

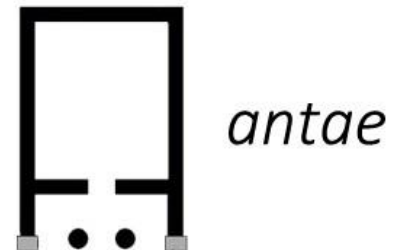
**The War on Terroir:
Biology as (unstable) Space in Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy**

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The War on Terroir: Biology as (unstable) Space in Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy

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Introduction: The *Southern Reach* trilogy

American author Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy comprises the novels *Annihilation*, *Authority* and *Acceptance*, published in quick succession in 2014. This essay considers how these novels use the generic potentials of "Weird fiction" to offer a decentred perspective on human interactions with our lived environment. They do this through their sustained metaphor of biology as an unstable *spatial* environment, and the ramifications of this perspective for our understanding of human-caused climate change in the Anthropocene.

A key concept in this metaphor is "terroir", a wine-making term that shall here be explored. My title, 'The War on Terroir', evokes this term in the service of a conventionally wearisome academic pun, but is perhaps also suggestive of the analysis which follows: firstly, because it references George W. Bush-era American conservatism, which enacted a still-commonplace right-wing opposition to warnings of human-made climate change (consider, for example, Bush's 2001 withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol on economic grounds), a conservatism which the *Southern Reach* places itself in stolid opposition to (the term "Southern", within the American context, is hardly coincidental in this regard).¹ Secondly, the term "on" in "the War on Terror" contains an accidental ambiguity: is the war *against* terror—or is "on" a preposition, denoting a war which takes terror as its geographical location, its battle-field, its *space*?

The Weird and the New Weird

This ambiguity is typical of the spatial uncertainties that characterise Weird fiction, a subgenre which emphasises the Gothic potentials of speculative genre fiction.

VanderMeer writes that the Weird 'fascinates by presenting a dark mystery beyond our ken and engaging the subconscious'.² This resembles standard definitions of the "Gothic"; and indeed the Weird may be productively read as an *intensification* of Gothicism, which pursues the liminal, uncanny tropes of the Gothic to an ontologically destabilising extreme. The short-story writer and novelist H.P. Lovecraft, often considered Weird Fiction's archetypal exponent, is often called a "Gothic" or "horror" author, and was greatly influenced by Edgar Allen Poe, one of the most renowned American writers of Gothic fiction. Lovecraft himself attempted to define Weird fiction in a 1927 essay entitled 'Supernatural Horror in Literature', in which he

¹ See Julian Borger, 'Bush kills global warming treaty', *The Guardian*, 29 March 2001, <www.theguardian.com/environment/2001/mar/29/globalwarming.usnews> [accessed 17 March 2017].

² Jeff VanderMeer, 'The Uncanny Power of Weird Fiction', *The Atlantic*, 30 Oct 2014, <www.theatlantic.com/amp/article/381794/> [accessed 7 March 2017].

differentiated Weird writing from both 'the literature of mere physical fear and the mundanely gruesome' and from 'the conventional or even whimsical or humorous ghost story where formalism or the author's knowing wink removes the true sense of the morbidly unnatural'.³ In the following excerpt, where Lovecraft sought to explicate this difference in terms of the 'sensations [...] excited' by Weird fiction, one notes the hyperbolic, cosmic lexicon of 'spheres' and 'universes': the Weird is concerned with the unknowability of reality, not in terms of subjective psychology but on a macrocosmic scale and with a spatial frame of reference:

The one test of the really weird is simply this—whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim.⁴

Lovecraft wrote this melodramatic description in 1927: unsurprisingly, the genre—and the discourse surrounding it—has developed since then, although not in ways which necessarily contradict this diagnostic "test". While the work of VanderMeer and his contemporaries may still be accurately termed Weird fiction, the descriptor "New Weird" has also gained currency to specifically denote twenty-first century writing in this field. This New Weird is a self-aware genre, as first demonstrated by an online forum discussion hosted by science fiction author M. John Harrison in 2003, in which contemporary Weird writers—including Harrison, VanderMeer, China Miéville, Justina Robson, Steph Swainston and many others—debate not only the generic boundaries and influences of the genre Harrison identifies as "New Weird", but also its efficacy as a marketing term. Miéville's participation is particularly pertinent to this last, as his work's commercial success in the early years of the 21st century seemed to grant the genre a commercial viability; as VanderMeer has since wryly commented, there was a 'gold rush' in the wake of Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000): 'like every gold rush things get acquired because there's perceived to have been a shift in the paradigm... and then it just turns out, oh no—it's just that people loved Mieville's [sic.] work, not new weird per se'.⁵ This self-critical discourse among authors of the New Weird is not only analytic, therefore, but also strategic: as Teodor Reljić writes, '[w]hat in fact emerged out of the [online forum] discussion [...] was, more than anything else, the *desire* for a genre, a label, a rallying call for a type of fiction that is neither ashamed of its roots within genre nor restricted by it'.⁶

