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**On monsters and other matters of housekeeping:  
reading Jeff VanderMeer with Donna Haraway and Ursula K. Le Guin**

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**Abstract**

The *eco* in ecology and economy derives from the Greek *oikos*, meaning “house” or “household”. The age we call the Anthropocene is one of wide-ranging domestic violence. Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy provides a rich fantastic world to think the nature of that violence, and also the possibility of its antonym. That antonym, I suggest, is perhaps not peace, but ‘importance’ as understood by the philosopher AN Whitehead. The itinerary taking me to that suggestion meanders through the kinship ties between cosmic horror, colonialism, and the Anthropocene as narratives of power and control. I briefly explore those kinship ties in the good company of Donna Haraway and Ursula K. Le Guin.

I then return to the Southern Reach to focus on the role of bounded, situated ecologies in the novels like an overgrown swimming pool, a desolate parking lot and tide pools. It is here that the concept of ‘importance’ takes on meaning and substance. It is here also that I find some rudimentary elements of an answer to the questions that open this chapter: how do the matter of stories and the matter of the living relate to each other? How does fiction help us appreciate and think about ecosystems? And how might ecosystems themselves invite us to turn to fiction?

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In “Some Thoughts on Narrative” Ursula K. Le Guin says that stories are typically told in the past tense, because this allows for forward movement: and then this happened, and then that happened (1989a, 38). Like stories, cells and organisms move forward and develop, as Le Guin reminds us in the same essay. They do not stay put and constantly organize themselves in relation to their surroundings. The word “organism” is rooted in “organization”. There is, in other words, a close kinship between the matter of stories and the matter of living: both move forward, develop, evolve, and sometimes mutate into strange twists of plot. How things will organize is not always predictable in good stories, nor in complex ecologies. To explore that kinship—to see how it works on levels deeper than a mere analogy—this chapter proposes a reading of Jeff VanderMeer’s Southern Reach Trilogy (2014). Its strange ecosystem, I argue, offers a different storyline than that of ‘nature’ to be preserved, dominated or controlled—an ecocentric storyline whose closest analogue is Rachel Carson’s *Under the Sea-Wind* (1941). I will not discuss the latter in detail as it is a work of biology rather than fiction. The focus, instead, is on the exercise of building a connection between VanderMeer’s weird and invented ecology on the one hand, and the real-world ecology carefully described by Carson on the other. How does fiction help us appreciate and think about ecosystems? And how might ecosystems themselves invite us to turn to fiction? In considering these questions, this chapter is less a systematic analysis than coming to grips with a gut reaction I get when I read about the Anthropocene in terms of monsters, shock, and horror. I become obstinately contrarian when I am expected to display a sense of awe in the face of environmental crisis, when certain texts tell

me that bedazzlement is the appropriate reaction when faced with a world we are no longer in control of. I just don't think that is news. First, what is it that we thought we controlled? And second, I believe that it is important to actively *refuse* such a state of bewilderment. The refusal matters in a way that relates to the work of Ursula K. Le Guin, who never used the fantastic to divert attention away from housekeeping. The *eco* in ecology and economy derives from the Greek *oikos*, meaning "house" or "household". Our age, however, is one of wide-ranging domestic violence. Monsters and hyperobjects are not going to help us. The question "what I am going to tell my kids," however, is something I can, and must, work with. It requires imagination, listening and responding. The Southern Reach Trilogy helps us imagine what it might be like to start listening and responding to that larger household we call ecology. That the trilogy is weird fiction, rife with monsters and horror, is all the more interesting if we can turn them into housekeeping issues rather than spectacular metaphors for our troubled times. Accordingly, I start with the monsters and the horror, make a brief stopover at Haraway's Chthulucene, and then explore how a storied ecology may help us better relate to ecology in the real world.

