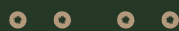


SURRENDERING THE SELF: THE POSTHUMAN WORLD IN VANDERMEER'S ANNIHILATION

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In his novel *Annihilation*, author Jeff Vandermeer provides a science-fiction narrative on nature as an unstoppable and uncontrollable environment where plants, animals, humans, and the land exist as a collective and connected entity of interactions. The novel utilizes Lovecraftian horror elements of an uncontrollable nature, human contamination, and an unknowable future controlled by nonhuman forces to portray both a multispecies environment and the posthuman future. Read through a multispecies lens and framed by Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, this essay is an analysis of how *Annihilation*'s setting—Area X—necessitates the removal of human-centered processes and the human concept of individualism for favor of a flourishing multispecies environment. Its analysis

exemplifies the genre of science fiction—as a method to expand the boundaries of our perceived human-centered world. The narrative and rhetorical structures utilized by Vandermeer in his representation of real-world environments and natural processes as uncanny horrors and an off-center reality accurately represent the unknown future beyond the human species.

In the science fiction and weird horror foundation built by American fiction writer H.P. Lovecraft, stories are characterized by cosmic, unseen, and unnameable horrors. His fictional Cthulhu mythos is a representation of the world and the future beyond the human species, and portrays human-created laws and social orders as meaning little in the grand scope of an indifferent universe. Human characters often experience physiological torment and contamination in response to interactions with an unexplainable environment and complex creatures (Kneale). In *Staying with the Trouble*, multispecies scholar Donna Haraway names our current ecological period the Chthulucene in opposition to the Anthropocene, and in reference to Lovecraft, emphasizing that the interactions, connections, and evolutions between living and nonliving beings extend beyond humans, and will continue after our extinction. Jeff Vandermeer calls to Lovecraftian science-fiction elements of weird horror and psychological manipulations in his novel *Annihilation*, but utilizes them to represent Haraway's Chthulucene in his biologically uncanny setting in Area X. Vandermeer illustrates a setting where no one species is an individual, but instead an intermingling amalgamation of plants, animals, and other-worldly creatures—in so doing, arguing for a multispecies perspective in studying living and nonliving relationships and considering the posthuman Earth. The Lovecraftian horror and science fiction genre expectations of exploring the mysteries of the unknown allow Vandermeer to push the boundaries of natural realities like coastal environments, the human microbial system, death and decomposition, and the posthuman world to explore the natural world's true power over humankind. Through *Annihilation*, Vandermeer offers up the science fiction genre as an adequate portrayal of multispecies theory, and specifically how the posthuman Earth requires the removal of human-centered belief systems and actions to preserve the natural environment and its processes.

H.P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) was an American horror fiction writer who created a literary mythos that cemented cosmic horror as an avenue of storytelling far beyond his lifetime—the avenue now labeled Lovecraft-

tian. In his fiction, the nonhuman creatures and spirits from the incomprehensible beyond were Lovecraft's sources of horror and fear, belonging to "spheres of existence whereof we know nothing and wherein we have no part" (Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror") and initiating the most visceral feeling of fear that humans encounter: fear of the unknown. His descriptions of the unknown tread the line between clarity and confusion, so his texts become "explorations of the limits of language and representation" (Kneale 110). An example being his description of the monster Cthulhu representing a "vaguely anthropoid outline" with an "octopus-like head" (148) and originating from some society "frightfully suggestive of old and unhallowed cycles of life in which our world and our conceptions have no part" (149). Lovecraftian horror became a genre where human actions are inconsequential in the grand scheme of the cosmos, represented by the inability of human society to understand its grandeur, and the metamorphosis of human social constructs (Lovecraft et al., "Letters" 8). Upon their awareness and interaction with cosmic beings, human characters experience physical and psychological transformations and hauntings. After researching the cult of Cthulhu, narrator Francie Thurston in Lovecraft's "The Call of Cthulhu" says:

With it shall go this record of mine—this test of my own sanity, wherein is pieced together that which I hope may never be pieced together again. I have looked upon all the universe has to hold of horror, and even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me. But I do not think my life will be long. As my uncle went, as poor Johansen went, so I shall go. I know too much, and the cult still lives. (Lovecraft, *The Call* 169)

In his tales, Lovecraft willfully leaves out placid resolutions where humans are better off than they began and instead leaves them to accept the nature of their devolving condition. This decision emphasizes two key elements of Lovecraftian horror that persist in Vandermeer's novel *Annihilation*: human ideas, investigation, and anatomical or physiological abilities are no match for whatever exists 'beyond' their society; and cosmic

environments and beings will continue to exist beyond humanity's societal lifespan.

Annihilation by Jeff Vandermeer is a novel that utilizes Lovecraftian horror elements to describe a world indifferent to human processes, but differs from Lovecraft in its multispecies application. Where Lovecraft's characters unwillingly forgo their autonomy to be plagued with torture by cosmic horrors, Vandermeer's narrator forgoes her autonomy willingly to be intertwined in an environment where an ever-evolving nature wins out, and humans are clearly represented as one evolutionary step into a post-human world. The novel follows a group of four women: a biologist, a psychologist, a surveyor, and an anthropologist as they explore Area X on the twelfth expedition put on by an obscure governmental agency referred to as The Southern Reach. Surrounded by a slowly growing and indestructible border, Area X is an environment reclaimed by nature and that is evolving into a diverse and biologically abnormal ecosystem. Upon arrival, the team finds an opening in the ground with descending stone stairs, and along the wall are cursive words with the make-up of, according to the biologist, "rich green fernlike moss...a type of fungi or other eukaryotic organism" (Vandermeer 24). The vines are composed of an ecosystem of filaments and golden nodules, including one that sprays the biologist with gold spores and initiates her contamination (25). This contamination is dubbed a "brightness" (83) and produces psychological and physical changes within the biologist, transitioning her from an observer and mapper of Area X into an active component of it. The novel ends with the biologist venturing out into the sea of Area X rather than traveling back home through the border in search of her husband, who was on the previous expedition.

Reviewer Sam Gormley names Jeff Vandermeer's writing as "brimming with eerily intelligent life forms overspilling the boundaries between natural and unnatural, organic and artificial, human and nonhuman" (111) and his Southern Reach Trilogy as "showing up the limitations of human intelligence" (114). This essay builds upon previous scholarship on Anni-

hilation's place in multispecies theory and ethics, such as Lisa Dowdall's chapter "Figures" and its description of *Annihilation* as reimagining interactions between plants and humans by exposing what lies beneath nature (151-152), as well as Finola Prendergast's "Revisiting Nonhuman Ethics in Jeff Vandermeer's *Annihilation*" and its explanation of how science fiction represents reality slantwise in order to express an ethical way of managing interactions between nonhumans and humans (344). This essay explores three elements of *Annihilation*: the ongoing and indescribable ecosystem Area X, the biologist and other human characters, and the interconnectedness and transformation of humans into the environment. Each element serves as an example of the utilization of Lovecraftian horror genre expectations to describe how living in a multispecies world—as defined by Donna Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble* as the Chthulucene—requires an acknowledgement of that which is unknown and an absolving of human constructions and identities as absolute.

