



Mourning the Human? Posthuman Death and Ontological Vulnerability in Jeff VanderMeer's The Southern Reach Trilogy

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ABSTRACT

This article reads Jeff VanderMeer's *The Southern Reach* trilogy from the perspectives of critical posthumanism and trauma theory, paying particular attention to how the two discourses perceive the relationship between self and other, the vulnerability of the human and the expectation of death. The discussion is articulated against the background of the trilogy's explicit concern with the reconfiguration of the human and with the Anthropocene. This is carried out through an exploration of classical and recent definitions of trauma after its encounter with environmental degradation and under the threat of human extinction. As it is contended, the trilogy invites us to imagine an end to humanity that is not also the end of life on the planet. While this might be read in the key of horror or induce feelings of anxiety or mourning, it compels us to confront the ethical implications of our embeddedness to the natural world and our shared vulnerability. The article ultimately argues in favor of the power of the imagination to spark change.

KEYWORDS: Vulnerability; Posthuman Death; The Anthropocene; Trauma; The Southern Reach Trilogy.

1. INTRODUCTION

What does the future hold for us? This is a question that more and more people are asking themselves in the context of the current climatic emergency, whereby human activities are

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responsible for the growing environmental degradation. The term ‘Anthropocene’, coined in 2002 by Nobel Prize winner Paul Crutzen, is an unofficial but widely accepted term that describes the current geological era as characterized by the negative human impact on our planet’s climate and ecosystems. While anthropogenic changes to the planet have been occurring for many years, the situation has reached a point of almost no return, with scientists warning that “[s]ome future changes are unavoidable and/or irreversible” and that “[t]he likelihood of abrupt and/or irreversible changes increases with higher global warming levels” (IPCC, 2023: 18). According to the Climate Change 2023 Synthesis Report presented by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), “[c]limate change has caused substantial damages, and increasingly irreversible losses, in terrestrial, freshwater, cryospheric, and coastal and open ocean ecosystems (high confidence). Hundreds of local losses of species have been driven by increases in the magnitude of heat extremes (high confidence) with mass mortality events recorded on land and in the ocean (very high confidence). Impacts on some ecosystems are approaching irreversibility” (2023: 5). Further, according to the United Nations Climate Action, “[w]armer temperatures over time are changing weather patterns and disrupting the usual balance of nature”; “[w]ildfires start more easily and spread more rapidly when conditions are hotter”; “[w]ater is becoming scarcer in more regions [...]. Deserts are expanding,” etc. This “poses risks to the survival of species on land and in the ocean” (United Nations, n.d.: n.p.)

Despite the bleakness of this scenario, even the most environmentally conscious of us tend to go about our daily lives hoping that everything will be ‘okay’ somehow. Medical, scientific and technological advances have given us a (false) sense of security. Surrounded by our hospitals, protected by our vaccines, aided and enhanced by our technologies, many of us living in the western world have forgotten that our bodies are vulnerable flesh, that we are embodied and embedded to the wider environment. Indeed, anthropogenic changes to the environment have started to affect human life, as “climate change is the single biggest health threat facing humanity. The impacts are already harming health through air pollution, disease, extreme weather events, forced displacement, food insecurity and pressures on mental health” (United Nations, n.d.: n.p.). Recognition of this, together with the acknowledgment that not all of us are equally vulnerable —just as not all of us are equally responsible for the current climatic emergency (see Cole, 2016)— has led to a proliferation of critical engagements with vulnerability, most of which emphasize that we are vulnerable because of our embodied, affective and social nature¹.

Before advancing any further, however, this scenario begs the question: who is this ‘we’? The use of the first person plural above is not innocent: it is meant to emphasize the habit that human beings have of seeing nature as background, as something external to us, as what we are not. As Stacy Alaimo puts it, “[t]he recognition that human activity has altered the planet on the scale of a geological epoch muddles the commonsensical assumption that the world

exists as a background for the human subject” (2016: 1). Such a view is perhaps one of the most enduring and entrenched legacies of humanism, posited as it is on the radical separation of culture and nature, human and nonhuman, self and other, etc. According to the discourse of humanism, the human being occupies a natural place at the center based on its supposedly superior ontological position with respect to other beings, such as machines, animals and the more-than-human world. Against what Alaimo calls “the predominant Western mode of distancing the human from the material world” (2016: 1), critical posthumanism emerges from the recognition, as Stefan Herbrechter explains, that a traditional humanist worldview and understanding of the human have become untenable, “either because of external, mostly technological, economic or ecological influences, or because of internal metaphysical and ethical reasons” (2013: 10). Posthumanist theory and practice work to dismantle “the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (Haraway, 1991: 181), articulating “an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction” (1991: 150; emphasis in the original). As such, posthumanist thought also relies on an understanding of vulnerability as an ontological condition of all living beings, emphasizing the porosity of the human and our entanglement and radical openness to the nonhuman and the more-than-human.

In contrast to this understanding, it is worth keeping in mind the etymological meaning of the word vulnerability as a wound. As Donna Haraway explains, Freud described three historical blows that wounded the narcissism of the human subject and exposed the absurdity of what she calls ‘the Great Divide’ separating humans from *everything* else: the Copernican wound, which removed the Earth from the center of the universe; the Darwinian wound, which placed human beings firmly within the realm of the animal and in close connection and co-evolution with other creatures; and finally the Freudian wound itself, which posited an unconscious that dispels fantasies of mastery over our own conscious processes (Haraway, 2008: 11). Haraway then adds a fourth wound, “the informatics or cyborgian, which infolds organic and technological flesh” (2008: 12). To these, Michael Peters adds the “eco-technological” wound, which also takes into account “the age and realization of the Anthropocene and the apocalyptic vision of planet Earth” (2020: 4). As these accounts suggest, the ‘transition’ from humanism to posthumanism may be seen through a lens of suffering and, indeed, has been connected by some critics to the notion of psychological trauma.

