

# Mankind's Relationship with the Environment in Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*

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## Abstract

In Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014), a unique relationship is established between a fecund and futuristic environment called Area X and a group of scientists commissioned to probe this area. While the scientists' initial response toward this area is human-centered and Anthropocenic, the conventional expectations of this initial response are severely shattered later in the novel. The present study believes that the various aspects of this shattering gives us a glimpse of the kind of relationship we could have with the environment in the Anthropocene, the human epoch. By utilizing the theoretical concepts in key secondary sources – such as Pieter Vermeulen's *Literature and the Anthropocene* (2020) and Benjamin Robertson's *None of This Is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer* (2018) – the study identifies that various demarcational means fail to fulfill their binary making function due to the vastness and unmappable nature of environments such as Area X. Accordingly, this failure constitutes the study's purpose in that it shows conventional paradigms of mankind's knowledge bodies could not delve into the cognizance and intentions of an amoral and un-registrable environment. This failure also shows recalcitrant areas such as Area X are already present and all encompassing around us.

## Keywords

VanderMeer; Annihilation; Anthropocene; Nature; Cartographic; Symbioses.

## 1. Introduction

Anthropocene is a term which has been popularized through a short essay by Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen in 2002, and “refers to a proposed geologic epoch that would follow from the Holocene.” (Robertson 14). According to Benjamin J. Robertson, this epoch commences in the late eighteenth century, with the emergence of fossil fuels utilization; in the mid-twentieth, the development and use of nuclear weapons and power at the end of the World War II and in the postwar era perpetuates Anthropocene (14). Generalizing the connotations of Anthropocene, many critics broaden the usage of this term to refer to “a period of manmade disruption in which the human species is becoming conscious of itself as a planetary force” (Carrington). Commenting on mankind as becoming this ‘planetary force’, Pieter Vermeulen mentions:

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In [the Anthropocene], Crutzen notes, human action has come to expand its reach over the whole planet, and its impact on the climate and on chemical and geological processes has become ever more intensive. [...] In this new epoch, humans have become a proper geological (rather than merely social or biological) agent akin to meteorites and volcanoes. (3-4)

The emergence of mankind as this new 'agent' with intensive impact on the environment has allowed him to manipulate it in his favor. While manipulating the environment, he hoped to find a passive Mother Nature who would be kind and accommodating toward her inhabitants and their demands; no matter how horrendous and nefarious these demands are. Next to this rendition, others fancied a more scientific passivity for the environment in which mankind could easily map it in its own favor. Nature, in turn, did not maintain these convenient misconceptions. Although the Anthropocene presents a thoroughly humanized environment, this does not mean that it is under human command. As Vermeulen believes, "the problem is that the different manifestations of the Anthropocene are neither linear nor localized, neither reversible nor containable" (10). The irreversible and uncontainable feature of the manipulated environment in the Anthropocene has set off unpredictable ecological and chemical processes that interlock with one another in ways that destabilize the earth system as a whole. Under such set of circumstances, the environment remains anything but this tamed and caring Mother Nature for its inhabitants, or a kind of dissectible environment through analytical paradigms of science.

Such an uncontainable environment has been represented in many works of literature since one of literature's functions is to delve into domains and concepts which could not be represented conventionally. Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014) is one of such works which puts a strange environment at the center of the developments in the novel, and therefore, the present study opts it as its ideal case for discussing mankind's lack of control in the Anthropocene which seemingly bespeaks our dominance; a dominance which would be betrayed by the unpredictable workings of the environment.

*Annihilation* as the first installment of *the Southern Reach Trilogy* speaks of the occurrence of an Event: "About thirty-two years ago, along a remote southern stretch known by some as the forgotten coast, an Event had occurred that began to transform the landscape and simultaneously caused an invisible border or wall to appear" (VanderMeer 35). Following the overnight appearance of the border, inexplicable occurrences start to transpire in this bordered-off region, which is called Area X by a clandestine agency named Southern Reach. This agency starts sending groups of experts into the affected area; an area which is a seemingly pristine and lush region of coastline separated from the rest of the United States by an invisible border. Life in Area X is not merely wild, it is positively weird: on top of black bears, coyotes, and huge aquatic reptiles, there is also an undetermined "low, powerful moaning at dusk" (VanderMeer 5), and the crew later stumbles upon "a vast biological entity that might or might not be terrestrial" (VanderMeer 90). The status of this entity, which will later be called the Crawler, is deeply uncertain.