### Area X and the biologist

The tower, which wasn't supposed to be there, plunges into the earth in a place just before the black pine forest begins to give way to swamp and then reeds and wind-gnarled trees of the marsh flats. Beyond the marsh flats and the natural canals lies the ocean and, a little farther down the coast, a derelict lighthouse. All of this part of the country had been abandoned for decades, for reasons that are not easy to relate. Our expedition was the first to enter Area X for more than two years, and much of our predecessors' equipment had rusted, their tents and sheds little more

than husks. Looking out over that untroubled landscape, I do not believe any one of us could yet see the threat. (VanderMeer 2015a, 3)

So reads the opening of *Annihilation*, the first book of The Southern Reach Trilogy by Jeff VanderMeer<sup>1</sup>. *Annihilation* is told by “the biologist” in the first person. It is an account written by the protagonist while on expedition in the mysterious Area X and left for readers to find beneath a trapdoor in the lighthouse. The lighthouse is the only stable reference point that appears both in Area X and on the maps of that territory. The official explanation for Area X—a swathe of forest, marshland, and coastline in the now abandoned southern coastal area of the United States—is an “event” thirty years previous. No description of the event is available, other than a vague reference to an ecological disaster. Area X sealed itself off by some kind of border and started transforming, mutating and developing an ecology of its own. A government agency, The Southern Reach, has been set up to survey, control, and—in all likelihood—*contain* Area X within its current border. At irregular intervals, the agency has sent eleven expeditions into Area X, the members of which returned, if they did, with severe memory loss; some of them with fatal cancer; and some did not return at all. One expedition ended in mass suicide; another with its members shooting each other. Little material evidence comes back across the border. Evidence such as samples, video footage, or testimony from expedition members making it back to the Southern Reach does not seem to add up to any kind of knowledge. Instead, it induces profound disorientation within the agency, in a sense that is both psychological and awkwardly architectural. The biologist is part of the twelfth expedition into Area X, together with three other women: the psychologist, the anthropologist and the surveyor. “All of us were women this time, chosen as part of the complex set of variables that governed sending the expeditions”

(VanderMeer 2015a, 3). Not exchanging personal names is another strategy to try and make expeditions successful, even though there is no standard by which to measure any degree of success.

The Southern Reach Trilogy has been praised for its suspenseful and distinctively textured world with elements of Lovecraftian horror, but reminiscent also of Thoreau's ecstatic writings about nature and Rachel Carson's lyrical and factual engagement with ecology. The trilogy never fully reveals whether Area X is still part of our world, even though it is dotted with remnants of human civilization: an overgrown hamlet; a lighthouse; rusty equipment strewn about. The origins and nature of the "border" remain unclear too: neither the characters in the novel nor the reader know for sure whether it is organic, a local fissure in time and space, or something else entirely. It is suggested at many points that its border is expanding. Area X is an unsettling and horrific place, with its share of Lovecraftian presences unbearable for human minds to accommodate. Yet, Area X is not indescribable either and the books are full of close descriptions of plants and wildlife, mosses, lichen, algae. Told from the perspective of the biologist, *Annihilation* is the book where these descriptions are at their sharpest. At several points in the novel, biological detail and sensory experience coalesce into lyrical homages to biodiversity, describing a buzzing richness of life so vast that it almost tips over into the monstrous. The longer she stays in Area X, the more the biologist's perception alters, revealing an "ongoing horror show of such beauty and biodiversity that I couldn't fully take it all in" (VanderMeer 2015a, 43). As days go by, she does start to take in the landscape even as the landscape seems to be taking in part of her. On the way to the lighthouse, for example, the biologist describes entering into a different mode of awareness, a silent ego dissolution, exposing a landscape of emotion and intensified biological diversity:

Now a strange mood took hold of me, as I walked silent and alone through the last of the pines and the cypress knees that seemed to float in the black water, the gray moss that coated everything. It was as if I travelled through the landscape with the sound of an expressive and intense aria playing in my ears. Everything was imbued with emotion, awash in it, and I was no longer a biologist but somehow the crest of a wave building and building but never crashing to shore. I saw with such new eyes the subtleties of the transition to the marsh, the salt flats. ... The strange quality of the light upon this habitat, the stillness of it all, the sense of *waiting*, brought me halfway to a kind of ecstasy. (VanderMeer 2015a, 89-90, original emphasis)