The discourses of critical posthumanism and trauma are two key contemporary paradigms that have become imbricated in the last few years in the context of the so-called ethical turn in criticism (see, for example, Luckhurst, 2014; Collado-Rodríguez, 2016; Ferrández San Miguel 2018), influencing present understandings of human existence. As I have argued elsewhere, “the discourses of trauma and the posthuman are congruent in that both focus on shatterings of existing structures of self, on the fragmentation of the self” (2018: 31). Where these theories appear to diverge, however, is at the consequences that these shatterings of the self may have on the individual subject:

the fracture that trauma provokes is usually read as negative, and hence the self seeks re-integration, while the fragmentation and hybridization that result from the assimilation of the posthuman is potentially liberating, and the discourse of posthumanity rejoices at the opportunities that this shattering of structures may afford the individual subject. (Ferrández San Miguel, 2018: 32)

In the same way, vulnerability as an ontological condition of human (and nonhuman) existence, may be expressed as either positive or negative depending on how we approach it, inspiring a sense of mourning over the disintegration of the human or a celebration of the opportunities that its disintegration may afford.

In light of these definitions, the outstanding critical currency of these fields of enquiry appears no accident, given the aforementioned scenario of anthropogenic environmental deterioration. The current ecological crisis has led to a proliferation of literary texts and other cultural products that engage with the Anthropocene and its effects. Speculative fiction is a particularly well-suited mode to address it, as it invites us to see “the world anew and to engage responsibly in the creation of better futures” (Bould & Vint, 2012: 111). By imagining alternative scenarios that nevertheless evoke reality and refract the familiar (see Graham, 2002: 57), speculative fiction highlights both the provisional character of the present and the contingency of the future, opening a remarkable space of interrogation. Jeff VanderMeer’s new weirdⁱⁱ The Southern Reach trilogy —*Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance* (2014)— is a particularly captivating and disquieting example of this. As Vermeulen and Faasen explain, “Jeff VanderMeer’s Southern Reach trilogy [...] inscribes itself into the long lineage of weird writers who have struggled with the human’s fatally anthropocentric and pathetically anthropomorphizing drives in the face of a world that has increasingly revealed itself to be more vast and complex —as well as more vulnerable— than previously thought” (2019: 7). Indeed, the trilogy emerges from VanderMeer’s “anger and grief over the BP Gulf Oil Spill,” which he refers to as a “dark, horrible spiral through [his] mind” (2015: n.p.). As he further explains, “[t]he series might be a mix of science fiction and conspiracy/spy fiction, but the underlying concepts come out of an intense awareness of our natural landscapes and of our current predicament with regard to global warming” (2014d: n.p.).

The Southern Reach trilogy revolves around “Area X,” a pristine and disconcerting ecosystem somewhere on the US east coast that underwent a strange transformation triggered by a mysterious “Event” around thirty years before the events in *Annihilation*. Ever since then, the area has been separated from the rest of the world by an invisible but impenetrable border of unknown nature that causes any entity that passes through it to vanish forever. Tasked with managing and studying Area X, the Southern Reach, a secret government agency, trains and sends in through the border’s only known door expedition after expedition of scientists in hopes of explaining the origin and nature of Area X and of averting the danger it potentially

poses to human life, were it to expand. Some return seemingly unhurt, others are lost forever, others return but are strangely changed, while others die of cancer within a few months.

Annihilation introduces us to the twelfth expedition and is narrated from the perspective of the unnamed biologist in the crew. After a few days in Area X and while exploring a mysterious tunnel—which she calls the Tower—whose walls are covered by text composed of living, fungi-like letters written by a strange creature called “The Crawler,” she accidentally breathes in spores and begins to change, eventually transforming into something new—herself, but not herself anymore. *Authority*, the second book of the series, is set at the Southern Reach headquarters and follows John “Control” Rodriguez as he takes over as the new director of the agency. Overwhelmed by the accumulated data—incoherent interviews of returned expedition members, inexplicable footage of Area X, incomprehensible photos and puzzling notes by the former Director, whom we learn was the psychologist in the twelfth expedition—Control also has to face the hostility of Grace, the agency’s deputy director, the apparent insanity of some of the scientists working there, the attempts to manipulate his investigation by the mysterious Central, and his growing empathy for the returned biologist of the twelfth expedition. Insisting that she is not the biologist and should be called Ghost Bird, she eventually guides Control to Area X after the border expands and absorbs the Southern Reach facilities. *Acceptance* takes us back to Area X. Jumping around in time and narrated from interspersed character perspectives, the novel presents three parallel plotlines: the lighthouse keeper, whom we learn is responsible for triggering the Event that originates Area X and will later become the Crawler; the director of the Southern Reach, who reveals that she lived as a child in the area before the “Event” and knew the lighthouse keeper, secretly crosses the border with one of the agency’s scientists and then returns again as the psychologist of the twelfth expedition; and Control and Ghost Bird, who encounter Grace on Area X, learn about the fate of the biologist and return to the tunnel-Tower to face the Crawler. The trilogy ends with Grace and Ghost Bird walking, not knowing whether Area X has disappeared or the border has expanded further.

This article reads VanderMeer’s *The Southern Reach* trilogy from the perspectives of critical posthumanism and trauma theory, paying particular attention to how the two discourses perceive the relationship between self and other, the vulnerability of the human and the expectation of death. The discussion is articulated against the background of the trilogy’s explicit concern with the reconfiguration of the human and with the Anthropocene. This is carried out through an exploration of classical and recent definitions of trauma after its encounter with environmental degradation and under the threat of human extinction. As it is contended, the trilogy invites us to imagine an end to humanity that is not also the end of life on the planet. While this might be read in the key of horror or induce feelings of anxiety or mourning, it compels us to confront the ethical implications of our embeddedness to the natural world and our shared vulnerability. The article ultimately argues in favor of the power of the imagination to spark change.

2. ANNIHILATING THE HUMAN(IST) SUBJECT

The events that make up the plot of *The Southern Reach* trilogy, spanning around thirty years, tell of inexplicable and strange transformations taking place within Area X. The area is described by the biologist as a transitional environment in which, “within the space of walking only six or seven miles, you went from forest to swamp to salt marsh to beach” (2014a: 11). In this area, marine life has adjusted to the brackish freshwater, sharing the same ecosystem with otters and deer, while giant reptiles have adapted to the oceanic medium. While this is in itself puzzling enough, the biologist soon realizes that these habitats are transitional in what she perceives as “a deeply *unnatural* way” (2014a: 160; emphasis in the original). While human life was apparently wiped out of Area X right after the Event that gave rise to it, she discovers that the vegetative matter collected from the “forehead” of an eruption of moss and a dead fox that she finds in the abandoned village are composed of modified human cells (2014a: 96). One of the dolphins that she sees in the reeds, which has adapted to freshwater, is said to “stare at [her] with an eye that did not, in that brief flash, resemble a dolphin eye [...]. It was painfully human, almost familiar” (2014a: 97). The same happens with a boar that the whole crew encounters right after arriving in Area X, whose face is said to be “contorted, as if the beast was dealing with an extreme of inner torment” (2014a: 16), and “[a] kind of electricity sparked in its eyes that I could not credit as real,” giving the biologist a “startling impression of some *presence* in the way its gaze seemed turned inward and its head willfully pulled to the left” (2014a: 16-17; emphasis in the original). Even more puzzling, a sample taken from the skin of the Crawler, the strange creature that inhabits the Tower, impossibly proves to be human brain tissue.