The commercial impetus of the early-2000s 'gold rush' aside, there are many consistent—or at least repeated—characteristics suggested in the definitions of the New Weird offered by the participants of this forum discussion. These may be summarised as a marriage of the Lovecraftian "Old Weird", with its 'unknown spheres', to a self-aware "alternative" generic position: alternative, that is, to the now heavily-codified generic tropes of mainstream

³ H.P. Lovecraft, 'Supernatural Horror in Literature', 1927.

<www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/essays/shil.aspx> [accessed 7 March 2017], Section I.

⁴ Lovecraft, section I.

⁵ Jeff VanderMeer, 'Ask me Anything', *Reddit.com: r/IAmA*, 2 Dec 2014,

<https://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/2o2jsx/i_am_jeff_vandermeer_nytimes_best_selling_author/> [accessed 5 July 2017].

⁶ Teodor Reljić, 'Getting on with the Weird anyway: China Miéville and the New Weird' (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Malta, 2010), p. 4.

speculative fiction. These mainstream tropes are usually summarised by New Weird writers by reference to *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) by J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien's political and religious conservatism, "consolatory" approach to the fantastic, and particularly his numerous mass-market imitators are seen as anathema to the provocative ethos of Weird fiction: Miéville writes that although Tolkien 'established a form full of possibilities and ripe for experimentation', he 'used it to present trite, nostalgic daydreams'.⁷ This trite nostalgia is supposedly opposed by a Weird tradition in which Lovecraft's ancestral influence is augmented by that of Mervyn Peake's Gothic *Gormenghast* trilogy (1946-59) and the subsequent "New Wave" of British sci-fi including Peake's disciple Michael Moorcock and Harrison himself. Swainston summarises this position in a forum discussion:

The New Weird is a kickback against jaded heroic fantasy which has been the only staple for far too long. Instead of stemming from Tolkein [sic.], it is influenced by *Gormenghast* and [Harrison's] *Viriconium* [...]. The New Weird is secular, and very politically informed'.⁸

With reference to this last comment, it is worth noting that the "political" writing of the New Weird authors is a marked departure from the politics of the explicitly racist Lovecraft: Miéville, a committed Marxist, has noted that 'for Lovecraft, the horror of Modernity is above all horror of "inferior" races, miscegenation, and cultural decline': by contrast, Miéville and VanderMeer are explicitly egalitarian in their political remarks (of course, these polarised political stances are nonetheless equally "political").⁹ Notwithstanding these differences in politics from their chief progenitor, the New Weird tendencies summarised by Swainston do not contradict the present original claims for the Weird as an "intensification of Gothicism"; rather, they update it. Miéville, in conversation with VanderMeer in 2009, defined the "weird", with reference to Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, in terms of the same "sublime" impulse which inspired the generic tropes of the original 18th-century Gothic romance novels such as Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. Here Miéville distinguishes the weird from other representations of sublimity by its ability to question where the sublime might be located, without undermining the effect of 'horror at the immeasurable scale of' sublimity'; he goes on:

I think what the Weird can do is question the arbitrary distinction between the Beautiful and the Sublime, and operate as a kind of Sublime Backwash, so that the numinous incomparable awesome slips back from "mountains" and "forests," into the everyday. So... the Weird as radicalised quotidian Sublime.¹⁰

⁷ China Miéville, 'Tolkien—Middle Earth Meets Middle England', *Socialist Review* 259: January 2002, <<http://socialistreview.org.uk/259/tolkien-middle-earth-meets-middle-england>> [accessed 5 July 2017].

⁸ Steph Swainston, April 29, 2003 post in 'The New Weird'. <http://www.kathryncramer.com/kathryn_cramer/2007/07/the-new-weird-a.html> [accessed 5 July 2017].

⁹ China Miéville, 'Weird Fiction', in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, ed. by Mark Bould, Andrew M. Butler, Adam Roberts and Sherryl Vint (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), pp. 510-515, p. 513.

¹⁰ China Miéville, "'God, That's a Merciless Question": China Miéville's Interview From *Weird Tales*', Interview by Jeff VanderMeer, *Jeffvandermeer.com*, 16 June 2009. <<http://www.jeffvandermeer.com/2009/06/16/god-thats-a-merciless-question-china-mievelles-interview-from-weird- Tales/>> [accessed 5 July 2017].

