Moving Beyond “our banal, murderous imagination”: The Ideology of the Weird and the (De)composition of Progress in Environmental Science Fiction

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Abstract

Weird science fiction is a subcategory of science fiction that adapts horror and supernatural elements, often with a focus on awe- and fear-inspiring monsters. In this paper, I argue for a shift from exploring the generic qualities of weirdness to weirdness as a *mode* inherent to the ideologies of science fiction. As a mode, the weird's stance seems to be one of entanglement, porosity, and multispecies becoming, a stance in opposition to the commonly held belief that science-fiction works are a bastion of humanity's progress ever onwards and upwards. In working out our relationship to progress, a supposedly natural and inevitable forever-fantasy that views the environment as something separate from and with less agency than humans, we come to the weird: we come to progress's failure – how it fails, why it fails, and where to go from here. The three primary texts analyzed in this paper, Jack London's "The Red One," J. G. Ballard's "The Terminal Beach," and Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy, all occupy an important place historically in the science fiction genre, but they also disrupt the ideologies of progress that dominate much science fiction literature. These works do this through the underlying, shadowy presence of weirdness that reveal both humans' inherent interconnectedness and limited perceptions of the world.

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Introduction

"Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?"

– (Merleau-Ponty 138)

John Rieder writes, in his analysis of the colonialist impulses buried at the root of science fiction, that "belief in progress is an absolute prerequisite to the formation of science fiction" (29). But there are a multitude of science-fiction stories that dramatize the failures of progress rather than expressing a belief in its utopian potential. What, then, happens to our formation of science fiction when our belief in progress is contested, deconstructed, or, as Latour would put it, decomposed? I argue that this type of decomposing inquiry reveals a decidedly posthumanist bent, and that above all else, the science fiction that arises out of it looks "weird." Works such as Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy (which I will talk about at length in this paper) hold at their core Latour's imperative that we enact "a subtle but radical transformation in the definition of what it means to progress, that is, to *process* forward and meet new prospects" (473). *Southern Reach* has become emblematic as an example of what we would typically call *weird science fiction* – a subcategory of science fiction that adapts horror and supernatural elements, often with a focus on awe- and fear-inspiring monsters. I want to focus less on the generic qualities of weirdness, however, and to instead highlight what I am calling "the ideology of the weird" – an impulse that is twinned to and in an ever-present dialectic with the ideology of progress that lies at the root of the history of pretty much all western science fiction.

This ideology of progress arises out of a modernist, Eurocentric point of view, one that professes myths of eternal growth, disconnects the human from the "inert" natural environment,

and erases likewise the subjugation of those (human, plant, animal, etc.) who stand in the way of this traditional impulse towards ever-increasing growth. For the purposes of this paper, we will look at the ways that the ideology of progress impacts the environment, characterizing it as something separate from and with less agency than humans (and perhaps no agency at all). The most contemporary example of the real-life failures of the ideology of progress on the environment is climate change, but I will also look back to earlier incarnations of these attitudes, including European colonization and Cold-War-era disregard for the environment. The ideology of the weird undercuts the ideology of progress in three noteworthy texts: Jack London's "The Red One," J. G. Ballard's "The Terminal Beach," and Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy. All three works occupy an important place historically in the science fiction genre, but they also disrupt the ideologies of progress that dominate much science fiction literature. These works do this through the underlying, shadowy presence of weirdness that reveal both humans' inherent interconnectedness and limited perceptions of the world.

As I hope to put into practice into this paper, a definition of a thing is no substitute for an awareness of the thing in action, so I do not intend to "define" the weird as much as I intend to show what it does, how it works. Roger Luckhurst, for example, approaches his own introduction to the weird as a "Dis/Orientation" rather than an "orientation," arguing that it "dissolves generic glue...defies categorisation, and...by definition escapes the containment of the act of 'introduction.' The weird reveals the best iterations of itself in the way it disorients any simple route map through the territory" (2). This notion of mapping a territory, of traversing a landscape or a wilderness, is fitting for the works I choose to analyze in this paper, because they all focus on explorers, expeditions, and different attempts to come to know or to understand a certain type of natural (although the idea of "natural" will be interrogated) environment. The weird in these

stories of exploration functions via a type of messy seepage that defies systems of organization and categorization, resulting in "a fiction of strange zones and borderscapes, its monsters boundary-crawlers that slime all over generic quarantines, making borders less lines of separation than promiscuous contact zones" (Luckhurst 24-25).

This kind of porous "monstrosity" shares much in common with the posthuman, and I would like to align the weird with posthumanist thought in the sense that they both interrogate the knowable via multispecies becomings. I am thinking in particular of the new materialist strain of posthumanist thought, of which Francesca Ferrando provides a succint overview:

> "New materialisms pose no division between language and matter: biology is culturally mediated as much as culture is materialistically constructed. New materialisms perceive matter as an ongoing process of materialization, elegantly reconciling science and critical theories…. Matter is not viewed in any way as something static, fixed, or passive, waiting to be molded by some external force; rather, it is emphasized as 'a process of materialization.' Such a process, which is dynamic, shifting, inherently entangled, diffractional, and performative, does not hold any primacy over the materialization, nor can the materialization be reduced to its processual terms" (31).

In this model of posthumanism, focused on our material and biological realities, subjectivity takes on fleshy interconnectivities. There is a reason that Haraway names our current era the Chthulucene, after one of H.P. Lovecraft's most well-known weird monsters, rather than the Anthropocene; she sees all creatures as interrelated in 'tentacular' entanglings – "critters do not precede their relatings; they make each other through semiotic material involution, out of the beings of previous such entanglement" (*Staying* 60). Haraway focuses on living beings, but

others have extended her ideas of multispecies becoming to include broader agencies, such as the environment itself. I will draw primarily from Stacy Alaimo's idea of *transcorporeality*, which she defines as "the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from 'nature' or 'environment,'" for these purposes ("Transcorporeal Feminisms" 238). This notion of transcorporeality is crucial to understanding how the weird performs the posthumanist task of barring humanity from standing alone, as superior, triumphant, "sovereign" colonizers who perform a one-sided mapping and scientific study of their environments. The impetus towards ever-increasing knowledge and progress must be reconfigured into a new type of multispecies awareness and subjectivity.

For contemporary readers, this reconfiguration of multispecies awareness is perhaps most prevalent in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy. In *Annihilation*, the first book of the trilogy, as the protagonist, known only as the biologist, tries to piece together an understanding of Area X, she admits that "I am aware that all of this speculation is incomplete, inexact, 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" (VanderMeer 192-193). This indictment of our instruments, methodology, and motivations is at the core of what I wish to accomplish with this paper: to show how weird texts depict posthuman environmental agencies undercutting the hegemonic thrust of institutions of knowledge, revealing how these institutions (colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, etc.) and their inherent obsessions with progress are filled with violent impulses that ultimately to do not "progress" to anywhere. Progress, a forever-fantasy that we view as both inevitable and natural, is ultimately futile; we must find some other way of interacting with the world. An attention to the weird, not just in "weird" science fiction, but as a mode inherent to the ideologies of science fiction, helps us see

the methods by which this conception of knowledge is subverted. For the biologist, for example, the "objective" mapping of the outer world is inextricably entwined with the interrogation of the subjective being. With this paper I want to explore how this type of posthuman entanglement can help us look not only for the failures of progress, but also for the promise of the weird.