These weird becomings not only affect the flora and the fauna of Area X. Under its effect, all the human beings that cross the border begin to be transformed too. After breathing in some spores from the fruiting bodies that form the letters in the Tower, the biologist starts to be changed by what she calls “the brightness” (2014a: 83). The most immediate effect is that she becomes immune to the hypnotic suggestions to which the psychologist has been subjecting the members of the crew to control their thoughts and actions. Another important effect is that the biologist becomes more attuned to the natural world around her, and her instincts and ‘animal’ senses become sharper, allowing her to feel, smell and hear things far above normal human capacities. What is more, the life that she has left behind stops mattering to her. Little by little, she becomes less interested in taking samples and finding scientific explanations for everything that she sees, and begins to accept her own position within the ecosystem of Area X, to acknowledge the fact that the brightness that is taking control of her is “a natural thing” (2014a: 146).

The biologist’s vulnerability to the transforming agency of Area X resonates with Stacy Alaimo’s notion of transcorporeality, which she defines in *Bodily Natures* (2010) as “a recognition that one’s bodily substance is vitally connected to the broader environment” (2010:

63). For Alaimo, the body is “never a rigidly enclosed, protected entity, but is vulnerable to the substances and flows of its environments” (2010: 28). She speaks of “interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures” that bring to the fore the “material interconnections between the human the more-than-human world” (2010: 2). Evoking Alaimo’s refusal to “see the delineated shape of the human as distinct from the background of nature” (2010: 142), *The Southern Reach* trilogy, foregrounds the permeability of the human body, its vulnerability to material agencies and its entanglement with the more-than-human world. The biologist describes this as follows after her ‘contamination’ by Area X: “the brightness washed over me in unending waves and connected me to the earth, the water, the trees, the air, as I opened up and kept on opening” (2014a: 160). This process of opening up to the ecosystem culminates with her transformation into a monstrous leviathan, big as a mountain, covered in “many glowing eyes that were also like flowers or sea anemones,” “the flanks carved by dark ridges like a whale’s,” with a back covered with “hundreds of miniature craters, of tidal pools” (2014c: 195). The biologist’s transformation reconsiders traditional understandings of nature, emphasizing its dynamism as “an agent of change and always already within and without the permeable membrane of the human” (Alaimo, 2010: 154). More-than-human entanglement is dramatized in the trilogy as a process of being permeated, colonized and contaminated by the ecosystem.

The biologist is neither the first nor the only human to be changed or assimilated by Area X. A “tormented beast” haunts the reeds near base camp that leaves behind “a long trail of skin-like debris, husks, and sloughings” (2014a: 140), including a molted mask “with a hint of pockmarks across the left cheek” (2014a: 145), which the biologist recognizes as the face of the psychologist from the eleventh expedition. This leads her to the conclusion that “the moaning creature was, or had once been, human” (2014a: 140). In *Acceptance*, Control and Ghost Bird encounter the decomposed skeleton of the strange creature, which “looked uncannily like the confluence of a giant hog and a human being” (2014c: 34). The first human to be transformed by the area is Saul Evans, the Lighthouse Keeper, who finds something glittering hidden by the leaves of a strange plant, and as he tries to catch it he feels “a sliver enter his thumb” (2014c: 25). This causes him to suffer strange dreams and hallucinations and to feel “more and more a stranger in his own skin” and that “perhaps something was beginning to look out through his eyes” (2014c: 101). This delirious process culminates in his transformation into the monstrous Crawler—a slug-like bioluminescent organism with a “bell-shaped body” (2014c: 284), crowned by a halo and with a human arm “obscured by loam or moss” (2014c: 285) as the only trace left of its former humanity.

The trilogy’s weird fascination with the porosity of the human and its openness to transformation into something else—or something more—bears two apparently contradictory readings. From a critical posthumanist perspective, the trilogy’s concern with matter that is constantly in the process of transforming allows it to dismantle a number of key dualisms—namely human/nonhuman, subject/object, self/other, meaning/matter and culture/nature—that

have long shaped western thought, insistently privileging the human over *everything* else. The descriptions quoted above of the tormented beast of the reeds, the leviathan-biologist and the Crawler—all of them creatures that retain human features but are most decidedly no longer human—bring to the fore the redundancy and instability of what Elaine Graham calls the supposed “ontological hygiene” of humanity (2002: 11). The tormented beast is said to act as if it was “new to its body,” expressing “utter uncomprehending anguish, the mouth open in a perpetual O as it moaned out its distress” (2014c: 162); yet, as the biologist muses, “[b]eneath what seemed to be pain might lie ecstasy—what remained of the human dreaming, and in that dream, comfort” (2014c: 163). When the leviathan-biologist returns to the site where she last felt the presence of her husband (apparently transformed into an owl), Ghost Bird, her double, looks at her eyes, still recognizably human ones, and feels that “there was connection, there was *recognition*” (2014c: 196; emphasis in the original). Finally, the Crawler, in its utter nonhumanness still recognizes the Director as Gloria, the little girl he knew before Area X came to be: “‘Do you remember me?’ ‘You shouldn’t be here,’ Saul Evans says under his breath. His eyes are closed; he cannot see you, and yet you know he sees you. ‘You need to get off the rocks. The tide’s coming in’” (2014c: 57-58). Both recognizably human and unquestionably nonhuman, both knowing subjects and objects of scientific enquiry, these beings dramatize the notion that “‘human nature’ is as much a piece of human artifice as all the other things human beings have invented” (Graham, 2002: 37).

