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“Death by Inference”: Epistemic Crisis in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach* Trilogy¹

If anything marks Jeff VanderMeer’s oeuvre, it is that he is “highly attuned to the difficulty of processing and representing extreme alterity.”² His *Southern Reach* trilogy (published in three installments, *Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance*, in quick succession in 2014)³ has provoked a rich flurry of scholarship addressing the multivalent alterity manifest in/as “Area X,” in which an otherworldly, lurking but also regenerative alien presence establishes itself. Critics have approached this processive “thing”⁴ from various directions: elaborating notions of Anthropocene monstrosity by situating Area X in the history of weird fiction;⁵ reading the trilogy as an exploration of “eco-fear” or

1. This article was conceived and took shape in conversations with Karl van Wyk, my colleague at the University of the Witwatersrand.

2. Georgie Newson-Errey, “Weird Horizons and the Mysticism of the Unhuman in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach* Trilogy,” *The Cambridge Quarterly* 50.4 (2021): 368–88, 368.

3. Jeff VanderMeer, *Area X: The Southern Reach Trilogy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014). I have elected to refer to the three novels as the “*Southern Reach* trilogy,” although the Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition of the novels combined is titled *Area X: The Southern Reach Trilogy* (2014). This is to obviate confusion about “Area X,” which I use to designate the thing itself.

4. Immanuel Kant distinguishes “things” in themselves (*noumena*) and “phenomena,” which are the appearances that constitute our experience of the world. See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and eds. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 114–16.

5. See Aran Ward Sell, “The War on Terror: Biology as (Unstable) Space in Jeff VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach* Trilogy,” *antae* 5.1 (2018): 86–100; Jonathon Turnbull, “Weird,” *Environmental Humanities* 13.1 (2021): 275–80; and Gry Ulstein, “Brave New Weird: Anthropocene Monsters in Jeff VanderMeer’s *The Southern Reach*,” *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 43.1 (2017): 71–96.

ecologically implicated dis-ease;⁶ placing Area X's transformation of expedition members alongside Rosi Braidotti's and Katherine N. Hayles's posthumanism;⁷ considering the Southern Reach expeditions in terms of their obstructive cognitive and affective embedding in humanism and rationalism and their consequent recourse to mystical and transcendental tropes;⁸ more broadly, mapping the trilogy as a fictional rumination on global warming;⁹ and interpreting Area X as a "hyper-object," Timothy Morton's neologism derived within the philosophical frameworks of "new materialism" and its adjunct, Object Orientated Ontology.¹⁰

In this article, I seek to increment these interpretations of Area X with a focus on the epistemological crisis as it manifests at the levels of semantics and figuration. Existing critical reflections do not consider the role of the "linguists" at the Southern Reach, presumably because Hsyu, the linguist on the twelfth expedition around which the trilogy coheres, turns back before the party enters Area X. Hsyu's decision to desert, and her subsequent comments on the failure of analogies, categories, and metaphors to "capture" Area X, attest to the uncanniness of the alien presence. There is, however, an important counterpoint to Hsyu's melancholia in the *Southern Reach* trilogy: Whitby Allen's mad "language" on the walls of the attic room he inhabits as well as his elaboration of the word "terroir" in a lengthy report to his superiors

6. See Meera Baidur, "Ecofear as Visible and Invisible: Conceptual Underpinnings of The Southern Reach Trilogy by Jeff VanderMeer," *International Journal of Fear Studies* 3.1 (2021): 11–25; and Alison Sperling, "Second Skins: A Body-Ecology of Jeff VanderMeer's The Southern Reach Trilogy," *Paradoxa* 28 (2016): 230–55.

7. See Sam Gormley, "The Southern Reach Trilogy by Jeff VanderMeer, and: *Borne* (review)," *Configurations* 27.1 (2019): 111–16; and Dunja M. Mohr, "Tentacular Narrative Webs: Unthinking Humans in Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy," in *Surreal Entanglements: Essays on Jeff VanderMeer's Fiction*, eds. Louise Economides and Laura Shackleford (New York: Routledge, 2021), 169–91.

8. See Newson-Errey, "Weird Horizons"; and Laura Shackleford, "Strange Matters: More-than-Human Entanglements and Topological Spacetimes," in Economides and Shackleford, *Surreal Entanglements*, 124–46.

