weird Exploration Narratives." *Paradoxa*, vol. 28, 2016.
- Chin, Gabriel. "Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People." *Textual Practice*, vol. 32 no. 3, 2018, pp. 561-564.
- Conrad, Jennifer. *Becoming Nonhuman: Uncanniness, Impossibility and Human-Animal Indistinction in Recent Literature and Visual Art*. 2016. University of Wisconsin, PhD dissertation.
- Creed, Barbara. "The Monstrous Feminine." *The Monster Theory Reader*, edited by Jeffrey Weinstock, University of Minnesota Press, 2020, pp. 211-225.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." 1919. Translated by James Strachey, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII, Hogarth Press, 1966, pp. 217-256.
- Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.

- Hageman, Andrew and Gerry Canavan. "A Conversation between Timothy Morton and Jeff VanderMeer." *Global Weirding*, special issue of *Paradoxa*, no. 28, 2016, pp. 41-66.
- Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, 1991.
- . *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke Press, 2016
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Luckhurst, Roger. "The Weird: A Dis/Orientation." *Textual Practice*, vol. 31 no. 6, 2017, pp. 1041-1061.
- Malcolm-Clarke, Darja. "Subversive Metropolis: The Grotesque Body in the Phantasmic Urban Landscape." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 17 no. 2, 2006, pp. 140-154.
- Morton, Timothy. *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. Columbia UP, 2016.
- . *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. University of Minnesota Press, 2013.
- . *The Ecological Thought*. Harvard UP, 2010.
- Noys, Benjamin and Timothy S. Murphy. "Introduction: Old and New Weird." *Genre*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2016, pp. 117-134,
- Sperling, Alison. *Second Skins: A Body-Ecology of Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy*. *Paradoxa*, vol. 28, 2016, pp. 214-238.

Temperton, James. “‘Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds’. The story of Oppenheimer’s infamous quote.” *Wired*, 8 Sep. 2017, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/manhattan-project-robert-oppenheimer>. Accessed 20 Oct. 2022)

VanderMeer, Jeff. *Annihilation*. FSG Originals, 2014.

---. “Hauntings in the Anthropocene: An Initial Exploration.” *Environmental Critique*, vol 7, 2016.

---. “The New Weird: It’s Alive?” *The New Weird*, edited by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer, Taychon Publications, 2008, pp. ix-xviii.

van Loon, Julianne. *The Thinking Woman*. Rutgers University Press, 2020.

Witzel, Guy. Abcanny Waters: Victor LaValle, John Langan, and the Weird Horror of Climate Change. *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 45, 2018, pp. 560-574.