In the 2010s, the Weird/New Weird continues to evolve. The high-profile success of VanderMeer's trilogy (which will no doubt be bolstered by the forthcoming feature film of *Annihilation*, to be directed by Alex Garland and starring Natalie Portman), as well as his subsequent novel *Borne* (2017), is perhaps sufficient to situate his work alongside Miéville's as some of the Weird/New Weird's most visible developments. Also highly relevant to situating the *Area X* trilogy in its generic context is the emergence of the Scottish novelist Martin MacInnes. In order to understand the relevance of genre to VanderMeer's innovations, it is worth briefly considering the commonalities and discrepancies between the texts authored by his Weird fellow-travellers. Like Vandermeer, these authors also represent humanity's spatial environment in counterintuitive ways, constructing the 'radicalised quotidian Sublime' through acts of displacement. Miéville's *The City and the City* (2009) takes the familiar landscape of an "everyday" urban environment, rather than "'mountains" and "forests"', as the canvas for its spatially paradoxical premise. *The City and the City* sets a detective noir murder-mystery in two separate cities, which are legislatively foreign to each other, but which occupy the same geospatial location. MacInnes' debut novel, *Infinite Ground*, is closer to VanderMeer's work in its focus on organic matter, as nuances of micro-biology become inescapably entwined with seemingly sterile corporate bureaucracy, and further with a wider framework of migration and landscape; as in the following passage where the protagonist, an Inspector seeking to trace a missing office worker, realises that the disappeared man's

employee number [...] if converted into the Latin alphabet, read as AGCCG. This, he saw, was biologically meaningful as a DNA strand: adenine, guanine, cytosine, cytosine, guanine. It repeated in nucleotide transcription errors in organisms making transitions from land habitation to sea.¹¹

Such seemingly trivial observations combine and multiply in MacInnes's novel, with the cumulative effect of placing microbial interactions at the heart of spatial—and social—causality in *Infinite Ground*. VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy, as the rest of this paper will demonstrate, is equally startling in its departure from established relations between "life" and "space". The *Southern Reach* trilogy uses and distorts these relations using a "living geography" of human-environment interactions; an interconnected ecosystem of the 'radicalised quotidian Sublime'.

Finally, before exploring this living geography, it should be emphasised that VanderMeer and his wife, Ann VanderMeer, are themselves anthologists of Weird Fiction, having compiled *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*.¹² This anthologising, along with Jeff VanderMeer's participation in the discussions and interviews cited above, show that his work can be confidently treated as self-consciously generic to Weird Fiction: he is an author who is not only aware of his literary forebears, but also tracks and responds to contemporary developments within his generic field in a manner analogous to a scientist or academic keeping up with cutting edge research in their discipline—hence the relevance of Miéville and MacInnes' contributions to VanderMeer's own generic and thematic position. Likewise, it is

¹¹ Martin MacInnes, *Infinite Ground* (London: Atlantic Books, 2016), pp. 83-4.

¹² See *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*, ed. by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer (London: Corvus, 2010).

clear that disorientation of spatial convention can be equally confidently taken to be an identifying trope of this genre, from its Lovecraftian origins to the present day.

Weird Fiction in the 21st century, then, retains many of the destabilising aims of Lovecraft's 1927 description, but with an added literary self-consciousness and desire for the *alternative*; both in generic terms—a Peake-inspired alternative to Tolkienian “heroic fantasy”—and more significant ontological and existential ones, whereby the Weird can articulate alternative perspectives to philosophical consensus. It is this latter capability—“to Weird” a perspective through the decentring capacities of this generic form—which VanderMeer applies to boundaries between spatial location and biological form in order to provide an alternative to anthropocentric conceptions of 21st century climate change.

Area X as Living Geography

Representations of living geography, of course, pre-date VanderMeer, and pre-date also Weird Fiction. The pre-medieval bestiary the *Physiologus* contains a sea-monster called an *Aspidocoleon*, often mistaken for an island.¹³ In the Hebrew bible, Jonah is swallowed by a whale or fish so vast that he survives inside it for three days and three nights.

In contemporary speculative fiction, too, creatures which act as inhabitable space pre-date the *Southern Reach* trilogy, notably in Terry Pratchett's *Discworld*, a flat planet resting on the backs of four elephants who stand on a giant turtle, itself a derivation from Hindu mythology.¹⁴ Pratchett, it may be noted in passing, is perhaps significantly underrated as one of the architects of the New Weird: not as a participant himself, but as a parodist of post-Tolkien “heroic fantasy” whose diligent ridicule so undermined this genre that exponents of speculative fiction were forced to look elsewhere for credible avenues by which to explore the fantastic.

