

Posthumanism and Compassion in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* Trilogy: A Vegetarian, Ecofeminist Approach

by

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POSTHUMANISM AND COMPASSION IN JEFF VANDERMEER'S *SOUTHERN REACH*

TRILOGY: A VEGETARIAN, ECOFEMINIST APPROACH

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Introduction:

Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014) is a thrilling work of speculative fiction that begs for a posthumanist reading. The novels delve into the fictional Area X, a strange and beautiful, though feared, physical landscape on earth. Pet theories about the mysterious Area X proliferate in the narratives of VanderMeer's three compelling novels, with a conclusion that is nothing short of empowering for both the human and the non-human. Both the genre of VanderMeer's trilogy and the theme of the posthuman operate in a chiasmic relationship to convey a clear teaching that evokes a powerful message about humanity, posthumanity, and the future of the planet. I argue that the *Southern Reach* trilogy illustrates the duality of the term posthumanism: Characters exceed what it means to be human in a biological sense, and in an ethical sense, certain characters become posthuman in that they accept a mode of thinking that does not invariably place the human at the center. My argument outlines two very different ways of using the term posthuman, yet also illustrates the commonalities between each of my applications, thus creating a means of applying the posthuman lens as a tool for approaching literary texts.

A Brief Genealogy of Posthumanism:

To comprehend how posthumanism can aid us in gaining an in-depth understanding of compassion towards all life, it is crucial first to have a grasp of how a sometimes fluidly-used term such as posthumanism has been deployed in recent Continental philosophy. And in the U.S., N. Katherine Hayles and Cary Wolfe are prominent theorists of the posthuman condition. For Wolfe, posthumanism becomes a new avenue for a continually unfolding discourse that reflects critically upon the humanist enterprise:

My sense of posthumanism is thus analogous to Jean-François Lyotard's paradoxical rendering of the postmodern: it comes both before and after humanism: before in the sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world, the prosthetic coevolution of the human animal with the technicity of tools and external archival mechanisms (such as language and culture) of which Bernard Stiegler probably remains our most compelling and ambitious theorist— and all of which comes before that historically specific thing called “the human” that Foucault's archaeology excavates.¹ But it comes after in the sense that posthumanism names a historical moment in which the decentering of the human by its imbrication in technical, medical, informatic, and economic networks is increasingly impossible to ignore, a historical development that points toward the necessity of new theoretical paradigms (but also thrusts them on us), a new mode of thought that comes after the cultural repressions and fantasies, the philosophical protocols and evasions, of humanism as a historically specific phenomenon. (Wolfe xv-xvi)

For Wolfe, posthumanism operates in two ways, both as in it is a response to the 17th Century mode of discourse that places the human at the center of all rational thought, and in the manner that posthumanism is also a timeless methodology that directs thinking to that beyond the human, including machines.

Wolfe and Hayles are in agreement that posthumanism is quite different from the historical period of reasoning that defines humanism, although Hayles does separate the two more distinctly. She warns against a kind of posthumanism that branches *directly* from humanist

¹ Wolfe's notes: “See in particular Bernard Stiegler, *Techinics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).”

discourse: “Yet the posthuman need not be recuperated back into liberal humanism, nor need it be construed as antihuman” (Hayles 287). A key deviation between the posthumanist work of Wolfe and that of Hayles is in their conceptions of human embodiment. For Wolfe, a definition of posthumanism revolves around two foundational ideologies:

The first has to do with perhaps the fundamental and anthropological dogma associated with humanism and invoked by Balibar’s reference to the humanity/animality dichotomy: namely, that “the human” is achieved by escaping or repressing the animal origins in nature, the biological, and the evolutionary, but more generally by transcending the bonds of materiality and embodiment together. (Wolfe xiv-xv)

Wolfe thus takes the stance that a crucial aspect of posthumanism relies on the potentiality for the erasure of the human body. In opposition to Wolfe’s views regarding human embodiment, Hayles argues that:

...the cultural contexts and technological histories in which cellular automata theories are embedded encourage a comparable fantasy—that because we are essentially information, we can do away with the body. Central to this argument, is a conceptualization that sees information and materiality as distinct entities... It is this materiality/information that I want to contest—not the cellular automata model, information theory, or a host of related theories in themselves. (Hayles 12)

Hayles is referring to theories such as that of “Edward Fredkin and Stephen Wolfram [who] claim that reality is a program run on a cosmic computer. In this view, a universal informational code underlies the structure of matter, energy, spacetime—indeed of everything that exists”

(Hayles 11)² Hayles explains that these cellular automata are akin to coded units “that can occupy two states: “on or off.” (Hayles 11). When the cellular automata model is applied to humans, Hayles states that “embodiment can flow from cellular automata as easily as from atoms. No one suggests that because atoms are mostly space, we can shuck the electron shells and do away with occupying space altogether” (Hayles 12). Through Hayles analogy and example as cellular automata theory being applied to human embodiment, the posthuman does not equal a kind of transcendence of the body, but instead illustrates the cohesiveness of information and body.

When approaching these opposing views of embodiment within posthumanist discourse, I argue that Hayles’ method proves especially useful for examining VanderMeer’s trilogy, as we will see. For, a posthuman discussion can open up when focusing on pattern and randomness, and not solely absence and presence, as Hayles suggests. She advances the concept of “distributed cognitive system” (Hayles 289) to describe more wholistically how cognition operates, how thinking can occur with help outside of the autonomous human subject, including other tools, machines, entities. As she argues: “Located within the dialectic of pattern/randomness and grounded in embodied actuality rather than disembodied information, the posthuman offers resources for rethinking the articulation of humans with intelligent machines” (Hayles 287).

² Hayles note reads: Edward Fredkin, "Digital Mechanics: An Information Process Based on Reversible Universal Cellular Automata," *Physica D* 45 (1990): 245-70. See also the account of Fredkin's work in Robert Wright, *Three Scientists and Their Gods: Looking for Meaning in an Age of Information* (New York: Times Books, 1988). Also central to this theory is the work of Stephen Wolfram; see his *Theory and Applications of Cellular Automata* (Singapore: World Scientific, 1986)

Using Hayles' methodology and terminology for defining the posthuman, it is possible to view the human species as only one pattern that has emerged in a vast universe of randomness, and not as a dominating presence in a universe filled with absence. Hayles goes on to argue: "If pattern is the realization of a certain set of possibilities, randomness is the much, much larger set of everything else" (Hayles 286). The posthuman can help us to view the universe as a collection of patterns, some of which are difficult to quantify through human cognition, as in the case of "hyperobjects", a term coined by Timothy Morton. Posthumanist thinking allows us to view machines and humans as part of a "distributed cognitive system", as Hayles puts it, but also to create space for a discussion regarding any life outside of the human whether machine, animal, or mineral.

As Hayles suggests, "the posthuman both evokes terror and excites pleasure" (Hayles 4). Yet, the posthuman age can also aid us in exceeding our habitual modes of thinking: it can bring us pleasure by ultimately encouraging us to become better humans, not just for the benefit of ourselves, but also for the benefit of other life—whether this life is another human, another animal, the planet, or yes, even a machine. Through the lens of posthumanism, literature from all eras, from Victorian to modern, postmodern to post-postmodern, can open up other possibilities for flourishing, revealing how we can improve life in and around the human. Coupled with the genre of speculative fiction, posthumanist philosophy can help us to bridge the gap between a lifestyle that adheres to the hierarchies of speciesism and one that engages in acceptance and respect for all living beings as equals, while also, at times, displaying that when the environment is viewed as an intricate web of entangled life, we can approach the earth itself with a similar kind of acceptance.

My discussion of posthumanism intersects with a discussion regarding hyperobjects, a term coined by Timothy Morton. I argue that hyperobjects (what I would argue are types of posthuman objects) present a vivid way of envisioning the web of entangled life that I argue is illustrated in VanderMeer's trilogy. Morton explains hyperobjects by explaining that:

They involve profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to. In particular, some very large hyperobjects, such as planets, have genuinely Gaussian temporality: they generate spacetime vortices, due to general relativity. Hyperobjects occupy a high-dimensional phase space that results in their being invisible to humans for stretches of time... Hyperobjects are not just collections, systems, or assemblages of other objects. They are objects in their own right... (Morton 1)

Morton provides examples of these elusive, but ever-present objects such as “a black hole... the sum total of all nuclear materials on Earth; or just the plutonium, or the uranium... or the sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism” (Morton 1). In regard to my exploration of posthumanism, hyperobjects help us to comprehend that which is hard to quantify by human brains alone. Tools would be needed to measure the effects of global warming, for instance, and thus would be an example of one of Hayles' “distributed cognitive systems” at work. The way in which global warming, as a hyperobject, exceeds the limits of human sight and touch, will be useful in my approach—connecting VanderMeer's trilogy with themes that focus on rethinking the human and compassionate modes of living.

An Introduction to Speculative Fiction as Genre:

While I argue that literature that is particularly conducive to the posthuman lens has the potential to offer compassionate messages, I also argue that the genre of speculative fiction is a

particularly fruitful mode for conveying these sentiments. Similarly to Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, VanderMeer's work may alternately be deemed a work of science fiction or of fantasy, yet it is the speculative nature of the text that creates its unique usefulness and what lends itself to my specific application of the posthuman. The text erodes the boundaries between the very genres that we may try to place it within. Although sometimes difficult to define, speculative fiction enables the reader to imagine a world that is much like our own, where possibilities have been stretched and altered in ways that are not completely unfathomable, as we can sometimes say of fantasy. While I argue that speculative fiction is this ideal genre for revealing compassionate messages while challenging the ways in which we consider the human, it is helpful to keep in mind that the genres of science fiction, speculative fiction, and fantasy are so closely related, that what may be speculative fiction to one, may be called science fiction to another. Margaret Atwood also has commented on the flexibility of the terms "science fiction," "speculative fiction," and "fantasy":

In a public discussion with Ursula Le Guin in the fall of 2010, however, I found that what she means by "science fiction" is speculative fiction about things that really could happen, whereas things that really could not happen she classifies as "fantasy"... In short what Le Guin means by "science fiction" is what I mean by "speculative fiction" and what she means by "fantasy" would include some of what I mean by "science fiction."
(Atwood 6-7)

Keeping in mind the flexible nature of speculative, science and fantastical fiction, for the purposes of my argument, a basic definition of speculative fiction is useful. R. B. Gill describes the wide range of categories that emerge from the slightly amorphous genre of speculative fiction and why a working definition is beneficial:

Clearly, speculative fiction is marked by diversity; there is no limit to possible micro-subjects and, understandably in such a mixed field, no standard definition...

