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## Human Contamination: The Infectious Border Crossings of Jeff VanderMeer's Area X

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By Sophia Booth Magnone

“What if an infection was a message, a brightness a kind of symphony? As a defense? An odd form of communication? If so, the message had not been received, would probably never be received” (*Acceptance* 490).

“What if containment is a joke?” (*Acceptance* 576).

It all begins with a thorn: the delicate, glittering prickle of an unidentified plant growing at the base of a lighthouse in a sleepy coastal town. On a peaceful sunny day, the thorn pricks a man's thumb, an act of violence so mild, so mundane, it scarcely attracts notice. Yet the end of the world starts there, where one organism pierces the skin of another. That tiny rift swells to a full-fledged invasion; the man and his lighthouse become the first targets of an inexplicable transformative force. When the initial cataclysm subsides, the coast has been purged of all human life, its inhabitants dead or transformed beyond recognition. The rest of the world is left only with questions. What exactly happened at the lighthouse? What lies dormant in that lonely landscape? Most importantly, how can whatever remains there be contained?

This nebulous, quietly sinister premise forms the foundation of Jeff VanderMeer's novels *Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance*, collectively known as the Southern Reach trilogy. The novels take place, for the most part, thirty years after the mysterious event at the lighthouse, which has been officially categorized an “environmental disaster” and, by most people, forgotten about entirely. Only the government organization known as the Southern Reach continues to investigate the cordoned-off region now designated “Area X”: from the byzantine depths of its crumbling bureaucracy, the Southern Reach dispatches research expeditions, interprets findings, and scrabbles desperately at the possibility of defensive action. For Area X is growing, and it threatens, like a thorn stealthily penetrating a thumb, to infiltrate the very substance of the world.

One way to read the Southern Reach trilogy is thus as a story about borders: about the order and security they promise, the function of the divisions they uphold, and, most bewitchingly, about what happens when

they are breached. Borders structure the world of the Southern Reach trilogy at every scale. The most prominent border is the one separating Area X from the rest of the world; it is a high-security zone patrolled by armed guards, officially passable only by approved expedition members placed under hypnosis. Because of its history of “environmental disaster,” Area X is under perpetual quarantine; the border acts to keep the human world safe, in theory, from whatever remaining hazards Area X’s weird biome might harbor. Each expedition member also carries a personal version of that border, writ small, as they venture into Area X: they are [trained to protect their bodies against infection](#) from foreign ecosystems, keeping a safe distance from contaminants and using breathing masks in risky situations. If the Southern Reach has learned one thing from decades of research, it is that skin, on its own, is a feeble border indeed.

Both forms of the border, geographic and personal, are fundamentally concerned with the division between human things—bodies, populations, communities—and nonhuman things that threaten to get in where they don’t belong—thorns, infections, monsters. Both are thus embedded in broad-based cultural norms of sickness and health, contamination versus purity. Borders enforce the principle that a healthy body (whether a human, an environment, or a nation) exists in a state of boundedness, closed off to invaders. A body that leaks and oozes, overflowing its boundaries and mixing with the outside world, is considered suspect—improper, diseased, and potentially dangerous.

In VanderMeer’s story, the health of individual human bodies and the body of planet Earth itself are equally at stake, and deeply entangled. Yet as the Southern Reach’s human operatives cling to the comforting myth of prophylaxis, the unfolding story makes clear that borders are human ideas: partial, temporary, and, faced with the messy interconnectedness of ecological growth, ultimately irrelevant. Infection, contamination, and mixture are Area X’s biological imperatives; the place infiltrates the bodies of expedition members as it infiltrates the whole world beyond the border. The result is the loss of what the Southern Reach is trying to safeguard: the purity and coherence of the human species. Whether Area X’s infection of the human world constitutes a move toward sickness or wellness is the series’ unanswerable central question.

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The text of *Annihilation*, the first novel in the series, is presented as the expedition journal of a woman identified only as “the biologist.” Names are discouraged on Southern Reach missions, and while most recruits find it difficult to detach from their personal identities, the biologist gives hers up without a twinge of nostalgia. This nonchalance toward social norms is characteristic of a woman whose defining trait is a profound affinity for the

nonhuman world. By her own admission, navigating the company of humans has always been difficult for her; in snatches of sparse prose scattered across her journal, she sketches the contours of an unhappy childhood, a solitary adulthood, a tumultuous marriage troubled by an unbridgeable gulf. Yet from the biologist's perspective, her inherent distance from humankind is not a tragic flaw: it is simply the nature of this organism to orient toward other forms of life. To the chagrin of her gregarious husband, who wistfully nicknames her "Ghost Bird" for her spectral presence in his life, the biologist's primary relationship is with the natural world. "Fun for me was sneaking off to peer into a tidal pool, to grasp the intricacies of the creatures that lived there," she explains. "Sustenance for me was tied to ecosystem and habitat, orgasm the sudden realization of the interconnectivity of all things. Observation had always meant more to me than interaction" (*Annihilation* 72; all quotes are from *Annihilation* unless otherwise specified).