Living geographies such as Pratchett's turtle or Jonah's whale, however, consist of a single sentient entity (give or take a few extra elephants) upon whose bodies human characters dwell in an essentially parasitic form. VanderMeer creates a radically different politics of biogeography: encoding space not as a single creature, but as a living ecosystem dependent on a complex interaction of micro-organisms, organic intelligences and climatic conditions. While no multicellular organism exists either hermetically or monadically in terms of its biological make-up, it is a commonplace assumption both in human psychology and in literature that the self is individual; in the *Southern Reach* trilogy, the fallacious nature of this assumption is illustrated through liquid transformations between characters and locations, between life and space, which exaggerate and make visible the multifarious internal makeup of complex living organisms.

¹³ *Physiologus: A Medieval Book of Nature Lore*, ed. and trans. by Michael J. Curley (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2009), p. 94.

¹⁴ Terry Pratchett, *The Colour of Magic* (London: Corgi, 1985), p. 11.

In the *Southern Reach* trilogy, an entire peninsula, termed 'Area X', has been changed irredeemably.¹⁵ This change seems to constitute an extra-terrestrial invasion. Rather than an invasion of conscious beings, as in H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, Area X itself, simultaneously a geographical space and a hostile intelligence, is the invader. Throughout the trilogy, human characters such as 'the biologist' and 'Control', who attempt to understand Area X, refer to it using a mixture of biological, technological and spatial terminology, as in the following quotations from *Acceptance*:

The tower is breathing. There is no ambiguity about it.¹⁶

Area X was all around them; Area X was contained in no one place or figure. It was the dysfunction in the sky, it was the plant Control had spoken of. It was the heaven and earth (AC, 283).

Area X, this machine, this creature (AC, 287).

Depicting geographical space as a monstrous being is fantastic: by troubling the interaction between biology and its spatial habitat, VanderMeer renders it Weird. He encodes space as an unstable living *ecosystem* in which '[s]ometimes the host and parasite [get] confused about their roles' (AC, 296). Area X is not just a combination of land and life, but an ontological confusion of this distinction: we are told that 'this place had built its own ecology, its own biosphere' (AC, 331).

Terroir

Very early on in VanderMeer's trilogy, 'the biologist', as the protagonist of *Annihilation*, encounters words written on the inside of a tunnel—or descending 'tower'—in Area X: "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..."¹⁷ The text of this never-ending graffito sermon, which descends into deep darkness, is less startling than its medium:

the letters, connected by their cursive script, were made from what would have looked to the lay-person like rich green fern-like moss but in fact was probably a type of fungi or other eukaryotic organism [...]. Other things existed in this miniature ecosystem. Half-hidden by the green filaments, most of these creatures were translucent and shaped like tiny hands embedded by the base of the palm.¹⁸

This fusion—text and tunnel/tower and fungal script and miniature "creatures"—is the first sign of what will become the *Southern Reach*'s defining structure: the irreducible co-dependence of place, consciousness and ecosystem: put another way, the concept of Area X having "built its own ecology" is extended beyond the limits of the biological.

¹⁵ A single-volume publication of the series has been entitled *Area X*, although the publisher still refers to this compendium as containing the 'Southern Reach trilogy': FSG Originals, 'Area X'. See: www.fsgoriginals.com/books/detail/area-x. [Accessed 12th December 2017].

¹⁶ Jeff VanderMeer, *Acceptance* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), p. 55. Henceforth cited in text as (AC, page number).

¹⁷ Jeff VanderMeer, *Annihilation* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), p. 23.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 24-5.

In the second novel, *Authority*, an insight into this “ecology” is provided by a secondary character called Whitby, who evaluates Area X using the winemaking term *terroir*. VanderMeer has summarised *terroir* elsewhere as a ‘profound sense of location that’s more than the sum of its parts’.¹⁹ Whitby’s definition in the novel itself is more effusive:

[Terroir] means the specific characteristics of a place—the geography, geology, and climate that, in concert with the vine’s own genetic propensities, can create a startling, deep, original vintage [...]. Terroir’s direct translation is ‘a sense of place,’ and what it means is the sum of the effects of a localized environment, inasmuch as they impact the qualities of a particular product. Yes, that can mean wine, but what if you applied these criteria to thinking about Area X?²⁰