With this is mind, I will focus on the ways in which the agency of environmental systems contributes to posthuman subjectivities in these three texts, specifically through the way these types of agencies appear in speculative works that treat notions of Earth exploration. Although the same type of analysis could undoubtedly (and perhaps should) be performed on stories that deal with extraterrestrial exploration and colonization, I have chosen to limit my analysis to stories that take place on Earth, particularly because of the state of precarity that Earth residents are currently experiencing. It is crucial to rethink how to live with each other, *here and now*, rather than *out there and later*. Perhaps we have made the earth alien, and we need to relearn how to be a viable part of it. As J.G. Ballard, the author of one of the stories I will analyze in this paper, says, "the only truly alien planet is Earth" ("Which Way" 197).

The three works I focus on in this thesis are spread over about a century, from 1918 to 2014, but I don't view them as a genealogy, with one work the cause or effect, progenitor or spawn, of another work. Rather, I view them as emblematic of a surprisingly consistent expression of the weird at different times throughout the history of science fiction. Many more works could, and should be added to this analysis, if we truly begin to "think of the weird as an inflection or tone, a mode rather than a genre" (Luckhurst 7). *Mode* is different from genre; it is "a way of doing something...of telling stories….a stance, a position on the world as well as a means of portraying it" (Attebery 295). As a mode, the weird's stance seems to be one of entanglement, porosity, and multispecies becoming, a stance in opposition to the commonly held

belief that science-fiction works are a bastion of humanity's progress ever onwards and upwards. In working out our relationship to progress, then, we come to the weird: we come to progress's failure – how it fails, why it fails, and where to go from here.

Southern Reach will bookend my discussion, initially highlighting the insidious apocalypse that results from a breakdown of our ability to continually progress via established knowledge-making practices. Then I will move into a discussion of two short stories, Jack London's 1918 "The Red One," and J. G. Ballard's 1964 "The Terminal Beach." These stories will help us understand more fully the ideologies leading up to the impending apocalypse in the *Southern Reach*, and how the deconstruction of institutions of knowledge is not at all a new phenomenon in science fiction. "The Red One" will illustrate a budding (although perhaps not fully realized) awareness of the failure of the (white, male, privileged, colonizing) human to stand triumphant at the center of all things – the jungle, its indigenous inhabitants, and the enigmatic Red One itself all work to disrupt the central position of Bassett, the explorer in this story. In "The Terminal Beach," the eerily synthetic wilderness of the island of Eniwetok sets the backdrop for Traven's self-disintegration, and the legacy of U.S. imperialism is both acknowledged and ignored in striking ways throughout this famous exploration of "inner" rather than "outer" space. Finally, I will return to the *Southern Reach* at the end of this paper to help us answer the question of what to do now, in situations of grave precarity, situations we have helped create that seem beyond both comprehension and coping. Who is actually able to "survive" Area X, and what does "survival" even mean in the context of our awareness of transcorporeal environmental systems? There is a necessity for new ways of being in the world today, and I hope to show how the weird can ultimately be a productive, and hopeful, source for understanding how to align ourselves in such a way.

"Studying" Area X: Destabilizing Knowledges in the *Southern Reach Trilogy*

The *Southern Reach* trilogy showcases a multitude of attempts, on both the individual and the institutional level, to study and understand a stretch of Floridian wilderness known as Area X. The trilogy is explicit in its interrogation of the twinned impulse to know and to control, as all three novels show, in various ways, how all attempts to reach a definite understanding of the history and ecological workings of Area X are violently thrust back upon the ones doing the investigating. The *Southern Reach* deconstructs what it means to study something, whether up close and personal as part of an expedition, or from farther away, as part of a government institution such as the Southern Reach. The tendency for human knowledge-seeking to be destructive to its subject of study is reversed – Area X is destructive to its human explorers. As we will see, this destabilizing of knowledge will go so far as to question even the power of language to organize and capture reality.

The expedition into Area X that is played out in *Annihilation*, the first novel of the trilogy, helps to dramatize the failures of disciplinary knowledge to understand the world. Each of the women on this expedition is referred to by her job title, defined by the way that she has been trained to discover and understand new information: a biologist, an anthropologist, a surveyor, and a psychologist. They embody their particular expertise, but all four's fields fail them in some way or another. For example, surprise landmarks appear that aren't present in the surveyor's maps, and the biologist has the sense that the samples she looks at under a microscope change when she isn't looking at them. Even the story that we are reading itself becomes suspect, as it is presented as the biologist's written record of her experiences in Area X. We are made intimately aware of her limited, subjective perspective, rather than what she wishes to be, "the

kind of impartial observer who simply catalogues details" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 51). The biologist dramatizes for us the philosophical idea of being embedded in a transcorporeal environmental system – this inability to separate the self from the environment "surrounding" it – through the "colonizing" spores of Area X that weave their way into her biology, changing the way that she views things and how she is able to understand them. Even the connection to her husband, who was part of the previous, eleventh expedition, complicates the biologist's status as "a credible, objective witness" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 56). She muses, "But how could I not be affected by Area X, if only through him?" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 56). There is too much leakage, too much connection between those who study Area X and Area X itself. There is no real "border" between Area X and the rest of the world, in an example of what Alaimo calls "the movement across—across time, across place, across species, across bodies, across scale" that "reconfigures the human as a site of emergent material intra-actions inseparable from the very stuff of the rest of the world" (*Bodily Natures* 156). These material intra-actions between the biologist and her experiences concerning Area X show the impossibility of understanding its phenomena according to a method of science that views the environment as an inert "thing" to be studied.

Just as the members of the expeditions into Area X eventually are forced to distrust and eventually to abandon their disciplinary training, they also come to find institutional knowledge suspect. The Southern Reach, taking its orders from the vaguely named Central, is the government agency in charge of studying Area X and has trained them for the expedition, but the training process is quickly revealed to have been riddled with both partial and false information. Although the Southern Reach is seen as an authority on Area X, the manipulation of the expeditions into Area X (many more than the previous eleven that the twelfth expedition has

been told of) is really a coverup of the fact that the institutional knowledges of the Southern Reach are just as hopelessly far from understanding the truth as the expeditions are. The biologist settles on the fact that, in the end, "it did not matter what we knew or didn't know" – any type of knowledge or preparation would in the end always be insufficient for actually becoming embedded in the environment (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 95).