Due to the occurrence of the Event – which is implied to be triggered as the result of a human-based encounter with the environment<sup>1</sup> – Area X becomes the epitome of the unpredictable environment in the Anthropocene, which undermines the autonomy of humans in this epoch. Considering such epitomic representation of the environment, the present study reviews the ways the novel grapples with the irrepresentable features of such an environment. It asks how conventional means of demarcation and representation fail to contain the irrepresentable nature of Anthropocenic environments such as Area X. At the same time, the study analyses how these means could not protect mankind from the unpredictable workings of such regions. In “The Status of Various Demarcational Means in Area X”, the study analyzes the ambivalent and unmappable nature of Area X’s scale and border. Even the seemingly precise demarcation of Southern Reach agency proves to be inaccurate and merely arbitrary. In “The Environment’s Amoral and Indistinctive Treatment of Mankind in Area X”, it would be argued that in Area X, mankind would not be allowed to survive his encounter with nature unscathed since this area would remain indifferent (what we would dub more precisely as abdifferent) and cruel even toward blameless human agents regarding the occurrence of the Event. Finally, in “The Non-Referential Agency of the Environment in Area X’s Writing Capability”, the study reads the writing capability of this area and its mysterious creature, the Crawler, as the sign of its active cognizance; a kind of cognizance and agency which is nonrepresentational, besmears the boundaries of human and inhuman entities through its symbiotic powers, and bespeaks the existence of agency in the environment. Such an environment with authorial capabilities cannot be reduced within passively romantic or scientific renditions of the environment.

## 2. Research Approach and Methodology

Pieter Vermeulen’s *Literature and the Anthropocene* is considered to be the study’s main framework for discussing the concept of borders and demarcations and Area X’s capability to undermine mankind’s control and distinction in the novel’s world. As Vermeulen comments his book’s argument structure is devised as follows:

the first part (“Anthropocene Agencies”) presents the new agents comprising the Anthropocene world, while the second part (“Anthropocene Temporalities”) focuses on the way that world reorders the relations between past, present, and future. Cumulatively, the two parts survey key concepts and ideas as well as literary examples in ways that extend our vocabularies for confronting environmental degradation. (Vermeulen 30)

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<sup>1</sup> As Robertson comments it was Saul Evans’ encounter (the lighthouse keeper) with a spiral of light which produces the first adumbration of Area X. (138) This, in turn, could give us the interpretive permission to recognize the cause of the Event as a manmade one.

Vermeulen emphasizes that Anthropocenic novels such as *Annihilation* expose limitations of taxonomies – of borders, lines, and even bodies of knowledge – with which mankind tends to gauge geological and environmental facts in the Anthropocene. He also believes the all encompassing presence of areas such as Area X results in a kind of menacing environmental alreadiness which would cause a series of symbioses between human and inhuman entities. This entanglement would undermine any autonomy humans think have compared to the existential status of the environment.

### **3. Literature Review**

The enumerated concepts from Vermeulen's book are domesticated in Benjamin Robertson's *None of This Is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer* regarding VanderMeer's novels, and in particular his *Southern Reach Trilogy*. For example, he beautifully turns Vermeulen's insistence on the environmental alreadiness and all encompassing presence into a concept called abdifference to show that environments such as Area X have no moral conscious in making everything, including human agency, indistinctive and irrelevant. In "Reviewing Inhuman Ethics in Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*", Finnola Anne Prendergast domesticates this environmental alreadiness more by emphasizing the loss of any sign of distinction in human autonomy and agency.

The discussed undermining of the concept of borders and lines by Vermeulen and Robertson is strengthened through the study's utilization of J. Hillis Miller theoretical conceptualizations in "Line" and Jeffery Clapp's "Jeff VanderMeer, or the Novel Trapped in the Open World". In these works, it is discussed that in deconstructive set of circumstances such as Area X, lines, borders, scales and any kind of spatial or cartographic demarcations could not keep their monoscalar nature, and would betray their unreal and purely arbitrary nature as Miller believes.

These observations materialize the study's insistence that the utilization of any single romantic, scientific or metaphysical paradigm would prove to be dysfunctional; the very belief which is espoused by Christopher Margeson's "Imaging the Anthropocene: The Weird Ecology of Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*" and Andrew Strombeck's "Inhuman Writing in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*". Both believe that Area X's cognizance as a vast and unmappable hyperobject makes it anything but this pastoral and romantic Mother Nature, and turns it into an entity with unexplainable writing abilities which could generate unfathomable symbioses between human and inhuman.

### **4. The Status of Various Demarcational Means in Area X**

In *Annihilation*, the lines between binaries are severely challenged. As Jim Coby believes, "VanderMeer posits circumstances that cleanly dispatch with easy conceptualizations of binaries" (Coby 15). In the novel, when members of the scientific expedition enter Area X, they quickly find themselves accosted by dolphins with eerily human eyes, wild boars empowered with the ability of human calculation, and flora life imitating human forms. These encounters, and countless others like them, "force the explorers, and by extension

readers, to fundamentally reorganize and conceptualize their ontological understanding of the environment” (Coby 15). While reorganizing and conceptualizing their understanding, the explorers’ expectations from the functionality of borders and demarcations is fundamentally challenged. Some like the Director – as the representative of the Southern Reach Agency – do not want to accept the loss of the functionality of borders and lines in this world, but others like the biologist accept the limitations of the man’s demarcational and cartographic endeavors in this strange world. She believes that although categories and delimitations are comforting for mankind, these binary makers could not function in this world. Upon discovering a journal left behind by her husband from a previous expedition into Area X, she learns that he had “grown suspicious of the entire idea of borders” toward the end of his experience within Area X (VanderMeer 166).