Ill at ease in human society and driven always to observe, the biologist's personality and line of work combine to attune her to the fascinating possibilities of nonhuman life on a macro and micro scale. It is fitting that, several days into the expedition, her biophilic curiosity brings her too close to the dangerous lifeforms of Area X. On an exploratory mission with two fellow recruits, the biologist descends the spiral staircase of an underground tower. The team is startled to discover along the tower's left-hand wall a seemingly endless line of cursive script, written in the curling filaments of an unknown fungus and peppered with tiny hand-shaped creatures. Entranced by the mysterious ecosystem of the words, the biologist momentarily lets down her guard:

I leaned in closer, like a fool, like someone who had not had months of survival training or ever studied biology. Someone tricked into thinking that words should be read.

I was unlucky—or was I lucky? Triggered by a disturbance in the flow of air, a nodule in the W chose that moment to burst open and a tiny spray of golden spores spewed out. I pulled back, but I thought I had felt something enter my nose, experienced a pinprick of escalation in the smell of rotting honey. (17)

Just as the Southern Reach guards the border separating Area X from the human-occupied world, expedition members are instructed to zealously maintain personal borders between their bodies and Area X's biota. Here, that personal border is breached—not violently, but subtly, through the spores' delicate invasion of the biologist's nose. Though she keeps her

inhalation a secret from the group, the biologist knows instantly that what has happened is a “contamination” (17). Area X has entered her body, has infected her, and she is not the same as before.

Throughout the remainder of *Annihilation*, the biologist records the gradual sculpting of her body by the spores’ mysterious program as the infection takes hold. Her senses intensify; her reflexes heighten; her capacity for healing quickens. Her skin develops a phosphorescent glow. She feels an irresistible, growing affinity—what she can only describe as a “*brightness*” (55)—toward Area X and its inhabitants. By *Annihilation*’s final pages, the biologist is only partly human. By the time the reader approaches the end of the trilogy’s final volume *Acceptance*, she has become something else altogether. Something entirely different. “In all her glory and monstrosity” (*Acceptance* 492).

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According to [Jeff VanderMeer’s account of writing the Southern Reach trilogy](#), the idea for Area X came out of two overlapping conditions: “dental surgery along with anger and grief over the BP Gulf Oil Spill.” Suffering from serious illness following an extraction and root canal, VanderMeer finds his anxieties about the environmental devastation wreaked by the 2010 spill transformed into a “dark dream”—a sunken tower, words made of fungus, the scrawling of an unknown entity far below—whose elements eventually spin out into a three-volume story. The trilogy is born at the crossroads of environmental devastation and personal illness: oil infiltrates the gulf as *Streptococcus* infiltrates his own immune system. Two forms of contamination converge in a feverish bout of writerly inspiration.

It is easy to identify echoes of Vandermeer’s experience in the emphasis on borders, both geographic and personal, that structures the story of Area X. Yet the implications of contamination become far more equivocal when transferred from reality to fiction. The oil spill and its massive poisoning of local ecosystems is an unquestionable tragedy for human, animal, and plant life; the disaster epitomizes a situation where the border between human things (drilling rigs, extracted oil) and nonhuman things (bodies of water, marine life) should, ideally, have been impenetrable. But Area X is not an oil spill. Indeed, it is the opposite: a rare site of pristine wilderness in a heavily polluted world. Life thrives in its rich biosphere, where ecosystems of the forest, swamp, salt marsh, and marine coast overlap. Area X is home to otters and wild boars, velvet ants and damselflies, purple thistles and tall pines, cormorants and owls, among many other known and unknown species.

In contrast, the human world, protected behind the border maintained by the Southern Reach, lacks such vibrancy. Development, industrialization,

and pollution have all taken their familiar toll. From the biologist's perspective, "the world back beyond the border was what it had always been during the modern era: dirty, tired, imperfect, winding down, at war with itself" (20). Area X offers a land cleansed of human contamination and enthusiastically flourishing. Even the air is noticeably different: "so fresh it buffeted the lungs" (8), its cleanliness renders it almost unbreathable to expedition members inured to smoggy skies.

So while the function of the heavily-guarded border is to quarantine, to protect from contamination, the strange circumstances of Area X yield confusing uncertainty about which side is being protected from the other. "I understood why no one lived in Area X now, that it was pristine because of that reason," writes the biologist, "but I kept un-remembering it. I had decided instead to make believe that it was simply a protected wildlife refuge, and we were hikers who happened to be scientists" (9). Area X is at once a nature preserve under protection from the ravages of development, and a disaster area quivering with biohazards that threaten to leak across the world: both impossibly healthy and dreadfully diseased. Several scholars, including Matthew Masucci and Brian Onishi, note the trilogy's self-conscious repetition of "pristine wilderness" to describe Area X, and the paradoxical horror imbued in that normally pleasant phrase. While "pristine" implies an original, unspoiled condition, Area X is "pristine" only in the sense that no humans *currently* live there: the former settlement and all of its impacts have been absorbed and overwritten by nonhuman nature, but no one who enters it can forget that the land is in its post-human, not pre-human, stage of growth.