This ultimately is also true for those at the Southern Reach itself. Even though they are "separate" from Area X, their unique awareness and study of it makes them equally embedded in the environment. Area X eludes understanding not just on the level of the expeditions, but also on the level of military industrial-capitalist research and subjugation. John Rodriguez, who goes by Control (and who illustrates the fruitless desire for "control" that is wrapped up in the hegemonic thrust towards definite knowledge), arrives as the new acting director of the Southern Reach at the beginning of *Authority*, the second book in the trilogy, and is meant to piece together the old director's legacy and see what he can learn about Area X via what she has left behind. He has to rely on direct accounts of Area X and its expeditions – files, videos, and even interviews – but they only ever serve to increase the mystery rather than to decrease it. Control has a sense that "he wasn't above it all–he was *in* it," which we can see as a corollary to the biologist – embedded in the ecosystem of Area X (VanderMeer, *Authority* 5). This ecosystem, however, is an ecosystem formed out of the mire of bureaucracy. Control's mission (given to him by the enigmatic "Voice," who we later find out is a man named Lowry, the only survivor of the first expedition into Area X) is described to him as "'to acclimatize, assess, analyze, and then dig in deep,'" essentially to do what the expeditions in Area X did, but on the level of the Southern Reach (VanderMeer, *Authority* 8).

Control's "expedition" into the Southern Reach reveals that the very institutional and ideological structure of the Southern Reach is what is causing it to fail – its secrecy, its lack of communication and honesty, its obsessive, violent attempts to uncover the truth, and the way that it is more than willing to sacrifice countless lives for the purpose of uncovering a truth that might be impossible for humans to comprehend, with no sense of what they will do with that knowledge once gained. The ideology of the weird reveals the "progressive" ideas of security and containment to be a farce, and the risk that Area X poses, in the end, ironically makes some lives (the expedition members, the thousands of white rabbits forced across the border into Area X, etc.), worth risking. The attitude of the Southern Reach overlaps with Donna Haraway's discussions of the different types of subjectivities composed in the sciences. She says that "evolutionary momentum, always verging on modernist notions of progress, is a constant theme….Even as these sciences lay the groundwork for scientific conceptualization of the Anthropocene, they are undone in the very thinking of Anthropocene systems that require enfolded autopoietic and sympoietic analysis" (Haraway, *Staying* 62). In other words, the ideologies of progress that are central to the Southern Reach's study of Area X (that assume that "Area X" is a completely separate, viewable and understandable "object" for study) are the things that reveal their own failings – that reveal that Area X and the Southern Reach are "both subjects and objects to each other in ongoing intra-action," as Haraway says about the posthuman relationship between people and lab specimens (*Species* 72).

Perhaps most fascinating about the ways in which the *Southern Reach* trilogy illustrates this devaluation of institutional knowledge is the literal physical breakdown of material manifestations of that knowledge. Samples from Area X misbehave (a plant refusing to die, a cell phone with the apparent ability to scuttle around on its own), and notes, written records, and

files on Area X are treated as fodder for Area X. The old director's notes, "much-worried sentences and phrases existing in a rich patina of cross-outs and paintovers and other markings," remind Control of "a compost of words," rather than information that he can process intellectually (VanderMeer, *Authority* 273). A packet of one of the Southern Reach scientist's theories on Area X, "a masterpiece entitled 'Combined Theories: A Complete Approach,'" literally dissolves in a puddle in Area X by the end of the third book in the series, *Acceptance* (VanderMeer 42). Every expedition member to ever venture into Area X is instructed to keep a journal, and the biologist stumbles across these journals in a pile in one of the lighthouses in Area X. The image of the journals in a "moldering pile about twelve feet high and sixteen feet wide that in places near the bottom had clearly turned to compost, the paper rotting away. Beetles and silverfish tended to those archives, and tiny black cockroaches with always moving antennae," shows the ecosystem itself devouring records of that ecosystem, asking what the actual value of these records is for recording anything useful (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 111). The biologist notes that "Slowly the history of Area X could be said to be turning into Area X" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 112). These "compost" documents of supposed knowledge about Area X are illustrative of Latour's "Compositionist Manifesto," in which he outlines the necessity of a shift away from modernist critique, which "was predicated on the discovery of a true world of realities lying behind a veil of appearances," to compositionism, which "takes up the task of searching for universality but without believing that this universality is already there, waiting to be unveiled and discovered" (474-475). Unlike the toolsets of modernist critique, which assume that they exist outside of time and place, with compositionism our attitude towards nature changes "from a nature always already there to an assemblage to be slowly composed" (Latour 477). Thus, the decomposition of physical artifacts of knowledge dramatizes this shift in

a materially involved way – useless knowledges are composed by expeditions, and then decomposed by Area X.

The destabilizing of knowledge is so complete in the *Southern Reach* trilogy that it extends even to the act of naming, showing the effects and anxieties of simply naming a thing. Speaking of a strange structure burrowing into the ground, the biologist says, "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" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 6). This naming impulse has an organizing effect: for example, a "tower" leads to a different conception of the thing's parts and purposes than a "tunnel" ("A tower, which made this level not so much a floor as a landing or part of the turret") (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 21). Language winds us down and down, dizzying us in our search for the truth, which might actually lead us further and further away as we attempt to approach it. This failure of language remains the same with the words being written in the tower ("'*Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead to share with the worms that…*'") – the words being written here can in the end convey nothing other than affect; they cannot convey what is typically privileged as definite, objective information, no matter how much the expedition members obsess over and try to analyze them (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 23). This isn't even to mention that in addition to attempting to parse out the words linguistically, they can also be potentially parsed out biologically, as they are also alive, a "miniature ecosystem" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 24).

The Southern Reach approaches the study of Area X via a hegemonic institutional power imbued with a colonizing gaze, but Area X inverts this colonizing gaze, turning it over on the ones doing the studying; the expeditions end up completely powerless in the face of Area X's starkly other-than-human agency. They become the recipient of the destructive interrogating

gaze that humans have used on the environment – they become the ones pulled apart and changed via study. Area X seems to have an awareness of everyone who studies it, and it "re-forms, ever questing, forever sampling," but via weird modes of knowledge that are foreign to us, different from us, and for purposes that we cannot understand (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 7).

The *Southern Reach* trilogy is relatively straightforward in its critique of the ideology of progress: all of the methods we use to progress forward are disrupted and interrogated by the weirdness of Area X. The previous director of the Southern Reach has a dream (told in second person) that "you stand on the sidelines, holding the plant in one hand and the cell phone in the other, watching a war between Central and Area X. In some fundamental way, you feel, they have been in conflict for far longer than thirty years–for ages and ages, centuries in secret" (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 228). It is this "secret" conflict between what Central represents (the ideology of progress) and what Area X represents (the ideology of the weird) that I want to turn to in my next two readings, before returning to the *Southern Reach* to analyze the hopefulness buried in its ideology of the weird.