Nevertheless, for literary purposes, a definition that suggests affinities with other types of works and that facilitates interpretation is indispensable. (Gill 72)

Gill describes speculative fiction as “presenting modes of being that contrast with their audiences’ understanding of ordinary reality” (Gill 72-73). Gill thus deems speculative fiction as best understood through its relation to other genres and subgenres, yet Gill notes that the subtle differences between science fiction and fantasy cause speculative fiction to achieve what it does: “Science fiction, characterized solely by its dependence on scientific method, does something basically different from speculative fiction; but where science fiction expands to include the fantastic, it seems closer to our field” (Gill 72). It is the very blending of genres, such as science fiction and the fantastical, that create the space for speculative fiction to thrive, and also why it is so hard to define. However, Gill clarifies that a useful definition of speculative fiction separates it from science fiction in that the scientific method is not depended on, while the reality of our world is still easily conceived. For example, Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading* occurs on the fictional parallel world Anti-Terra, yet Anti-Terra is so similar to earth, that I classify it as speculative fiction according to Gill’s definition. Yet, being so similar to our experience of reality, speculative fiction—although sometimes overlapping classification of science fiction or even fantasy—can adequately convey accessible material regarding our own world (such as messages of compassion) in a specific, productive, and compelling way, while it can also provide a productive modality for imagining the posthuman condition.

Comparatively, Morton’s hyperobjects have crucial implications for literacy genre, especially speculative fiction, due to the imaginative aspects revealed in speculative fiction and

the elusive nature of hyperobjects. Morton expands upon this elusiveness of hyperobjects through an explanation of the withdrawnness of objects:

Around 1900 Edmund Husserl discovered something strange about objects. No matter how many times you turned around a coin, you never saw the other side as the other side... The gap between phenomenon and things yawns open, disturbing my sense of presence and being in the world... hyperobjects are not simply mental (or otherwise ideal) constructs, but are real entities whose primordial reality is withdrawn from humans. (Morton 11-15)

The withdrawnness that Husserl, and now Morton focus on, helps to unlock the apprehension of hyperobjects, and the metaphor of the coin can also help us fully unlock the potential that speculative fiction, as a literary genre, possesses: Speculative fiction helps us to imagine the other side of the coin and to project how it may be perceived through our own cognitive processes.

The *Southern Reach* trilogy by Jeff VanderMeer does allow for us to imagine the withdrawn side of the coin, helps us to unlock hyperobjects and to unlock the potential of the posthuman world —the text comes alive with a thrilling narrative, but also and more importantly, provides views of compassion for other life, whether animal, plant, or even unknown life. In the *L.A. Review of Books*, David Tompkins also connects Morton and VanderMeer, but arrives at a very different conclusion from the one I will offer: “The beauty of the books is that *they let the other side win*. They offer a collapsitarianism in reverse. Area X represents not ecological collapse but rather *human* collapse — or, better said, human transmutation” (Tompkins n.p.). However, I would like to suggest that the trilogy is a productive place to examine posthumanism, and that instead of human collapse, VanderMeer illustrates a convergence, a similarity and

equality between human and non-human. He presents an improved human that has not abandoned its humanity, but has accepted a kind of co-habitation with another species, a co-habitation that operates in a manner very similar to that of the hyperobject. Through imagery and characterization that challenge us to rethink the human, ironic inversions, specific examples of vegetarian characters, and new ecologies, the text teaches us to become better humans, and in this way the posthuman philosophy becomes an ironic reversal itself, a human philosophy and one that betters *our own* species as well as others.

Introduction to the *Southern Reach* trilogy:

The *Southern Reach* trilogy describes the story of human interaction with a mysterious wilderness called Area X. The narrative suggests that Area X has come about by human pollution or waste that has resulted in an environmental catastrophe, causing the area to be closed off to the public. The government has appointed an agency called the Southern Reach, with a parent agency known as Central, to head all exploration and discovery of Area X. Both are agencies that proliferate almost as much mystery and secrecy as Area X itself. We also find out that Area X is also shrouded in mystery for the Southern Reach itself. Rabbits have disappeared—mid-leap—into Area X and strange footage from past expeditions reveals expedition members acting as though they have lost rational control. The Southern Reach hypnotizes expedition members before they travel across the invisible border and pass through the mysterious entry point into Area X. However, the border the novels represent is a place where time, vision, and perception in general are all altered, and at the very least, the experience of crossing it is disorienting for expedition members. We also find out that copies of expedition members have been created by Area X and have returned across the border in the originals’

places: for example, the character Ghost Bird is a copy of a biologist, and is held captive by the Southern Reach in *Authority*.

Significantly, strong female characters open up the trilogy, as a description of an all-female expedition of intelligent and physically able women enter Area X. The women are also introduced by their function, and not by name, calling attention to their abilities, and also significant as I will argue the calling of people by their function serves to symbolize the erosion of human categorization.

Book One, *Annihilation*, is narrated by a biologist, who is part of an expedition into Area X headed by a psychologist, the director of the Southern Reach. Throughout *Annihilation* and *Authority* we learn that Area X contains within it life forms that do not coincide with the life that the world outside of Area X knows. The biologist discovers a living tower, and an organism within it that she cannot identify. She explores a lighthouse which does not seem odd at first, but after exploration, reveals a trapdoor and storage space containing several journals from several past expedition members, including a journal left behind by her husband who was a member of a past expedition into Area X and returned as a sort of zombie retrieved by the Southern Reach after returning home, and then died of cancer at the Southern Reach facility. Readers may correctly suspect that the husband who returned and died is a copy of the biologist's former husband and is indeed a living anomaly that emerges from Area X.

Book Two, *Authority*, is narrated by John Rodriguez, who calls himself Control and who becomes the new director of the Southern Reach as *Authority* opens. His mother works for Central and helped him get the position, although a mysterious Voice is the source to whom Control must report. Control discovers that the Voice has been hypnotizing him by commands

spoken during their phone calls. Control discovers from his mother that the Voice is James Lowry, one of the members of the first expedition into Area X and who serves as an angry and oppressive force in command of Central. *Authority* allows us to gain access to information that the biologist could not give us in *Annihilation*—what the Southern Reach knows—although this knowledge is not comprehensive, and like the biologist’s, limited. Control learns that members of the Southern Reach, such as Whitby Allen, act strangely and seem unhinged. By the end of *Authority*, the border has expanded past the Southern Reach building; Control has made a run for it, encouraged by his mother; found the escaped Ghost Bird; and found an undiscovered entry point into Area X.

Book Three, *Acceptance*, explores the narrative from inside of Area X as Control and Ghost Bird’s narrative perspectives from inside the border are provided in separate chapters. We are also given past narrative viewpoints in subsequent chapters revealing the history of Area X from Saul Evans, the last lighthouse keeper of the lighthouse on the coast and the first person affected by Area X before the time of the Southern Reach. The narratives continue to flow from multiple perspectives and times as we also are given stories from the director’s past before her final expedition that takes place with the biologist in *Annihilation*, and we receive the secondhand written testimony of the biologist’s final days told via the narration of Ghost Bird. The jumps between perspective and time in *Acceptance*, reminiscent of postmodern works such as Nabokov’s *Invitation of a Beheading* and David Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas*, create a thorough outlook of Area X and the world that mirrors the text’s full view of life, which I will argue is made visible by examining the novels through a posthumanist lens. The grand revelation about Area X tells us that a different kind of life and existence has inhabited Area X, which may be alien. The mysterious life-force does not follow the laws of biology nor the known physical laws of earth, but does

allow for a kind of evolution and growth which is in the end enlightening for characters, who are not all human beings, but who, regardless of species or gender, grow to accept the life that is never fully understood in the world of the novels.

Imagery and Characterization from the *Southern Reach* trilogy viewed through a Posthumanist Lens

VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy is permeated with imagery that not only generates suspense, but also challenges the borders between species, calling into question what is considered strictly human in the novels. I argue that certain images and characters from VanderMeer's fiction portray the posthuman in two specific ways: one in that they defy our concept of the biological human animal, and second, that, they simultaneously portray intelligence that compassionately envisions life other than the human.

One of the compelling images in VanderMeer's trilogy is Area X, an image that challenges conventional understandings of the natural world. The ecological anomaly of Area X is alive in a manner that suggests some kind of intelligent thought at the center of its functionality, and throughout *Authority* the scientists and members of the Southern Reach aim to find out "whoever or whatever had created that pristine bubble" (*Authority* 37). As Area X appears so much like the earth as we know it, it serves to draw attention to the "otherness" with which the Southern Reach so readily approaches the landscape. The approach of the Southern Reach resembles a line of thinking which is reminiscent of the 17th century rationality of humanist discourse, an approach to science that I argue is detrimental to the expeditions sent to Area X. Contrastingly to viewing Area X as "other," Area X is more accurately an example of a fictional hyperobject, operating through different ways than the real world. Area X lies outside

of the scientists' methods of understanding, and quite literally humans and animals become a part of it, resembling the viscous quality Morton attributes to the domain of the hyperobject. For example, in the biologist's final testament she describes a blending of land, animal, atmosphere, and herself: "There is a sense of the world around me strengthened or *thickened*, the weight and waft of reality more focused or determined. As if the all-too-human dolphin eye I once glimpsed staring up at me with each new phase further subsumed in the flesh that surrounds it"

(*Acceptance* 179). The "thickening" and "subsuming" the biologist feels inside of Area X conveys the interconnected nature within Area X in a biological sense, not just in a psychological or a spiritual sense, while also conveying the manner in which Area X defies conceptions of the physical world as the biologist knows it. When the biologist changes, she also becomes a part of the land of Area X, her body is part of the ecosystem, much like Saul Evans becomes a part of it, and the disappearing rabbits as well. The whole image is one of a jar of honey with all the pieces and life forms in it enmeshed in interconnectedness, but in a way that also defies our understanding of how the physical world is supposed to work. The viscous nature of Area X reveals the posthuman in the sense that the human is not at the center of intelligence in Area X, but serves as one piece of an interconnected network. The animals—human and non-human within Area X—are literally a part of the land's very life force, as Area X is like one body with several different creatures serving as the individual body parts.