This is even more conspicuous in the case of the doppelgängers that Area X produces and sends back across the border to replace ‘original’ expedition members after these have been assimilated by Area X in one way or another. Like all the other doubles, Ghost Bird is an exact physical copy of the biologist and possesses her memories, but she is also decidedly nonhuman, not just as a product and, essentially, an extension of Area X, but most significantly through a perspective that is increasingly distanced from the human. This becomes evident, for instance, through the internally focalized passages in which Ghost Bird reflects on the shortcomings of human beings: in the face of Area X’s “[l]imitless amounts of energy. Effortless manipulation of molecules. Continual attempts to transform the human into the non-human,” Ghost Bird despises human beings because, “bound by their own view of consciousness,” they are incapable of understanding the message that Area X is sending, and she mocks them for “[h]aving to reach for such banal answers because of a lack of imagination, because human beings couldn’t even put themselves in the mind of a cormorant or an owl or a whale or a bumblebee” (2014c: 189). In short, Area X’s hybrid creatures and doubles pose a challenge to the stability of the human(ist) subject, negotiating the boundary that separates human and nonhuman, subject and object, and self and other.

These dualisms are undermined in *The Southern Reach* trilogy through VanderMeer’s outstanding ability to create haunting monsters. Elaine Graham has argued that one of the ways in which the boundaries between the human and its others have been traditionally established

is through the discourse of monstrosity (2002: 12). For Graham, “monsters bear witness to the power of the marginal, the other, to demarcate the known and the unknown, the acceptable and deviant. Monsters are keepers of the boundaries between human and other, yet by virtue of their inhabiting the ‘borderlands’ they promise liberation from the very strictures of binary definition” (2002: 60). For monster theorists, monstrosity is seen “as a destabilizing change to the known regimes of truth” (Levina & Bui, 2013: 7). Precisely because monstrosity must exist outside of the realm of the possible, “it offers ways of becoming that are not known, not domesticated, and not appropriated by the existing discourses of power” (Levina & Bui, 2013: 7).

In contrast to these views, within horror monsters have traditionally been thought to represent a Freudian “return of the repressed” (see Wood, 2018). For Freud, unconscious material —memories, thoughts, wishes, desires, fears— that has been “sunk into the id by repression” is unalterable, virtually immortal, and may resurface at any time (1964: 74). In his theorization, this repressed material will be forever reemerging in various forms while often remaining unrecognizable, becoming conscious only “as substitutive formations and symptoms —generally [...] after having undergone great distortion as compared with the unconscious, though often retaining many characteristics which call for repression” (1962: 193). Inspired by psychoanalytic theory, Robin Wood sees the monster in horror as standing for “all that our civilization represses or oppresses, its reemergence dramatized, as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror” (2018: 79). As Marina Levina and Diem-My T. Bui further explain, narratives that deal with monsters “offer a space where society can safely represent and address anxieties of its time” (2013: 1)ⁱⁱⁱ. This is true also of *The Southern Reach* trilogy in particular, and of new weird fiction in general, as it constitutes “an implicit challenge to and interrogation of the normal” (Weinstock, 2016: 186). This interrogation is carried out through representation of grotesque monsters, as we have seen —“grotesquerie of exaggeration” (Malcolm-Clarke, 2008: 338)— and of “things that breach borders, the body-horror that bursts the ‘skin-ego’ and unbounds the self,” creating a sense of being “menaced by forces beyond the range of human senses” (Luckhurst, 2015: 201).

Indeed, in contrast to the posthumanist reading provided above, or perhaps as a result of it, a question that one finds oneself asking as the trilogy progresses is about the position that these monstrous attacks to the normal and to the stability of the (human) self leave us in as (human) readers. The trilogy’s monstrous transformations, symbolizing the return of the repressed as it plays out in the key of trauma, evoke a sense of anxiety over a very specific source of horror: the colonization of the human by the nonhuman that leads to the disintegration of the self in its exposure to the other. It is worth pointing out in that sense that a key level at which trauma theory and critical posthumanist thought clash is in their articulation of the relationship between self and other —a relationship that in fact dominates both discourses. From a critical posthumanist perspective, as we have seen, the human is radically changed by the encounter with the other, opening up a hopeful space of contestation

and resistance to western dualist thought and its damaging ideological implications. For trauma theory, however, the other is construed as a threat to the subject's homeostasis (Ferrández San Miguel, 2018: 31), as we will see in more detail in the following section.

In short, the transformations that take place within Area X bring to mind the critical posthumanist notions that “‘we’ are always radically other, already in-or-ahuman in our very being” (Wolfe, 2010: 89), that the trace of the other is always already within the (human) self. As Graham argues, and *The Southern Reach* trilogy dramatizes, “we are perhaps more like the ‘others’ than like ourselves, unavoidably contaminated by hybridity and leaky boundaries” (2002: 36). At the same time, however, the attacks to the stability and integrity of the human self that these monstrous transformations constitute may be read as a traumatic threat to homeostasis, causing a sense of dread and having a defamiliarizing effect on the reader. In short, in the series, VanderMeer explores the pleasures and anxieties derived from the breaching of the boundaries between human and nonhuman, subject and object, and self and other, emphasizing porosity, hybridity and their implications.

3. VULNERABILITY, MOURNING AND THE DEATH OF THE HUMAN

The transformations taking place within Area X, which constantly reshape life within its border, also put forward very compelling views about death. Nothing truly dies in Area X, it only changes. After their encounter with the Crawler in the Tower, both the anthropologist and the psychologist suffer wounds that quickly become colonized by some sort of some vegetal matter. The biologist's less direct contact with the transforming agency of matter in Area X means that her human body survives longer. Yet, by the end of her narration in *Annihilation*, she has calmly accepted that she will not be there as she is now when the next expedition comes: “Have they seen me yet, or are they about to? Will I melt into this landscape, or look up from a stand of reeds or the waters of the canal to see some other explorer staring down in disbelief? Will I be aware that anything is wrong or out of place?” (2014a: 194). By this time, she has long suspected that “[d]eath [...] was not the same thing here as back across the border” (2014a: 145), and that those who have died “*still exist* in Area X in some form, [...] layered over one another, communicating in whatever way is left to them. [...] anywhere and everywhere” (2014a: 191, 194; emphasis in the original).