9. See Miranda Jeanne Marie Iossifidis and Lisa Garforth, "Reimagining Climate Futures: Reading *Annihilation*," *Geoforum* 137 (2022): 248–57; Arwen Spicer, "Acceptance and Continuation: Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy and Hope in the Anthropocene," in Economides and Shackleford, *Surreal Entanglements*, 47–62; and Andrew Strombeck, "Inhuman Writing in Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy," *Textual Practice* 34.8 (2020): 1365–82.

10. See Kaisa Kortekallio, "Becoming-instrument: Thinking with Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* and Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects*," in *Reconfiguring Human, Nonhuman and Posthuman in Literature and Culture*, eds. Sanna Karkulehto, Aino-Kaisa Koistinen, and Essi Varis (London: Routledge), 57–75; and Spicer, "Acceptance and Continuation."

about Area X. Although Whitby's generative signifying is limited in its implications, it instantiates a refusal to turn away from the possibilities of language. Whitby does not give up hope that a language might be created that represents aspects of Area X and, in making some sense of it, might—somewhere down the line—facilitate some form of communication. I read Whitby's signifying as a rejoinder to Hsyu's pessimism yet also (implicitly) to Morton's "anti-linguistic turn," which phrase I will clarify as I proceed.

Before considering Whitby as a counterpoint to the pervading despair at the Southern Reach, it is useful to describe the origins of the trilogy, as they have been narrated by Jeff VanderMeer, to track some of his engagements with Morton's *Hyperobjects*,¹¹ and to describe and contextualize the details in the novels that are pertinent to my discussion.

VanderMeer stated in 2016 that "the Gulf Oil Spill had created Area X."¹² The British Petroleum Deepwater Horizon spill, as we are all aware, began on April 20, 2010, in the Gulf of Mexico and was the largest and most damaging spill in the history of the petroleum industry (the well site, which gushed submarine plumes of oil for eighty-seven days, was still leaking in early 2012). Biologists and environmentalists continue to register the impact the spill has had on marine and coastal ecosystems around the Gulf—to which, at its immeasurable cost, the devastation was largely confined. (Although the borders of ecological catastrophes are convenient abstractions, their actual extent and impact can never be adequately established.) At the time of the spill, VanderMeer had lived (and hiked) in North Florida for over twenty years and felt that "for many of us in the area [the oil] was gushing in our minds, and we could not get away from it" ("Hauntings"). He describes his subconscious and then literary grappling with the trauma of the oil spill: "that dark swirl coalesced into a dark tunnel with words on the wall, and an invisible border and Area X; a strange place in which nature was always becoming more what it had been without human interference: less contaminated, less compromised. Safe. Where the oil was being taken out."¹³

VanderMeer routinely disavows being a "philosopher," presumably in the institutional sense, for his literary engagements with the theoretical

11. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2013).

12. Jeff VanderMeer, "Hauntings in the Anthropocene: An Initial Exploration," *Environmental Critique*, July 7, 2016, <https://environmentalcritique.wordpress.com/2016/07/07/hauntings-in-the-anthropocene/>.

13. Strombeck presents a nuanced analysis of the link between the Deepwater Water Horizon spill and the *Southern Reach* trilogy ("Inhuman Writing," 1365–67).

recalibrations of the “new materialism” are informed and resonant. His closest association among the speculative realists is with Morton, whose work he regularly invokes—since 2017, VanderMeer has referred to the Deepwater Horizon spill and Area X as “hyperobjects.” It is worth observing, though, that in an MIT Comparative Media Studies Seminar in 2016, “The Spooky Science of the Southern Reach,”¹⁴ having discussed the *Southern Reach* trilogy, VanderMeer is asked by an audience member if he had encountered Morton’s *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013), and he answers that he had recently begun reading it, willfully slowly to savor each chapter. Area X, then, is not a (derivative) iteration of Morton’s “hyperobject.” The unintended intersection is particularly significant because VanderMeer and Morton—both preoccupied with the geologic Anthropocene—conceived of things (rather than “phenomena”) that are richly analogous. Their public conversations have entailed a mutual refinement of their understanding of global warming and its effects on ecosystems.¹⁵

Let us remind ourselves of Morton’s definition of “hyperobjects”—I cannot here capture his elaboration of the concept across *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013) and *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (2016).¹⁶ In *Hyperobjects*, he introduces the concept:

Hyperobjects have numerous properties in common. They are *viscous*, which means they “stick” to beings that are involved with them. They are “nonlocal”; in other words, any “local manifestation” of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject. They involve profoundly different temporalities than the human scale we are used to. . . . Hyperobjects occupy a high-dimensional phase space that results in them being invisible to humans for stretches of time. And they exhibit their effects *interobjectively*; that is, they can be detected in a space that consists of interrelationships between aesthetic properties of objects. The hyperobject is not a function of our knowledge.¹⁷

14. Jeff VanderMeer, “The Spooky Science of the Southern Reach: An Evening with Jeff VanderMeer,” MIT Comparative Media Studies, March 18, 2016, YouTube, 1 hr., 32 min., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gV0RokMC8Uo&t=261s>.