The first reason for this ‘suspicious’ attitude is the symbioses between disparate human and inhuman entities. We would be discussing how Area X’s writing capability – materialized through the powers of a monstrous creature called the Crawler – facilitate such symbioses. For the time being, let us see how the biologist finds the instances of such symbioses even on a molecular level. When she examines cells from Area X flora life, she learns that they are “composed of modified human cells” (VanderMeer 160). Through this observation – and the ones enumerated earlier under this entry ranging from dolphins with eerily human eyes to flora life imitating human intelligibility – one could see how VanderMeer destroys the line separating inhuman and human, creating “the possibility of an ecology that refuses to play by the rules humans have conceptualized for it” (Coby 16). In another part of the novel, she refers to unique ways such symbioses ‘refuse to play by the human’s conceptualized rules:

In Area X, I had been told, I would find marine life that had adjusted to the brackish freshwater and which at low tide swam far up the natural canals formed by the reeds, sharing the same environment with otters and deer. If you walked along the beach, riddled through with the holes of fiddler crabs, you would sometimes look out to see one of the giant reptiles, for they, too, had adapted to their habitat. (VanderMeer 12)

‘Adaptation and ‘sharing’ are the mildest words she uses for describing the most normal symbioses in Area X. Even these less radical cohabitations do emphasize the Area’s tendency to undermine the notion of rigid borders and demarcations. These observations, alongside her suspicion, turn her into what Vermeulen calls an Earthbound. Borrowing this term from Bruno Latour’s conceptualization on Anthropocene, Vermeulen believes that “the Earthbounds like the biologist feel attached (bound) to the earth as well as heading (bound) for a different relation to the planet” (16). By cherishing and looking for places where the very notion of borders and binaries between the human and the inhuman is annihilated, Earthbounds like the biologist acknowledge limitations in our demarcations and are ‘bound’ to expose those “who still believe the planet is a gridded globe to be subdued” (Vermeulen 16).

The second reason for the biologist's suspicion toward the very notion of borders should be recognized in the way she as an Earthbound is 'bound' to acknowledge the limitations of the demarcated paradigms – romantic, metaphysical or scientific – with which humans tend to know and contain the environment. Our legislative bodies and way of thinking, for instance, assume that only human beings ever do things intentionally. In the novel, the unfathomable intelligibility of Area X and its power to render strange symbioses possible sway readers “to consider the unfamiliar idea that an inhuman thing can also have aims, plans, and designs of its own, and that human beings now have to share their agency with other kinds of forces” (Vermeulen 2). This new way of thinking even undermines the biologist's confidence on her own thinking taxonomies and categorizations. On occasions, she wonders even the thoughts she has might not be her own, but rather the effect of the organism “pulling these different impressions of itself from [her] mind and projecting them back at [her], as a form of camouflage” (VanderMeer 179). It is not just that the boundary between human and inhuman is an unstable one, it is also that the border seems to cut right through human communities, scientific bodies and paradigms, and even psyches.

The entanglement between the human and inhuman could not be addressed through the neat divisions between the sciences, the humanities or any other romantic or metaphysical set of paradigms. None of these human constructs are “particularly well equipped to capture that entanglement on their own” (Vermeulen 3). In *Annihilation*, the Southern Reach Agency insists on confronting Area X through its seemingly 'well equipped' disciplinary divisions, and therefore it dispatches an interdisciplinary team, consisting of a biologist, an anthropologist, a surveyor, and a psychologist to study the area. However such a demarcated pursuit to study an area rife with instances of borderlessness, entanglement, and symbioses is doomed to fail. At the end of the novel, only the biologist survives since as an Earthbound, she accepts the irreducible heterogeneity of the world through manmade demarcations and taxonomies. As Christopher Margeson comments

the biologist begins to really see Area X rather than seeking to contain it within set systems of knowledge. She takes up the task of building a common world with the proviso that this common world has to be built from utterly heterogeneous parts that will never make a whole, but at best a fragile, revisable, and diverse composite material. (47)

Her acceptance of the demarcation limitations of 'set systems of knowledge' and her acknowledgement of fathoming Area X only as a 'diverse composite' is an orientation away from what VanderMeer's biologist calls “the burning compulsion [that] we had to know everything” (VanderMeer 194). She approximates herself to “a truthful seeing” of

Area X (VanderMeer 90) since she comes to appreciate the incomprehensibility of even the seemingly familiar things in Area X, undermining the functionality of demarcated academic pursuits and knowledge bodies in fathoming familiar concepts. She even sees too much acuteness of her senses as an obstacle for the borderlessness of Area X: “I had tried to ignore the change in the confined space of the tower, but my senses still seemed too acute, too sharp. I was adapting to it, but at times like this, I remembered that just a day ago I had been someone else” (VanderMeer 194). Adapting her ‘too acute and too sharp senses’ is the provision for the perpetuation of her unfettered appreciation of ‘the wind’, ‘rain drops’, and ‘the rolling waves’ in the Area X. This adaptation sways her to become ‘someone else’; a person who is not obsessed with ‘the burning compulsion to know everything’ and contain everything ‘within set systems of knowledge’. Such a person acknowledges that the high entanglement in areas such as Area X would defy becoming contained in any kind of analytical paradigm.