Multispecies theory and studies involve an inclusive look at the world, one that acknowledges all of its interactions and entanglements between living and nonliving beings. Multispecies scholar Donna Haraway defines the world in *When Species Meet* as a "knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down" (42) from before, during, and beyond their existence. Analyzing *Annihilation* as a science-fiction avenue of multispecies scholarship opens up its value beyond casual readership into a guidebook for how to acknowledge the web of interspecies interaction in the present day, but more specifically the posthuman world. Haraway defines the Chthulucene as the trash-collector of the Anthropocene, and a name for "an elsewhere and elsewhere that was, still is, and might yet be" (*Staying with*, 31). The setting Area X in *Annihilation* represents a potential Chthulucene, and thus a potential posthuman world. Although Vandermeer calls to Lovecraftian horror themes of inconsequential humans and contamination, he differentiates himself from the genre's negative aspects and transforms those themes into ones that describe Haraway's Chthulucene. Vandermeer uses science-fiction tropes

to extend beyond the portrayal of humans as a part in a web of living and nonliving beings in the present, instead hypothesizing about “the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come” (Haraway 31). The Chthulucene is one that we, the collective *Homo sapiens*, will not see, and thus cannot study, understand, and most horrifyingly, control. In narrating through the biologist who understands the limits of human capabilities, and thus becomes one with the natural environment through what van Dooren defines as “passionate immersion” (6), Vandermeer explores one possibility of the inevitable evolution of the natural world past our current geological age, and past the human species.

Readers of *Annihilation* traverse Area X alongside the biologist narrator as she attempts to make sense and meaning out of an ecologically diverse, extensive, and at times unexplainable environment. Area X is located in a coastal, or transitional environment—a zone where ocean water meets the land, characterized by sand, mud, marsh, and swamp terrains. Upon arrival, the biologist describes Area X as having a dense pine forest eventually giving way to a swamp with swaying reeds and “wind-gnarled trees” (3), and before the coast and the ocean run rivers of natural freshwater canals. The purpose of representing Area X as a coastal environment lies in the real-life qualities of coastal flora and fauna—namely their natural biodiversity and ability to adapt in an environment in constant motion. Vandermeer utilizes the differences in terrain to introduce complex interactions between atypical organisms, such as marine animals that adapt to freshwater and coexist in environments with otter and deer (12), and the underground tower with flesh-like walls that live and breathe, its depths “revealing themselves in a kind of ongoing horror show of such beauty and biodiversity” (43). Area X pushes the limits of a real-life coastal environment by representing its ecology slightly off-kilter, its wildlife, structures, and creatures increasingly perplexing and scientifically uncanny to the biologist. For example, she encounters a pair of otters that stare at her for over a minute, producing “a strange sensation that they could see

[her] watching them...that things were not quite what they seemed” (30). In his descriptions of Area X, Vandermeer connects to the central source of Lovecraftian horror by shining a light on an unknown realm, making the literary “endeavor to visualize and verbalize the unseen and unsayable” (Jackson 23). Vandermeer is setting the scene of the posthuman world as one humans would undoubtedly recognize by featuring similar ecological components, but is insinuating that this environment has changed certain processes through evolution.

In the biologist’s endless curiosity, rhetorical questioning, and acknowledgement of her inability to describe Area X and its ecological processes, Vandermeer is emphasizing the power of what we do not fully understand, and thus cannot fully control. In the underground tower, a being the biologist names the Crawler appears to be writing organic and plant-like words on the wall, themselves a perplexing amalgamation of indecipherable phrases. The biologist acknowledges her own inability to conceptualize the tower, claiming:

I felt that I had abdicated my responsibility to that point, which was to consider those elements found inside of the tower as part of a vast biological entity that might or might not be terrestrial. But contemplating the sheer enormity of that idea on a macro level would have broken my mood like an avalanche crashing into my body. So...what did I know? (93)

The words on the wall themselves represent both the inability to adequately represent the posthuman “beyond” in words and how Area X evolved to include human words and languages, but leaves them vague and incomprehensible. Vandermeer is arguing that the posthuman world will inevitably hold remnants of the human species as we currently understand it, but those remnants will not be focused on the benefit of human society or its once-powerful species, hence why neither the biologist nor explorer’s from past expeditions made any progress on the words’ meaning or purpose. When the biologist finally reaches the Crawler near the bottom of the tower, she is perplexed by the appearance, or non-appearance, of