VanderMeer's attitude towards death in *The Southern Reach* trilogy evokes Rosi Braidotti's affirmative theory of posthuman death, theorized in her seminal work *The Posthuman* (2010). For Braidotti, death does not involve transcendence, entropy or a return to an “inanimate and indifferent state of matter” (2010: 137), but is “the generative inhuman within the subject” (2010: 142), the moment of the subject's “merging with the web of non-human forces that frame him/her” (2010: 136). In a posthumanist move that displaces the boundaries between living and dying, Braidotti proposes a productive life-death continuum

endowed with generative capacity: the nonhuman, vital force of life, which she calls “*zoe*,” aims fundamentally at self-perpetuation and then at dissolution, leading her to argue that it also encompasses death. In other words, death is part of the cycles of being and becoming. As such, it must be understood as yet another form of interconnectedness. In her theorization, death is “a creative synthesis of flows, energies and perpetual becoming” (2010: 131), “the becoming-imperceptible of the posthuman subject” (2010: 137). Resonating with Braidotti’s understanding, death in Area X is a form of radical immanence, a moment that makes apparent the entanglement and embeddedness of the (post)human to the ecosystems that shape, constitute and reconstitute human and nonhuman beings as they shape, constitute and reconstitute themselves. As Donna Haraway very aptly —if somewhat shockingly— also puts it, we are “humus, not Homo, not anthropos; we are compost” (2016: 55).

This is an understanding that the words in the walls of the Tower, which are worth quoting at length, also hint at:

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 [...] The shadows of the abyss are like the petals of a monstrous flower that shall blossom within the skull and expand the mind beyond what any man can bear, but whether it decays under the earth or above on green fields, or out to sea or in the very air, all shall come to revelation [...] That which dies shall still know life in death for all that decays is not forgotten and reanimated it shall walk the world in the bliss of not-knowing. (2014a: 46, 47, 61, 134, 138, 172; emphasis in the original)

The biomass of the words themselves, let it be added, is symbolically composed of saprotrophic organisms, that is, they consume dead matter. Many of the critics engaging with the trilogy have claimed that the words make no sense or, at best, that they are “vaguely evocative of Area X itself [...] but lacking any clear logic” (Strombeck, 2019: 1371). However, when seen in the light of the transformations produced by Area X and given their material and linguistic nature, the words are revealed to be sending a powerful message about life and death understood as a continuum, but in a way that produces discomfort and even anxiety, as well as a sense of estrangement, on the characters and readers alike.

This is a particularly clever move by VanderMeer: on the one hand, the words’ apocalypticism mocks humanity’s hardwired fear of the extinction of our lives, which is especially pervasive in western culture, so much so that it has been theorized as an intrinsic, “untranscendable” source of what Dominick LaCapra termed structural trauma. LaCapra defines structural trauma as related to “transhistorical absence (absence of/at the origin) [which] appears in different ways in all societies and all lives” (2001: 76-77). A most powerful absence in that sense —and one that evokes much anxiety— is the nothingness of death. Indeed, in contrast to historical trauma, which “is related to particular events” (80), LaCapra

sees structural trauma as resulting from, among other sources, (awareness of) our intrinsic mortality —evoked in the words of the Tower by reference to “worms,” “darkness,” “shadows,” “abyss,” “skull” and “decays”— causing an inescapable sense of dread. On the other hand, the words’ Biblical overtones —and indeed the fact that they are mixed from Saul’s mind as former preacher— bring to mind Judeo-Christian religions, their belief in the immortality of the human soul and their hope for transcendence after death. As such, the words constitute a powerful ironic reversal of the (posthumanist) understanding of death as a manifestation of our radical immanence, producing a deep feeling of defamiliarization on the reader. Indeed, the view of death as part of a continuum with life put forward by the trilogy inflicts a sharp blow to the Judeo-Christian tradition that lies at the foundation of western societies, to western culture’s resistance to accept death as part of a continuum with life, to the humanist belief in our exceptionalism and to its related fantasies of transcendence, the desire to extend life and eventually even overcome death.

Extending life and overcoming death are some of the pursuits of transhumanism. Transhumanism is described by its proponents as a philosophy of life that seeks “the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology, guided by life-promoting principles and values” (More, 2013: 3). Transhumanists view human nature as a “work-in-progress, a half-baked beginning that we can learn to remold in desirable ways. Current humanity need not be the endpoint of evolution” (“Transhumanist Declaration,” 2013: 4). It is actually quite humorous —and I would argue not at all accidental in light of VanderMeer’s activism through social media and as guest speaker, and his support of non-profit wildlife protection projects^{iv}— that these definitions work as a twisted description of Area X’s own designs on the human. Leaving this idea aside for the moment, the articles that compose the latest version of the ‘Transhumanist Declaration,’ adopted by the Humanity+ Board in 2009, convey a commitment with avoiding pain, reducing risks, developing means for the preservation of life and health, and alleviating grave suffering (hpluspedia.org, 2021: n.p.). As these aims suggest, transhumanist discourse has its roots in a widespread conceptualization of vulnerability as negative, as something that needs to be remedied at all costs.

In *The Southern Reach* trilogy we find yet another instance of ironic reversal in this respect: after being shot by the surveyor, the brightness within the biologist that has started to transform her stops spreading, “its progress stunted by the need to tend to [her] injuries” (2014a: 151). This leads the biologist to the realization that “to keep the brightness in check, [she] would have to continue to become wounded, to be injured” (2014a: 151). She does this for a while to delay her transformation, going so far as to step on purpose on rusty nails or let herself be stung by poisonous snakes and spiders —particularly conspicuous examples of real-world transcorporeality, of our condition as exposed beings “subject to the agencies of the compromised, entangled world” (Alaimo, 2016: 158)— although she eventually acknowledges

that “the thought of continually doing harm to [her]self to remain human seems somehow pathetic” (2014a: 194). It may be claimed, then, that vulnerability to the more-than-human world is what marks and preserves the biologist’s humanness.