Weirding the Ambivalence in "The Red One"

Barbara Lindquist writes that "few have recognized the science in London," speaking of Jack London's science fiction stories (99). I would like to add that even fewer have recognized the weird. There is much contradiction and confusion about where to place London's writing ideologically: Crews writes that "there is ample evidence of contrary leanings in London's work towards both socialism and individualism," and that "there is even a degree of romanticism in the presentation of his protagonists which makes it difficult to reconcile them with Naturalism" (205-206, 211). Lovett-Graff calls London "a profound Darwinist as well as a committed Marxist" (89). Where London scholars often see confusion, I see something productive – London's often contradictory ideological positionings are *weird*. They are weird in the sense of their ideological border-crossings and slippage, and I want to read one representative short story of his, "The Red One," with attention to what Luckhurst describes as an "open, dynamic, undetermined set of possibilities…a productive method to transfer to the weird" (8). My reading of "The Red One" as playing into the dialectic between the ideology of progress and the ideology of the weird arises out of London's naturalist perspective and the complications that it produces. For London, according to Lovett-Graff, "no less subject than the rest of organic life to the whims of Nature and its random organic developments, here is the price humanity pays for its insertion into the natural order of things. No longer can humanity claim pride of place in Nature's chain of being; instead, in London's scheme, humanity is just as much prey as predator" (100-101). This perspective is strikingly similar to the traditionally weird notion of "cosmic indifference" – "of a universe expanded inconceivably in time and space by scientific discovery in the nineteenth century, and which dethroned anthropocentric conceptions of the world" (Luckhurst 5). This

overall powerlessness of the human being in relation to the natural world, or, if we read it for its affinity to posthumanism, this integration of humans *into* the natural world rather than above it, constitutes the weird strain of London's "The Red One," even as the story struggles to grapple with notions of evolutionary and scientific progress that come hand-in-hand with nineteenth-century naturalism.

John Rieder astutely notes that "The Red One" contains an "overriding ambivalence that makes itself felt at every level at which one attempts to approach the text" (94). To understand this ambivalence, we need to analyze the ideological baggage that accompanies Bassett, our protagonist, on his trip to the island of Ringmanu to collect a rare species of butterfly. To start, Mary Louise Pratt points out the significance of the figure of the naturalist in nineteenth-century depictions of travel:

> "Specimen gathering, the building up of collections, the naming of new species, the recognition of known ones, became standard themes in travel and travel books. Alongside the frontier figures of the seafarer, the conqueror, the captive, the diplomat, there began to appear everywhere the benign, decidedly literate figure of the 'herborizer,' armed with nothing more than a collector's bag, a notebook, and some specimen bottles, desiring nothing more than a few peaceful hours alone with the bugs and flowers." (27)

But Bassett's (on the surface) innocuous task of searching for bugs is undercut with menace – he has arrived to Ringmanu on a blackbirder, a ship for enslaving indigenous Pacific islanders, and he is armed with a gun and both uses it and threatens to use it against the indigenous populations on the island. His entire journey is imbued with the rhetoric of colonialism, and Pratt further expands on the naturalist figure to elaborate on their role in European conquest: The naturalist is

part of "a narrative of 'anti-conquest,' in which the naturalist naturalizes the bourgeois European's own global presence and authority. This naturalist's narrative was to continue to hold enormous ideological force" (28).

London is using this "naturalist's narrative" as the backbone of his story, but it is unclear to what extent the story is a direct critique of it – thus the aforementioned ambivalence. We sense this ambivalence at the start of the story, as Bassett almost immediately contradicts his own scientific nature: "The abrupt liberation of sound, as he timed it with his watch, Bassett likened to the trump of an archangel" (London 117). He measures the peal of the mysterious sound that he calls the Red One, while at the same time assigning a sublime significance to it, a placement of the thing outside of the realm of scientific categorization. This type of slippage, which persists throughout the entirety of the story, leads us to eventually question the very validity of the colonial project that Bassett is a part of.

I want to read "The Red One," as I did the *Southern Reach*, with an awareness of Alaimo's notion of the transcorporeal self, because it will help us understand Bassett's positioning. Alaimo writes:

> "As the material self cannot be disentangled from networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial, what was once the ostensibly bounded human subject finds herself in a swirling landscape of uncertainty where practices and actions that were once not even remotely ethical or political matters suddenly become the very stuff of the crises at hand." (*Bodily Natures* 20)

This change in positioning is what occurs to Bassett upon his arrival to Ringmanu – the politicization and the ideologies fueling his expedition are brought to the surface when he puts

himself in this environment. The jungle environment in particular is wrapped up in both Bassett and London's sociopolitical preoccupations. London often writes about the Pacific Islands with a racist and colonialist tone of disgust, usually resulting in the white colonizer turning to savagery due to the influence of the indigenous peoples. Earle Labor problematically calls this particular version of London's vision of the South Pacific his "Melanesian" fiction: "In the midst of ruthless savagery, the white man is reduced to like savagery; human values are cruelly subverted in this rotting green hell" (153). In "The Red One," however, emphasis is placed not necessarily on the indigenous natives, but on the natives as *part* of the jungle environment, and furthermore on the entire environmental network system in which the jungle itself appears to take on agency. The entire jungle "network" seems to poison reason and rational thought; thus the description of "the dank and noisome jungle" as brimming with an insidious will of its own – "it actually stank with evil, and it was always twilight….And beneath that roof was an aerial ooze of vegetation, a monstrous, parasitic dripping of decadent lifeforms that rooted in death and lived on death" (London 120-121).

The Red One is undeniably part of this jungle environment, this networked system that includes the indigenous people, the jungle, and the Red One itself, but Bassett chooses to align it more with the pastoral grasslands, the "sweet, soft, tender, pasture grass that would have delighted the eyes and beasts of any husbandman" (London 121). The sound of the Red One is described as "wonderful," "sweet," and "like a benediction to his long-suffering, pain-wracked spirit" (London 121). It is a symbol to Bassett of the tamed, systematized, Linnean vision of an orderly nature in which "All the plants on the earth…could be incorporated into this single system of distinctions, including any as yet unknown to Europeans" (Pratt 25). The unexamined, uncategorized, unmanaged jungle wilderness is thus shown to be in stark contrast (and a threat

to) the task of colonial scientific exploration, with its obsessive organization and taxonomic classification and its impulse to order and control. But the Red One is very literally and materially part of the jungle environment, deep in its depths, and its presence within this "evil" environment, heavy with its own weird, dark agency, complicates and undercuts Bassett's understanding of it as a sounding of sublime, potentially even divine knowledge.