Apart from the two previously enumerated reasons, the biologist suspects the functionality of borders and demarcations in fathoming Area X due to a sense of alreadiness of this area’s presence. We would be revisiting this sense of alreadiness in this study, but for the time being, let us define this sense and discuss the key repercussion of encountering an environment such as Area X which espouses this menacing sense. In the novel, Southern Reach Agency tends to perpetuate this belief that Area X “exists along a line dividing one space or type of space from another in a larger homogenous context affording progress and comparison” (Robertson 113). This line is “invisible to the naked eye”; it is then an unreal (irreal) concept, but the agency drew along a line standing in for this invisible line/border. Homogeneity is the presupposition upon which the binary making function of borders and lines could materialize, and their arbitration could operate. As J. Hillis Miller comments in “Line”, due to the imaginary and arbitrary nature of such abstract lines and borders, they could only perpetuate a “phantasmal real”, which he calls “irreality” too (Miller 238). This ‘irreal’ demarcation of the agency hopes to achieve a sense of inside/outside, and here/there between Area X and its surrounding; however due to the realization that everywhere is under the influence of Area X, this demarcation could have “no purchase on and do not register on seemingly inside and outside spaces of Area X” (Robertson 114). In this sense, everywhere should be regarded as being mere, abstract and irreal borders.

Due to the already beleaguering presence of Area X, it upends the very binary making function of borders and lines. In this upending, Area X turns borders and lines as means which “include the concepts that it cuts, weaves and sets out in its boundaries. In this sense it contaminates the definer(s) through inclusion of what is supposed to be defined and marked out” (Miller 233). This contamination of the ‘definers’ – which comprises Southern Reach Agency and members of the scientific expedition – happens because Area

X is not an invasive force from a spatial outside. It is what already exists here and there around all the characters and the earth's inhabitants in the novel. Area X's cutting, weaving and contamination of definers cause them "to be affected while remaining imperceptible to and unaffected by us" (Robertson 115). This all affecting and yet imperceptible area does not linger in an arbitrary, unreal outside to be discovered, contained and impacted by humans. Neither human techniques, from architecture to critical thought, nor the invisible, arbitrary and unreal lines/borders could have anything to do with comprehending Area X. As Miller believes, borders and lines become deconstructed in such areas and therefore are turned into mere metaphors without the concrete ability to enclose anything (233). Due to this lack of concrete ability, borders and lines in Area X betray denoting any referentiality, and "are tolerated by its materiality as it play a long game in which humanity's part matters little" (Robertson 115). The Director of the agency is entangled and blinded in such 'a long game' when she tells the biologist, "the border is advancing. For now, slowly, a little bit more every year. In ways you wouldn't expect. But maybe soon it'll eat a mile or two at a time" (VanderMeer 99). However, the biologist does not find the very concept of borders as 'this monolithic wall' anymore:

This statement [is] too limiting, too ignorant. [...] We had come to think of the border as this monolithic invisible wall, but if members of the eleventh expedition had been able to return without our noticing, couldn't other things have already gotten through? (VanderMeer 119)

The expedition's unnoticed and unregistered return from a seemingly demarcated space attests that the drawn unreal and arbitrary line by the agency only "disturbs, knots, re-crosses and suspends straightforwardness of linearity" which it intends to create between an outside (Area X) and an inside (which does not exist) (Miller 232). The absence of this 'linearity' and 'monolithic nature' (the kind of nature which one expects from lines which could function linearly and conventionally) makes deciding on the exact location of the border/line in the all burgeoning space of Area X impossible.

The key repercussion of the loss of this conventional functionality of lines/borders in an all encompassing Area X is the cartographic and scalar distortion and disorientation. The alreadiness of the Area X's presence around human subjects makes it be there all along, too big and too close to be seen by them. As the biologist puts it, "When you are too close to the center of a mystery there is no way to pull back and see the shape of it entire" (VanderMeer 130). In the case of such blindness to 'see the [full] shape' of Area X, the very notion of scale would be distorted; the very scale human subjects use to "stand both atop and within Area X even as it traverses and swallows the



human whole” (Robertson 122). In Area X, human subjects and members of the scientific expedition fail to find another kind of scale for measuring this area since Area X “is less about the discovery of new scales than about the human’s confrontation with such areas as trans-scalar entities. The illusion that such areas are monoscalar entities has made it possible to obfuscate the reality of scalar difference” (Vermeulen 98). Due to too closeness, vastness and already-encompassing nature of Area X, any kind of ‘monoscalar’ understanding of this area (scientific, romantic, etc) would be impossible since this area is “distortion generally, a kind of materiality defined by distortion” when studied and analyzed through such monoscalar ways of understanding and analyses (Robertson 123). No unified scalar collapse could read through Area X since its too vastness and alreadiness could not satisfy “the totality that abstract borders, lines and scales provide” (Robertson 123).