15. See, for example, Andrew Hageman, Timothy Morton, and Jeff VanderMeer, “A Conversation between Timothy Horton and Jeff VanderMeer,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 24, 2016, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-conversation-between-timothy-morton-and-jeff-vandermeer/>.

16. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2013), and Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia UP, 2016).

17. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1–2, Morton’s italics.

Among other hyperobjects, which are “massively distributed in space and time,” are “the climate,” “climate change,” and “plutonium production” but also the elements and flows of “capitalism” and the “global finance system.”¹⁸ Hyperobjects defy correlationism, the commitment that “philosophy can only talk within a narrow bandwidth, restricted to the human–world correlate,”¹⁹ and are an irreducibly materialist rejoinder to modernist and poststructuralist commitments to (constitutive) discursivity; they are neither productions nor effects of discourse and cannot be conceived anthropocentrically. Hyperobjects, in Morton’s formulation, are conspicuous only as symptoms dispersed or flowing across spacetime. They resist metalanguage, invalidate—in their inscrutably complex interobject relations—our schemes of figuration, and exceed empiricism, defying, as they do, the capacities of any instrumental rendering.

Area X meets the requirements for a hyperobject. Its manifestations are unreadable; they do not conform to Euclidian geometry, are at odds with both Enlightenment and Romantic individualism, and defy any sense of verifiable causation. Area X’s motivation, the register of its agency, is unfathomable. It was initiated by “The Event,” when what seemed to be a “tiny shifting spiral of light” pierced Saul Evans’s thumb as he tried to pick it up—“a splinter that was not a splinter.”²⁰ Evans, an erstwhile Christian evangelist and later the lighthouse keeper on the “Forgotten Shore,” is, over the thirty-year span of the trilogy, transformed into the “Crawler,” a posthuman entity continuous with the ecosystem of the “tower” or the “tunnel” (the persistent confusion is an example of the slippage between signifiers and signifieds that is induced by Area X). Members of the Southern Reach, an agency of “Central” established to investigate Area X, refer to it as the “topographical anomaly”—an example of their bureaucratized imprecision, which is also evident in the naming of “Area X.” While the Crawler is understood by the expeditions to be the heart of Area X, it is also an aggregating thing that has taken elements of prior investigations into itself. It is the dynamic origin of an expanding territory of radical difference that is—as the characters in the trilogy come to learn—unbounded.

Initially understood to be bordered, with one “point of egress,”²¹ it becomes evident that Area X is steadily weaving the Southern Reach

18. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 1.

19. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 9.

20. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 376, 432.

21. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 154.

into itself, assimilating it. In his monograph, *None of This Is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer*, Benjamin J. Robertson observes that “Area X appears to violate its established border by way of irruption, but anyone who understands it to be doing so has been limited by assumptions about the nature of this border.”²² The border is no more than a figment of human hope. Robertson, in his analysis, the adequacy of which he needlessly disavows, centers the shocking moment in which “Control” (John Rodriguez, the newly appointed director of the Southern Reach) attempts to enter the Southern Reach science division. The moment is rendered by VanderMeer:

Control reached out for the large double doors. Reached for the handle, missed it,
 tried again.
 But there were no doors where there had always been doors before. Only wall.
 And the wall was soft and breathing under the touch of his hand.
 He was screaming, he thought, but from somewhere deep beneath the sea.²³

Control comes to realize, in an ironic reversal, that “he’d lost control”²⁴—both authority and any coherent sense of selfhood. He is, though, “Control” in another sense: he discovers that he was posted to the Southern Reach by his mother, an intelligence operative at Central and his “handler.” Jackie Miranda Severance (a surname from which spiral any number of Freudian connotations) and her martial coconspirator, Jack Lowry, use Control as a control in their clandestine experiment to determine the nature of Area X. To reduce the number of variables in Control’s conduct and comprehension, he has been conditioned and hypnotized so that his cognition and affect are muted and directed to their purposes. When he touches the transformed wall, he is submerged momentarily in the uncanny worlding of Area X, which “remains immune to logics that identify the known and the unknown so that the latter may be contained by the former.”²⁵ The border proves to have been no more than a propagandistic rhetorical device deployed by Central in its efforts to contain the impact of the unbounded, encroaching,

22. Benjamin J. Robertson, *None of This Is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2018), 114.

23. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 323.

24. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 411.

25. Robertson, *None of This Is Normal*, 115.

assimilating, and transforming presence in the public imagination. Following his interrogation of “the biologist” and the transformation of the Southern Reach, Control concludes: “There is nothing but border. There is no border.”²⁶

There are other ways in which Area X manifests beyond its borders. Several members of the expeditions are transformed into near copies, still recognizably themselves but deeply changed. Since the first disastrous expeditions, members are referred to only by their roles—“psychologist,” “surveyor,” “linguist,” and “biologist”—to reduce individuals to the functions they are expected to play in an empirical process of observation and recording. The biologist states, “We were meant to be focussed on our purpose and ‘anything personal should be left behind’. Names belonged to where we had come from, not to who we were while embedded in Area X.”²⁷ She returns from the twelfth expedition as “Ghost Bird,” who, Georgie Newson-Errey writes, “slowly [loses] faith in the empirical methodology around which her life has hitherto cohered” and then “wholeheartedly disavows [the] epistemological scheme” that has fashioned her relation to the Earth’s biosphere.²⁸ Her despondency is reflected in the first novel, *Annihilation* (of which she is the narrator): “If I don’t have answers, it is because we still don’t know what questions to ask. Our instruments are useless, our methodology broken, our motivations selfish.”²⁹

The psychologist (the director of the Southern Reach before Control’s appointment) is altered by a clandestine crossing into Area X, and following her (apparent) death on the twelfth expedition (which she leads), she returns to the Southern Reach, transformed and emblazoned, just weeks after Control has taken charge: “. . . [the psychologist/director] trailed plumes of emerald dust and behind her the nature of the world was changing, filling with a brightness, the rain losing its depth, its darkness.”³⁰

The third person Control registers as some version of doppelgänger is Whitby Allen, a scientist at the Southern Reach who accompanied the former director on her furtive excursion. He develops a speculative description of Area X based on “terroir,” a winemaking term. “Terroir,” Whitby explains to Control, “means the specific characteristics of a

26. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 362.

27. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 7.

28. Newson-Errey, “Weird Horizons,” 372.

29. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 127.

30. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 329.

place—the geography, geology and climate that, in concert with the vine's own genetic propensities, can create a startling, deep, original vintage."³¹ I will return to Whitby's "terroir" later, and I will consider the pictures and words he paints on the walls of the Southern Reach attic in which he takes up residence. While the trilogy dwells on the transformation of Ghost Bird, the psychologist, and Whitby, there are reasons to assume that other expeditioners have been in some way re-constituted—many seem to return transformed into obscure iterations of Area X, inexplicably woven into its metamorphizing, assimilating ecosystem.

Having inflected a brief outline of the *Southern Reach* trilogy with my concerns, I now turn to Hsyu, the linguist, and her questions regarding signification. Hsyu turns back just as the twelfth expedition is about to enter Area X: "'She had second thoughts,' the psychologist told us, meeting our questions with a firm gaze. 'She decided to stay behind.'"³² The biologist (after she has become Ghost Bird) reflects: "This came as a small shock, but there was also relief that it had not been someone else. Of all our skill sets linguist seemed at the time most expendable."³³ This intimates the biologist's sense—based in part on her husband's death from a cancer-like disease after his return from the eleventh expedition—that the relation between words and the manifestations of Area X is disjunctive and that language is woefully inadequate to the task of representing and, hence coming to terms with, the alien presence. Figuratively, Hsyu turning back suggests that language has no place in relation to the alien.

Nonetheless, when the biologist explores the tunnel, which consists in "*breathing . . . , living tissue*,"³⁴ she discerns evanescently phosphorescent fungal words, phrases, and sentences—"a ghosting of *prior words . . . written in . . . cursive script*."³⁵ Her first thought is that she had "the wrong brain" to attempt any interpretation, that "we needed a linguist."³⁶ The fragments on the tunnel's wall are a palimpsest of Saul Evans's fiery sermons drawn from his previous life as an evangelist and, here and there, from his father's sermons. Area X has absorbed Evans, not only corporeally (except for one arm that protrudes from the wall)

31. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 217.

32. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 7.

33. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 7.

34. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 27, VanderMeer's italics.

35. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 32, VanderMeer's italics.

36. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 33.

but also his Old Testament register, his memories, thoughts, and affect. The text, the fullest version of which Control discovers transcribed on the back of the door of the former director's office, begins: "*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 gather in the darkness and surround the world with the power of their lives while from the dim-lit halls of other places forms that never could be writhe for the impatience of the few who have never seen or been seen.*"³⁷ Studying the script, the biologist observes: "Whole ecosystems had been born and now flourished among the words, dependent on them, before dying off as the words faded."³⁸ This speculative symbiosis—organisms (networked into ecosystems) are indistinguishable from semantic denotation and connotation of the words and sentences—undoes the structuralist logic of the sign. The script is not simply rendered in organic microworlds; meaning is also absorbed into the "living flesh" of the tunnel. Signifier, signified, and signifying have become inextricable. Many of those who experience Area X become (existentially) attached to this linguistic palimpsest—it enters their conscious thought and subconscious, shifting their being by small increments closer to the uncanny presence. Whatever else Area X is, it can assimilate, process, and disseminate language in ways that are continuous with its organic being. The inextricability of language and ecosystems presents as a Möbius strip: an organic, linguistic, parametric surface that cannot be pictured in terms of Euclidian figurations of spacetime, cannot be ordered by the structures of language, and seems inaccessible to poetic figuration.

In an argument with Cheney, an unimaginative scientist at the Southern Reach, Hsyu shouts, "We shouldn't take the meaning of words for granted!" Cheney asks: "You mean a word like *border*?" to which Hsyu replies, "Yes, that's exactly what I mean! You get it! You understand!"³⁹ At one point, Hsyu sets out—somewhat pedantically—her explanation for Area X's irrepresentability. She says, "We keep saying 'it'—and by 'it' I mean whatever initiated these processes and perhaps used Saul Evan's words—is like this thing or that thing. But it isn't—it is only itself. Whatever it is. Because our minds process information almost solely through analogy and categorization, we are often defeated

37. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 194, VanderMeer's italics. According to VanderMeer, the text appeared to him in a dream, and he set it down unaltered upon waking. See VanderMeer, "The Spooky Science."

38. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 60.

39. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 319, VanderMeer's italics.

when presented with something that fits no categories and lies outside the realm of our analogies.⁴⁰ Control observes that the Southern Reach linguists' most common declamation is "We lack the analogies,"⁴¹ which seems to him "somehow deficient as a diagnosis, linguists burning up during re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere after encountering Area X."⁴² He senses the radical defamiliarization of language that would be required to "wrench [all of] their imaginations—and thus their analogies and metaphors—out of a grooved track that had been running through everyone's minds for hundreds and hundreds of years."⁴³

Hsyu realizes that their diction, semantics, and figurations are not only at odds with Area X but also that they inhibit observation and prevent insight. There are even moments when—in an anthropomorphic or creatural turn—she considers their observations and characterizations of Area X to constitute a form of violence. Because the advancing ecosystem's seemingly intentional processes remain unapproachable, observers and participant-observers experience alienation, disorientating estrangement. Therefore, the interrogative mood dominates the narrative. The researchers come to realize that they cannot truly see, register, and record and, hence, cannot comprehend the alterity they have been tasked to map. Empiricism is impossible. All they can observe and attempt to fathom is constituted by projection: each apprehension is fashioned in the "narcissism of our human gaze"⁴⁴ or, as the biologist refers to it, in "our banal, murderous imagination."⁴⁵ In epistemic terms, each interpretation is not only inevitably incorrect, but it also occludes Area X in the observing mind. The perceptual and epistemic routines of humanism and rationalism extinguish Area X. Control describes this as "Death by . . . inference."⁴⁶

An aside is necessary before proceeding. The biologist is impeded in her progress by the Southern Reach's refusal to record any details of the tunnel on its maps. She observes that the agency has been "writing around the edges of things."⁴⁷ Any characterization or analysis of the *Southern Reach* trilogy compounds its fictional interrogations; it can

40. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 205–06.

41. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 389.

42. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 389.

43. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 206.

44. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 126.

45. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 214.

46. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 216.

47. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 75.

only diffract its oblique descriptions of the ineffable, yet material, presence. Hence, my use of *border* and my numerous caveats in describing that which cannot be described.⁴⁸

There is another way in which Area X assimilates text. It has “retained” a pile of the expeditioners’ journals in a room in the lighthouse—scuttling the Southern Reach’s investigations, which depend on these first-person accounts and the rudimentary data they include. There are indications across the trilogy that Area X is “aware” of the efforts that have been made to understand its existence and processes—that in some sense it has “read” the journals. It is this, in addition to its hyperbolic alterity, that thwarts empiricism. Area X has assimilated structures of meaning in terms of which it has been studied and experienced. The observer and observed have merged in Area X, undermining any possibility of Cartesian interpretation. The expeditioners find themselves, on occasion, staring at their predecessors’ transformed bodies, but everywhere they confront the structures of the thought and affect of those who ventured into Area X before them. This immaterial human residuum seems to have been tested, transformed, adapted, and somehow materialized.

The failure of empiricism and the cabalistic infighting at Central and the Southern Reach have led to the characters’ compulsive theorizing of Area X. These theories, as Andrew Strombeck observes, have taken on the character of “conspiracy theories.”⁴⁹ They are unverifiable interpretations (superstitions, really) rooted in an impression of Area X’s malevolence, imagining it to be an invasive, occupying force, some version of contagion.

Whitby’s elaboration of “terroir” is different.⁵⁰ As I mentioned, “terroir” is a winemaking term that refers to the complex interrelation of factors that contribute to a particular vintage. It suggests, above all things, *particularity*. Whitby explains to Control his understanding of “terroir”: “Terroir’s direct translation is ‘a sense of place,’ and what it means is the sum of the effects of a localized environment—the geography, geology, and climate . . . , inasmuch as they impact the qualities

48. I use “describe” in Michel de Certeau’s sense: “as a mobile point ‘describes’ a curve.” See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984), 116.

49. Strombeck, “Inhuman Writing,” 1375.

50. For a fuller analysis of “terroir,” see the persuasive article by Siobhan Carroll, “The Terror and the Terroir: The Ecological Uncanny in New Weird Exploration Narratives,” *Paradoxa* 28 (2016): 67–90.

of a particular product."⁵¹ Caught up in Whitby's enthusiasm, Control questions him as to whether it might be possible to describe the terroir of Area X: "So you mean you would study everything about the history—natural and human—of that stretch of coast, in addition to all other elements? And you might—you just might—find an answer in that confluence."⁵² There is nothing surprising in comprehending that the intersection of cultivation and a particular "pristine environment" (a phrase that is a touchstone across the trilogy) will produce unique ecosystems. But in unsettling the binary of human/nature, Whitby and Control are spurred on to think of terroir, not as "a kind of autopsy"⁵³ but as a revivifying conception. The only thing Control takes as he flees the Southern Reach (which, at the end of *Authority*, is being dramatically assimilated by Area X) is Whitby's terroir manuscript, which he protects obsessively as he pursues the escaped Ghost Bird to Rock Bay and then accompanies her back into Area X.

New conceptions come at a personal cost in that they are existentially disorientating. Even before Control's arrival, Whitby was living in a small attic above a cleaning closet adjoining the main dining room of the Southern Reach. Possessed (both preoccupied and partially assimilated) by Area X, striving to elaborate his terroir theory, Whitby has painted on the walls of the attic "a vast phantasmagoria of grotesque monsters with human faces."⁵⁴ In his efforts to articulate Area X, he has also scribed "much-worried sentences and phrases in a rich patina of cross-outs and paint-overs and other markings, as if someone had been creating a compost of words."⁵⁵ These Blakean productions attest to a manic enlightenment colliding with the limits of systems of semantic and pictorial representation. Control conjectures that Whitby had become "a breach, a leak" through which Area X was flowing into the Southern Reach but also, more positively, that he had become a "door"⁵⁶ to a less compromised perception based in a recognition of the radiant creativity of Area X.

Whitby's generative activities—his conceptual obliquity in deploying "terroir" as a departure point, his weird images, the words and sentences he dislodges from their conventional uses—suggest a version of

51. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 217.

52. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 217.

53. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 218.

54. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 312.

55. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 312.

56. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 329.