Area X also signifies what Morton refers to as the "mythical land Away" (Morton 31): "For some time we may have thought that the U-bend in the toilet was a convenient curvature of ontological space that took whatever we flush down it into a totally different dimension called Away, leaving things clean over here" (Morton 31). Admitting that waste, pollution, etc. never truly "exit" our world, demands that we see earth as a continuous physical entity, and a viscous

one at that; for Morton tells us: “Knowledge of the hyperobject Earth, and of the hyperobject biosphere, presents us with viscous surfaces from which nothing can be forcibly peeled” (Morton 31). Because at first it is hinted that Area X is a result of biological waste, we can imagine Area X as the “mythical Away,” but instead of being absent, Area X is quite present. It symbolizes the matter that will never truly exit our own earth, but is instead very existent. The idea of acceptance, such as the *Acceptance* that is the title of VanderMeer’s third novel, comes when we realize that the jar of honey, the viscous nature of our world and its various life particles, pollution, land, sea, and air, are indeed similar to that of Area X in that matter on earth is ever-present. Morton describes that “it’s not a matter of making some suicidal leap into the honey, but of discovering that we are already inside it” (Morton 32). Thus, the viscous nature of the earth is not affected by human knowledge in any other way other than how it may affect our choices regarding how we dispose of waste. Accepting the viscous quality of the earth also promotes an acceptance that the earth does not rely on human knowledge to function.

During the biologist’s first trip through the tower she encounters slime left behind from a creature walking ahead of her and writing cryptic messages upon the walls. Fortuitously, she uses the same word that Morton employs to describe hyperobjects, “viscous,” to describe the residue left behind on the ground’s surface from the being preceding her: “The residue sparkled with a kind of subdued golden shimmer shot through with flakes like dried blood... ‘It’s slightly viscous, like slime,’ I said. ‘And about half an inch deep over the step’” (*Annihilation* 53). The slime possibly containing blood, symbolizes the life, blood and all that encompasses our planet and its interconnectedness just as Morton describes hyperobjects as an interwoven network. The metaphor is twofold, for if viscosity is a way of understanding Area X, and if blood (signaling a human or animal body) is part of the viscous slime, the metaphor serves to not only reiterate that

Area X, the land, is a living thing, but also to reiterate that beings who have blood in their veins such as humans and animals are connected to the viscous network of Area X in an intimate way.

Another image that is posthuman in that it embodies a form of humanness, yet resists a classification of simply human, animal, or mineral and introduced in the first novel, *Annihilation*, is the tower/tunnel made of living, breathing tissue. The image is both astounding to the biologist, but also enlightening. The tower/tunnel is one of the first true images that allows for the biologist and for us as readers to visualize the truth about Area X, and that is that Area X is an environment that is alive and intelligent. The realization that Area X is alive mirrors the nature of reality that the earth is alive and supports growing plants and organisms. The living Area X displays the hypocrisy in not taking care of the land that provides sustenance for us and a place for us, as human animals to live. The living tissue makes it undeniable that the earth is a living entity that deserves respect, and not just a non-breathing part of the planet which is for humans to control and submit to their use without our affecting it and it affecting us.

Instead of the tower/tunnel existing as an archaeological “thing” for the expedition members to explore, the reader and the biologist are able to realize that the expedition members are walking into a fellow creature’s space and co-existing, body-to-body. The way that the organism is described as a tunnel by all of the expedition members except for the biologist—who insists it is a tower—conveys the organism’s resistance to classification and reveals its hyperobjectivity, its inability to be understood by the naked human eye or other senses. The biologist reveals her discovery in her report: “The tower *breathed*, and the walls when I went to touch them carried the echo of a heartbeat... and they were not made of stone but of *living tissue*. ...The tower was a living creature of some sort. *We were descending into an organism*” (*Annihilation* 41). The fact that the tower, part of the earth that is Area X, is indeed biological,

not simply inert architecture, demonstrates the interconnectedness of Area X and posthuman in the sense that the organism is humanlike, but not human as traditionally understood and it defies traditional, preconceived definitions of human. The symbolization of the tower also adheres to Hayles' view that the posthuman does not merely erase the biological body or leave it behind:

...the deconstruction of the liberal humanist subject [is] an opportunity to put back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects... If my nightmare is a culture invaded by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by the fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude, as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival. (Hayles 5)

The tower is biological, yet it is not able to be classified in the singular, taxonomical category of "the human" as we know it. The tower has a body, although not a human body as we know it, and much like a human—it thus exhibits "embodied consciousness," to use Hayles' term.

The creature that the biologist names "the Crawler" is yet another example of the trilogy's figurations of posthuman being, and is discovered by the biologist in her first exploration of the tower/tunnel. VanderMeer describes the Crawler as a monster, a creature that eludes the analysis that the biologist would like to apply to its physical makeup. Yet the Crawler becomes all the more suggestive of posthuman embodiment when we discover that the Crawler

wears a human face despite its unconventional body. The biologist has trouble describing the Crawler's body, showing the same kind of resistance to classification as with the tower/tunnel:

It was a figure within a series of refracted panes of glass. It was a series of layers in the shape of an archway. It was a great sluglike monster ringed by satellites of even odder creatures. It was a glistening star... The shape spread until it was even where it was not, or should not have been. (*Annihilation* 176)

The face of the Crawler belongs to the former lighthouse keeper of Area X before it was named as such—Saul Evans. The biologist tells us about her sample of the Crawler's tissue: “At first I didn't know what I was looking at because it was just so unexpected. It was brain tissue—and not just any brain tissue. The cells were remarkably human, with some irregularities”

(*Annihilation* 72). Just as the biologist confirms that the Crawler is composed of human cells, she also confirms the extra-human nature of the Crawler/Saul Evans: “No, the sample had come from the margins, from the exterior. Which meant it couldn't be brain tissue, which meant it was definitely not human. I felt unmoored, drifting, once again” (*Annihilation* 73). The biologist's unease stems from her inability to categorize the Crawler as human or not, to classify it according to human conceptions of species identity. At this stage of the trilogy the biologist has not yet accepted or come to a full realization of the interconnected nature of the creatures within Area X. Her metamorphosis into a character who biologically becomes something other than human and who ethically accepts equality between species and lifeforms has only just begun. However, it is important to note that at this stage the biologist does begin to realize that the creatures of Area X may possess intelligence, for after gathering the anthropologist's samples from the tower, the biologist says: “For one thing, in all of this I assumed that neither Crawler nor Tower was intelligent, in the sense of possessing free will” (*Annihilation* 92). She is just

beginning to understand the species-defying imagery before her and to realize that life around her may not be human, but may be of equal intelligence to herself and worthy of equal respect as any other living being. Her tissue study of the Crawler leads to a discovery of its radical posthuman otherness:

Perhaps it is a creature living in perfect symbiosis with a host of other creatures. Perhaps it is “merely” a machine. But in either instance, if it has intelligence, that intelligence is far different from our own. It creates out of our ecosystem a new world, whose processes and aims are utterly alien—one that works through supreme acts of mirroring, and by remaining hidden in so many other ways, all without surrendering the foundations of its otherness as it becomes what it encounters. (*Annihilation* 191)

The biologist accepts that the Crawler may be alien, human, machine, creature, but it is still alive and intelligent, and at this instance in *Annihilation*, it is clear that the biologist has accepted a kind of ethical posthuman that views all lifeforms as equals and does not place human as intrinsically better than life which is not human. The biologist has also realized that the Crawler biologically is something that exceeds the limits that the category of “human” and is literally something else.

^ The biologist, the narrator of *Annihilation*, serves as a posthuman character in both ways that I argue the theme manifests in the *Southern Reach* trilogy, biologically and ethically: she biologically becomes something other than human, and she evolves to accept a lifestyle of compassion that displaces the human from its center. She is a woman who has had a challenging childhood, a troubled marriage, and now has decided to venture into Area X as a volunteer expedition member for the Southern Reach. She is intelligent, feels connections with nature

including tidal pools that she has studied professionally, but also closely studied in childhood. She is challenged by human social relationships, and is chosen for the expedition by the psychologist partly for this reason. Upon arrival in Area X and discovery of a massive tunneling structure spiraling into the ground, the biologist is encouraged to explore what I have been referring to as the tower/tunnel. After stepping down into the tower/tunnel she becomes infected by spores grouped together in words made of fungi along the walls of the tower/tunnel: “Triggered by a disturbance in the flow of air, a nodule in the W chose that moment to burst open and a tiny spray of golden spores spewed out. I pulled back, but I thought I had felt something enter my nose, experienced a pinprick of escalation in the smell of rotting honey” (*Annihilation* 25). The biologist, in these early stages of the first novel, here becomes something other than just human, her biological makeup is altered by the spores, and thus, her character defies our understanding of what is biologically makes her human. She instead becomes something else, an undocumented species, and begins a vivid transformation at the moment of inhalation of the spores that enables her to become more intimately intertwined with the environment of Area X and eventually, by the third novel in the trilogy, to evolve into an impressive biosphere. One of the compelling and exciting notes about the biologist’s change is that her character, in whatever form it is in, even after inhaling the spores, still retains some bodily qualities of the human she once was, and thus as Hayles puts it: “We do not leave our histories behind, but rather, like snails, carry it around with us in the sedimented and enculturated instantiations of our pasts we call our bodies” (“Afterword: The Human in the Posthuman” 137). The biologist is thus an image of the “embodied consciousness” that Hayles so insistently connects with the posthuman.

The biologist describes her metamorphosis into a new species in vivid terminology. She continually describes the change her body feels as a “brightness” within her: “Internally, there was a *brightness* in me, a kind of prickling energy and anticipation that pushed hard against my lack of sleep” (*Annihilation* 83). The “energy” and “anticipation” that the biologist feels suggests a positive change and one that the biologist enjoys both mentally and physically. Her evolution into a new kind of creature is an experience of joy and one that entails mental growth and stimulation. The “brightness” suggests something larger than the biologist can comprehend. Moreover, the brightness and the growing energy that exudes from the biologist thus provides an example of Morton’s viscous, nonlocal hyperobjects. The “rotting honey” suggests the “viscous nature of hyperobjects” that Morton elaborates, so that as the biologist inhales the spores, becomes infected, and begins her metamorphosis, she smells the smell of a substance (honey) that is also viscous, much like the viscosity of the life network she is now becoming a part of biologically in Area X. The lifeform that the biologist is becoming is permeated through Area X, and by thinking about her change like contamination, she can be viewed as becoming part of the “viscous, nonlocal” (Morton’s terms) entity that is Area X. The biologist’s brightness can also be viewed in terms of what Donna Haraway describes in “Encounters with Companion Species: Entangling Dogs, Baboons, Philosophers, and Biologists,” as symbiobiogenesis between all living organisms—how quite literally, the pattern of connection exists at even the tiniest level: “Trying to make a living, critters eat critters, but can only partially digest each other. Quite a lot of indigestion, not to mention excretion is the natural result, some of which is the vehicle for new sorts of complex patternings of ones and manys in entangled association” (Haraway 112). Through Haraway’s example, we can envision the biologist as actually sharing a physical, biological connection with Area X; the body of the biologist and the land of Area X literally

share certain cells and cognitive functions. If we see the biologist as a living product of the very symbiogenesis that does indeed exist in our own world, the fictitious aspect of her change becomes more perceptible. As the biologist becomes an embodied symbol of the posthuman, meaning her character is no longer merely human, but a being whose bodily constitution has become mixed up with other life forms—her symbiogenesis actually has exceeded the limits of the world as we know it—we are able to view her transmutation, infection, or evolution as an image that challenges conventional understandings of the natural world.