What the Red One represents to Bassett is in stark contrast to what it represents and how it functions for the indigenous islanders. London's portrayal of the indigenous islanders is incontrovertibly racist, but the weirdness of the story inflects this portrayal with a certain ambivalence that hints at more – that prompts the readers, through Bassett's changes in perspective, to rethink their (de)valuing of the Pacific Island natives. This is particularly true for Ngurn, the indigenous priest that Bassett often talks to as he is approaching death. Ngurn's dismissive appraisal of Bassett functions similarly to the way that Area X inverts the colonizing, interrogating gaze: "The exotic, once it had been scrutinized, analyzed, theorized, catalogued, and displayed, showed a tendency to turn back upon and re-evaluate those who had thus appropriated and appraised it" (Rieder 4). Ngurn, the tribe's priest and resident curer of heads, is the person in the tribe most closely aligned with Bassett's ideal image of science, and they seem to be able to communicate with each other to a certain extent. Ngurn, along with the indigenous community he advises, becomes tied to the past rather than to ideas of progress and the future – Ngurn carries and recites to Bassett local tribal histories. His practice of curing heads also seems to serve an important historical function – it is implied that one of the heads is so old that it is potentially a Viking explorer. There is also a reversal of privilege in their relationship that performs the type of "reevaluation" that Rieder mentions: Bassett attempts to strike a deal in order to have access to the Red One – "'When I die I'll let you have my head to cure, if, first,

you take me to look upon the Red One,'" Bassett asks, and Ngurn replies, "'I will have your head anyway when you are dead'" (London 126).

At the end of the day, though, these reversals and ambivalencies remain outside of Bassett's awareness – he remains wholeheartedly stuck in his colonialist and social Darwinist appraisal of the Red One. The revelation that the Red One appears to be extraterrestrial allows Bassett to reorient himself to his own self-supposed superiority, bringing to the forefront his allegiance to scientific thought (and progress) over humanism – "to him, human life had dwarfed to microscopic proportions before this colossal portent of higher life from within the distances of the sidereal universe" (London 131). He aligns the pilots of the Red One with himself – reason and scientific understanding, he muses, characterize both Western Europeans in their colonialist conquest of the world, as well as the Red One's pilots who ended up on Earth – "intelligences that questioned and sought the meaning and the construction of the whole. So reasoning, he felt his soul go forth in kinship with that august company" (133). Thus the Red One becomes a fixture in Bassett's mind of the utopian image that (white, colonizing) man may one day be able to reach through scientific progress.

All of Bassett's obsessive thoughts surrounding the Red One, as honed-in on rationality and scientific progress as they are from Bassett's point of view, are revealed for the reader to be exactly the opposite – they are obsessive and irrational. He imagines, with no proper evidence, that "this enormous sphere should contain vast histories, profounds of research archived beyond man's wildest guesses, laws and formulae that, easily mastered, would make man's life on earth, individual and collective, spring up from its present mire to inconceivable heights of purity and power" (133). Not unlike some expedition members' obsessions with the words written by the Crawler in Area X, "the idealized alien 'message' is full of significance but devoid of meaning,

allowing Bassett to fill its empty volumes with his own fantasies" (Rieder 94-95). It is in the grips of Bassett's fevered obsession that we begin to see that this obsession is truly with his own image of hegemonic scientific progress, and not *actually* with the Red One, which remains a weird, unknowable material fixture of the jungle environment throughout the entirety of the story. The motivation towards the type of rational progress Bassett strives for is turned on its head, revealed as another form of irrationality – another faulty, incomplete striving towards an impossible utopia. Rieder argues that "every meaning attributed to the Red One is paranoid...because it is based on an inescapably self-centered construction of a coherent reality" (95-96). When Bassett makes up his mind that "what he had to do was recover from the abominable fevers that weakened him and gain to civilization. Then would he lead an expedition back, and, although the entire population of Guadalcanal be destroyed, extract from the heart of the Red One the message of the world from other worlds," we can see the truth of the way that Bassett has constructed his relationship to reality – the violent, hegemonic, colonialist impulse masquerading within the guise of nonthreatening, bug-collecting science (London 134).

Bassett's central hubris – believing that he will be able to gain "full knowledge of the Red One and the source of the Red One's wonderful voice," comes to its ultimate conclusion in the final moments of the story, when Ngurn sacrifices Bassett to the Red One (London 129). At this moment, when Bassett finally hears the full-fledged peal of the Red One, he hears in it "the intelligence of supermen of planets of other suns; it was the voice of God….In that moment the interstices of matter were his, and the interfusings and intermating transfusing of matter and force" (136). The ultimate knowledge that Bassett appears to gain is, in the end, more of an affective response than definite, categorizable knowledge, although it is presented as both intimately and cosmically significant. This conflation makes us rethink the supposed superiority

and uncontested nature of Western scientific knowledge. Bassett, even, potentially acknowledges this in his final moments, as he has the ability to kill Ngurn with his shotgun, but chooses not to, because "head-hunting, cannibal beast of a human that was as much ape as human, nevertheless old Ngurn had, according to his lights, played squarer than square. Ngurn was in himself a fore-runner of ethics and contract, of consideration, and gentleness in man" (London 136). Ngurn is placed by Bassett along a social Darwinist trajectory that conflates evolution and progress. This moment seems to reinforce the ideological positioning of the story as a revelatory, but ultimately not revisionary, look into the heart of notions of scientific progress in the late nineteenth century.

There is one final "flip" of these colonial ideas in the very final moments of the story. Just as he is about to die, Bassett sees both "the shadow of the Unknown, a sense of impending marvel of the rending of all before the imaginable" as well as "the serene face of the Medusa, Truth," conflating the two, questioning whether it is possible to reach one without almost encountering and having to deal with the other (137). The image that he sees, the image representative of both this ultimate truth and this ultimate unknown, is "the vision of his head turning slowly, always turning, in the devil-devil house beside the breadfruit tree" (137). London completes the same type of reversal that is present in the *Southern Reach* trilogy: Ngurn's interrogating gaze appraises Bassett now. Grappling with the unknown, seeking to encounter truth becomes a disorienting, inverting experience. This connection of the ideological stance towards scientific progress and knowledge with a phenomenological reorienting of the (in)ability to experience truth has profound resonances with the positioning of posthumanist philosophies. The truth of the matter is, as Seals puts it, that "the foreign landscape that claims Bassett forever at the end of 'The Red One' was never, at any moment, anything more or less than exactly what it was. Bassett's downfall was that he refused to let himself believe that" (14). Rieder writes that

"science fiction exposes something that colonialism imposes" (15). For the purposes of this paper, I would like to amend that, and say that *the weird* exposes something that the impulse towards *progress* imposes. In this story's weirdness, the naturalistic tendency is pushed up to the limit of cosmic horror, but Bassett never quite perceives this horror. The jungle and all of the agents within it strip him of his conception of unique, individual agency as he becomes a transcorporeal self, but he continues to strive towards what he views as the pinnacle of evolution, the pinnacle of civilization, even though that thing itself (the Red One) is in reality also an emblem and a part of the dark, disruptive, disorienting jungle. There is never any reason in Bassett's obsessive search for the Red One, only his own mapping of reason onto it, and this impulse towards a utopian pinnacle of knowledge and progress rather than an acceptance of the embedded, material truth of the Red One ends, ultimately, in Bassett's death – a weird, triumphant death that can be read with just as much ambivalence as the rest of the story can be read.