(highly qualified) agency. He strives to find a language that melds the analytical, representational, and poetic to reach toward the “phenomenon” of Area X. His agency is that of a hybrid being; by the time he takes to the attic, he is already woven into Area X in inscrutable but constitutive ways. Yet from within his liminal subjectivity, he—alone at the Southern Reach—is not despondent. Unlike the other investigators, Hsyu among them, Whitby does not lapse into melancholic *asymbolia*, that mute space in which it is not only impossible for the individual to signify meaningfully and in which they lose the will to try. Rather, he is fully engaged in creating a phenomenology of Area X, which feeds into his analysis. There is no accessible form to order his thoughts and affect; rather he reaches across modes of representation (the poetic, the visual, and the analytical) in his fiery attempts to reach into the uncanny. My William Blake analogy notwithstanding, Whitby is not a Romantic artist in any obvious way. For him, Area X is not sublime in the Kantian sense (he is intent on finding a form, even as his process is heuristic), and while his own perceptions are integral, his shift from iridescent creativity to writing an analytical report implies a decentering of his subjectivity as he strives to articulate the qualities of Area X.

If my characterization of Whitby and his creativity is persuasive, then he represents a sensitizing perspective on Morton’s conception of the hyperobject—and more generally, on the “anti-linguistic turn” on which the new materialism is based. Morton’s opening chapter of *Hyperobjects*, “A Quake in Being,” is polemical; it dismisses correlationism, empiricism, discursive constructivism, and all of postmodernism in favor of a “powerful new philosophical approach for finding out real things about real things.”⁵⁷ “The first task” of the new materialism is, he argues, “to abolish the idea of a metalanguage that could account for things while remaining uncontaminated by them.”⁵⁸ Morton acknowledges that unsettling metalanguages defined poststructuralism but then rejects that entire philosophical enterprise in the simplest of terms: “The globalizing sureness with which ‘there is no metalanguage’ and ‘everything is a metaphor’ are spoken in postmodernism means that postmodernism is nothing like what it takes itself to be, and is indeed just another version of the (white, Western, male) historical project.”⁵⁹ Morton stages himself as the herald of a new philosophical horizon, an evangelist for things and hyperobjects in the face of the obfuscations of

57. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 15.

58. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 3.

59. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 4.

Western philosophy, despite obviously knowing much more about that tradition than he lets on.

I do not wish to place too much philosophical weight on Whitby's shoulders, nor am I dismissive of Hsyu's despondency—"We lack the analogies."⁶⁰ Yet as a student of literary modernism, of which I consider postmodernism to be a postscript, I cannot but read Whitby's intellectual and affective creativity against the grain of Morton's polemic. By way of conclusion, then, I offer two propositions that do not amount to a coherent philosophical position.

First, centering things need not (perhaps should not) strive to set representation aside. The new object ontology has been integral to theorizing the Anthropocene. Anthropocentrism has brought us here: we are an existentially threatened species facing the encroachment of a wasteland we continue to enlarge by subscribing blindly to the logics of late-stage capitalism. In many ways, the processes of production and ideologies that have brought us here are beyond words. Yet we have no option other than to engage, first and foremost, with their representation among the discourses, for language is the ground on which (political and epistemic) activism proceeds. Morton's declaration of a new epistemic horizon—at which humans are radically decentered and in which speech acts, figuration, and analogical thought are rendered immaterial—dehistoricizes and hence diminishes the present. We are here and now because of the interpenetration of discourses, ideologies, and economic orthodoxies—something which the "old materialism" (Marxism and its elaboration) was profoundly aware of.

Not all those labeled "new materialists" are as programmatic as Morton about rejecting the prospects of language or the legacy of modernism. Bruno Latour's "social network theory"—set out most fully in *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*—proposes an "ontological pluralism" that incorporates an analysis of naturalized and disruptive speech acts and advocates the need to "remove some speech impediments."⁶¹ For Donna Haraway, certain practices of interaction (often in marginalized societies) and atypical linguistic codes offer models for "making kin" in the Anthropocene (she coins a neologism, "Chthulucene," to characterize the present, emphatically distancing herself from the racist H. P. Lovecraft).⁶² And Anna

60. VanderMeer, *Southern Reach*, 389.

61. Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2018), 123–26.

62. Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham,

Lowenhaupt Tsing, an avowed anti-humanist, both mobilizes and complicates analogy in her fungal account of life in the ruins of capitalism.⁶³ We cannot, even this small sample suggests, generalize the new materialists' conception of representation, of the place of language in thinking about the Anthropocene. Nevertheless, Latour, Haraway, and Tsing are joined to Morton in their categorical dismissal of formalism and modernism as vestiges of thought that we need to overcome.