This ‘what if’ can be read as almost an authorial intrusion, a pointed suggestion from VanderMeer that it might be fruitful for the reader—or critic—to bear the ‘terroir’ in mind as a critical device when attempting to understand Area X on a metaphorical level. The *terroir* of Area X incorporates plant and animal life in their native terrestrial form (or something close to it), but has a radically transformative effect upon human characters, paralleling real-world humanity’s self-created incompatibility with our lived environment through technological and industrial processes. The implication is that the human species is an aberration in the functionality of the *terroir*, which the *terroir* must seek to redress by removing humankind’s unique incompatibility with its processes. As Control discovers, ‘nothing about language, nothing about communication could bridge the divide between human beings and Area X’ (AC, 311). In response to this unbridgeable divide, Area X attempts to reintegrate human characters into the *terroir*, creating genuinely Weird human-plant-animal hybrids. This process is not always successful, as signalled by the failed re-integration of a minor character:

the body had the consistency and form of a giant hog and a slug commingled [...] it had the face of the psychologist from my husband’s expedition [...] it *looked* like a mistake, a misfire by an Area X that had assimilated so much so beautifully and so seamlessly (AC, 161-2).

This reintegration later achieves its fullest, most successful iteration when the biologist, the protagonist of *Annihilation*, is re-encountered in *Acceptance* after spending several years in Area X:

the mountain that was the biologist came up almost to the windowsill [...] it had many, many glowing eyes that were also like flowers or sea anemones split open, the blossoming of many eyes—normal, parietal and simple—all across its body, a living constellation ripped from the night sky. Her eyes. [...] the biologist now existed across locations and landscapes [...] an animal, an organism that had never existed before or that might belong to an alien ecology (AC, 195-6).

The comparative success of the biologist’s re-integration may reflect her personality; she is characterised as a social misfit, with an empathetic approach to the natural world and a cynicism towards human interactions. This success manifests as plurality: the transformed biologist becomes monstrous in size, but, being composed of multiplicitous co-dependent

¹⁹ Jeff VanderMeer, ‘From *Annihilation* to *Acceptance*’, *The Atlantic*, 28 Jan 2015.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/01/from-annihilation-to-acceptance-a-writers-surreal-journey/384884/> [accessed 5 July 2017].

²⁰ Jeff VanderMeer, *Authority* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), p. 40.

living components, is more complex and plural than the still-singular 'mistake' where a unitary 'body' is composed, chimera-like, from a 'hog and slug commingled'. This is repeated by VanderMeer's repeated use of the plural in the phrase 'existed across locations and landscapes'. The reference to 'a living constellation', meanwhile, recalls the cosmic vastness of the Lovecraftian Weird: that the constellation is *living* further reiterates VanderMeer's refusal to recognise a non-porous conceptual boundary between instances of "life" and instances of "space". The emphasis on landscape and ecology, as well as both plant and animal comparisons, reaffirms that Area X is neither a space, nor a creature, but a *terroir*: this text's shorthand for an irreducible symbiosis between biology and geography to which humanity has become fundamentally hostile. This hostility has rendered humanity foreign to its native climate, and so humanity must be fundamentally altered if it is to reintegrate. Area X's act of annihilation through reabsorption, seen from Area X's perspective, is an ultimately charitable judgement on an aberrant species.

Implications for climate change

In the end-matter of the trilogy, alongside literary inspirations, VanderMeer acknowledges an intriguingly diverse trio of theoretical influences: the anarchist Invisible Committee, poststructuralist Jean Baudrillard, and nature writer Rachel Carson.²¹ Carson's seminal 1962 text *Silent Spring* was an early critique of human-made climate change, detailing the effect of pesticides on natural habitats. As an editor's foreword summarises, *Silent Spring* 'made clear the basic irresponsibility of an industrialized, technological society toward the natural world'.²² Carson's influence on the *Southern Reach* trilogy can be seen in *Silent Spring*'s denunciation of anthropocentrism. As Carson writes, 'the "control of nature" is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man'.²³

VanderMeer's combination of the iconoclasm of the Invisible Collective and Baudrillard with Carson's environmentally grounded critique is expressed in the fatalistic radicalism of the *Southern Reach*, which depicts total human alienation from the biosphere as a logical, perhaps inevitable, endpoint for near-future capitalism—which extorts the planet's natural commodities at the expense of maintaining the essential spatial and chemical symbioses which maintain not only human, but plant and animal existence. Capitalism, 'conceived in arrogance', is an unsustainable evolutionary strategy for the terrestrial *terroir*, and one whose obvious conclusion is the eradication or wholesale transformation of its host agent, the human species. Miéville writes, in the *Routledge Encyclopedia to Science Fiction* entry on 'Weird Fiction', that the 'great Weird Fiction writers' of Lovecraft's era 'are responding to capitalist modernity entering, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a period of crisis' culminating in the First World War.²⁴ The *Southern Reach* extends this tradition by responding to the greatest

²¹ Jeff VanderMeer, 'Acknowledgements', in *Acceptance*, pp. 339-341, p. 340.