Futile Progress: "The Terminal Beach"

While Bassett never arrives at an awareness of the ways in which the ideology of the weird has "infected" his expedition towards progress, in J.G. Ballard's "The Terminal Beach," there is an awareness that the ideology of progress has played out to its ultimate end: the creation of the hydrogen bomb, and that all that is left to do is sit around and wait for the world to end. The weird seeps into this story as a feature of the environment and the way that Traven, who has marooned himself on the South Pacific atoll Eniwetok, is in relationship to that environment. There is nothing explicitly supernatural in this story, but the psychic impact of the Anthropocene takes its weird toll on Traven.

"The Terminal Beach" is emblematic of what Ballard calls the exploration of *inner space*, rather than outer space: "the internal landscape of today that is a transmuted image of the past, and one of the most fruitful areas for the imaginative writer" ("Time, Memory" 200). It is the concept of an internal *landscape* here that interests me, because we see this exploration of inner space play out in the story via the environment surrounding Traven. In much the same way that Alaimo configures "the messy, multiple, material origins of th[e] posthuman...that begins from a movement across—across time, across place, across species, across bodies, across scale—and reconfigures the human as a site of emergent material intra-actions inseparable from the very stuff of the rest of the world," Traven is a posthuman figure whose relationship to the environment includes not only Eniwetok itself, but also the spacetime environment – the surrounding socio-historical context that Ballard believes bleeds into the subconscious (*Bodily Natures* 156). We will see both of these components interact, impressing themselves upon Traven and becoming part of his dissolution among the blocks.

Ballard is interested in the ways that scientific experimentation as mediated through war can be played out in the realm of the individual psyche, and even though I am less interested in aligning myself with his psychoanalytic perspective, and more interested in examining this story for what it can reveal about fleshy, material relations in the Anthropocene, it will still be helpful to get a sense of where this Ballardian "death drive" comes from. The landscape that Traven traverses is one that has been irrevocably changed by the military-industrial complex and Cold-War-era scientific experimentation on weapons of mass destruction. Anna Tsing describes the impact of this era of discovery: "Grasping the atom was the culmination of human dreams of controlling nature. It was also the beginning of those dreams' undoing" (3). The evidence of this undoing is, for Ballard, psychological – he sets up the island to illustrate a collective, historical unconscious that directly impacts Traven's malaise. In quoting a book on the intersection of group psychology and war, he says that "'*ideas of world-destruction are latent in the unconscious mind. Nagasaki destroyed by the magic of science is the nearest man had yet approached to the realization of dreams that even during the safe immobility of sleep are accustomed to develop into nightmares of anxiety*'" (Ballard, "The Terminal Beach" 309). This death drive, brought to the pinnacle of completion by the development of the atomic bomb, is so all-encompassing that to Traven, "even the death of his wife and six-year-old son in a motor accident seemed only part of this immense synthesis of the historical and psychic zero, the frantic highways where each morning they met their deaths, the advance causeways to the global Armageddon" (Ballard, "The Terminal Beach" 309).

We also learn that Traven used to be a military pilot, adding more credence to the "full load of cosmic guilt" he seems to have brought with him to the island (Ballard, "The Terminal Beach" 319). When Dr. Osborne, a Navy biologist doing research on the atoll, runs into Traven

and asks him what he hopes to find there, "to himself, Traven said: the tomb of the unknown civilian, *Homo hydrogenensis*, Eniwetok Man. To Osborne he said: 'Doctor, your laboratory is at the wrong end of the island'" (Ballard, "The Terminal Beach" 319). Traven appears to have an evolutionary perspective that transcends mere psychic unease – he has a sense that humanity is already changing or will soon change – and it seems as if Traven is trying to force this proto-posthumanist change upon himself by isolating himself on Eniwetok. Beaumont speaks of this type of change in saying that "in addition to destruction, a form of casting out from the world, nuclear military technology in 'The Terminal Beach' is also responsible for creation, a form of bringing forth into the world; in addition to concealing an old landscape, it has revealed or uncovered a new landscape" (104).

This "new landscape" is both synthetic and primitive. The prior hydrogen bomb testing has obliterated all wildlife, turning Eniwetok into an empty wilderness, a hybrid of primitiveness and technology that has lost all use: "Traven stumbled into a set of tracks left years earlier by a large Caterpillar vehicle. The heat released by one of the weapons tests had fused the sand, and the double line of fossil imprints, uncovered by the evening air, wound its serpentine way among the hollows like the footfalls of an ancient saurian" (Ballard, "The Terminal Beach" 307). Beaumont calls this synthetic landscape "a numinous fantasy of technology after technicity," and in the process, "the effect is to confront the reader with a synthetic landscape of impossible regularity that could only have been produced by a human hand but whose purpose is unclear even to the apparently omniscient narrator, and which seems to resist any attempt to imagine how it might be, or even have been, instrumentalized" (96, 108). This landscape is a weird, material upending of the ideology of progress: technological structures with no purpose, an empty, synthetic, wilderness. Distinctions between the "natural" and the "synthetic" break down

in this weird realm of the apocalyptic Anthropocene: "this landscape also reveals what might be considered the flat, ontological nature of the concept of landscape itself, which does not distinguish between the natural and human-made features comprising its touchable surfaces" (Marshall 641). The shadow of the previous uses and associations of these now meaningless artifacts imbues these artificial monoliths with a sense of uneasy agency that is both "a visual archive of the forgotten past, evident in traces of an older urban history of the island; and a visual archive of an exhausted future, evident in piles of technological refuse that clutter the textual landscape" (Baxter, "Sounding" 19).

Specific parts of the landscape, such as the enigmatic "blocks," seem to call out to Traven, and this new emptiness of meaning is attractive to him in the face of what appears to him to be impending doom. Jeroncic and Willems call this "the rubric of the vacuum," and they argue that, for Ballard, it "describes how a near-total emptiness of time and space is one way to respond to a global ecological catastrophe" (6). For the majority of the story, Traven has little more than brief moments of lucidity when he "took stock of himself. This brief inventory, which merely confirmed his physical identity, was limited to little more than this thin body in his frayed cotton garments" (Ballard, "The Terminal Beach" 310). The rest of the time, Traven is hopelessly obsessed with playing out his Ballardian death drive via a strange compulsion towards the material environment of Eniwetok. This revelation of the failure of the human that emerges as a form of proto-posthumanism is bleak, nihilistic, and apocalyptic. Its attitude is pessimistic because this revelation is still tied up in the ideology of progress, even though progress is shown to have ultimately failed, resulting in a listlessness, a dissolution, characterized by Traven's disintegration of self. Latour stresses the importance of composing to the ability to unwed ourselves from the ideology of progress – we have to "compose the common world from

disjointed pieces instead of taking for granted that the unity, continuity, agreement is already there" (Latour 485). Traven is intimately aware of the fragments, the "disjointed pieces," but he is unable to (re)compose them into what Haraway would call a sympoietic system. Sympoiesis, or a sympoietic system, for Haraway, "means 'making-with.' Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing….is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems" (*Staying* 58). Traven is trapped in the dissolution of the autopoietic systems that got him here, unable to understand or interact according to his sympoietic nature.