Due to the absence of such convenient and containable abstract ‘totality’, the expedition team find themselves without any navigational equipment which they can trust. They are “forbidden watches and compasses” (VanderMeer 4), and of the two maps they have, neither seems trustworthy as neither shows the tower they’ve encountered anywhere in Area X. Even their own bodily senses have been disturbed by “a low, powerful moaning at dusk” (VanderMeer 5) which the biologist describes as having “dulled our ability to gauge direction, so that the sound seemed to infiltrate the black water that soaked the cypress trees” (VanderMeer 5). William Hugel believes that except the biologist, other members of the expedition tend to stick to their conventional measuring and cartographic means despite knowing that they do not function as properly as they should have in Area X. They find these means the only familiar things to which they could hold among the all encompassing Area X. VanderMeer uses the available dysfunctional maps and measurement means – which do not even show the location of all the geological and seemingly manmade structures such as the tower – “to emphasize the expedition’s orientation with Area X as they use the map to cling to the familiar” (Hugel). In one such instance, the psychologist, in attempting to settle the restless expedition team, claims they are “to put [their] faith in [their] measurements” (VanderMeer 18). To reinforce this idea, the psychologist examines the tower and says:

This structure is 61.4 feet in diameter. It is raised 7.9 inches from the ground. The stairwell appears to have been positioned at or close to due north, which may tells us something about its creation, eventually. It is made of stone and coquina, not of metal or of bricks. These are facts. That it wasn’t on the maps means only that a storm may have uncovered the entrance. (VanderMeer 18)

The biologist finds the explanation “endearing” (VanderMeer 18), and it’s interesting to read this “as the biologist finding the psychologist’s cognitive map, her projection of Area X, as a form of comfort or place” (Hugel), but this sense of ‘comfort’ and reassuring could not help the psychologist and others like her to deal with the absolutely distorted cartographic features of Area X. That is why she admits that the sense of unease and dislocation is still present with her and that she can’t completely disregard the lack of tower’s presence on the expedition’s physical map of Area X.

To show more layers of cartographic complications and destabilization of Area X, Jeffery Clapp categorizes types of spatial structures in Area X into horizontal and vertical spaces. In his opinion, while vertical spaces espouse incoherence and unmappability, the horizontal spaces do create the false sense of “rigid orientations and cardinal linearities” (2). This false sense of mappability of the horizontal spaces is the reason why the psychologist could give herself the hope that conventional cartographic means function in this strange world. However, she is not aware that these spaces could not be mapped. In order to expose the impossibility of Area X’s mapping, Clapp refers to the mysterious nature of this area’s vertical spaces which espouse fungibility. These spaces include not only the mysterious tower/tunnel, but also the lighthouse and the Southern Reach Agency building itself (Clapp 8). Clapp believes that

by constructing a world which seems to be legible in one way – from above, one might say – and illegible in another – from within, one might say – VanderMeer provides an extraordinarily immanent allegory of a world in which the subject finds itself wandering amidst and among things it does not understand and cannot control. (8)

The seemingly ‘legible’ nature of horizontal spaces is uneasily juxtaposed with the ‘illegible’ nature of vertical ones. This juxtaposition is the ultimate blow for even indulging the fantasy (like the one the psychologist and some members of Southern Reach Agency has) that conventional cartographic means and scales could measure up Area X. According to Clapp, this juxtaposition only attests the impotency of members of the scientific expedition of not having the full knowledge, and that is why they experience a harsh “knowledge asymmetry” in Area X (2). This asymmetry, Clapp maintains, shows “the sense that one is always being watched. Indeed, it is often the case” (8). The biologist, for example, finds herself observed by the Area’s strange occupants:

Then the dolphins breached, and it was almost as vivid a dislocation as that first descent into the Tower. [...] As they slid by, the nearest one rolled slightly to the side, and it stared at me with an eye that did not, in that brief flash, resemble a dolphin eye to me. (VanderMeer 96-7)

Being under the gaze of constituent entities of Area X is the ultimate rupture of cartographic endeavors in the novel. In this area, borders, lines and demarcations lose their functionality to generate binary distinctions. This loss exposes the arbitrary and unreal nature of borders and lines in a setting which could not indulge lines' conventional functionality to create insides/outside, inclusions/exclusions. Area X is too vast, too close and is already too present for the members of the expedition to be analyzed, demarcated and studied. It also includes mutated beings such as the above-described dolphins whose symbioses with humans betray the functionality of borders and demarcations of bodies and paradigms of knowledge – scientific, romantic, or metaphysical. In the next entry, we would be focusing on Area X's unique and cognizant attitude towards humans; the attitude – we would be calling it *abdifference* – which is amoral and shows little registrable signs of being impacted by humans.

### **5. The Environment's Amoral and Indistinctive Treatment of Mankind in Area X**

In his book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Timothy Morton coins the term “hyperobjects” to refer to events, systems or processes such as black holes, nuclear materials, mass species extinction, climate change, and the Event in *Annihilation* – and the subsequent emergence of unmappable Area X – that are too complex, too massively distributed across space and time, for humans to get a grip on in the history, specifically in the Anthropocene (Tompkins). Although we know we live with the local effects of these phenomena, they are quite literally beyond our ken. In one sense they are abstractions; in another they are ferociously, catastrophically real (Tompkins). Since these phenomena massive scale are ‘beyond our ken’, we start having this feeling that the environment would not notice our presence in its texture. While this lack of notice formerly allowed mankind to try to contain the environment through its insufficient but convenient paradigms – such as romantic or scientific frameworks – in the Anthropocenic set of circumstances like Area X in *Annihilation*, these paradigms could not compensate for our sense of not being noticed by the environment. The reason for the dysfunctionality of such paradigms is that they could not be imposed upon an uncaring environment. As one of the more unhinged employees of the Southern Reach reflects in his notes on Area X: “Would that not be the final humbling of the human condition? That the trees and birds, the fox and the rabbit, the wolf and the deer... reach a point at which they do not even notice us, as we are transformed” (qtd. in Tompkins).