I argue that the biologist also becomes a character who accepts other beings and species around her as equals, an acceptance that I call the ethical posthuman. The natural connection with the environment of Area X the biologist feels after being “infected” is portrayed through animal imagery such as: “My heart felt like an animal had become trapped in my chest and was trying to crawl out” (*Annihilation* 43). Although the biologist describes her inner feelings in simile, I argue that through my reading of her character as one who evolves ethically as well as biologically, a more literal reading of her zoomorphic word choice describes the inner animal that she is both realizing she is and is becoming.

Whitby’s artwork is another example, and one of the most blatant and compelling images of VanderMeer’s trilogy which I argue are visual interpretations of posthuman ideas, ideas of species equality and resist the category of human. The artwork image continues to convey the theme compassion for all species and encourages, if not demands, respect for the living earth from humans. Whitby Allen is a skittish scientist whom we discover in *Authority* was involved in a secret, undocumented mission into Area X with the director, and about whom Control, the narrator of *Authority* grows suspicious. Whitby pulls Control into a janitor’s closet during a scene at the Southern Reach headquarters. Out of curiosity, Control returns to the closet, where

he discovers a vestibule in which Whitby has painted altered images of members of the Southern Reach upon the walls—Control included. The striking aspect about the images is that the human characters depicted are half-animal or creatural—essentially posthuman beings that defy species distinction or categorization:

Along the wall and part of the ceiling someone had painted a vast phantasmagoria of grotesque monsters with human faces. ... There was a border, too: a ring of red fire that transformed at the ends into a two-headed monster, and Area X in its belly. ... The body that dominated the murals or paintings or whatever word applied depicted a creature that had the form of a giant hog and a slug commingled, pale painted skin mottled with what was meant to be a kind of mangy light green moss. The swift, broad strokes of arms and legs suggested the limbs of a pig, but with three thick fingers at their ends. More appendages were positioned along the midsection. ... The director had been rendered as a full-on boar, stuffed with vegetation; the assistant director as a kind of stout or ferret; Cheney as a jellyfish. ... Then he found himself. Incomplete. His face taken from his recent serious-looking mug shot, and the vague body of not a white rabbit, but a wild hare, the fur matted, curling, half penciled in. (*Authority* 273-274)

The blending of species in Whitby's art is crucial in comprehending the erosion of boundaries between human animal and non-human animal that the *Southern Reach* trilogy enacts. For instance, the image of Control's face paired with the image of the rabbit is an illustration of a biological conjoining of human and rabbit, but the image also suggests a harmony between species, literally one of human and animal sharing bodily space, and mirroring our many human animal traits that we do have in common biologically with non-human animals.

The imagery furthers to support the fallibility of species boundaries through descriptions of animals as people, people as animals, and land as human. Terminology is used in a fluid manner to convey a fluid network of lifeforms. The imagery displays the problematic nature of categorization when it used as a tool for control, and contrastingly presents the interconnection within Area X. One of the first examples of human/animal blending is the biologist's observation of a dolphin's eye: "and it stared at me with an eye that did not, in that brief flash, resemble a dolphin eye to me. It was painfully human, almost familiar" (*Annihilation* 97). The novels routinely describe humans through similes of animal, reminding us that humans are in fact animals too. For example, the biologist describes herself in animal terms: "I rummaged like the rats and the silverfish" (*Annihilation* 116). She also describes the psychologist's hypnotic command through animal terminology: "The word seemed more meaningless the more she repeated it, like the cry of a bird with a broken wing" (*Annihilation* 124). The owl that the biologist describes in her final log acts like a human, even leading her to wonder: "Was this my husband in altered form?" (*Acceptance* 170). The biologist becomes posthuman in more ways than one: Her biological makeup is altered through inhalation of the spores, but when she is able to approach the owl as a "companion" (*Acceptance* 172), she also displays an ethical facet of the posthuman through her rejection of speciesism and view of human and owl as equals. She does not place the human at the top of a hierarchy of species. The fact that she wonders if the owl is an altered human also illustrates the posthuman theme as the being represents to species—owl and human—and serves as another image of species blending, much like Whitby's painted mural of creatures. There are also descriptions that connect the land with the human, more images of blending, such as the director's account of the land: "It will rain soon, the horizon like a scowling forehead" (*Acceptance* 92). Control also is described as land: "A tiny seismic shift

occurred inside of Control, an imperceptible shudder” (*Authority* 31). The morphing between species and various animal/human/land similes challenge speciesist conceptions of the living world and encourages us to view all species as related and worthy of equal respect and treatment.

The novels also portray several characters, besides the biologist, as evolving into members of unknown species or becoming integrated into a category that resists classification, but that is closely linked with animal terms. For instance, Saul Evans is described in the terms of the Crawler, a partially human alien or machinelike form, while Control describes an evolution much like the rabbit that Whitby foreshadows for us, but that we cannot definitively say that he becomes a rabbit. The director, similarly, describes flying above the other characters, much like we would imagine a bird, although the narrator never explicitly uses term “bird.” Ghost Bird is a copy of the biologist, so she is both human and not, and thus a fitting image of the posthuman, in that she is another example of a being that cannot be classified as human in the traditional sense. She is not simply a clone, as she shares memories with the biologist, but she has a distinct personality and lifestyle. Ghost Bird’s origin is different from other humans, yet she possesses what could be called humanity in that is she is a woman who deserves respect and is viewed autonomously by her comrades, such as Control. When human categories are removed, we can view the characters like animals or part-human, but more accurately, the human characters such as Control, Ghost Bird, and the director have become beings which, viewed through a posthumanist lens, suggest an evolved species, no longer merely human or animal. They have become something else entirely, and defy known categories of “living being,” as Hayles describes through her dialectic of pattern and randomness: “Although these models differ in their specifics, they agree in seeing randomness not simply as the lack of pattern but as the creative ground from which pattern can emerge” (Hayles 286). Instead of filling an empty

category of “other,” the randomness that everything outside of the human category fills is given weight and validated in VanderMeer’s trilogy. The characters of *Control* and the biologist in VanderMeer’s speculative fiction might help us to see beyond a hierarchy of species and to embrace, instead, the kind of acceptance that the title of VanderMeer’s third novel alludes to, and to become accepting, compassionate, and appreciative of the many differences within the vast field of the living.

Aside from the imagery of morphed ‘humanity,’ the trilogy reveals species of unknown or fantastical beings, such as monsters. For instance, in *Acceptance* a young Gloria playfully yells: “ ‘I’m a monster! I’m a monster!’ ” (*Acceptance* 72). The Crawler is first thought of as a monster by the expedition members, including the biologist, who concedes: “Bodies were one thing; no amount of training could prepare you for encountering a monster” (*Annihilation* 59). Another example of a monster is the moaning creature that the biologist and other expedition members hear during the first expedition, which turns out to be a disfigured form of a past expedition member whom the biologist recognizes. The biologist ponders the fantastical as she tries to identify the moaning sounds the creature makes: “It seemed so utterly human and inhuman, that, for the second time since entering Area X, I considered the supernatural” (*Annihilation* 139), and she also refers to the mysterious figure as a “beast” (*Annihilation* 142). The interconnectedness of life inside and outside of Area X, between the monster and the human, is symbolized through *Control*’s dream about being a moaning creature: “...he felt more like some ponderous moaning creature trapped in the mire” (*Authority* 41). The tower is also described as a kind of monster with teeth, as the biologist and her fellow expedition members descend into the open maw of what they describe as “an anomaly”: “The tower steps kept revealing themselves, those whitish steps like the spiraling teeth of some unfathomable

beast...” (*Annihilation* 47). Even the mound of journals that the biologist finds in the tower are depicted as a beast: “It was a kind of roiling, moving monster beneath my boots, unwilling, like the sand of the dunes outside, to allow my tread without an equal and opposite reaction” (*Annihilation* 118). The characters use the term “monster” as a means to describe the uncanniness of figures that defy known biological taxonomies. Even the biologist is referred to in this manner in Control’s mind: “Wanting to see just how well Grace had adjusted to living on an island with a monster” (*Acceptance* 212). Yet, in *Authority*, Control imagines the Voice (whom he later finds out is Lowry) as a kind of monster: “A megalodon of a kind. Lowry in yet another form...” (*Authority* 74). It becomes clear through the playful use for the term by Gloria (the director as a child) that monsters are just another artificial category that serves to identify the other-than-human. Yet the more that VanderMeer paints for us a thriving, interconnected, and to use Morton’s term, “viscous” ecology, the clearer it becomes that the true monstrous behavior the text presents does not stem from life that is other than human, but originates with cruel and violent human behavior. For instance, the carnage left behind from human expeditions into Area X that the biologist finds and Lowry’s cruel treatment of the Southern Reach members are more inhumane or “monstrous” than actions originating from the non-human creatures in Area X.

Inversions and Reversals

Aside from imagery of mixed or species-defying organisms, there are several other ways in which the text successfully pleads for human compassion for the earth and all life beyond the human. One specific way the text achieves its effect is through imagery of reversals and inversions. The significance of the reversal imagery is that these illustrations directly symbolize the irony of living and being a part of a world, while simultaneously failing to respect and/or appreciate that world and other life within it. As we have already seen, the tower/tunnel image

serves as one of the first, primary images of reversal. The biologist continually refers to the tunnel, where she first discovers the walls of living tissue and the spores, as a tower, although she must travel down into the ground to explore it. The biologist's insistence upon what she regards as a "tower" conveys the significance of the reversal. She adamantly asserts her sentiments regarding the tower to her fellow expedition members, even though she sees this admission as a risk: " 'I want you to know that I cannot stop thinking of it as a tower,' " I confessed. 'I can't see it as a tunnel.' It seemed important to make that distinction before our descent, even if it influenced their evaluation of my mental state" (*Annihilation* 19). The figure of the lighthouse, which the biologist explores after the tower, serves as a literal inversion of the tunnel. The interplay of these images illustrates that in the world of speculative fiction, Area X may be not be as it seems (for as we have already witnessed, it is made of living tissue and not inorganic material); objects which at first glance seem insignificant prove to be quite significant. When we consider the irony of the inverted tunnel—that the tunnel truly is a mirrored tower, an inverted version of the lighthouse—we are reminded of what I suggest is one of the most crucial ironies within the text: not appreciating and treating the earth we live on and depend upon for sustenance and shelter with respect.