the being: “the Crawler kept changing at a lightning pace, as if to mock my ability to comprehend it” (176). Vandermeer recognizes what scholar James Kneale calls “the problem of witnessing” in Lovecraftian horror, where the writer must include enough hints about a being’s complexity to make it horrific without explaining the fear away (112). Where Lovecraft’s characters experience negative physical and psychological repercussions of coming too close to the unknown, or the cosmic, Vandermeer’s biologist is overtaken with an *appreciation* for Area X’s complexity and an acceptance that she may never understand it. Her experience engaging with the environment is enough, as she claims “[o]bserving all of this has quelled the last ashes of the burning compulsion I had to *know everything*” (195). Through Vandermeer’s description of Area X as an uncanny version of a coastal environment and creating a narrator who appreciates its complex beauty, readers’ interpretation of an ecosystem is reframed into a multispecies perspective for the purpose of appreciating a world one might not fully understand, and might not be the central figure of.

Like Lovecraft’s humans, Vandermeer’s human characters traverse through an unknown environment and are made aware of their insignificance in relation to it—the contrast being Lovecraft’s sole ending for humans to be in death or endless torment, where Vandermeer only results to torment if the characters refuse to adapt to nature’s will. Vandermeer’s depiction of humans in *Annihilation* serves his purpose of both acknowledging Lovecraftian genre expectations of their insignificance, but also arguing that humans are tangled in Cthulucene’s web of beings and must adapt to an uncontrollable nature. The biologist becomes the perfect model for this adaptation by nature of her general distaste for human connection in favor of nature and of her acceptance *into* it via Area X. At her core, the biologist craves solitude and assimilation with the nature she studies, often expressing this nature in opposition with her confident and outgoing husband. “Observation always meant more to me than interaction,” she claims, even comparing an orgasm to the “sudden realization of the interconnectivity of living things” (Vandermeer 110). In the biologist, Vander-

meer exalts a worldview that understands humans' incapacibilities while not leaning entirely anti-human in his narrative. The biologist criticizes her husband's outgoing nature directly, claiming he "wanted to stand out... he had been wrong for the eleventh expedition because of this quality" (110), but Vandermeer also uses subtler ways to critique exclusively human-to-human interaction by removing any personal names and instead referring to the human characters by their job titles (psychologist, biologist, surveyor, anthropologist), and bringing harm to those in the novel that solely adhere to human methods of communication, technology, or both. The anthropologist is killed by the Crawler in the tower, the psychologist jumps from the lighthouse platform for fear of the biologist and her physical transformation resulting from her immersion into Area X, and the surveyor is shot by the biologist in self-defense. Their deaths are results of not just their human-centered professions, but also their inability to passively coexist with Area X. Their end goals for the expedition are ultimately self-interest or at least an increase in their knowledge of the environment for the benefit of a governmental agency—contrasting to the biologist's belief: "[y]ou had to fade into the landscape...you had to pretend it wasn't there for as long as possible. To acknowledge it, to try to name it, might be a way of letting it in" (116). The nature of Area X as the Chthulucene requires a sort of giving up on the self, a shedding of human-centered belief systems and ways of studying or understanding the world for the purpose of *nature's* self and system of being. Area X makes this system inherent, so no human can control or access its patterns except for the biologist, who experiences a transformation physically and psychologically that separates her from her human self. This separation from the self is not a complete separation from the human as a *being*, because humans do play an important role in multispecies interaction and study. Haraway herself discredits the belief of *Homo sapiens* as entirely purposeless in the Chthulucene, as "[d]iverse humans are necessary in every fiber of the tissues of the urgently needed Chthulucene story. The chief actors are not restricted to the too-big players in the too-big stories of Capitalism

and the Anthropos” (*Staying with*, 55). Interpreting the title of *Annihilation* as explaining the novel’s depiction of destroying humans is inaccurate, it instead is explaining the destruction of human-centered communication, interaction, and the belief of humans as *above all others*, or at least above nature. The biologist retains her natural passion, her body, her consciousness, but forgoes an element of her human autonomy and social orders in favor of Area X. Her contamination and subsequent transformation represent a disconnect from an Anthropocentric worldview in favor of a multi-species one.