The feeling of not even being noticed by a hyperobject such as Area X is not indifference, but “*abdifference*”. Coined by Benjamin Robertson:

The ab in *abdifference* does not amplify or otherwise augment a concept of indifference. Rather, it designates a movement away, a constantly renewed flight from difference and from everything particular and toward nothing in particular, a movement without trajectory within a space without markers. It is a nonattitude, a nonrelation, a means of identifying the measureless gap between the human with its knowledge practices and the weird planet without a capacity to be known. (134-5)

Robertson believes humans may affect this 'weird planet', but it does not notice or react in terms humans can comprehend. This planet is not even indifferent. "To be indifferent, it would have to be different than us, positioned to be impartial with respect to an other" (Robertson 125). The planet is abdifferent – outside of or fleeing from notions of difference. This is precisely its terror; it is there already without being detectable, it impacts us since it is us, and it cannot be affected by us because we are already it. In *Annihilation*, this sense of alreadiness is rendered through the recognition "that we have always been surrounded by beings of all sorts who share elements of that which we had thought to be most distinctively our own." (Prendergast 348) The abdifference between Area X and the members of the scientific expedition would compromise human autonomy and value. As Finola Prendergast argues, "*Annihilation* stages this fear of compromised autonomy by hinting that Area X as a hyperobject could even manipulate expedition members' bodies and minds" (348). Due to its abdifferent nature, Area X can physically hamper the ones who enter it from acting out their intentions. It can also impact their will to choose actions they would not otherwise endorse. As the biologist tells us, "members of the second expedition to Area X had committed suicide by gunshot and members of the third had shot each other" (VanderMeer 17). Thinking of the environment abdifferently with the agency to impact even its inhabitants' decisions is anything but to think of it as "a more or less static [Mother] Nature; a metastable continuity bounded by time and space, likening the environment to a romantic or picturesque painting of a landscape, something always over yonder" (Margeson 36). The alreadiness of the environment's presence and lack of distinction between inhabitants and the abdifferent environment makes the 'yonder'-based distant between Mother Nature and humans impossible. This impossibility is emphasized by Vermeulen too.

The abdifferent nature of the environment makes its attitude toward its inhabitants amoral. In *Annihilation*, those at the margins are the first to experience the future that awaits all of us; those very people who have nothing to do with initiating the Event, and have no bad intentions of manipulating the environment in the favor of their covert objectives – like the ominous and secretive objectives of the Southern Reach agency. As Robertson believes,

There is an environmentalism of the subaltern, of people who experience the slow violence of hyperobjects such as Area X. They confront a kind of materiality that conditions them without being known or knowable according to the humanist assumptions that produced it – humanist assumptions that have always already failed to represent them and their interests. (60)

Area X does not care about the fact that such subaltern subjects have little to do with inflicting nefarious impacts on the environment. These people would “experience effects without ever being a cause, who are subject to a condition – the condition being the abdifferent amorality of Area X as a hyperobject – unable to register their presence” (Robertson 112). Apart from geographically marginal status of the inhabitants of Area X and the ones in the vicinity of this area, nearly all of the characters belong to ethnically marginal groups of the society. The Director is half Native American, Control is half Mexican, Grace is a descendent of people from the West Indies. By having Area X impact on both geographically and ethnically marginal and subaltern communities, VanderMeer returns to an old, or at least infamous, trope in weird literature: the use of marginal humans as an interface between the organised, rational world and the abdifferent vastness of the inhuman world (Strombeck 13).

By avoiding Area X have a moral conscious, VanderMeer asks “how ecological catastrophes create ruins for the humans that live around them, and sees part of his task as examining the kinds of lives possible in the ruins” (Strombeck 14). In these ruins, inhabitants and even the members of the scientific expedition fail to evoke a motivated reaction from Area X. This failure attests its abdifferent inertia and lack of concern for characters’ Anthropocenic interventions. Knowing this fact, the biologist summarizes the Southern Reach Agency’s desperate attempt to evoke any kind of motivated response or reaction from Area X as follows: “Feed Area X but do not antagonize it, and perhaps someone will, through luck or mere repetition, hit upon some explanation, some solution, before the world becomes Area X” (VanderMeer 120-21). This explanation could not be achieved since Area X avoids registering any meaningful impact by human beings. Even if it registers an impact, the novels’ characters are incapable of recognizing these impacts since they do not have the means to read and contain such an impact. Regarding Area X’s defiance to register any meaningful anthropogenic impact, Robertson comments:

Area X defies every attempt to provoke it into providing feedback meaningful to human beings. Human beings die in, and because of, Area X. They are affected by Area X. However, they never understand what has been done to them, or even if their provocations are the cause of what has been done to them. They are affected by Area X without affecting it because whatever effect they have on it cannot be registered as such. (133)

There is no comprehensible return or fallout for human beings from Area X due to its abdifferent attitude toward mankind’s intervention. This attitude does not give the scientists the distinction they look for in the environment after their investigative interventions – and previously nefarious interventions of agencies such as Southern Reach. What is certain is that Area X would destroy everybody eventually, but not for revenge. Revenge is based upon distinction and caring for an other. Revenge is also based upon the desire of destroying an other. Due to its abdifferent attitude, Area X does not even see human beings. It would destroy them since it desires nothing. It is an irreducible and uncontainable kind of materiality, and such materiality is inexorable.