Another ironic reversal within the text is the various perceptions of Area X. Area X serves as both a prison and a liberating and free land. The reversal unfolds throughout the trilogy: where in *Annihilation*, it seems apparent that the expedition members feel stuck and talk about returning to the checkpoint for retrieval, by the close of VanderMeer's second novel, *Authority*, it is apparent that the perception of Area X has become the reverse of an enclosed prison. Ghost Bird envisions her entrance into Area X as an escape: "I thought I could just stay here. Build the life she [the former biologist] didn't build, that she messed up. But, I can't. It's

clear I can't. Someone will be after me no matter what I do" (*Authority* 338). Control recognizes the fact that Ghost Bird is essentially held captive throughout the second novel, a fact that serves as an example of the inhumane treatment of an unknown species or of one that is other than human. Inhumane actions thus are associated with human civilization outside of Area X and which Ghost Bird is escaping as she enters Area X into freedom. Ghost Bird, however, is not the only character within VanderMeer's novels who may feel imprisoned *outside* of Area X. Control, the biologist, and Whitby, for example, all do portray dissatisfaction with their lives in the world as they know it. The notion that the familiar world outside Area X and even the Southern Reach building itself form a prison becomes abundantly clear as the director recalls Lowry's words. He refers to her undocumented expedition into Area X as a jailbreak: " 'You and Whitby and any other son of a bitch stupid enough to try another jailbreak thinks twice' " (*Acceptance* 132). The irony that the unknown world of Area X proves paradoxically liberating where the known human world exemplifies captivity, conveys the hypocritical way that humans hold other living creatures, including animals, captive. The irony that we often fail to appreciate, respect, and care for the earth, is mirrored in the irony of the captivity characters experience outside of Area X in all three *Southern Reach* novels.

Another image of inversion is that of mirrors and glass, including the glass from the lighthouse beacon that serves as "the anomaly." The anomaly is the beginning of Area X which cannot be labeled or categorized by humans. The alien nature of Area X makes it quite literally "other." Glass and mirror imagery illustrate the themes of introspection and narcissism that the text so compellingly calls to our attention. Through the lens of posthumanism, we might read the text's insistence upon introspection as a call for compassion for life beyond the human. The rejection of the "other" that is Area X becomes more difficult for the characters of the *Southern*

Reach trilogy after introspection—after examining traditional species divides. An example of the imagery is through Saul Evans: As Saul evolves into the Crawler, his character fuses with glass and mirrors: “Henry almost contorted himself to avoid brushing against Saul as they passed by, as if Saul were made of the most delicate crystal” (*Acceptance* 202). Saul Evans is likened to a mirror, his metamorphosis or evolution more akin to the life force within Area X and its capacity to mimic, but his mirror quality also suggests Morton’s “viscous hyperobjects”:

If we stay on the level of the sticky, oily mirror [...] we obtain an equally powerful reading. It’s not reality but the subject that dissolves, the very capacity to “mirror” things, to be separate from the world like someone looking at a reflection in a mirror— removed from it by an ontological sheath of reflective glass. The sticky mirror demonstrates the truth of what phenomenology calls ingenuousness or sincerity ³[...] The mirror of science melts and sticks to our hand. The very tools we were using to objectify things, to cover Earth’s surface with shrink wrap, become a blowtorch that burns away the glass screen separating humans from Earth, since every measurement is now known as an alteration, as quantum-scale measurements make clear. (Morton 35-7)

Morton’s account of mirrors in relation to hyperobjects explains the associative logic of VanderMeer’s speculative description of Saul’s mirroring quality. Saul is unveiling the very “ingenuousness” that Morton describes, as he is no longer a genuine human being, while he is mirroring the very environment he is joining, illustrating the interconnectedness of creature and environment within Area X. Saul becomes a walking paradox, both human and non-human, as he grows increasingly intimate with a landscape that seems to evolve with him.

³ Morton refers to Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 106– 16.

The glass from the lighthouse beacon that pricks Saul's skin serves as another glass/mirror image with posthuman resonance. The small piece of glass, examined by the S & S Brigade in the trilogy, cannot be identified according to human analysis, and is where the alien environment of Area X is first discovered. Saul Evans describes the lighthouse beacon and its superb light-reflecting ability: "The spectacular four-ton lens, or beacon, at the top had its own unique signature, and he had hundreds of ways to adjust its light. A first-order lens, over a century old" (*Acceptance* 13). The piece from the lens that sticks his finger is a: "glittering thing... It reminded him of what you might see staring into a kaleidoscope..." (*Acceptance* 25). The descriptions of the multiple reflections that emanate from the lens and the shard that Saul touches also have similarities to the nonlocality of hyperobjects discussed by Morton:

A hologram can't be seen directly, but is a mesh of interference patterns created by light waves bouncing off the object and light waves passing through a beam splitter. When you pass light through the interference pattern, a three-dimensional rendering of the object appears in front of the pattern. Cut a little piece of hologram out, or shine light through a little piece of it (same thing), and you still see a (slightly more blurry) version of the whole object. Every piece of the hologram contains information about the whole.

(Morton 45)

As the lens and its mirroring reflections seem to have infinite endpoints, its reflections are indeed nonlocal and evades the gaze of a single human eye. As the lens is the beginning of the alien environmental force that is Area X, the nonlocality of the lens' reflections symbolize the nonlocal, interconnected nature of all life within Area X and the way it is dispersed throughout Area X resembles something like a contagion or infection.

Glass imagery and symbolism also serve a vital function during a scene at the Area X training camp that Lowry designs. Lowry serves as the primary narcissistic character—and during one of the scenes recollected by the director in *Acceptance*, he appears as a predator: “Lowry sits in his chair, leaning forward like a predator” (*Acceptance* 120). Viewing Lowry as a predator serves as a reminder of the predatory actions within our own world when a view of the human as dominant species can lead to predatory, and sometimes cruel, treatment of the earth and living creatures within it. Glass imagery proliferates throughout this scene. The director describes the setting as one permeated with mirrors, including Lowry having “the mirror at his back” (*Acceptance* 120). She also describes Lowry breaking glass and shattering into pieces: “The glass that was in his left hand smashes against the window near your head, shatters. As you recoil, sidestep, gaze never leaving Lowry, liquid splashes your shoes and splinters of glass needle your ankles” (*Acceptance* 120). During the same recollection, when Jackie Severance enters the room, the director recalls: “She’s on her phone, but Lowry doesn’t see her—just his own reflection, and she’s trapped there, within his outline” (*Acceptance* 133). The scene not only connects Lowry’s violent, predatory nature to glass, but the narcissistic moment connected to the glass mirror creates a symbol with multiple meanings. Lowry is too enamored with himself to realize the speciesism that he is enacting through his rigid training camp and his predatory expeditions into Area X. His treatment of characters like Ghost Bird displays the cruel treatment that can occur in our own world, suggesting ways in which VanderMeer’s work implores introspection. As Ghost Bird is a copy of the biologist, Lowry’s inhumane treatment of her seems darkly prescient of her being not entirely human, and reminds us that such characteristics as his are not only uncompassionate, but also hint at an underlying speciesism.

Jacques Derrida offers a radical reading of the “mirror stage” in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass* in his lecture “The Animal That Therefore I am (More to Follow),” and suggests an application of the mirror imagery that I have been tracking within the *Southern Reach* trilogy. He identifies the mirror stage as the ultimate venue for examining the animal’s response, as it makes us question what a response is and whether we understand our own human responses. When we think about the problematic nature of the response, we realize that we are also animals and that all responses are equally difficult to define. Much like the introspection I have been discussing, Derrida’s reference to Lewis Carroll allows us to envision a non-human point of view: “we will have to deal with a type of *mirror stage*—and to ask certain questions of it, from the point of view of the animal, precisely” (Derrida 377). The point of view of his cat causes Derrida shame as he realizes the cat’s autonomous nature:

When it responds in its name (whatever *respond* means, and that will be our question), it doesn’t do so as the exemplar of a species called cat, even less of an animal genus or realm. It is true that I identify it as a male or female cat. But even before that identification, I see it as this irreplaceable living being that one day enters my space, enters this place where it can encounter me, see me, or even see me naked. Nothing can ever take away from me the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized. (Derrida 379)

If Derrida’s idea of the mirror stage enables humans to see themselves as also animal, to see an animal as an individual being, then Lowry’s view of the mirror causes him the shame that Derrida describes feeling when his cat sees him naked. Thus, the symbolic mirror exposes speciesism. Instead of examining his actions towards other life, Lowry’s smashed mirrors and

broken glass symbolize his inability to face the mirror, and thus he attempts to destroy it, smashing it to bits.

Lowry's artificial Area X training camp leads us to the proceeding binary within the text: the real and imaginary. Throughout the trilogy there are several examples of real objects paired with imagery of the artificial. The hypnosis employed by the director and by Control is an example of consciousness radically altered. The expedition members' experience of this mental distortion is similar to the imaginary nature of a hallucination. After inhaling the spores and beginning her evolution into a being that is not solely human, the biologist is no longer susceptible to hypnotic suggestion, making her experience of her surrounding world more tangible and concrete. Like hypnosis, the hallucinations exhibited by some of the characters—including the hallucination the director sees, which causes her to jump out of the lighthouse in *Annihilation*, or the hallucinations described by Saul Evans in *Acceptance*—demonstrate that there is an imaginary, artificial component to their cognitive experience. Yet for all of the examples of altered consciousness, VanderMeer contrastingly presents several instances where characters portray mental clarity and knowledge. Ghost Bird, for instance, is a copy of the biologist, yet she displays great acumen and strength in escaping the Southern Reach. In addition, the biologist has a tangible and authentic connection to nature within both the world outside and inside Area X.

One especially unsettling image within the text is that of the border by virtue of the threat it poses to our very notion of real and imaginary. The characters cannot necessarily see it, but when they cross it, their sense of time and space is altered, affecting their cognitive functions. Control refers to the border as “that imaginary but too-real line” (*Authority* 79). The fact that the border is too-real serves as a vivid reminder that because something may not be perceivable to

our human senses, our lives may, nonetheless, be affected by it, much like Morton's example of global warming. The border is an invisible line that the director believes is advancing, yet it is hard to quantify, measure, or even explain through scientific metrics. The border reminds us that Area X does not operate in the same way as the physical world that we know. The border thus exemplifies what Morton calls the "nonlocality" of the hyperobject:

Nonlocality deals a crushing blow to the idea of discrete tiny things floating around in an infinite void, since there is strictly no "around" in which these things float: one is unable to locate them in a specific region of spacetime... Implication and explication suggest substances we think of as "matter" being enfolded and unfolded from something deeper.
(Morton 42-44)

Most accurately put, the border of Area X resists classification and is nonlocal—it is both alive, yet is not necessarily human or even produced by humans. Yet the border is able to interact with humans by causing them to perceive the dimensions of space and time differently. The border is both absent and present at the same time, and becomes another reversal of the real and imaginary that the text so intricately illustrates. The border's interaction with human cognition suggests an alternate form of companionship and a kind of interaction that defies our sharp demarcations between human, animal, vegetable, and mineral. Commenting on the BP Gulf Oil Spill, VanderMeer relates: "After the oil spill, the spiral continued because I knew that at the microscopic level the oil was still infiltrating and contaminating the environment. That just because you can't see something doesn't mean it isn't affecting you or the places you love" (VanderMeer n. p.). This very nonlocality that VanderMeer identifies in the BP oil spill makes its way into his fiction in the form of Area X, the biologist's "infection" by the spores, and most vividly through the trilogy's real/imaginary border that eludes the human eye.