The creeping horror of VanderMeer's trilogy emerges from the threat that this "pristine wilderness" presents to the human world. Yet the nature of that threat is far less clear than the threat of 780,000 cubic meters of oil to a marine ecosystem. Area X cultivates a testing ground for a permeable border between human and nonhuman things. The Southern Reach organization is officially dedicated to controlling and reversing that permeability. But the biologist's unorthodox point of view permits a recurring question: Is Area X really a threat at all? Might it offer, rather, a possibility to be embraced?

The answer depends on one's investment in the status quo of the Anthropocene, the modern geological epoch defined by the drastic shaping of the planet's terrains, climates, and ecosystems by human activity. It depends on the value one places on preserving the human species in its current form, with its current capacity for planetary domination, and how liberally one is willing to define the notion of a "healthy" planet. Area X's infiltration of the borders erected against it inaugurates a massive change for planet Earth, the beginnings of what [David Tompkins calls](#) "a comprehensive reversal of the Anthropocene

Age.” Is it important, the trilogy asks, that the human species, the instigator of so much damage, survive such a cataclysm? What counts as survival, anyway—is it only the unaltered reproduction of a current form, or does it involve metamorphosis, evolution, adaptation? What might be gained by perforating the border between the human and nonhuman world, by letting the latter, for a change, infect the former?

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VanderMeer’s biologist is uniquely positioned to process her mysterious infection with an open mind. Her interest, after all, is the study of life in all its variety, the constant exchanges and encounters between organisms. From her perspective, the infection of one organism by another is not a crisis, but a novel phenomenon to scrutinize—even in her own body. This cavalier approach to sickness, the reader learns, was a point of contention between the biologist and her husband, a medical professional. As she documents the infection’s early stages—mild fever, coughing, light-headedness, and other symptoms of a low-grade cold—she imagines his reaction: “My husband would have been proactive about the brightness. He would have found a thousand ways to try and cure it—and to take away the scars, too—and not let me deal with it on my own terms, which is why during our time together I sometimes didn’t tell him when I was sick” (100). Her husband’s approach to disease is not only to pursue an immediate cure, but to erase any traces of sickness, as if the state of health had never been interrupted. But for the biologist, sickness has its own value, scars their own form of interest. Letting herself be sick, “deal[ing] with it in her own terms,” becomes a stealthy act of independence from her husband and his urge to fix.

Getting sick is far graver in Area X, however, than in the world beyond the border. The biologist’s expedition has no doctors, few medical supplies, and uncertain means of exit. Furthermore, the unknown nature of the ecosystem and the unspecified disaster that has occurred there bestows high stakes on any infection. Previous expedition members have suffered a range of mental and physical maladies. In one expedition, members commit group suicide; in the next, they go to war against one another. Members return from the most recent expedition as blank, disaffected shadows of their former selves, dying of systemic cancer six months later; among the afflicted was the biologist’s husband, the expedition’s medic. The biologist wonders, too, about what might have become of those who *didn’t* return from Area X. Strange animals roam the landscape: a charging boar with an anguished expression; a reed-dwelling creature emitting plaintive moans at dusk; a freshwater dolphin with a “painfully human” eye (64). This uncanny menagerie of apparent human-nonhuman hybrids suggests one possible outcome of an Area X-borne infection: contamination may be the first step in the breakdown and eventual

transformation of human being.

But being human is just not that important to the biologist, who seems to identify more as an organism than as a person. She has come to Area X fully aware of the journey's potentially toxic effects: after all, she watches firsthand as her husband wastes away from cancer and from the mysterious blankness that makes him a stranger to her. But she suspects that whatever happened to him, and to every hapless voyager before him, might happen differently to her. In her, Area X's infection might run a different course: not a sickening, but a becoming. As she remembers looking into her dying husband's eyes, she recalls seeing "a deep and unending solitude, as if he had been granted a gift that he didn't know what to do with. A gift that was poison to him and eventually killed him. But would it have killed me?" (55). Only the prickly, antisocial biologist, oriented from childhood toward the nonhuman world, can appreciate Area X's influence as a gift, rather than a deadly poison. If its effect is to contaminate human beings with a profound "solitude," to rip them from human society and assimilate them into its strange wilderness, the biologist's allegiance toward nature over culture suggests she may be ready to meet Area X halfway.