In *Annihilation*, Area X as a cognizant entity takes away the luxury of distinction from humans, especially members of the scientific expedition. As a borderless and unfathomable hyperobject, it encompasses everything, and therefore, imposes a sense of alreadiness and the impossibility of discretion upon humans. Its abdifferent attitude does not care for abiding by any moral compass, affects the blameless agents first, and defies the possibility of analysis and comprehension through these scientists' containment, taxonomic and analytical measures. Such an environment is anything but the safe hospice of a passive pristine purity of Mother Nature. Abdifferent materiality is the only thing found in Area X. In the next entry, we would be focusing on Area X's writing capability as one of its unmotivated aspect, which gives it true inhuman agency, results in strange and unfathomable symbioses between human and inhuman entities – as the final blow of Area X for taking away distinction from mankind – and betrays Area X become reduced through any romantic or scientific frameworks.

### **6. The Non-Referential Agency of the Environment in Area X's Writing Capability**

In *Annihilation*, the full emergence of writing capability of the environment is depicted near the novel's end, when the biologist finally encounters the Crawler, a monster that ascends and descends the stairs of the tower while writing words on the tower's wall. This capability, the study would argue, attests the agency of the Area X in its encounter with humans. It also bespeaks how the Crawler commandeers the manmade skill of writing in its favor by making it utterly non-referential and non-representational. In the appropriation of writing, the Crawler initiates the formidable symbiosis of human and inhuman entities, and makes the probability of containing the Crawler and Area X within romantic or scientific notions of nature impossible. This environment does not stand by to be written about, but through its writing capability, disturbs the conventional referentiality with which the environment has been conveniently contained and talked about in passive romantic paradigms of Mother Nature or taxonomic rendition of the environment through science.

VanderMeer explains the writing capability of Area X as bioluminescent flora. In the novel, the biologist starts encountering this capability in its nascence in its very beginning: "Then, as I stared, the vines resolved further, and I saw that they were words, in cursive, the letters raised six inches off the wall" (VanderMeer 19). When the biologist gets close to the words, she inhales spores from them that infect her consciousness. As Andrew Strombeck believes, this infection causes language become "detached from its referential properties" (7), and that is why two of the characters start naming one geological structure through exactly converse terminologies. While the Director calls this structure a tunnel, the biologist wants to call it a tower. The hypnotic suggestion of the Crawler's writings triggers the emergence of a fundamental problem for these characters

and all the scientists on the team. The problem is that all their analytical and referential skills fail to map and contain this geological structure and other features of Area X. As Strombeck comments: “VanderMeer frames Area X as something that evades scientific perception, part of a world beyond language. The world here slips away from the apparatus developed to capture it” (8). As Strombeck argues, by undermining the representative capability of language as the ultimate ‘apparatus’ for fathoming things, and making the produced words and sentences by the Crawler and Area X slip from the referential nature of language, VanderMeer challenges the human agency in using language and in particular writing skills.

In Area X, language’s referentiality is so disturbed and challenged that names don’t function as they do formerly. That is why none of the characters are referred to by their names, and merely by their disciplinary identities. As the biologist notes, “we were always strongly discouraged from using names. We were meant to be focused on our purpose, and “anything personal should be left behind. Names belonged to where we had come from, not to who we were while embedded in Area X” (VanderMeer 9). Becoming ‘embedded in Area X’, as Vermeulen comments, has caused “language to find non-referential and unconventional ways to test and tune an unsettling and untried constellation of things, forces, and affects. This is precisely what VanderMeer’s atmospheric, patient, and almost ambient mode of describing Area X achieves.” (7-8)

Apart from disturbing the referential nature of the linguistic and writing skills of members of the scientific expedition, even the inscribed words by the Crawler and Area X betray having any clear referentiality or conventional significance. The inscribed words by the Crawler are as follows:

Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead to share with the worms that gather in the darkness and surround the world with the power of their lives while from the dim-lit halls of other places forms that never could be writhe for the impatience of the few who have never seen or been seen. (VanderMeer 21)

While these words are vaguely Biblical and vaguely evocative of Area X itself, they have no clear referent. The reason for this non-referentiality is that no human has written these words. These words “are read as if an inhuman entity has read one’s mind and generated them out of the raw material it finds there” (Strombeck 7). Vermeulen believes that giving Area X agency is the only purpose of allocating this non-referential and non-human capability of writing to the Crawler. He says, “if we define agency as the capacity to have an impact, to leave traces for others to read, then it makes sense to figure agency as, precisely, a form of writing” (VanderMeer 25). In the novel, the Crawler’s usage of human materials in its writing – and thus giving a Biblical sense to the inscribed words on the wall – and at the same time taking away all its referential significance is the way

the Crawler and Area X 'leave traces for others to read'; the others being members of the scientific expedition as the representative of the human race. Their symbolic inability to make sense of these words and even finding their own linguistic, writing and mapping capabilities disturbed due to their encounter with these entities attest that the environment in the Anthropocene has found its unique way, agency and voice for making an impact; the uniqueness of which is evident in human's incapability to fathom the exact referentiality of this impact.