Rather than “becoming one” with the landscape, the biologist experiences a multitude of intensified subtleties that, it seems, she *must* relate to and tell about, as if the landscape wanted to be told, and as if the monstrous were a mere perceptual distortion for eyes and minds unable to accommodate the prodigious and intense richness of life’s fizzy insanity. The important difference from cosmic horror is that VanderMeer’s work does not insist on or radicalize the distinction between the human and the monstrous. Rather, it leaves the door slightly ajar for humans to know Area X in some way, even if that kind of “knowing” may come at an unthinkable price.

## Whose horror?

Area X offers a different storyline than that of ‘nature’ to be preserved, dominated and controlled. While in our world we keep referring to ‘nature’ and ‘the environment,’ Area X cannot be understood in those terms. Ecology and ecosystem, however, make sense, because these terms point to a diversity of relations that may change, mutate, create, destroy and evolve. In contrast to ‘nature’, ecology is not a stable object of either patronizing admiration or economic exploitation. It is historical and ongoing, reconfiguring itself with new elements. It does not care about what is wild or natural or human or alien. Area X is an interesting figure that intensifies the technical meaning of the term ‘ecology’ and what it might imply to start thinking in ecological terms. In that sense, it has a lot in common with Donna Haraway’s notion of the *Chthulucene* (Haraway 2016). But what is the Chthulucene? Is it another geological epoch, like the Anthropocene, or something else?

While the Chthulocene is often taken to be an alternative name for the geological-cultural concept of the Anthropocene, my sense is that Haraway does not so much propose it as a label to describe reality—which reality? whose reality?—but as a speculative figuration to think with. The affordance of speculative figurations is that they do not represent something else that we might be familiar with, as a metaphor would do; nor do they refer back to the reality we pretend to know. Reality must always be turned into a question for Haraway, because claims to reality and realism are easy ways to impose authority, along with a master narrative that would matter for everyone. Speculative figurations acknowledge the narrative character of our ways to understand and relate to the world. While the Anthropocene is on the brink of becoming the official name for our present geological epoch, Haraway replies with the Chthulucene because, for her, *anthropos* takes us back to the usual narrative where Man controls the fate of all living

beings. “Unlike the dominant dramas of Anthropocene and Capitalocene discourse,” Haraway writes, “human beings are not the only important actors in the Chthulucene, with all other beings able simply to react. The order is reknitted: human beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main story” (2016, 55). It is a bit unfortunate that Haraway refers to the biotic and abiotic powers of the earth as ‘the main story,’ because I understand her Chthulucene as, first and foremost, a place of many stories. In this perspective, the Chthulocene is not an actual story in itself. Rather it is a different mode of attention, another way of noticing, that may then give birth to new stories.

The reason for confusion, I believe, is the use of Cthulhu itself. The reference to Cthulu in the Chthulucene would seem to imply that Haraway invites her readers to think in terms of Lovecraftian cosmic horror. And, to confuse things even more, a good deal of scholarship about the Anthropocene has used cosmic horror tropes and references to H. P. Lovecraft (Ulstein 2017). The knot of cosmic horror, Anthropocene, and Chthulucene is interesting to untie, and it is helpful to allow a better appreciation of the difference between monsters in cosmic horror and those in The Southern Reach Trilogy. If, as some have suggested, the trilogy represents the ‘new weird’ (Ibid.), are its monsters different from Lovecraftian cosmic horror? If they are, what vision does VanderMeer’s notion of monstrosity express?

Haraway’s Chthulucene refers to the Greek *chthonios*, meaning “of, in, or under the earth and the seas” (Haraway 2016, 53). Haraway twists this term into *chthulu*, rendering homage to a particular spider in the Californian redwoods (*Pimoida chthulu*) that was named after Lovecraft’s *Cthulhu*. In a short endnote, Haraway says that she is determined to ‘rescue’ the spider from the Lovecraftian version of horror: “Lovecraft’s dreadful underworld chthonic serpents were terrible only in the patriarchal mode. The Chthulucene has other terrors – more dangerous and generative



in worlds where such gender does not reign” (Haraway 2016, 174, note 4). But what has gender got to do with horror? Was not Lovecraft trying to touch an old, ancestral string, one irrespective of gender and hardwired into our very being as a species? Was he not clear that cosmic horror arises when all rationality, and reality itself, are overpowered by the intrusion of an unthinkable and unbearable monstrous presence? How can such horror be anything but *universal*?