Among the trilogy's ironies is its insistence upon real or authentic experience when it has dealt so many blows to reality as we know it. For example, when Ghost Bird rows a boat in Area X with Control for a passenger, she delights in feeling her physical strength: "The tautness she felt in her triceps, her forearms as she put her back into it. The pleasing soreness that came after, letting her know this was effort, this was real" (*Acceptance* 112). The sense of what "was real" here resides more in the movement of Ghost Bird's muscles than in any claim she might have to being an authentic human being.

In the biologist's testimony, read by Control, Ghost Bird, and Grace, she audaciously suggests that we dispense with notions of teleology and purpose: "I was still holding on to the idea of causality, of *purpose* as that word might be recognizable to the Southern Reach. But what if you discover that the price of purpose is to render invisible so many things?" (*Acceptance* 157). Much like the hypnotism could have hindered the biologist's experience within Area X, the sense of purpose that drives the Southern Reach is based in human interests and values and, VanderMeer suggests, actively prevents human beings from experiencing connections with nonhuman forms of life. The biologist reveals how a view of the world through a discourse centered on purpose, a human concept, can be limiting, and thus in a sense imaginary. When the biologist inhales the spores, she becomes a part of Area X as it does of her.

The Vegetarian Connection

As we have seen, the Southern Reach trilogy displays an appreciation of the value and vitality of beings across species without placing special emphasis upon humans as superior or dominant species. In doing so, I will suggest, it proves especially conducive to a vegetarian reading. Just as Area X, as hyperobject, displays interconnectedness between lifeforms, the

biologist's call to vegetarianism also indicates interconnection. I take my cue here from Carol J. Adams, who also alludes to interconnection, as she envisions the future human of a more compassionate century looking back and realizing that in our time "some of the earliest people talking about climate change were animal activists who understood the interconnections between environmental destruction and animal agriculture" ("Preface to the 20th Anniversary Edition of *The Sexual Politics of Meat*" 1). The biologist transforms into a character whose increasing compassion for others manifests in a vegetarian lifestyle and thus realizes the profound connections between human, animal, and plant. The alterations to her diet nicely follow her metamorphosis into something other than human, suggesting that her vegetarianism is, at least in part, a result of her change and the growing "brightness" she feels. Her compassion for other living beings and her abstinence from eating them is reflected in her physical change, best symbolized in her becoming a biosphere with tidal pools and animals living on her physical body, a literal embodiment of Haraway's symbiogenesis. In one of the biologist's earliest flashbacks, the biologist and her husband have "an excruciatingly polite conversation over eggs and bacon" ironically within sight of "the gray shape of the new bird feeder [...]" (*Annihilation* 79). This carnivorous meal, in all its "excruciating" intensity, gives way to a very different diet later in the trilogy. By the time we are given the biologist's last testimony, read by Grace, Control's former assistant at the Southern Reach in *Acceptance*, it becomes clear that her conscious decision to stop eating animals is a result of her biological change and her sense of interconnection with the environment:

I learned to become so attuned to my environment that after a time no animal, natural or unnatural shied away at my presence, and for this reason I no longer hunted anything but

fish unless forced to, relying more and more on vegetables and fruit. Although I thought I grew attuned to their messages as well. (*Acceptance* 177-78)

I argue that VanderMeer's work provides an avenue for the vegetarian transformation of the biologist to become intensely complex. The life within Area X operates in a manner other than we understand and the biologist discovers in *Annihilation* that she can slow down the physical changes happening to her inside the borders of Area X by injuring her body. The dark and unsettling nature of her self-wounding suggests the violence to animals that a carnivorous lifestyle enables.

The biologist describes the reasoning behind the end to her violence, closely intertwined with her decision to become a vegetarian. She decides to stop harming her own human flesh first, as she no longer desires to be defined as (or even to be) solely human: "It is just the beginning, and the thought of continually doing harm to myself to remain human seems somehow pathetic" (*Annihilation* 195). As she makes the decision to stop delaying her complete evolution with Area X, she also realizes that she should stop hurting animals. Thus the biologist's vegetarian turn carries both physical and ethical implications: as she physically defies what it means to be human, she also rejects a human-centered ethos. As the biologist ends a violent cycle, harmful to her as it is to the animals she eats, the text suggests a leveling of the species hierarchy. The very domination of other species by consigning them to food is a form of control the biologist overcomes as a result of her evolution both physical and mental—her evolution into someone who is other than human and who lives compassionately for having been so transformed.

VanderMeer juxtaposes the biologist's decision to stop eating meat with examples of characters who eat meat regularly and do not lend themselves to metamorphosis, again suggesting a connection between the biologist's compassion and her non-human qualities. I argue that the text suggests a kind of distancing from the human, and an empathetic nature can lead to compassionate choices. The text thus calls for a turn to vegetarianism and equates it with an understanding of and communion with life beyond the human. Some of the carnivores in VanderMeer's trilogy are Control (whose will to dominate is signaled by his adopted name), the director, and Saul Evans, all characters whose eating habits are described only before they have undergone the evolution that the biologist discloses in her testament in *Acceptance*. I argue that such transformation, and its accompanying realization of the interconnected nature of lifeforms within Area X, tends to produce vegetarianism.

Control's carnivorous ways are some of the most ironic and clearest examples of the problematic nature of meat eating within the text. On one hand, Control's character is aware of animal cruelty and even uses terms such as "slaughterhouse" to describe labs at the Southern Reach: "The stairs awaited them at the corridor's end, through wide swinging doors more appropriate for a slaughterhouse or emergency room" (*Authority* 47). He also thinks in empathetic terms regarding the rabbits that disappeared as a result of an experiment at the border of Area X:

An anger rose in Control then... But mostly because the Southern Reach had sent some expedition in through a door they hadn't created, into God knew what—hoping that everything would be all right, that they would just come home, that those white rabbits hadn't just evaporated into their constituent atoms, possibly returned to their most primeval state in agonizing pain. (*Authority* 62)

Aside from awareness and empathy for the rabbits, he also takes care of an animal at home as his beloved pet, El Chorizo, the cat. The cat's name conjures up another form of animal body, that of dead flesh cooked into the form of sausage. The irony appears to be lost on Control, who dismisses the horror and reality of animal meat through the explanation: "The family had had a pig named El Gato growing up, so this was his father's way of making a joke" (*Authority* 74). The text implicitly calls the idea of eating the flesh of an animal, whether a pet or not, into question. The El Chorizo example is much like the argument made by Jonathan Safran Foer about American culture and its singling out of dogs as companions rather than sources of protein: "Despite the fact that it's perfectly legal in forty-eight states, eating 'man's best friend' is as taboo as a man eating his best friend" (Foer 24). Foer also attempts to dismantle the logic by which humans forego eating dogs for their higher mental acuties:

If by "significant mental capacities" we mean what a dog has, then good for the dog. But such a definition would also include the pig, cow, chicken, and many species of sea animals. And it would exclude severely impaired humans... Thinking about dogs, and their relationship to the animals we eat, is one way of looking askance and making something invisible visible. (Foer 25-28)

El Chorizo the cat, much like Foer's example of the pet dog, becomes a symbol of the very paradox of an animal serving as both nutritional source (or fulfillment of a desired taste) and a companion. The irony of Control's food choices becomes all the more apparent when we learn that "Control only remembered his father's chickens—generously put, tradition or legacy chickens, named and never slaughtered" (*Authority* 149). Where chickens were once a family pet, Control has no qualms about eating "a chicken sandwich" (*Authority* 146). Moreover, Control refers to human bodies as meat when he is visiting the border, revealing his knowledge

of shared vulnerability of human and animal flesh: “If you were ten feet beyond the line, the lasers from a hidden security system would activate and turn you into cooked meat” (*Authority* 134). His recognition of both animal and human-animal as “*cooked meat*” is accurate, ironic, and compelling as the possibility of harm being done to a human body challenges him to view humans and animals as possessed of the same organic substance. Control continually recognizes the hypocrisy of eating animals, and the human chauvinism it betrays, yet these realizations do not spur any dietary changes for Control—he still eats and desires animal meat for consumption.

In the same chapter that presents Control’s controversial chicken-eating, the reader is made aware that the director is also a carnivore: “The napkins, receipts, and advertising brochures from a barbecue place in her hometown of Bleakersville figured prominently, and induced in Control a hunger for ribs” (*Authority* 153). Control’s own desire for animal flesh is duplicated in evidence from the director’s private life. Control finds that: “She liked pork chops and shrimp with grits. She liked to dine alone, but one receipt from the barbecue place had two dinner orders on it” (*Authority* 154).