²² Paul Brooks, 'Foreword', in Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), pp. xii-xiii, p. xii.

²³ Carson, p. 297.

²⁴ Miéville, 'Weird Fiction', p. 513.

crisis of globalised late capitalism in the early twenty-first century: the looming environmental catastrophe of the Anthropocene.

It has become commonplace to reflect that we are now living in an unprecedented geological era; one where the defining feature of Earth's geological record is the influence exerted upon it by human industrial processes. This current era has been termed the Anthropocene, a term popularised by Paul Josef Crutzen. As the truth of human-made climate change—the early-warning signs which Carson was so quick to recognise—becomes scientific orthodoxy, the Anthropocene has become a useful periodising category beyond the field of geology, as reflected by the following definition by environmental scientist Erle Ellis:

The Anthropocene defines Earth's most recent geologic time period as being human-influenced, or anthropogenic, based on overwhelming global evidence that atmospheric, geologic, hydrologic, biospheric and other earth system processes are now altered by humans.²⁵

Indeed, Ellis has elsewhere suggested that the term may be *most* useful as a general concept rather than a geological formality, writing that:

As an informal term, the 'Anthropocene' merely represents Earth's transition to a time of profound human influence on its functioning as a system. [...] A formal Anthropocene epoch will likely be quite different.²⁶

Area X, as I have demonstrated, is different in character from folkloric imaginings of living islands—but it is also a logical extension of them into the Anthropocene. Area X may be read an Anthropocentric recast of the mythical *Aspidocoleon*, in that irredeemable human alteration of this living landscape is a precondition of the text. Just as the *Aspidocoleon* would drown unexpected sailors (representing caprice and unknowability as being central to the way that nature was perceived by the mythmakers of the *Physiologus*'s era), the inexorability of Area X's disintegration of human characters represents the fatalistic conclusion that it is too late for humanity to reverse the ecological degradation that it has instigated. VanderMeer expressed his frustration at this *lateness* in a recent online Q&A:

[H]ow can we not know this by now? How can we deny what's manifesting in front of our eyes? I was writing about [climate change] in my fiction in the 1980s. How did we get to this point now that we should have gotten to back then?²⁷

David Farrier notes that one of the Anthropocene's most striking tenets is that biological-scale forces—human forces—can now influence planetary and cosmic phenomena of the type which we habitually associate with “Deep Time”:

The Anthropocene, or era of the human, denotes how industrial civilization has changed the Earth in ways that are comparable with deep-time processes. The planet's carbon and nitrogen cycles, ocean chemistry and biodiversity—each one the product of

²⁵ Erle Ellis, 'Anthropocene', *The Encyclopedia of Earth*. <<http://editors.eol.org/eoearth/wiki/Anthropocene#>> [accessed 5 July 2017].

²⁶ Erle Ellis, 'Physical Geography in the Anthropocene', *Progress in Physical Geography*, 41(5), (2017), 525-532, p. 527.

²⁷ Jeff VanderMeer, 'Ask me Anything'. *Reddit.com: r/books*, 28 Feb 2017, <www.reddit.com/r/books/comments/5wqmbg/hi_its_jeffvandermeer_ive_written_nine_novels/> [accessed 7 March 2017].

millions of years of slow evolution—have been radically and permanently disrupted by human activity. The development of agriculture 10,000 years ago, and the Industrial Revolution in the middle of the 19th century, have both been proposed as start dates for the Anthropocene. But a consensus has gathered around the Great Acceleration—the sudden and dramatic jump in consumption that began around 1950, followed by a huge rise in global population, an explosion in the use of plastics, and the collapse of agricultural diversity.²⁸

While in Lovecraft's day it took the invention of Great Old Ones to give an agentive locus to 'unknown forces and powers', in the twenty-first century the consequences of human agency are writ large upon the geological record; Miéville's 'radicalised quotidian Sublime' is indeed quotidian inasmuch as planetary destruction on an awe-inducing scale is banally enacted by the human species on a daily basis: as Farrier puts it, 'in the Anthropocene, ironically we humans have become that sublime force, the agents of a fearful something that is greater than ourselves'.²⁹ VanderMeer, too, has acknowledged this, saying in a 2017 discussion that 'geologic time is showing its hand to us faster and faster, because processes that might [naturally] take place over thousands or even millions of years are manifesting more swiftly [due to climate change]'.³⁰ It is an entirely logical twenty-first century extension of Weird fiction for VanderMeer to use the genre of 'outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim' to destabilise the boundaries between biology and spatial location; the Great Old Ones are now made of very living, very mortal flesh. VanderMeer's characters' incompatibility with the part-spatial, part-biological Area X embodies our species' self-inflicted helplessness; the series implies that it is beyond humanity's collective will (even if not theoretically beyond our ability) to prevent catastrophic climate change. The human-made Anthropocene is beyond human control. Area X, as a metaphorical climatic resistance to human interference, decentres an anthropocentric reading of the Anthropocene: malign human influence on the ecosystem is acknowledged, human mastery of that ecosystem is not.