The final argument for Vandermeer’s Chthulucene and its foundation on and positive extension beyond Lovecraft is the depiction of human characters’ integration into Area X. As the biologist is transformed psychologically and physically, and human characters are enfolded in the natural environment during and after their deaths, Vandermeer is representing the complexity of the human self and its validity in the scope of Area X’s Chthulucene, connecting to scholarship regarding the microbiome and its power over human behavior. As it relates to a posthuman world, Vandermeer is also depicting the reality of humans as one evolutionary step between our current geologic age and whichever one might come after. In Lovecraft’s horror, human contamination often transfigures into a haunting and represents his support of eugenics. In “Arthur Jermyn” and “The Shadow over Innsmouth”, scholar Mitch Frye claims that Lovecraft’s miscegenation and the comingling of humans and monsters in his fiction often results in social denigration, suicide, and torment (248). While Vandermeer depicts the genre expectation of contamination and transforming human characters as a result of interaction with unknown elements of nature and the cosmic beyond, his analogy is concerned with the assimilation of the human species in the webs of the Chthulucene, or humans playing neutral in interactions with plants and animals, or more specifically the human microbiome. After her infection from the tower’s spores, the biologist begins perceiving elements of Area X and her own self differently, representing the ineffective human in relation to a nature that holds control.

First, the psychologist's hypnosis strategies fail to work on her, and she begins to see the tower as pulsating, living and breathing flesh, insinuating her transition from a human on a government-funded expedition to a part, a being, of Area X. She describes the general environment differently as well, claiming "[t]he wind was like something alive; it entered every pore of me...[e]ven the darkness seemed more alive to me, surrounding me like something physical" (Vandermeer 74-75), but never in her descriptions does she expound self-doubt or fear, instead her transition is neutral. In the first sentence of the chapter "Integration", Vandermeer writes, "In the morning, I woke with my senses heightened, so that even the rough brown bark of the pines or the ordinary lunding swoop of a woodpecker came to me as a kind of minor revelation" (37). The biologist's brightness, as she dubs it, gives her a certain power in Area X, specifically over the psychologist's actions and the Crawler—which is itself a former human fully absolved of all autonomy in writing the words on the wall. The psychologist describes her as "a *flame*...floating and floating, like nothing human but something free and floating" (125), and claims her arm did not allow her to pull the trigger and attempt to shoot her. Here, Vandermeer is detailing the change that occurs when we examine ourselves as just one piece in Haraway's "muddle" of multispecies interaction (*Staying with*, 56). One 'real-life' example lies in the human microbiome, how by acknowledging the livelihood of the trillions of bacteria within the human body and how their purpose and activity exists on a separate plane than the body they occupy expands the collective understanding of consciousness and self-control. Bacterial infections like syphilis and Lyme disease cause sensory, psychiatric, and cognitive issues, sometimes continuing after extensive antibacterial treatment, so the true make-up of the human self comes into question when bacteria in the human body impacts consciousness and self-making (Schuller). In giving up her human self, she becomes a gear in Area X that works to progress its processes, a reflection of reordering humans in the Chthulucene. As Haraway says, "human beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main

story” (*Staying with*, 55). The Crawler is eventually confirmed as the end result of a full-human-to-Area-X-cog transformation in the third novel of Vandermeer’s Southern Reach series, *Acceptance*, and his original form is hinted at when the biologist finds him at the end of the tunnel in *Annihilation*. She describes his face as featuring “the endurance of unending pain and sorrow, yes, but shining through as well a kind of grim satisfaction and *ecstasy*” (186), ultimately claiming that he “existed in a place none of us could comprehend” (187). It is undeniable that the Crawler is no longer human nor participates in human biological processes, but in Area X, he still holds elements of his human life physically and physiologically by retaining human expression and writing words in English. Neither the biologist nor the reader sees what the Crawler’s purpose for Area X is, so the resolution is that it (or he) is ultimately incomprehensible until the human self is surrendered. Beyond the biologist, Vandermeer portrays Area X’s reordering process in the deaths of other human characters.