The *Southern Reach* trilogy stages the seam at which language and an unknowable materiality (do not) meet. In its literariness, it summons Area X into being and then stages the efforts of investigators to ascribe meaning to its uncanniness, which is increasingly thought to be impossible. In this Anthropocenic fable, Whitby's poetic, disruptive representations stand for the defamiliarization of conventions or habits of representation in which the other investigators are resolutely implicated. His sensibility, I suggest, is that of a modernist, perhaps even the first member of the new avant-garde. In the face of the ennui pervading the Southern Reach, Control carries Whitby's report on "terroir" as a talisman, not to bring luck but to ward off speechlessness and the nihilism that would follow.

My second proposition relates to the first. The *Southern Reach* trilogy engages implicitly the melancholy of the new materialism. Earlier I used the word "asymbolia," the most apposite description of which is offered by the psychoanalytic theorist and literary commentator Julia Kristeva. In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, she considers the connection between "object loss" (in Freudian terms, the "Thing"—or the *real*—from which we are separated when we are weaned) and the "modification of signifying bonds."⁶⁴ She writes, "These bonds, language in particular, prove to be unable to ensure, within the melancholy/depressive composite, the autostimulation that is required in order to initiate given responses."⁶⁵ The melancholic experiences "the signifier's failure to insure a compensating way out of the states of withdrawal in which the subject takes refuge to the point of inaction (pretending to be dead) or even suicide."⁶⁶ The disconsolate subject is potentially aphasic

NC: Duke UP, 2016).

63. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2015).

64. Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1989), 10, Kristeva's italics.

65. Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 10.

66. Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 10, Kristeva's italics.

and, in extreme instances, lapses into full-blown asymbolia, in which words become empty signifiers detached from the things to which they conventionally refer. (This formulation summons, of course, the spirits of James Joyce, E. M. Forster, and T. S. Eliot.) Suffering this condition, the subject is enervated; a “radical, sullen atheist.”⁶⁷

Melancholy, as individual suffering, can be extended to characterize social and political formations in which mutism dominates, usually because subaltern subjects are unauthorized to speak or have become unwilling to do so. Perhaps the best-known extrapolation of melancholy along these lines is Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia*, in which he describes the effects of poverty, degradation, migration, and powerlessness as resulting in literal and political speechlessness.⁶⁸ It is in an analogously extrapolated sense that I use “melancholy” in relation to the *Southern Reach* trilogy and the new materialism. I am not concerned to diagnose Hsyu or Whitby, the former as melancholic and the second manic—thankfully, Ernest Jones's analysis of Hamlet's Oedipus complex is now only a shadow. Rather, in the fable of the trilogy, Hsyu and the other investigators are enervated (melancholic in being resigned to the impossibility of signifying the details and processes of Area X), while Whitby keeps meaning in the space of the verb. He and the Crawler are related, both in the plot (they have entered one another) and in their linguistic practices: both are unsettling signification, in their different ways undoing the bonds between signifiers and signified, doing new things with words, which is the signal impulse of modernism.

It is ponderous to describe the new materialism as inherently melancholic. Yet denouncing the history of humanism, formalism, and modernist experimentation risks political, artistic, and existential inertia at a time when making new meanings, it seems to me, is essential to address the unevenly distributed, unfolding catastrophe of global warming. The last thing we need is depressed silence or acquiescence, both of which may result from an “anti-linguistic” turn.

In this article, I have made several claims for literariness, and I am not about to stop. The *Southern Reach* trilogy is a remarkable feat of the imagination that is resolutely contemporary while being deeply embedded in literary history. We can also take Whitby as an analogue for VanderMeer. The trilogy is, in and of itself, creative and generative, and its lacunae of indeterminacy welcome readers into a unique complicity in making and unmaking meaning. The trilogy is not a panacea to the

67. Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 5.

68. Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia UP, 2005).

present; it draws us, aesthetically, into considering our ethical, affective, and political relations to the natural world. It unsettles us. Perhaps the trilogy should not be read for its intersections with the new materialism but as an imaginative rejoinder to that current trend in thinking.

Novelists are, of course, neither subservient to philosophy nor encompassed by it. I imagine a stage on which Morton and VanderMeer are sitting alongside one another as they have done on several occasions. VanderMeer reads the extract in which the biologist enters the “tunnel” and sees the text on the wall, then the Crawler. The audience is captivated by the details, the language; they are nothing like they expected, they are bewildering—they transport the listeners into a wild landscape of meaning in which anything seems possible. Afterward, Morton stands up to speak, and his first and only utterance is, “I could never have written that.”

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