Haraway does not elaborate on this but I think the key to understanding cosmic horror as *gendered* lies in the question of what we are afraid of losing. This begs at least two other questions: what do we think we *have*? And who do we think we *are*? For cosmic horror to work, we need ourselves to be the kind of humanity that can only conceive of its relation to other beings in terms of control: e.g., rationality, urban planning, public order, and the control over means of production. All these forms of control are patriarchal in the sense that they have been historically and systematically reserved for a particular type of man—the white Western male—and definitely denied to all women. It is only within this specific historical context of power that this “universal” male can believe his version of horror to be the most universal and spectacular: Man masters nature and other humans; and that is a power He cannot stand to lose. The legendary last words of the ill-famed character Kurtz, a colonial ivory trader in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, epitomize the type of dread the white colonial male faces when control falters in a bewildering ecology: “the horror, the horror.” Horror it may be, but it is “the horror” of a specific kind. It is intimately tied to historical and political patterns of control with colonialism in its wake. Cosmic horror can be seen as the ultimate failure of control, and of rationality itself. The impossible geometries in the world of Lovecraft’s Old Ones mocks man’s orderly planning of public space. In this type of horror narrative, all possible storylines sooner or later end in

paralysis. Once it is saturated with madness in the face of the unthinkable, the story can be taken no further.

That is, as long as madness and the unthinkable mean the loss of control. But what if we have never been in control in the first place? If not, it makes sense, as Haraway does, to question both the Anthropocene and cosmic horror as, at once, very impressive and very one-dimensional. Their heroes are Anthropos and His spectacular negation. The story must end in shock and awe. This is a resolution of sorts, but why seek resolution rather than ongoing process and transformation? This is Le Guin's question in her essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" (Le Guin 1989b). Stories need forward movement, she says, but that does not mean they have to be linear. Why do we liken time to an *arrow* anyway? Le Guin notes the prominence of sharp and pointy objects in the way we tell about the Ascent of Man. The patriarchal evolutionary story takes on the same form as the objects we tell it with: straight and pointy. But, Le Guin asks, what about receptacles to carry the wild oats and berries early humans picked to feed themselves for example? What if we conceived of the evolutionary story, and stories more generally, as carrier bags instead of objects that smash, thud, stab, and kill? Weapons call for heroes, but narrative does not work that way with carrier bags: "[I]t's clear that the Hero doesn't look well in this bag, he needs a stage or a pedestal or a pinnacle. You put him in a bag and he looks like a rabbit, like a potato. That is why I like novels, instead of heroes they have people in them" (Le Guin 1989b, 169). Things jumble in a bag and there is no straight heroic path to salvation or Progress.

Nor does it lead to the logical opposite: collapse, doom, or cosmic horror. Things jumble, and most of all, they go on. Le Guin notes that there is combat and aggression in the bag too. And I take it that there is horror in the carrier bag. But it is a horror of a different kind and quite possibly *worse* than cosmic horror because there is no easy way out—by instantly going insane,

for example. In Le Guin's novella *The Word for World is Forest* (Le Guin 2015 [1972]), the colonial horror is not like Conrad's Kurtz losing his wits. The horror lies in the fact that the local population, in defeating their oppressor, have learned how to kill. That is the horror they will have to live with. It is a kind of horror that they must face up to and ask: *how* will we cope with this; what arrangements will we make now that our society, our living together, has changed irreversibly? Facing such questions requires imagination and intelligence. It requires stories to think with.