As Christine Daigle argues in *Posthumanist Vulnerability*, vulnerability “can be expressed as either negative or positive depending on how we relate to it” (2023: 106). Daigle draws here on Judith Butler’s seminal distinction between precariousness and precarity. While the former is defined as an intrinsic aspect of human existence stemming from our corporeality and our radical interdependency on each other, the latter refers to the socially- and politically-induced vulnerability experienced by the marginalized, poor or those under the threat of war or natural disaster. The latter definition aligns itself more explicitly with received conceptualizations of vulnerability as negative. As mentioned above, the word vulnerability is etymologically negative: *vulnus*, in Latin means ‘wound.’ And so does the word trauma (*τραύμα*, in Greek), in fact. Many critics and practitioners have explored the relationship between the conditions described by Butler as precarity (context-specific vulnerability) and psychological trauma when it is caused by experiences subsumed by gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and ability^v. In contrast to this view, inspired by Butler’s theorization of precariousness and working from a posthumanist neomaterialist framework, Daigle puts forward a view of “vulnerability” as “affect-ability,” as the ability to affect and be affected: “We are permeated by the world we are in as much as we permeate it. The permeability of our being, the fact that we are transformed in our core by the experiences we have and the others involved in these experiences —[...] other humans, nonhumans, living or nonliving beings— all of this renders us vulnerable” (2023: 117). Thus, Daigle grounds vulnerability in what she calls “transjectivity” —“being as dynamic and in flux, as constantly shifting and entering different kinds of assemblages” (2023: 28)— that is, in each being’s constitution by dynamic subjective and material entanglements.

As we have seen, perhaps the most salient feature of the ecosystem that is Area X in its encounter with the human is the radical, dynamic, co-constitutive vulnerability that both share, which is dramatized in the trilogy as an ontological fact. Whether this is a positive or a negative thing remains a matter of interpretation. Hand in hand with the acceptance of our shared vulnerability —our common ontological nature as entities that affect and are affected by others— comes an overwhelming sense of immanence, of embeddedness: what the characters experience ‘in return’ for their openness to Area X is a strong feeling of communion. This is true not only of the biologist —whose personality predisposes her to let places “impress themselves upon [her]” and who feels as “orgasm the sudden realization of the interconnectivity of living things” (2014a: 110)— and of Ghost Bird, herself a product of Area X. But also, crucially, of Control —the main representative in the series of human exceptionalism, and the one who resists the most, the one who struggles the longest before accepting the loss of his humanness. After his encounter with the Crawler, and as he is transforming into some sort of pawed nonhuman creature, the brightness filling all of him,

“[t]here came to Control in that moment of extremity [...] an overwhelming feeling of connection, that nothing was truly *apart*” (2014c: 310; emphasis in the original). This is reminiscent of the posthumanist notion that we are embedded to the world, entangled in dynamic webs of mattering, always in the process of becoming-with. Throughout her work, Haraway has emphasized humanity’s co-habitation and co-evolution with other species and beings of all kinds, arguing that “to be one is always to *become with* many” (2003: 4; emphasis in the original). For Haraway, “all that is, is the fruit of becoming with” and “all the actors become who they are *in the dance of relating*” (2008: 17, 25; emphasis in the original). In *Staying with the Trouble*, her most recent work, she reinforces the same idea: “[o]ntologically heterogeneous partners *become who and what they are* in relational material-semiotic worlding. Natures, cultures, subjects, and objects do not preexist their intertwined worldings” (2016: 12-13; emphasis added). For Haraway, then, ontological vulnerability is far from negative; it is no more and no less than a precondition of being.

Thus, while the extreme vulnerability of the human may be seen as a source of horror in its heralding of the death of humanity, leading to states of mourning or even trauma, The Southern Reach trilogy, like Haraway, defends that existence is only and exclusively existence in entanglement. This is achieved through an emphasis on the life-death continuum and on the affectability that the human shares with the nonhuman and more-than-human world, which ties the characters and Area X together in an endless process of becoming-with. When the biologist returns to base camp, where the surveyor awaits her, the latter claims: “You’ve come back and you’re not human anymore. You should kill yourself so I don’t have to.” To which the biologist replies: “I’m as human as you [...] This is a natural thing,” and realized she wouldn’t understand that I was referring to the brightness. I wanted to say that I was a natural thing, too [...]” (2014a: 146). Area X is not the enemy, it is simply a place that allows the biologist and all the humans that cross the border to “just becom[e] more of what [they]’ve always been” (2014a: 127), as the psychologist puts it right before the death of her original human embodiment. Thus, while it is true, as Sherryl Vint aptly argues, that the trilogy sometimes “reads like ecohorror,” it ultimately “exemplifies the vibrant possibilities for a humanity that can embrace [...] the vital material world” (2017: 373). In so doing, it invites us to accept our shared vulnerability and entangled nature as beings “[n]ot *in* the world, but *of* the world” (Haraway, 2016: 14; emphasis in the original). The stakes, as the following section will discuss, are undoubtedly high.

4. CHANGING SIDES IN THE AGE OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

Reflecting about the expansion of Area X and her own eventual assimilation and transformation, the biologist writes: “I can no longer say with conviction that this is a bad thing. Not when looking at the pristine nature of Area X and then the world beyond, which we have altered so much. Before she died, the psychologist said I had changed, and I think she

meant I had *changed sides*” (2014a: 192; emphasis in the original). What would changing sides entail? After all, as we have seen, the biologist and all the other humans that enter Area X stop existing as they were. In light of this, changing sides may be taken to mean an apocalyptic acceptance of self-annihilation, of the extinction of the human species.

It is worth pointing out that only humans and human-made objects —especially advanced technologies— seem to “trigger Area X’s defenses” (2014c: 43). After the Event that originates Area X, human life completely disappears from the area, with only a few crumbling walls left where once villages had been. It is hinted that humans have been assimilated and changed on the spot: “But in what had been kitchens or living rooms or bedrooms, I also saw a few peculiar eruptions of moss or lichen, rising four, five, feet tall, misshapen, the vegetative matter forming an approximation of limbs and heads and torsos. [...] Four such eruptions, one “standing” and three decomposed to the point of “sitting” in what once must have been a living room with a coffee table and a couch —all facing some point at the far end of the room where lay only the crumbling soft brick remains of a fireplace and chimney” (2014a: 96). This is rather meaningful in light of the fact that the site had been an illegal drop site for barrels of chemical waste before the Event. Then, as Area X is coming to be, the Lighthouse Keeper’s last apocalyptic hallucination before turning into the Crawler speaks of a “stench of oil and gasoline and chemicals, the sea coming almost up to his feet now. [Saul] could see that the beach was strewn with plastic and garbage and tarred bits of metal, barrels and culverts clotted with seaweed and barnacles. The remains of ships rising, too. Detritus that had never touched this coast but was here now” (2014c: 322-323). Dreams and hallucinations within Area X are to be understood as manifestations of Area X itself. Thus, it may be claimed that the first expression of the area’s weird agency is to clean itself of human-made contaminants. Indeed, Area X is repeatedly said to be a “pristine wilderness” free of human-created toxicity, heavy metals, industrial or agricultural runoff and plastics, and so is everything and everyone that crosses the border back into the outside world (2014b: 36, 59, 125), including the sites on which returned expedition members are found: “‘The contamination at the sites from which we extracted the surveyor and the anthropologist has broken through quarantine and continued to grow, despite our best efforts.’ [...] ‘What kind of contamination?’ [...] ‘The kind that cleanses everything’” (2014c: 303).