One notable example of this is Traven's interactions with "Dr. Yasuda," a corpse of a Japanese man "of the professional classes" who "had been there for less than five years," and who, it appears, "had deliberately chosen to die in the crevice," mirroring Traven's own cosmic guilt, but from the eastern rather than the western front of the war (Ballard, "The Terminal Beach" 322, 323). Aside from adding to the characterization of the island as a sort of limbo state, one where it is potentially normal to find humans self-marooned, unconsciously seeking their own deaths (Dr. Osborne notes of Traven that "I would guess that he is neither the first, nor the last, to visit the island"), the "conversation" between Dr. Yasuda and Traven illustrates the ultimate failure of Traven to act with newfound agency as part of sympoeitic entanglings (Ballard, "Terminal Beach" 316). During the conversation that Traven has with the corpse, stylized in the story as a portion of a movie script (evidence that Traven has dissociated so far from his sense of self that he is playing the "role" of Traven), a fly interrupts them. When he asks Yasuda why he came to the island, Yasuda replies, "To feed this fly. What greater love–?" (Ballard, "The Terminal Beach" 324). This characterization of Yasuda's death, ostensibly composed in Traven's own mind, has within it a germ of the notion of posthuman transcorporeality – there is a sense that Yasuda, even in death, is part of an environment, a

networked system of interspecies becoming. However, by the end of the conversation, Traven "*hopelessly...kills the fly*," preferring a return to the stability of the blocks, although he brings the corpse with him. Traven ultimately clings to the ontological emptiness of the blocks, and he essentially gives up his role as an actant, in the sense that "the meaningful distinction is not between things that are alive or dead, or between people and objects, but between entities capable of instigating an action ('actants') and those that are not" (Dini 5). What Dini is implying is that there are some situations where matter can act, and there are some situations where humans *cannot* act. Traven does not pay attention to the ways in which the environment has begun to reassert itself in lively ways, for example, ignoring that the manmade lakes on the atoll "had been designed originally to reveal any radiobiological changes in a selected range of flora and fauna, but the specimens had long since bloomed into grotesque parodies of themselves," and the submarine pens "still contained several feet of water, filled with strange luminescent fish and plants" (Ballard, "The Terminal Beach" 312, 316). These small moments mirror Tsing's notion of "patchy" spots of hope in "blasted landscapes," but they are not the focus of the piece – Ballard is more focused on the human-centric failure of the notion of progress (108).

Additionally, as interested as Ballard appears to be in the intersection of historical context and its projection into the future, he seems to have been unable to foresee the role of phenomena such as radioactive waste, toxicity, and climate change to intersect with his ideas of collective cosmic guilt. As a prelude to the types of fears that the *Southern Reach* is grappling with, we can look at the ways in which the impact of climate change has changed the island of Eniwetok, as it exists in the world today, along with its indigenous inhabitants. Ballard completely ignores the presence (or rather, lack thereof) of the indigenous Marshall Islanders, who were relocated by the

military prior to the hydrogen-bomb testing on Eniwetok, presumably because the island had not yet been declared safe for habitation at the time he published the story. Even though his backdrop is an underlying cosmic guilt, the invisible toxicity of radioactive waste, manifesting materially as cancers and other genetic problems has in reality proven to be more prescient than a psychic death drive. Since the publication of "The Terminal Beach," Marshall Islanders have again been allowed to return to the islands surrounding Eniwetok, after an extensive cleanup of radioactive waste. However, in what Alson Kelen calls "the connection between the nuclear age and the climate change age," rising sea levels have led to water seeping into the concrete Runit Dome meant to house Eniwetok's radioactive waste, threatening the lives of the native Marshall Islanders, as well as the surrounding ocean life (qtd. in Willacy). This forced relocation in the name of scientific discovery is reminiscent of Bassett's desire to return to the Red One with an expedition, regardless of what that expedition will do to the indigenous population. That this colonialist impulse is sidelined in "The Terminal Beach," when Ballard is so obsessed with the ways that historical context can leech into the collective unconscious, is problematic. He could not have foreseen how climate change and what Alaimo calls "the traffic in toxins" would add to the reevaluation of humanity in the Anthropocene ("Transcorporeal Feminisms" 260). But current authors who are inspired by Ballard, such as VanderMeer, do make these connections explicit.

Weird Hope: How to Live in Area X

So far, I have discussed ways in which the ideology of the weird undercuts and reveals the failures in the ideology of progress in several science-fiction texts. In what I have analyzed above, there is a failure of the human to understand or adapt to their newly recognized transcorporeality in an anthropocentric environment. The result of these failures is catastrophic, potentially even apocalyptic. But does this depiction of catastrophe have to necessarily be pessimistic? In other words, is the ideology of the weird simply an indictment, a diagnosis of the failures of our attitudes toward progress? Ballard, for one, seems to think not. He writes, concerning depictions of catastrophes and apocalypses:

> "the catastrophe story, whoever may tell it, represents a constructive and positive act by the imagination rather than a negative one….Each one of these [apocalyptic] fantasies represents an arraignment of the finite, an attempt to dismantle the formal structure of time and space….It is the inflexibility of this huge reductive machine we call reality that provokes infant and madman alike, and in the cataclysm story the science fiction writer joins company with them, using his imagination to describe the infinite alternatives to reality which nature itself has proved incapable of inventing." ("Cataclysms" 209)

This "arraignment" and "dismantling" is presented as a weird reorienting of possibility surrounding "reality," and in a way it showcases the composed nature of reality or "nature" itself. As Tabas says, "the world here is only the one that we encounter, and it is thus conditioned and diminished by the limits of human embodiment and human subjectivity" (14-15). Human subjectivity itself is a limitation to encountering and understanding the "real" of nature. The

ideology of the weird, often represented as catastrophe, is an attempt to get around that, to reorient subjectivity in ways in which humans are not trying to subjugate nature to fit within their limited perceptions.

In ideologies of progress, the “real” and the “natural” completely overlap, but the weird acknowledges “the gap between the real and the natural.” Latour points out the organizing principle at the root of what we call “nature”: “Nature is not a thing, a domain, a realm, an ontological territory. It is (or rather, it was during the short modern parenthesis) a way of organizing the division...between appearances and reality, subjectivity and objectivity, history and immutability” (476). The weird reveals the failures of this organizing impulse, and our inability to perceive the “real” of nature. Pulling apart these two concepts (what is really “out there” vs. what we can actually see and study) forces us to acknowledge that “there is a reality outside and beyond the senses, while at the same time claiming that this reality can, in occult and incomprehensible ways, interfere with and challenge our reality” (Tabas 3). As the biologist notes, humans are limited by “our banal, murderous imagination” (VanderMeer, *Authority* 126). But there is a difference between merely being exposed to the fact that embodied human subjectivity is limited in its perception, and discovering ways of reorienting that perception so that it takes into account that which is beyond our understanding rather than attempting to subjugate and control it. The *Southern Reach* trilogy delves explicitly into this type of procreative and recreative territory. VanderMeer achieves this more positive, hopeful reorientation to the weird primarily through two characters: the biologist and her Crawler-spawned doppelganger, Ghost Bird. These two characters serve as examples of how to orient the self, in an open, dynamic, transcorporeal sense, to the environments and realities of the Anthropocene.