In the form of flashback we are given insight into Saul Evans’ life before his transmutation into the Crawler, and in these flashbacks VanderMeer reveals that Saul, too, eats animals when he catches Suzanne from the Science and Séance Brigade with “his ham and his cheese slices in a pile on the counter” (*Acceptance* 95). In the journal entry that begins the same chapter, Saul shows discomfort with animals eating other animals: “Sighted: a horned owl atop a tortoise, trying to eat it...didn’t fly away until I shoed it off the tortoise” (*Acceptance* 93). As with Control and his chicken sandwich, Saul fails to make the connection between saving the pig that became his ham and saving the tortoise that was about to become a meal for the owl. VanderMeer’s portrayal of the interconnectedness between human, animal, and earth is

consistent with a latent call to vegetarianism that I argue we witness in Control's, the director's, and Saul's hypocritical meat eating and in the biologist's resistance to meat eating. The fictional carnivores, whether Control, the director, or Saul, do not exhibit the same level of compassion that the biologist does.⁴

Nurturing of Human Children and Nurturing of Animals

In reading the *Southern Reach* trilogy through a posthumanist lens, I have argued the ways in which VanderMeer's speculative fiction ousts the human from its presumed centrality. The novels' case for vegetarianism as constructive and beneficial, and the comparisons they draw between human parent and child relationships and human and animal relationships serve to erode species hierarchies. Similarly, in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAdam* trilogy, (2003-2013), the lack of nurture that main characters such as Jimmy/Snowman and Toby remember from childhood mimics the lack of nurture that occurs between animals (some genetically modified) and humans in the present world of the fiction. Analogous social dynamics appear in VanderMeer's trilogy. Several characters experience a lack of nurture or a limited relationship with a parental figure in childhood. The biologist, for example, loses her parents in childhood. She is not particularly close with her biological family and often feels more connected to the tidal pools she cares for than with her parents—or in adulthood with her husband. Control,

⁴ In an article by VanderMeer, he relates details about his personal experience in creating the *Southern Reach* trilogy. He relates eating animal products himself: "To celebrate, I take the only two food items left in the apartment—chicken wings and Brussel sprouts—and stir fry them up together, a hideous dish I dub 'the topographical anomaly' " (VanderMeer n.p.). Although I argue that the text reveals a vegetarian message, the text more broadly unveils human hypocrisy, and suggests that we can do a better job of understanding the interconnectedness between living things, like that which manifests in Area X. Although VanderMeer is not a vegetarian, the text speaks for itself and proclaims that one of the ways in which humans can become more compassionate is through a rejection of speciesism and an acceptance of vegetarianism.

likewise, has a problematic relationship with his elusive mother, Jackie Severance, who is often absent from his life or only involved in it from afar. Lastly, we have Gloria (who is the director in childhood), whose mother and father are also seldom present in her life. When the narrative does delve into her home life, we find out that she lives with her mother who is often at work, and she rarely sees her father until the border comes down. While her mother is at work, Gloria is left to befriend Saul. He becomes a father figure and a nurturer of the young Gloria, while she is also a nurturer of him as a result of the meaningful friendship she offers him. As with Atwood's trilogy, VanderMeer's trilogy presents strained relationships between parent and child, which serve comparatively as illustrations of human and animal relationships. The care of the earth or an animal evokes the care of a child, and, just like the relationship between Gloria and Saul, animals can also provide for the human. In Atwood's trilogy, genetically altered pigeons who are produced in a lab with human brain tissue help their human allies in defending themselves from those who would do them harm. Yet, Atwood's pigeons illustrate a complex portrait of the oppression of animals in that the pigeons serve as what McHugh calls "real artificial" meat: "The GM pigeons initially are created to customize and thereby render more efficient the process of xenotransplantation; infused with human genetic material, eventually hosting 'genuine human neocortex tissue,' pigeons puncture genomic boundaries among species, and more" (McHugh 192)⁵. Atwood's pigeons, like the life within Area X, resist typical human classification, but specifically the factor of human intervention—the Southern Reach agency in VanderMeer and the lab scientists who modify the pigs in Atwood resemble a kind of parental force, and not a nurturing one at that.

⁵ McHugh cites Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), p. 56.

While ecofeminists like Carol J. Adams have associated the oppression of animals with that of children, Atwood's and VanderMeer's fiction also analogizes the strained relationship between a parent and child, with a lack of nurture between humans and animals. I argue that this concept of nurture operates alongside the theme of compassion in my posthumanist approach to the *Southern Reach* trilogy, as I examine the ways in which the texts display the interconnectedness of species and decenters the human as superior subject. Reading the novels in this way proves enlightening for the human species as it encourages us to become better human beings and to nurture our own species and our own children as well as other species.

The biologist, as narrator of *Annihilation*, introduces the theme of the child who does not feel fully nurtured by her parents. She describes feeling a separation from and a lack of closeness with both her mother and father, which she compensates for with fascination with the ecosystem of life she watches grow in her backyard pool. She describes the rift she feels between herself and her parents:

My mother was an overwrought artist who achieved some success but was a little too fond of alcohol and always struggled to find new clients , while my dad the underemployed accountant specialized in schemes to get rich quick that usually brought in nothing. Neither of them seems to possess the ability to focus on one thing for any length of time. Sometimes it felt as if I had been placed with a family rather than born into one. (*Annihilation* 44)

Furthermore, the biologist also observes: "So we proceeded, locked into our separate imperatives. They had their lives, and I had mine" (*Annihilation* 45). The division between human parent and human child is undeniable through these descriptions and contrasts with the

connection the biologist feels with her tidal pool. The thought of the new owners of her childhood home committing “unthinking slaughter” (*Annihilation* 46) to the life within her pool is more than the biologist can bear. She nurtures the pool of creatures, as we can imagine her parents *could* have nurtured her, but did not.

In *Acceptance*, the biologist becomes both nurtured and nurturer as she is cared for by a mysterious owl. The owl reminds her of her lost husband, but also cares for her like a parent or guardian. The owl guides her, shows her the way to food, and warns her of impending danger: “I woke only once during the night and saw the owl perched opposite me across the fire, atop my backpack. It had brought me another rabbit... And yet there was the owl, always watching over me, always nearby” (*Acceptance* 169). The owl “watches over” and stays within close proximity to the biologist, much like a careful parent watches over their child and assures that harm will not come to them. The biologist also refers to the owl as her “*companion*” (*Acceptance* 172) an image enacting Haraway’s vision of “companion species”⁶ but also providing us with a familial context in which to think about the biologist and the owl’s relationship. I argue that the biologist grows in her capacity for compassionate nurturing by becoming a vegetarian and sparing the meat of animal bodies. She also evolves into a self-sufficient biosphere becoming a kind of self-contained life-giving form—a symbolic image of compassionate life in and of itself. Yet we can also view the biologist as a figure who becomes a nurturer of fellow humans, for she leaves her testament for her human counterparts to read and learn from inside of Area X. The biologist has

⁶ Haraway expands on a model for human and animal co-living: “The partners do not precede their relating; all that is, is the fruit of becoming with—those are the mantras of companion species” (99). She states that she adapts the term “becoming with” from Vinciane Despret, “The Body we Care For: Figures of Anthro-zoo-genesis,” *Body and Society* 10:2 (2004): 111-134.

evolved biologically, but her nurturing qualities, especially compared to her lack of nurture as a child, displays her ethical transformation—one that values human, animal, and plant life alike.

Control is the character most deeply wounded by the absence of a nurturing parent his mother. Beyond her invisible presence in his childhood, she continues to control him from a distance in his adulthood. Control remembers Jackie Severance's lack of maternal nurturing:

As a distant flash of light, Control admired her fiercely, had, indeed, followed her, if at a much lower altitude... but as a parent, even when she was around, she was unreliable about picking him up from school on time or remembering his lunches or helping with homework—rarely consistent on much of anything important in the mundane world on this side of the divide. Although she had always encouraged him in his headlong flight into and through the service. (*Authority* 12)

Jackie Severance (whose very name signals her maternal remoteness and severity) controls the profession of her son. Instead of nurturing him, she pushes him, and David Tompkins goes as far as to illustrate *Authority* as reminiscent of a family chronicle:

Behind the Southern Reach is Central, the shadowy parent organization. Behind Control is his mother, a high-clearance operative for that parent organization, as her father was before her. Control toils, then, in the family business, and *Authority* becomes, as it moves along, a kind of family story. (Tompkins n.p.)

Tompkins reiterates what a crucial role family relationships play within the novels, especially for Control and his position at the Southern Reach. The early childhood memories of an unsatisfied child follow Control into adulthood where he feels his mother has fed him to the wolves by giving him over to Lowry's control, and by making him the director as a means of tracing his

physical location. Control is akin to a resentful child even in adulthood, as expressed in the final confrontational scene where he says goodbye to his mother: “ ‘You let him hypnotize me. You let them condition me.’ Unable to suppress his resentment at that even now” (*Authority* 305). It is as though we can hear Control’s internal screams as an unsatisfied child from the pages of *Authority*. When we consider Control’s awareness of animal cruelty and growing compassion for nature, such as for the rabbits sent into Area X, the similarities between the lack of care for a human child and the lack of care for the life within Area X, including the animals the characters may eat for food, becomes increasingly visible. My reading of the *Southern Reach* trilogy helps us to appreciate the novel’s elaboration of a very complex environment where a person unsatisfied with human relationships can still become a nurturer, not just of fellow humans, but of unknown living species.

Communicating between Species and Challenging Species Boundaries

Communication becomes a key piece of the trilogy’s case against speciesism that I argue is central to VanderMeer’s particular brand of speculative fiction. Both VanderMeer and Hayles draw upon the work of Baudrillard.⁷ Hayles borrows Baudrillard’s notion of hyperreality to map the posthuman, when she states: “The schematic shows how concepts important to the posthuman—materiality, information, mutation, and hyperreality—can be understood as synthetic terms as emerging from the dialectics between presence/absence and pattern/randomness” (Hayles 250). Even without viewing Hayles’ diagram, it is clear that Baudrillard’s idea of hyperreality and questions about language are involved in understanding the place of the human within the posthuman. Peter Barry describes Baudrillard’s conceptual

⁷ In his acknowledgements VanderMeer states: “I am also grateful for the works of Rachel Carson and Jean Baudrillard...” (*Acceptance* 340).

theory and how it relates to signs and what they signify: “But what, he asks, if a sign is not an index of an underlying reality, but merely of other signs? Then the whole system becomes what he calls a *simulacrum*” (Barry 87). This fundamental dissociation of the sign and signifier resonates with Derrida’s question as to whether an animal responds or not and our difficulty even in determining what a response is. I propose that VanderMeer’s trilogy displays compelling, unconventional interspecies communication, displacing an exclusively human communication, and once again challenging our notions of what it means to be human. The living words in the tower appear to spout nonsense, representing the failure of language, yet the very living spores that make up the words infect the biologist and communicate with her by giving her a “brightness.” Through the biologist’s change we see a way of words exceeding the limitations that we typically perceive them to have. The words are living material that can communicate through interaction reminiscent of the symbiogenesis described by Haraway. The biologist also exhibits communication that exceeds human limitations or comprehension with the Crawler. By touching the Crawler and letting it “read” her, she feels a sense of mutual communication and understanding. The alternative way of communication physically hurts her the first time it occurs because it surpasses her experience as a human being. The enigmatic nature of the living words within the tower lure in the biologist and the director, so that even without conventional meaning, the words still convey meaning to the human characters, causing them to become physically and intimately closer to the landscape of Area X. Control finds the words painted on the wall in the director’s office and in her home. The words haunt the director because she is unable to decode their literal significance. Contrastingly, I argue that the biologist successfully communicates with Area X and the living words more immediately and directly through her inhalation of the spores and her infection by them, manifesting as the “brightness” within her.