VanderMeer's trilogy cogently argues that humanity has *alienated* itself—through technology and intelligence, manifested as ecological disaster—from the functional interactions of the internally-closed *terroir*. The implication of the *alien* nature of this *terroir* is that our ecosystem appears fundamentally alien—Weird—to us because we have made ourselves Weird to *it*. Its best hope is to remodel humanity beyond recognition, into a non-discrete, functioning element of that ecosystem.

²⁸ David Farrier, 'How the Concept of Deep Time Is Changing', *The Atlantic*, Oct 31, 2016, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/10/aeon-deep-time/505922/>> [accessed 5 July 2017].

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Jeff VanderMeer, "'Sci-Fi,' Dystopia, And Hope in The Age Of Trump: A Fiction Roundtable', *Wired*, 4 July 2017, <<https://www.wired.com/story/dystopia-trump-science-fiction-roundtable/>> [accessed 5 July 2017].

Closure

In *Authority*, some time after Whitby has first introduced Control to the concept of *terroir*, Control reflects that Whitby's argument was, if anything, misleadingly persuasive:

Before leaving the Southern Reach for Hedley, [Control] had taken a closer look at Whitby's document on *terroir*. Found that when you did that—trained an eye that did not skim—it began to fall apart. That the normal-sounding subsection titles and the preambles that cited other sources hid a core where the imagination became unhinged.³¹

Recalling this article's previous contention that *Authority* deliberately highlights *terroir* as a hermeneutic key to the metaphorical significance of Area X, Control's disillusioned 'closer look' would seem to undermine this hermeneutic, and by extension the metaphor. However, Control's disillusionment itself must be questioned: the metaphorical potentials of Gothic/Weird writing come from these genres' liminality: as noted in Lovecraft's essay, resolution, closure, 'or the author's knowing wink removes the true sense of the morbidly unnatural'.³² It is thus necessary for the *terroir* to remain a *potential* means by which to read Area X, not a certain or fixed reading.

Control diagnoses Whitby's document as 'unhinged', which leads us to question Whitby's reliability—but also Control's. The text claims that Control finds Whitby's document lacking on 'a closer look', but we are then informed that Control 'stopped reading at a certain point', hardly an act of committed close reading. Taking a closer look here, Control's own reasoning seems suspect: he disputes Whitby's findings for their imaginative exuberance and apparent paranoia, but gives no objective reasons for doing so: indeed he praises Whitby's methodology as 'sobering and delicate'. He finds Whitby's report to be full of 'Monsters' which, although 'earned', have not been 'earned in the right direction'.³³ The 'right direction', it seems to be implied, would simply be something more consonant with Control's rational lived experience: Whitby's report is simply too Weird for its reader to find it credible.

The text thus proffers *terroir* sceptically, but invites further criticism of this very scepticism. In this way, Area X's ethos of insolubility remains an important aspect of a fictional aesthetic, which the reader may investigate through speculation, rather than an unavoidable Bunyanesque allegory which provides its own, neatly and reductively distilled, interpretation.

Elsewhere, however, there are lapses in the *Southern Reach* trilogy's ethos of Weird environmentalism, where the apparent insolubility of the *terroir* is contradicted by movement towards closure. Catherine Belsey writes of closure as 'the dissolution of enigma through the re-establishment of order', and there is a surprising amount of such dissolution offered, though fleetingly, in *Acceptance*.³⁴ At the trilogy's conclusion, Control encounters the hub of Area X's sentience as a 'blinding white light [...] like a comet roaring there but stationary' (AC, 311). This light, into which Control jumps, provides the *terroir* with an individual parent entity, challenging the *terroir*'s irreducibility.

³¹ *Authority*, p. 280.

³² Lovecraft, section I.

³³ *Authority*, p. 280.

³⁴ Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 64-5.

Earlier, the character Ghost Bird envisions 'the cataclysm like a rain of comets that had annihilated an entire biosphere remote from earth. Witnessed how one *made* organism had fragmented and dispersed' (AC, 286-7). In this vision, Area X is an alien technology, fallen to earth from a different planet, which once on Earth had 'begun to perform a vast and preordained function, one compromised by time and context, by the terrible truth that the species that had given Area X its purpose was gone' (AC, 287).