The biologist has a keen sense of ecosystem – she understands what it means to be "embedded in the risk of the exploration," which is an awareness that neither Bassett, nor Traven, nor the institution of the Southern Reach has (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 40). The biologist's obsession with ecosystems extends to "abandoned" places, which she sees as teeming with life: "the overgrown swimming pool in the backyard of the rented house where I grew up," the tidal pools of Rock Bay where she conducted fieldwork, and an empty lot in the city she lived in before the expedition, which she liked because "it wasn't truly empty" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 43-44, 156). As a child observing the pool in her backyard, she "eschewed books on ecology or biology. I wanted to discover the information on my own first" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 45). This preference for direct experience over disciplinary limitations continues later during her field research, when she fails to file the proper reports and focus on what her institution wants her to at Rock Bay. This attitude speaks to her awareness of ecosystems as networks of interspecies becoming, not as something that can be understood and categorized solely through the words of a textbook or a field report. The biologist describes the joy of her fieldwork at Rock Bay: "I could easily lose hours there, observing the hidden life of tidal pools, and sometimes I marveled at the fact that I had been given such a gift: not just to lose myself in the present moment so utterly but also to have such solitude" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 108). The biologist has a different motivation than, for example, Bassett did in his naturalism: she craves solitude, which we can translate in the context of her views as peaceful oneness with a dynamic ecological system. The notion of getting "lost" also takes on multiple meanings throughout the book, as "losing myself" points not just to what happens to individual human subjectivities within Area X, but also what happens to expeditions physically – they become lost within the landscape. If we shift our perspective to align more with the biologist, however,

perhaps we can see what being "lost" truly points to – an *embeddedness* that is dynamic and in-motion.

Area X ultimately changes the biologist's physical form, as it does to everyone who enters, into something other-than-human. Most of these changes results in grotesque human-animal hybrids, "deaths" that blend the human explorers into the landscape of Area X. This kind of "death" is the fear that many hold concerning climate change and the Anthropocene: it is both unavoidable and destructive. But the biologist's willingness to "embed" herself within Area X results in a unique outcome: When Ghost Bird finally sees what Area X has turned the biologist into, she finds that she has essentially become a living landscape that sweeps over the group travelling together in Area X – "the biologist now existed across locations and landscapes" (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 196). While this terrifies Control, Ghost Bird instead perceives that "nothing monstrous existed here–only beauty" (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 196). The biologist, who is also referred to as "*This leviathan that has taken the terroir of a place and made it its own,*" has succeeded in what Bassett, Traven, and the Southern Reach all failed to do, but this deep understanding of the environment looks much different than expected – from a modernist point of view, it is materially invasive (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 210).

Not only does the biologist become a living landscape, but she also becomes Ghost Bird, the duplicate of the biologist sent back from Area X. This duplicate shares her attention to ecosystem, serving as a more familiarly "human" example of how to reorient ourselves in posthuman environmental contexts. All of the other doppelgangers that Area X sends back act more like empty dolls with no personality, dying of cancer within several months of their return, but Ghost Bird is the only doppelganger who appears to be "viable" – to be recognizable and acceptable to the interrogating gaze of Area X, and to recognize and accept that gaze in turn. The

biologist and Ghost Bird share an inherent connection after they meet in Area X: "The hegemony of what was real had been altered, or broken, forever. [Ghost Bird] would always know now the biologist's position, near or far, a beacon somewhere in her mind, a connection never closed" (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 329). This "connection never closed" seems to be what VanderMeer is pointing towards in his exploration of how to live in Area X: a radical embeddedness, a transcorporeality that would allow us to exist, if not completely peacefully, at least in dynamic relationships with the multitude of environmental agencies that exist in our world.

The two versions of the biologist by the end of the series, the "original" that isn't recognizable as human and the "remake" that is, are able to survive the interrogative gaze of Area X because of their attunement to the unique environment of Area X: they are "elevated beyond…cosmic horror" and, "in its weird process of assimilation and reproduction, Area X has in the biologist and Ghost Bird performed the ultimate act of symbiotic facsimile: the original organism evolving to be kin to the invasive species, while the invasive species takes the place (and face) of the original to improve the copied hose organism as well" (Ulstein 89). Ulstein considers Area X to be the invasive species here, but I would ask whether we can also see humans as the invasive species in this context. In a posthuman, transcorporeal world, "invasion" might not look so sinister, as all fleshy beings are always already "invaded" by other fleshy beings in processes of intra-active becoming.

The *Southern Reach* trilogy is presented in an obviously Anthropocentric context, with clear references to climate change. VanderMeer himself cites human-created environmental disaster as the inspiration for the trilogy, describing "his 'anger and grief over the BP Gulf Oil Spill.' VanderMeer claims that the vision of Area X was strongly inspired by this natural disaster, and that to him 'it had seemed like they would never stop the leak, that the oil would

keep gushing out into the Gulf for decades'" (VanderMeer qtd. in Ulstein 87). This speaks to Alaimo's statements about the traffic in toxins, about a newfound awareness of "a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors" (*Bodily Natures* 2). As we see in the final novel of the trilogy: "Area X was all around them; Area X was contained in no one place or figure….It was the heavens and earth. It could interrogate you from any position or no position at all, and you might not even recognize its actions as a form of questionings" (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* 283). Area X is a weird funhouse mirror reflection of our reality, with an attention to the ways in which humans have failed in their understanding of and interaction with the lived reality of the environment with devastating consequences. We see the harmfulness of this ideology of progress in Bassett's racist, hegemonic naturalist tendencies in "The Red One," and Ballard's illustration of our psychic death drive played out on the stage of nuclear ruin. We also see this failure in the attitude of the Southern Reach, but the trilogy also gives us an alternative way of being: the way illustrated by the biologist and Ghost Bird.

Donna Haraway's notion of *staying with the trouble* can help us understand the biologist and Ghost Bird's ability to survive Area X even as it changes them irrevocably, and it might also help us understand how to do the same:

> "In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations. Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and

> apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings." (*Staying* 1)

Ideologies of progress look towards an imagined future, and in trying to secure that future, they undermine not only the imagined future but the present moment. The weird is potentially horrifying because it forces us to be right where we are – in our troubled present. Let us not make trouble – let us stay with it, and see what we might become.

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