The living words communicate to her intuitively and offer an alternative to our presumed human mastery over language.

There are also examples in the *Southern Reach* trilogy of communication without words—communication that works through touch, life, weight, and connection—a feeling that can overcome species boundaries, but can also exist between two human lovers such as Saul and Charlie: “Saul clasped him tight before he could get away. The weight of the man in his arms. The feel of Charlie’s rough shave that he loved so much” (*Acceptance* 261). VanderMeer’s description conveys a depth of intimacy and feeling without the use of words, but through embodied sentiment, which can at times surpass the power of words. *Ghost Bird* also describes such a communication that exceeds human speech: “There passed between the two something wordless but deep” (*Acceptance* 196). Control also experiences communication in unorthodox ways, as a sentiment expressed across species borders when he encounters the biologist as evolved biosphere: “Those thousands of eyes regarding him, *reading* him from across a vast expanse of space” (*Acceptance* 207). The very fact that he refers to her as “reading him” evokes a type of communication that does indeed relay sentiment but without human language, terms, categories, or distinctions. The biologist also is more readily available to communicate with the starfish and marine life of the pools than she does with her own husband, which is fortuitous for her eventual evolution into an ecosystem of tidal pools, waves, and marine life. Her metamorphosis into something other than human coincides with her communicative evolution. Her ability to communicate with marine life without human language grows stronger as she evolves.

Morton addresses the hypocrisy of our reliance upon speech when euphemistic language allows us to marginalize the harm we cause to the environment:

Whatever the scientific and social reasons for the predominance of the term climate change is plain enough. There has been a decrease in appropriate levels of concern. Indeed, denialism is able to claim that using the term climate change is merely the rebranding of a fabrication, nay evidence of this fabrication over global warming for naming this particular hyperobject, the effect in social and political discourse in flagrante delicto. (Morton 7-8)

Just as we can mask the dangers of global warming in euphemism, so we can strategically employ language that cloaks the evils of speciesism. As Derrida says, “The animal, what a word!” (Derrida 392). Thinking about the stark division that is created through the terms “human” and “animal” and the number of species that are grouped under the singular term “animal,” Derrida shows how we can use language in such a manner as to reinforce our dominion over other species:

A critical uneasiness will persist; in fact a bone of contention will be incessantly repeated [...] It would be aimed in the first place, once again, at the usage, in the singular, of a notion as general as “the Animal,” as if all nonhuman living things could be grouped without the common sense of this “commonplace,” the Animal, whatever the abyssal differences and structural limits that separate, in the very essence of their being, all “animals,” a name that we would therefore be advised, to begin with, to keep within quotation marks [...] And that is so in spite of the infinite space that separates the lizard from the dog, the protozoon from the dolphin, the shark from the lamb, the parrot from the chimpanzee, the camel from the eagle, the squirrel from the tiger or the elephant from the cat, the ant from the silkworm or the hedgehog from the echidna. (Derrida 402)

VanderMeer illustrates the complications of human language through the practice of naming the expedition members according to their professions. The biologist reveals that inside of Area X, “A name was a dangerous luxury [...] Sacrifices didn’t need names. People who served a function didn’t need to be named” (*Annihilation* 134). The biologist explains that stripping the expedition members of proper names serves as a means of dehumanizing and controlling them. VanderMeer’s text presents alternative modes of communication that might escape human pretensions to mastery over other species.

Ecofeminist Thinking in the *Southern Reach* trilogy

Thus far I have argued that by examining the *Southern Reach* trilogy through the lens of posthumanism—finding ways that the text challenges our preconceived notions of the human—we can appreciate the enmeshed network of beings that live on our earth, and including the earth as also one of the living parts of this network. I have argued that the novels critique speciesism and carnivorousness, but I also argue, as an additional ethical application, that we can identify the unveiling of gender roles in the *Southern Reach* trilogy as constructed implements of power. I suggest that the text challenges patriarchal authority as a key component of anthropocentrism.

VanderMeer’s text portrays a full cast of female characters who serve as the predominant leaders and initiators of much of the action within the narrative. As I have noted, the trilogy introduces us first to a powerful group of women, strong both intellectually and physically. Control even wonders why the expeditions have been exclusively all male or female and wonders “if his mother knew of any parallel in special ops, if secret studies showed something about gender that escaped him in considering the irrelevance of this particular metric. And what about someone who didn’t identify as male or female?” (*Authority* 115). Through Control’s

sentiments, I argue that the text displays how gender roles inform traditional conceptions of the human, and works to challenge the latter by refusing to portray women as merely objectified or subordinate. The narrator and protagonist of the first narrative, the biologist, as I have mentioned, communicates with the Crawler in unconventional ways. She evolves biologically, and I also argue compassionately, by means of her ethical and intellectual prowess. The biologist, the director, and Grace are also the first three humans to come to the realization of what Area X really is and that it operates as an intelligent network of life and, indeed, a hyperobject. The psychologist is a woman who runs the Southern Reach with intense devotion and knowledge.

In addition, Ghost Bird is a character who challenges our sense of the human in that she is a copy of a woman, yet she very successfully portrays a woman of immense cleverness and competence both mentally and physically. When Control first meets her, he notes his perception of her bodily strength: “Even sitting down at the table, she somehow projected a sense of being physically strong, with a ridge of thick muscle where her neck met her shoulders” (*Authority* 19). In *Acceptance*, after Control and Ghost Bird have entered Area X and journeyed together and escaped captivities—Ghost Bird’s a literal captivity, and Control’s a mental one—Ghost Bird asserts her autonomy and her mental difference from the biologist: “She didn’t think she was a failed double like this creature. She had a purpose, free will” (*Acceptance* 35). Ghost Bird further feels that she has the potential to communicate a unique “story” to the world: “She might also be a message incarnate, a signal in the flesh, even if she hadn’t figured out yet what story she was supposed to tell” (*Acceptance* 37). Ghost Bird knows that she has great potential as a unique individual being, regardless of gender and regardless of whether she is human or not human.

I also argue that Ghost Bird and the biologist resist what Adams calls “the sexual politics of meat” in that they defy patriarchal associations with meat eating and instead are examples of women who both represent feminist ideals and compassionate lifestyles regarding other species. In her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Adams traces the history of associations between the oppression of women and oppression of animals, and between meat eating and male virility, and explains the role that metaphor plays in a culture of meat eating, by designating what she describes the “absent referent” (Adams 43). Ghost Bird specifically asserts control over her own body, reversing misogynistic tropes that reveal women as merely sexual beings. Instead of performing the proverbial role of “a woman being a piece of meat,” she restores presence to Adam’s “absent referent.” Adams explains that

When I use the term “the rape of animals,” the experience of women becomes a vehicle for explicating another being’s oppression [...] Sexual violence and meat eating, which appear to be discrete forms of violence, find a point of intersection in the absent referent. Cultural images of sexual violence, and actual sexual violence often rely on our knowledge of how animals are butchered and eaten [...] Similarly, in images of animal slaughter, erotic overtones suggest that women are the absent referent. (Adams 43)

In a narrative where women grow to separate the living animal from the meat object and learn to assert control over their own bodies, Adams’ vision springs to life. Ghost Bird displays control over her own body, illustrated by her decision not to have sex with Control just because it is the next expected step in their relationship:

Among the misunderstandings between her and Control: having to make clear that her need for lived-in experience to supplant memories not her own did not extend to their

relationship, whatever image of her he carried in his head. She could not just plunge into something physical with him and overlay the unreal with the ordinary, the mechanical, not when her memories were of a husband who had come home stripped of memories. Any compromise would just hurt them both, was somehow beside the point. (*Acceptance* 36-37)

She does not feel bound by the assumed roles of human gender, again causing a rupture in the expected narrative she feels Control may expect of her and urging us, to reconsider how we view the human in terms of gender. Coupled with what we know about the biologist's decision to become a vegetarian and to value the animal life around her as equal, the image of the "absent referent" in VanderMeer becomes quite present. I also suggest that it is significant that Ghost Bird escapes oppressive captivity from the *Southern Reach*, not only because she is considered "other" regarding species, but also because she is a woman. Since Ghost Bird is in fact a being that cannot be understood as human in the traditional sense and she is also a woman, she represents both aspects of Adams' metaphor: She is both not-man and non-human, and thus we cannot separate either of these traits from a reading of her character. For, as Adams states: "The interaction between physical oppression and the dependence on metaphors that rely on the absent referent indicates that we distance ourselves from whatever is different by equating it with something we have already objectified" (44). Since Ghost Bird embodies the female non-human, she serves as a symbol of equality and empowerment for all species and genders.

Strong female characters who resist being thought of as objectified beings, yet also decide to value animals as beings rather than meat, generate a picture of species equality in the trilogy. Adams implores us to "imagine the day when people no longer feel they need a 'sausage' in the morning. Imagine the day when women and children are not sold into sexual

slavery or prostituted or pornographed. Better yet, imagine the day when equality, rather than dominance, is sexy” (“Preface to the 20th Anniversary Edition of *The Sexual Politics of Meat*” 1). In this vivid comparison, Adams illustrates that valuing equality supersedes oppression due to age, gender, or species. In VanderMeer’s fiction, the female characters undoubtedly provide a vibrant picture of what equality signifies.

Conclusion

I argue that reading fiction through a posthumanist lens aids us in realizing a more compassionate and ultimately better kind of human being—one who values equality and can recognize interconnectedness across species and gender divides. I have applied a posthumanist lens in two different ways. One application displays a rift in our notion of the human biologically, and the other application is an ethical one that views equality across species divides. As Hayles suggests, “For some people, including me, the posthuman evokes the exhilarating prospect of getting out of some of the old boxes and opening up new ways of thinking about what being human means” (Hayles 285). I argue that by examining literature through this dually applied lens of posthumanism, we can convey something even greater: that the human can become a *better* kind of being. In becoming posthuman readers, we are able to become beings who internalize a kind of posthumanist philosophy that allows for recognition that the earth, including all life and intelligence, in its true, intertwined, hyperobjective form can be respected and nurtured as a kind of companion. The genre of speculative fiction, which includes VanderMeer’s *Southern Reach* trilogy, is a particularly fruitful avenue for imagining the posthuman in the dual manner that I suggest. VanderMeer’s trilogy thus provides a means for us to escape the limitations of human taxonomies and of speciesism and to accept compassionate new methods of living that might encourage equality across gender boundaries, support the earth

rather than quickening environmental demise, encourage a vegetarian lifestyle, and become aware of the hypocrisy that often can mask the horrors of eating the animal. Furthermore, my reading of the trilogy can challenge us to better care for the human species itself, including a particular call to care for the human child with the same nurturance that the earth and its interlaced network of intelligence deserves.

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