Disorientation is so integral to the *Southern Reach*'s Weird aesthetic that these flashes of closure can be easily explained away through recourse to subjectivism by reading Control's *perception* of the light as Area X's core, or Ghost Bird's *vision* of Area X's extra-terrestrial origins, as these characters' misapprehension of Area X's incomprehensible complexity. But the offer of a generic science-fiction backstory for Area X implies a "solution" to the clearly insoluble problems of Area X's interactions with its terrestrial host/parasites: interpreted more generously, perhaps these stumbles in VanderMeer's abeyance of closure show the power of generic traditions—of "plot", "resolution" and "origin"—which underpin non-Weird Gothic and speculative fiction so tenaciously that even a work which decentres expectations as determinedly as the *Southern Reach* feels compelled to offer a coherent origin story for its incoherent central terror. This offer should be rejected, taken as a deviation from the *Southern Reach*'s central metaphor rather than a solution to it. Even the possibility of resolution is anomalous to the *Southern Reach* trilogy's ethic of anomaly.

Genre Modernism: Conclusion

Despite this late swerve towards closure, VanderMeer's Area X has radical, ultimately pessimistic implications for humanity's relationship with our spatial location; which is not a sterile or mappable known quantity but rather a co-dependent, contingent *terroir*.

Marshall Berman writes that 'modernism seeks a way into the abyss, but also a way out, or rather a way *through*',³⁵ while Mark Fisher writes that VanderMeer's Weird antecedent H.P. Lovecraft 'emerged from an occulted trade between pulp horror and modernism [...] Lovecraft, that is to say, turns modernism into an object of horror'.³⁶ Miéville evokes the same terminology when discussing the baroque prose which characterises much Weird Fiction: 'the particular kind of Pulp Modernism of a certain kind of lush purple prose isn't necessarily a failure or a mistake, but is part of the fabric of the story and what makes it weird'.³⁷

VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy, which was deliberately marketed to appeal to a combination of "literary fiction" and "speculative fiction" audiences, cannot be termed 'pulp modernism' as glibly as Lovecraft: it lacks the immediacy or populism of pulp. However, one can productively regard it as "genre-modernism"; a work which pursues similar goals to those Berman attributes to modernism; but whereas "high modernist" texts disrupt a classical realist meta-language through stylistic rupture and innovation, speculative genre-modernism uses the

³⁵ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York, NY: Verso, 2010), p. 266.

³⁶ Mark Fisher, 'Memorex for the Krakens: The Fall's Pulp Modernism', in *K-Punk*, May 8 2006, <www.k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/007759.html> [accessed 7 March 2017].

³⁷ Miéville, 'God, That's a Merciless Question'.

ontological non-fixity of speculative fiction—in this case Weird fiction, which might be seen as the modernist branch of speculative fiction proper—to disrupt classic realist subject matter. This is not to codify the transgressive potentials of either modernism or speculative fiction (to do so would limit that very potential: the generic characteristics of Weird Fiction are a descriptive, not prescriptive, toolkit of disruptive strategies; open to, and indeed dependent upon, the undermining of any emergent orthodoxies by new strategies, if they are to continue to subvert), but simply to diagnose commonalities between different forms of fiction which have shown a recurrent capacity to disrupt literary or societal norms. Modernism's tendency towards rupture is well-attested, and as Miéville writes in the *Routledge Encyclopedia*, 'the fantastic has always been indispensable to think and unthink society'.³⁸ (Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse this further, the *Southern Reach* is stylistically interesting, too—each of the three novels adopts a markedly different prose style, evoking different generic antecedents).

Miéville goes on to claim that, whereas the traditional fantastic is 'now profoundly inadequate, suddenly nostalgic', Weird fiction offers a 'revolutionary teratology and oppressive numinous' which can address 'global and absolute catastrophe'.³⁹ Climate change is as global and absolute as catastrophe has ever been, possibly exceeding even the threat of nuclear holocaust in the potential devastation of its outcome, if not that devastation's immediacy. Since, as Berman wrote in 1982, the 'abyss' of modernity has gained new depths, VanderMeer's trilogy represents an unflinching genre-modernist attempt to apprehend them.

The *Southern Reach* approaches Berman's ends via a destabilised relationship between space and living matter, offering at least a way *into* the abyss of man-made climate change in the unhaltable Anthropocene. *The Southern Reach*, however, resists the optimism of Berman's manifesto: while *The Southern Reach* certainly shows a way into the abyss, and the way *through* is implied by Area X's reabsorption of humanity into new biological forms compatible with its ecosystem, the way *out* will take a lot more work, and may necessitate our species' reinvention to the point of unrecognisability.

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³⁸ Miéville, 'Weird Fiction', p. 513.

³⁹ *ibid.*

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