In The Southern Reach Trilogy the government agency in charge of surveilling Area X undermines precisely those requirements in its attempts at being clever and in control of things. The agency sets up strategies to control the flow of information: expedition members are stripped of their personal names, given incomplete information about the mission, and trained to fall under hypnotic suggestion. These strategies aim at achieving "scientific objectivity" but in practice they create disastrous situations because the expedition members cannot properly converse with one another. Since they cannot properly think, no collective knowing emerges out of any of the expeditions. In this sense, the trilogy can be read as a colonial story about a strange ecosystem, populated with unknown critters instead of an indigenous human population. Numerous expedition members die horrible deaths; some go mad; some commit suicide; some kill each other. The question is whether all this horror and madness are really caused by an alien and hostile environment. What if they originate in organized ignorance, in designed mis-capacity and unwillingness of expedition members to adapt? And a lack of imagination on the part of the authorities? In all these ways, Area X challenges human colonial fantasies about venturing into a new world without adapting—without willing to become transformed in one way or another. In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Kurtz wanted only control but was not willing to adapt. In the

second book of The Southern Reach Trilogy, the Director of the government agency is nicknamed Control. Not surprisingly, he also fails to adapt and imagine a different relation to Area X than in terms of authority. But the individual titles of the trilogy—*Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance*—suggest different dispositions with respect to Area X. In *Annihilation*, the biologist reflects that they might not be pursuing the right strategy. As she and another expedition member descend underground into a spiraling structure, they both feel that they are approaching some kind of living presence and they impulsively draw their guns: “[H]olding the gun made me feel clumsy and odd, as if it were the wrong reaction to what might confront us” (VanderMeer 2015a, 52).

While Lovecraftian monsters signal the end of human understanding and the possibility for humans to interact with the nonhuman, Area X is more akin to Haraway’s Chthulucene, where monsters usher in an urgent question of *address*: how to confront and address them? Horror is real in Area X, but what if it reflects, more than anything else, an organized bereavement of the imagination? A violent lack of politeness? An obstinate inability to rethink one’s place with respect to other sentient beings?

### Ecology and responsibility

Asking how to address a person, an animal, an entity or a situation implies taking a position. An address is always directed at someone and this means that the speaker speaks from somewhere, just as our postal and email addresses locate us. The question of address is also an ecological question, because the position or location of humans, animals, plants, and trees with respect to one another *matters vitally*. This is true when we address other forms of existence too, like friends and kin who have passed away: we tend to ask *where* they are now, and we create places

where we can connect to them, where we can address them and they can address us (Despret 2019). If locations and positions matter, then the term ‘responsibility’ takes on a different tone. Liberated from the restricted and weighty meaning of ‘carrying blame,’ the term gains a new kind of importance which is precisely about becoming “response-able” or able to respond (Haraway, 2016, 34). Becoming response-able/responsible involves searching, or even inventing the terms of a conversation that is sensitive to where things and beings are located with respect to each other. And how things might shift and change as a consequence of our actions.

Through the characters and institutions portrayed, the Southern Reach Trilogy plays out different responses to Area X, and it sets up a very interesting contrast between The Southern Reach agency on the one hand and the biologist on the other. “The shadowy Southern Reach is in many ways a window into the ideological and imaginative inheritances that have shaped western attitudes towards the environment” (Margeson 2018, 40). The idea of “the environment” and of “nature”, I would add, bears the traces of those same inheritances. External to humans, nature in this framework is a foreign land to discover, admire, protect, exploit, destroy, (eco-)manage and rebuild. It is another word for a realm that is *available* for human intervention and control. Availability, of course, is the default assumption for imperialism and colonialism.