Not all human characters in *Annihilation* become contaminated, and a stark difference appears between the fate of the anthropologist, psychologist, surveyor, and the biologist because of the formers’ refusal to adapt to the environment. As an analogy for the human species as a singular and finite evolutionary step, Vandermeer represents their death as a sort of transformation, leaving hints of human elements in nature itself. The organic words on the tower wall speak truth to this analogy, appearing above the anthropologist’s body to say “...the shadows of the abyss are like petals of a monstrous flower that shall blossom within the skull and expand the mind beyond what any man can bear” (61). The shadows being the virtually unknown Chthulucene, the unknown future evolution of *Homo sapiens*, and the blossoming and expanding of the mind reflect either the biologist surrendering her human self for Area X, or the others dying and becoming Area X. Upon their deaths, their bodies become inhuman and pass quickly into the landscape and are assumed to become a living creature or plant. The biologist sees the completion of human transformation before seeing the process, describing a dolphin’s eyes as “painfully human, almost

familiar” (Vandermeer 97), finding human-shaped “eruptions of moss or lichen” (96) in an abandoned village—both things causing a “feeling of something left unresolved or still in progress” (97). Wounded and dead bodies grow vaguely organic and supernatural qualities, the anthropologist having “something green spilling out from her mouth” (60) and “a torrent of green ash that sat on her chest in a mound” (61), and the psychologist’s arm “colonized by a fibrous green-gold fuzziness” (133). The biologist does not witness any transformation of the surveyor, but has now recognized the pattern of human integration into Area X and hesitates to bury her in case it may block her from achieving her purpose to become a part of a multispecies and posthuman world. This process is not overlooked by Haraway, in fact, the act of living and dying is crucial in creating the multispecies web, imagining and appreciating the tangling of living and non-living beings in our world and beyond. Haraway writes that “There is only the relentlessly contingent SF worlding of living and dying,” “of becoming-with and unbecoming-with, of sympoiesis, and so, just possibly, of multispecies flourishing on earth” Vandermeer represents both the reality of human deterioration and decomposition after death and the part humans play in the flourishing of a multispecies world even if their consciousness dissipates. It reflects the truth of the Chthulucene, where whether humans are conscious of it or not, we must accept the truth of the passing of the human species, and thus surrender human needs and necessities, for the favor of an ever-changing ecosystem.

In Area X as the Chthulucene, humans are one piece in a range of uncanny multispecies interactions, but also themselves an amalgamation of natural elements that when initiated—in the biologist’s infection—are integrated into an environment where nature has full control. This essay explored how Area X is a representation of a complex transitional environment after our current ecological age, and how Vandermeer purposefully acknowledges his characters’ inability to describe Area X to emphasize the unknown future of the posthuman world. Like Lovecraft’s, Vandermeer’s human characters and their constructed systems and thought processes

are rendered inconsequential against Area X. By relinquishing her self, the biologist is transformed by and integrated with Area X, resulting in physical and sensory changes—and the other human characters physically become part of the ecosystem through animals and plants. This transfiguration of human characters represents the truth that Donna Haraway defines in *When Species Meet* and *Staying with the Trouble*: that humans are one piece in the web of human and nonhuman interaction, and to fully understand the extent of a non-human-centered world, there must be some sort of reframing the human as a natural element of an ecosystem. Vandermeer's *Annihilation* argues for science fiction as an adequate method to represent this reframing, its writing portraying the posthuman world as one that requires humans to absolve their sense of self and acknowledge the power of an ecosystem that runs on the collective web of interlocking and interacting living and non-living beings.

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