In a piece for *The Atlantic*, VanderMeer has claimed the following regarding his source of inspiration for *The Southern Reach* trilogy: “I knew that at the microscopic level the oil was still infiltrating and contaminating the environment. That just because you can’t see something doesn’t mean it isn’t affecting you or the places you love” (2015: n.p.). In light of this, the scenario that the trilogy presents constitutes a fascinating, if grotesque, ironic reversal that borders on the humorous —were it not for the seriousness of our predicament in the context of the Anthropocene. In her reading of the trilogy as a reimagining of the interconnections between the body, sickness and climate change, Alison Sperling has claimed that “[w]eird embodiment in the trilogy challenges standard discourses of health and ability by imagining

sickness, and environmental sickness in particular, not as an anomaly but as the norm” (2016: 232). For Sperling, VanderMeer “presents a vision of the world in which the toxicity of the Anthropocene cannot be contained, its effects unpredictable and immeasurable” (2016: 250). Anthropogenic environmental degradation is, however, ironically reversed in *The Southern Reach* trilogy, as we have seen, foregrounding the incompatibility of human activities with environmental sustainability in our industrialized, capitalist systems. This concern stems from an understanding on VanderMeer’s part of the fact that, as Alaimo puts it, “the environment is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves” (2010: 4), as we are “embodied, embedded and transversal selves [...] bonded by ontological relationality” (Braidotti, 2019: 44).

The Anthropocene and the intensification in recent years of anthropogenic climate change to a point of almost no return have forced us to confront the potential end to humanity. This has been articulated by some theorists and critics in the field of cultural trauma research as a source of trauma, variously referring to the resulting condition as eco-trauma, ecological trauma, or climate trauma, among others. To offer a salient example, E. Ann Kaplan speaks of climate “pretrauma” (“Pretraumatic Stress Syndrome”) to refer to severe anxiety about future catastrophic events caused by “fears about the total collapse of natural and social environments,” which are exacerbated, in her view, by the expansion of disaster narratives, as they “force us to face horror and fear” (2016: 1-9). Theorizations such as these bear the following question: what is the actual source of trauma? Claire Colebrook hits the nail on the head when she points out that “[w]e are becoming aware of our possible extinction, concerned that there may be a world without us—which would amount to no world at all” (2019: 276). What she means by this is that the only world for us is the human world and, thus, the only apocalypse that we are capable of imagining is one in which we stop existing. In this way, as she argues, “[e]xtinction and apocalypse become events of the subject. What we fear is not the catastrophic disturbance of the Earth as a living system, but losing ourselves” (2019: 269). This rings very true, given that it is nothing but our narcissism, selfishness, near-sightedness and utter disregard for the nonhuman and more-than-human world that have brought us to our present (and future) predicament.

This notwithstanding, some voices have been raised in recent years to claim that the only hope for life to continue in our planet, given the gravity and near-irreversibility of anthropogenic changes to the environment, is the extinction of humanity^{vi}. VanderMeer clearly toys with this idea in *The Southern Reach* trilogy, voicing it through the biologist/Ghost Bird: “‘The only solution to the environment is neglect, which requires our collapse.’ A sentence the biologist had excised from her thesis, but one that had burned bright in [Ghost Bird’s] mind” (2014c: 242). As this quotation suggests, environmental degradation prompts VanderMeer to question whether the (western, capitalist) mode of existence that has altered the planet as a living system should indeed become extinct in order to offer hope of flourishing

to other life forms. This is a rather bold and original move. As Colebrook explains, “[o]ne of the dominant features of post-apocalyptic writing, from Kant to the present, is to allow the figure of a soon-to-be-extinguished humanity to generate the imperative that ‘we’ ought to be saved” (2019: 277). In clear contrast to this trend, and unlike most literature dealing with anthropogenic climate change and the threat that it poses to human survival “in its urban, affluent, hyper-consuming, and globally subsuming form” (Colebrook, 2019: 277), VanderMeer succeeds in imagining the end of our world as we know it, to be replaced by another world that is not our own but that nevertheless exists. That is, the trilogy provides a vision of the end of humanity that is *not* also the end of the world. Crucially, however, by mapping the extinction of the human from a world that continues to exist, The Southern Reach trilogy encourages the fading not of the human, but of the humanist subject and its exceptionalist ethos.

The reference to ‘neglect’ in the quotation above is also very significant—and again probably not at all accidental, given VanderMeer’s activism—since it evokes the notion of stewardship. Inspired by the Christian belief that the Earth is a gift bestowed by God and humans must care for it^{vii}, this notion is a much subtler, if much better-intentioned and widely sanctioned, manifestation of human exceptionalism. Indeed, it objectifies nature, implying human beings’ superiority over it, and reinforces “humanist notions of the individual as a disembodied creature, detached from the environment” (Alaimo, 2016: 82). This is connected to the good-intentioned but ultimately misguided tendency to view the nonhuman and the more-than-human world as passive objects that we are destroying and that require our assistance to continue existing in the context of anthropogenic climate change, environmental degradation and mass extinction of species.

In light of all this, changing sides implies, above all, understanding that we are part of the more-than-human world, we are *it*. It follows that by damaging the environment we are wounding our posthuman selves. This is an understanding that clearly emerges from posthumanist theory, as the notions discussed in this article to support the analysis of the trilogy show, but arguably not so much from trauma theory in its encounter with environmental catastrophe. As Stef Craps rightly argues, the expanded trauma theory that scholars who have concerned themselves with climate-related anxiety call for continues to consider trauma an exclusively human experience, revealing an anthropocentric bias (2020: 280). In contrast to this, attempts are starting to be made to “reconceptualize trauma in non-anthropocentric terms and to acknowledge the interconnectedness and entanglement of human and non-human traumas” (Craps, 2020: 281). This is the case of Anil Narine, who provocatively defines eco-trauma as,

the harm we, as humans, inflict upon our natural surroundings, or the injuries we sustain from nature in its unforgiving iterations. The term encompasses both circumstances because these seemingly distinct instances of ecological harm are often related and even symbiotic: The

traumas we perpetuate in an ecosystem through pollution and unsustainable resource management inevitably return to harm us. (2015: 9).