In contrast, the character of the biologist steers the reader away from ‘nature’ and offers an entry point into ecology as a mode of attention, a form of thinking, and a way of being and evolving with other species. As suggested throughout the novels, ecology comprises a variety of relations: symbiosis, parasitism, predator-prey, and speculative forms of emulation and mimicry. Ecology is not *nice*. It may turn extremely violent depending on where and when you are situated. But such violence can be acknowledged and its nature questioned. In human history, much violence has gone either unrecognized or considered as a price to pay for imperialist

projects defended in the name of progress and civilization. Today's market economists speak in terms of "negative externalities" when they calculate the costs and realities of environmental degradation into a column on the balance sheet. In ecological thinking, however, violence cannot be hidden in rows and columns. One is obliged to face it and become response-able. And opting for less violence in the future is a real possibility. The violence and horror in Area X can, I believe, be read as consequences rooted in ill-adjusted acts of intrusion on the part of humans. This view takes on a particular edge when you take into account that the biology of Area X tends to emulate and mimic humans. It is not a passive reflection—a "mirror of society"—but an ecosystem that actively learns, incorporates, reinvents and responds.

Taken together in all its aspects, Area X provides a human-nonhuman relatedness that is more complex and challenging than that implied in the concept of the Anthropocene. Though referred to in a variety of contexts, the Anthropocene is originally a geological concept acknowledging the traces of human activity in the Earth's sedimentary layers. Naming the Anthropocene as the epoch following the Holocene turns humans into a geological force and the Earth's crust into a registry or archive of that force. That acknowledgement is important, as it certifies the impact of humans on the planet: a truth set in stone. But we need other figures and stories to think with if we want to address living ecosystems. Some ecologies are more fragile than others; some people and nations pollute more than others; some economies wreak more environmental havoc than others; and there are weird and inventive forms of life—both human and nonhuman—that we might learn from. Cosmic horror, a vengeful Earth, or "hyperobjects" are of little help if what we need is more intelligibility, more imagination, and more sensitivity to the richness of these ecosystems. Stories can turn very complex matters into something

intelligible, into something we recognize and can relate to. Stories and characters convey importance to things, persons, and places.

### Importance

While Area X and its monsters get most of the attention in book reviews and analyses, it is worth noting that Area X is but one among a series of places that are important to the biologist character. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead asked an enigmatic question: “what is it that gives the sense of importance?” (Debaise 2018, 25). If we think or feel something is important, where does that sense come from? What does importance really mean and imply? Different passages in *Annihilation* convey a sense of importance that arises when you start paying attention to a particular place and ecosystem. In *Annihilation*, the biologist recounts: “My lodestone, the place I always thought of when people asked me why I became a biologist, was the overgrown swimming pool in the backyard of the rented house where I grew up” (VanderMeer 2015a, 43). The biologist’s parents did not take care of the pool, and so the pool took care of itself. Weeds around it started to grow, algae formed, and all kinds of critters moved in. As a child, the biologist sat around the pool pretending to be a biologist documenting all the life in that little ecosystem. At some point, her parents could no longer afford the rent and they had to move out of the house and into a tiny apartment. “One of the great traumas of my life,” the biologist recalls “was worrying about the pool. Would the new owners see the beauty and the importance of leaving it as is, or would they destroy it, create unthinking slaughter in honor of the pool’s real function?” (46).

Importance *grows* in the biologist’s account. It initially grows out of neglect—not acting has consequences too—but then branches out into different lifeforms gathering in and around the

new ecosystem, including the biologist. The chain of consequences with respect to the place has been transformed along with the situation: there is no longer a choice between keeping the pool clean or leaving it be. The fate of the pool has now become a matter of life and death: the destruction of an ecosystem versus “honoring the pool’s real function”. The pool is a small and bounded ecosystem and the biologist is bound to it. Importance emerges in the way things become bound together.

*Annihilation* develops the biologist’s personal story around such specific places and bounded ecologies: the swimming pool; tide pools at a place called Rock Bay; an empty parking lot overgrown with weeds; and Area X itself. Though the nature and actual stretch of its border are undetermined and at some point perhaps gone, Area X is still defined by that border, like a giant tide pool of horrific strangeness, beauty and “pristine wilderness”.

In the biologist’s account, importance arises out of encounters between herself and specific places. For Whitehead, importance *is the property of a situation*—you plus the place—and not a “subjective” appreciation that you may have with respect to it. Etymologically, something that is important is something that bears consequences; it *brings in*, or imports, consequences. When you enter a particular ecosystem, you bring in your presence and the place is not indifferent to it. Dragonflies may alter the course of their flight; ants may choose to crawl over your feet or not.