As mentioned earlier by Strombeck, the Crawler's seemingly Biblical words are the non-referential reworking of an 'inhuman entity' from 'the raw material' of a human's mind. In the novel, this reworking is rendered upon Saul Evans, the lighthouse keeper whose encounter with a spiral of light produces the first adumbration of Area X (Robertson 138). While reworking the words, the writing capability of the Crawler and Area X initiate symbiosis between their inhuman environmental texture and Evans' body. That is why in her first encounter, the biologist sees on the wall "barely visible, the face of a man, hooded in shadow and oriented by indescribable things. Se continues her observation:

The man's expression displayed such a complex and naked extremity of emotion that it transfixed me. I saw on those features the endurance of an unending pain and sorrow, yes, but shining through as well a kind of grim satisfaction and ecstasy. I had never seen such an expression before, but I recognized that face. [...] This man who now existed in a place none of us could comprehend. (VanderMeer 141)

Robertson comments on this passage that "Saul's movement to this place, which is not a movement because he is already there, and which does not involve a place because this there is an area without measure or use" (139). The biologist's observation that mankind could not 'comprehend' this place shows the non-referential nature of any emergence out of the writing capability of the Crawler and Area X. The interesting thing is that these instances of non-referentiality both in the produced words and symbioses of the Crawler and Area X come from the unfathomable coupling of both human and non-human agents. It is like the Crawler and Area X transforms human actions into praxis; a praxis which is non-referential and unfathomable, and is apt to show the conditions of an un-romanticized environment in the Anthropocene. As Vermeulen comments,

[In the Anthropocene], writing is not just a reflection on the Anthropocene, it is also constitutive of it. The Anthropocene is not simply something that is written about; it is also something that is actively shaped and created through acts of human and inhuman inscription. The actions we undertake as subjects, together with the actions of inhuman agents, make up the reality of a geological epoch that carries our name. [In this epoch], there is nothing that is not marked by both human and inhuman traces. (26)



In *Annihilation*, the writing capability of the strange environment takes away the referential and representative feature of mankind's measuring tools, the most important of which is language and writing capability. As Heggland (2020) comments, "If it [the writing capability] is a human narrative, it is also a transient one – a transience reflected by the biologist's continuing awareness of her transformation from a Cartesian subject of knowledge into something else entirely" (42). This 'transformation' betrays giving the biologist or any human entity as a receiver in the equation between sender, object and receiver the ultimate narratological autonomy. It also results in Area X producing utterly strange symbioses between human and inhuman entities. Not having these tools, and having been faced with such symbioses, mankind could not "romanticize the environment, and call it Mother Nature or Wilderness and set it – in fear or adoration – apart from his life" (Margeson 41). At the same time, he could not even employ his convenient taxonomic tools for "breaking [the environment's] multitudes down into discrete chunks" (Margeson 41). The result would be that members of the scientific expedition fail to even agree upon naming a geological structure unanimously.

## 7. Conclusion

In *Annihilation*, Area X as the representative of the environment in the Anthropocene exposes the arbitrary and unreal nature of borders and demarcations between spaces and geographical landscapes. It also undermines the significance of bifurcations and taxonomies of humans' bodies of knowledge for gauging and comprehending the vastness and menacing alreadiness of Area X's presence around humans. The generation of symbioses is one of the key occurrences with which Area X cuts through the arbitrariness of manmade borders and demarcations. Only Earthbounds such as the biologist in the novel could reach a fleeting sense of true seeing through Area X since she acknowledges the limitations (bounded nature), arbitrariness and unreality of manmade borders, and is bound to establish a new relationship with the environment in the Anthropocene. Acknowledging the humbling of human agency and all his demarcational and gauging means, Earthbounds like the biologist also recognize the loss of referentiality of their most rudimentary comprehension means which is language and writing skills. The un-explainable writing capability of Area X severely disturbs the referentiality and naming capability of characters' writing and language skills, and leaves textual traces of its own – the traces which are absolutely non-referential and incomprehensible for the members of the scientific expedition – to exert its cognizance and autonomy. While exerting its agency, Area X refrains from showing any intelligent motives, morality or objectives, and do not allow humans to gauge and register feedbacks and reactions out of Area X. The members of the scientific expedition even start to lose their sense of distinction when faced with Area X's abdifferent attitude. It is these features of the pure and unfathomable materiality of Area X which makes its containment in convenient but lacking romantic, metaphysical and scientific paradigms impossible, and humbles mankind's agency and sense of control on his surrounding and environment in the Anthropocene; the epoch which proves to be ironically named after him.

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