According to Narine, “a traumatized earth begets traumatized people. Nature [...] does not simply enact its revenge upon us. Rather, it sustains and endures trauma as a human victim would” (2015: 13)^{viii}. Through an exploration of posthuman beings, Vinci further theorizes how an anti-anthropocentric, trans-subjective, trans-corporeal process of becoming-with may work to “restructure the social as a space inclusive of the pain of others via an ethic of radical vulnerability” (2020: 8). That is, trauma theory, in its conjunction with critical posthumanism, may also open a further space to account for nonhuman forms of suffering through the “eroding [of] our sense of priority and reconceptualizing [of] our embodied assemblages and subjectivities” (2020: 19). This understanding also finds support in scientific discourse: as the IPCC Climate Change 2023 synthesis report states, “[h]uman and ecosystem vulnerability are interdependent” (2023: 5).

Finally, this is also the posthumanist and environmentalist message that *The Southern Reach* trilogy ultimately sends. It does so by emphasizing the porosity of the human and its openness to the more-than-human, by dismantling the key dualisms that have long shaped western thought and by dramatizing the shared vulnerability of human and nonhuman lives, as well as the implications of the life-death continuum. In short, the trilogy compels us to confront the ethical and political implications of our embeddedness to the natural world. In so doing, VanderMeer joins from within the literary realm the scholars who have theorized a model of ethics that is grounded on the belief that human activities and practices are not only intermeshed with the wider world and its nonhuman- and earth-others, but also *accountable* to them^{ix}.

5. CONCLUSION

Pieter Vermeulen and Kahn Faassen make the important point that human responsibility for the current climate emergency “is not exhausted by the work of imagination alone” (2019: 8), claiming that “it is illusory to think that merely imagining an alternative ontology will somehow decisively address the ecological crisis —as if the causes of the crisis are not first of all a matter of economic and political power relations, rather than of bad ways of thinking” (2019: 2). It is true that an emphasis on the entanglement, constitutive co-dependency and shared ontological vulnerability with other nonhuman or more-than-human entities should in no way downplay the role of political and economic power relations or dilute the impact of specific measures at individual and policy-making levels. However, I do believe in the power of the imagination to spark change. The conventions of speculative fiction enable compelling posthumanist and environmentalist experiments of the imagination that have the potential to inspire readers to reflect and perhaps move them to action.

Many speculative writers who see literature not as a mere reflection of reality, but as a tool to give it shape, share this view, becoming what Ursula K. Le Guin called “realists of a larger reality,” “[...] writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope” (2014: n.p.). In this spirit, VanderMeer joins other literary voices that have started to call for “a smaller, gentler humanity living as part of the whole, not better or more important. Humanity as equal to, not greater than” (Bell in Vint, 2023: n.p.). Stories matter; they plant seeds. That is the promise of VanderMeer’s *The Southern Reach* trilogy and of *Area X*, conveyed through the words in the *Tower*: “*there shall be in the planting in the shadows a grace and a mercy from which shall blossom dark flowers, and their teeth shall devour and sustain and herald the passing of an age*” (2014a: 170; emphasis in the original). In light of the analysis carried out in this article, this age, it may be concluded, is not only that of the Anthropocene, but also the age of humanism and human exceptionalism. For VanderMeer, the human as a concept needs to be contested. The trilogy dramatizes the notions that the human (of humanism) is an ideological construct, that in its intrinsic porosity the human has always coexisted, collaborated and coevolved with the nonhuman and the more-than-human world. The trilogy’s emphasis on our shared vulnerability and its dramatization of human disappearance from a world that continues to exist without us may have been written in the key of weird eco-horror and may evoke responses connected to mourning, anxiety or even trauma. However, it may also succeed in producing something akin to what LaCapra termed empathic unsettlement and, as such, it offers grounds for hope.

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NOTES

ⁱ For a comprehensive outline of the main notions and approaches within vulnerability theory, see Gámez-Fernández & Fernández-Santiago (2024).

ⁱⁱ The trilogy belongs to the subgenre that has come to be known as “The New Weird.” Narratives belonging to this subgenre are characterized by a process of “weirding the world” (Weinstock, 2016: 181), which is tightly connected to their combination of elements from different speculative genres, sources and details, breaking down the boundaries between fantasy, science fiction and horror. What distinguishes new weird fictions from other genres is that “rather than attempting [...] to domesticate strangeness and invite it back into the fold of the normal, the [new] weird instead seeks to foreground and retain the strangeness of the strange” (Weinstock, 2016: 181).

ⁱⁱⁱ For Gry Ulstein, the use in the trilogy of these monster figures plays a key role also in environmental terms: “the paralysis often inflicted upon the human mind when grappling with Anthropocene issues might be broken, or at least understood better, by the introduction of the monster figure” (2017: 93).

^{iv} <https://vandermeercreative.threadless.com/about>

<https://twitter.com/jeffvandermeer/status/1436412592508084227>

^v See, for instance, Root (1992); Radstone (2007); Buelens and Craps (2008); Craps (2014).

^{vi} Leading to some initiatives like the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, which defends “phasing out the human species by voluntarily ceasing to breed” (vhemt.org).

^{vii} Genesis 2:15 says: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” See also Idema (2019).

^{viii} This view contrasts readings of the trilogy that have connected Area X to James Lovelock’s figure of Gaia (1989, 2006), “an earth system that is akin to an organism in the sense that it is endowed with intentionality” and that has “turned against the species responsible for its disturbance” (Idema, 2019: 106); see also Gry (2017: 86). Note also that one of the motifs identified by Wood as dominating the genre of horror is precisely the revenge of nature (2018: 57).

^{ix} Haraway bids us to “stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth” (2016: 2), calling for “an ethics and politics committed to the flourishing of significant otherness” (2003: 3). Alaimo also calls for a form of posthuman environmentalist ethics “that is not circumscribed by the human but is instead accountable to a material world that is never merely an external place but always the very substance of our selves and others” (2010: 158). Finally, Braidotti emphasizes the need for a new ethics that is posthumanist, non-anthropocentric, materially grounded, but differential, relational and affirmative, which she calls a new “ethics of affirmation” (2019: 152).

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