In that sense, importance cannot be detached from a specific situation, in contrast to its common use where we seem more or less free to decide whether we think something is important or unimportant. Importance, in its older and stronger sense, is not about personal or collective appreciation, but about the type of consequences you have to proceed with, never being fully in charge of the full equation. It is literally an ecological concept. You cannot fully decide, but you



can make a bet on the kind of consequences you want to avoid or bring about. Fictional characters are one means to convey importance in this sense.

Importance is at odds with the concept of ‘the environment.’ The biologist does not put it in those terms, but VanderMeer offers a hint by having his character paraphrase a sentence from a manifesto in our real world—not the world of the Southern Reach—called *The Coming Insurrection* (The Invisible Committee 2009, 75): “Never has a setting been so able to do without the souls traversing it.”<sup>2</sup> In the original text, this phrase refers to capitalism and control policies which have, over time, severed the vital bonds of importance between humans and their lifeworlds. For the writers of the manifesto, the concept of “the ‘environment’” is the result of this violent separation: “There is no ‘environmental catastrophe’. The catastrophe is the *environment itself*. The environment is what’s left to man after he has lost everything” (The Invisible Committee 2009, 74, original emphasis). For the authors of the manifesto, what we are in danger of losing are the strings that weave people, places and other forms of life into relations of importance. There are still people and trees, for sure, but capitalism does not need them: it needs human resources and timber. In *Annihilation*, the biologist reflects on the world outside of Area X as “what it had always been during the modern era: dirty, tired, imperfect, winding down, at war with itself. Back there, I had always felt as if my work amounted to a futile attempt to save us from who we are” (VanderMeer 2015a, 30). Deceived by many things, she seems to long for a world that does not care about humans who have stopped caring themselves. At the same time, she knows that we are always already inhabiting an ecology and inhabited by it. Area X intensifies what she has always known into something she can feel and become part of. There is no room for the environment in Area X.

## Speculative ecologies

Science fiction writer William Gibson claims that he does not write about the future but about the present (Rothman 2019). That writing is trying to catch up with the ever evolving and mutating present. Turn the process of time into a succession of moments and you will see that time itself, even life, becomes impossible. The arrow of time, as Zeno has argued, will remain stuck between the archer and the target. In fact, the arrow could not have gotten there in the first place. Nor the archer. It appears that we cannot cut up the flow of things without getting our minds into trouble. Would a ‘fact’ be to ecology what the ‘present’ is to time?

This is the sort of question that engaged Rachel Carson, a biologist who sought to describe ecological relations between species, oceans, landscapes, people, pesticides, bacteria and chromosomes. Carson needed narrative and elements of fiction to write about those relations. Her book *Under the Sea-Wind* is written from the perspectives of, respectively, a sanderling called Silverbar, a mackerel called Scomber, and an eel called Anguilla. This was not a matter of style, a way to bring lightness in what would otherwise be a dry descriptive account. Rather she needed narration and characters in order to be accurate about the facts. I imagine that for Carson those facts were, in the first place, relations. Rather than bare facts, the smallest possible units of reality are, perhaps, tiny little stories. It is interesting to think of the kinship between the matter of stories and the matter of living in that sense: that it is perhaps more than an analogy. And that fiction may take us closer to truth. “Truth,” as anthropologist Genly Ai puts it, “is a matter of the imagination” (Le Guin 1969, 1). This is a crazy thing to think in times of relentless fact-checking, post-truth discourse and fake news accusations, but it is perhaps even crazier to mistake fiction for lies, and to limit truth to facts only (Le Guin 2019, 108-109). Fiction tells about things that did not happen and it does not claim to be factual. The reader

knows the things described did not happen. Fiction is not deception but artifice. If the art is well mastered, it allows opening up a register of truth different to that available to fact. In some cases, artifice helps telling about facts too. Carson wanted to describe the ecology she had observed in a particular part of our existing world. But Carson's commitment to "[M]ake the sea and its life as vivid a reality for those who may read the book as it became for me [,]" (Carson 2007 [1941], 3), required artifice and imagination. Carson had to move elsewhere, inside her characters, in order to write better about what was happening in her here and now. But she was clear throughout about her 'art' and never claimed that she had actually encountered a mackerel called Scomber. She used the character to approach the real, and write a book of fact in the past tense.

VanderMeer's Area X does not exist in the real world. And yet it is alive for its readers, troubling our habits of thought. It brings more imagination and, quite possibly, more elements of truth in discussions about our curious present called the Anthropocene. As this chapter suggests, the ecology and story of the Southern Reach make a case against the Anthropocene as a concept to think with beyond its geological designation. What we get in return is a strange ecology which reminds us that real-world ecology is often 'weird' and capable of innovation too. I am not inclined to insist so much upon the weird aspects in these novels. Area X is not radically beyond all comprehension: there are enough elements to sustain the possibility of relating to its ecosystem. The ambivalence that works well for the story works equally well to speculate beyond the story, and that is perhaps no coincidence. Both stories and real ecologies are speculative. Both are replete with possibilities that depend upon the imaginative resources of humans and other species in knitting mutual ties of importance.

The speculative character of ecologies become very clear when compared to what the term 'nature' implies. With nature, the imagination does not do a very good job, proposing

stories where only people have real agency. What the concept of nature has done best in the West is to provide a moral and political vantage point for those in positions of authority and power (Daston and Vidal 2004). Many acts of discrimination and violence have been committed in the name of what is deemed ‘natural’ as opposed to ‘unnatural’: racism and the supposed natural superiority of some races over others; eugenics as a way to sift out errors and the unnatural; colonialism, homophobia, genocide ... the list goes on. The concept of nature works like a mirror: it is set apart from us but we see only ourselves in it. The reflected image makes us want to aestheticize and manage it, while the physical separation from that reflection makes it easy for us to consider it a mere resource. Either way, nature has always encouraged irresponsible behavior. The concept of nature is infused with the will to control and comes, as I discussed, with its own horror: a spectacular loss of all means of control: human order, rationality and morality. The concept of nature leaves humans ill-prepared for a world without mirrors, and cosmic horror arises in the face of unthinkable, radical Others. Within the scheme of nature, full control or madness are the only alternatives. Humans either rule or take the easy way out by going insane.

But ecology does not provide that escape route. There is no mirror standing between different beings or different ecosystems. Things relate to each other and *how* they relate changes with what happens amongst them. Ecology requires intelligence from all of its participants. With no ‘natural’ moral and political order to fall back on, the question of how to relate to other lifeforms and fellow humans must be asked anew. Likewise, violence cannot be taken out of the equation or set aside as a ‘negative externality’ because nothing is external. Bad housekeeping will sooner or later affect the entire household. So, ‘what are we going to tell our children’ is a good question to start from. And while I have no answer to what we parents should say, I believe

that the worst parent, and the worst housekeeper, is the one who does not listen or notice, lacking the imagination for both.

Speculative fiction enlarges the imagination. It makes readers and writers more sensitive to the world and it empowers them to notice it better. That way it enlarges reality. It is perhaps the closest we can get to wizardly shapeshifting and becoming someone or something else—for a while at least. The art of writing and thinking is to make some of that magic last.

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<sup>1</sup> The two other books of the trilogy are *Authority* (2015b) and *Acceptance* (2015c). I am grateful to Rob Geukens, a Belgian writer of fiction, fantasy and children’s books, for passing *Annihilation* to me on a cold November night, the dark wind tugging fiercely at our party hats.

<sup>2</sup> The citation, slightly modified with respect to the original text, appears in *Acceptance*, the third book of the *Southern Reach*, on page 241 and reads “Never has a setting been so able to live

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without the souls traversing it”. VanderMeer says in the acknowledgements that this manifesto had “tremendous influence” on the biologist’s/Ghostbird’s thinking. The manifesto is cited or paraphrased three times in *Acceptance*.