Her account of the infection and its progress is thus marked by extreme ambivalence. "I was unlucky—or was I lucky?" (17), she writes of the (un)timely spray of golden spores into her nose. The expected position to take toward this life-changing event would, of course, be "unlucky": based on what she knows of previous expeditions, contamination threatens her health, mental stability, even her very humanity. The biologist does not disavow the expected judgment "unlucky," but she does add an alternative, holding "lucky" and "unlucky" in tandem. Contained in the possibility that her infection could be "lucky" is a radical departure from standard human-centered systems of value. It takes the biologist's indiscriminate fascination with life in all its forms, with the changes and disruptions inherent to biotic processes, to consider contamination by Area X a positive occurrence in the development of a human organism.

Indeed, the spores' effects seem, in many ways, to confirm and enhance the biologist's natural state, rather than drastically change it. After a lifetime spent intensely observing the natural world, she experiences her newly heightened attunement to her surroundings with obvious joy. "The wind picked up, and it began to rain," she recounts shortly after her infection. "I saw each drop fall as a perfect, faceted liquid diamond, refracting light even in the gloom, and I could smell the sea and picture the roiling waves. The wind was like something alive; it entered every pore of me and it, too, had a smell, carrying with it the earthiness of the marsh reeds" (50). As her sensorium is reshaped, she perceives her environment with increasing intimacy, feeling herself a part of it and it a

part of her.

To someone else, someone more invested in the human part of their identity, such ecological attunement might feel alarmingly new. To the biologist, it is deeply familiar. “My sole gift or talent, I believe now,” she writes of her life pre-expedition, “was that places could impress themselves upon me, and I could become a part of them with ease” (72-73). This willingness to *receive*—to let the substance of her own identity be imprinted by her environment, like pliant clay—is what makes her a good biologist, and a bad human. For to become fully part of an ecosystem, one must stop being a human, must give up the species-specific behavior of observing, interpreting, and dominating the natural world, and instead start being simply an organism among other organisms. Area X enforces that protocol on everyone who enters it: within its borders, unlike in the outside world, there are no special privileges associated with being human. It takes an unconventional kind of human to accept that condition, but the biologist is a rare bird indeed. “You prefer this place, you really do, don’t you?” accuses a fellow expeditioner, her voice infused with “a kind of pity or disgust” (47) for what she perceives as the biologist’s lack of survivalist gumption. But the biologist intends to survive in Area X. It just doesn’t matter to her, ultimately, *as what*.

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At the same time, some hesitation prevents the biologist from succumbing totally to the seduction of Area X. There are elements of humanity that she wants to preserve in herself, securing her personal borders against complete rupture. For although the biologist is more interested in ecosystems than in humans, she is by no means a misanthrope, and the evidence she uncovers of Area X’s violent disregard for human life sickens her. As the expedition crumbles and the biologist explores the territory on her own, she finds evidence of terrible suffering. An abandoned village houses human-shaped eruptions of vegetative matter—apparent casualties of the cataclysmic event thirty years prior. At the lighthouse, the destination of several earlier expeditions, bloodstained walls and overturned tables riddled with bullet holes bear witness to “unspeakable and sudden violence” (67). The biologist, not overly given to emotion, is yet haunted by these scenes, which sour her characteristic attachment to the landscape. “Nothing beautiful here fooled me anymore,” she writes. “Human lives had poured into this place over time, volunteered to become party to exile and worse. Under everything lay the ghastly presence of countless desperate struggles. Why did they keep sending us? Why did we keep going?” (78).

Even the antisocial biologist mourns the loss of human life and human connection within the inexorable logic of Area X; she also mourns, in her

own quiet way, the loss of her husband. Her moments of dis-ease with the changes Area X brings about in her body and her world prevent VanderMeer's trilogy from falling into thoughtless anti-humanism. The novels constantly remind the reader that there is much to value in the human world, much to lament in its passing. Notably, they also take for granted the diversity of the human species with regard to gender, race, sexuality, class, background, and other less categorical forms of difference. "Humanity" is not being glossed here as only the white heterosexual American world, as evinced by the range of VanderMeer's cast of characters: an antisocial female scientist, a gay male lighthouse keeper, a multiracial Latino government agent, a black lesbian bureaucrat. The onslaught of Area X infects all their lives, and countless others', with pain, confusion, and terror. VanderMeer's trilogy, with its shifting points of view and emotionally nuanced characters, maintains a fundamental compassion toward all those who suffer from Area X. There is no gleeful celebration of the apocalypse here, no sense of *justice* at the violent overthrow of the reign of humankind.

What the series offers is, instead, *acceptance*, the apt title of the final volume: acceptance, if not exactly approval, of Area X and its transformative contamination of humankind. The borders have been breached; change is underway; the notion of a pristine anything (whether a pristine human species or a pristine wilderness) has become, more than ever, an impossible fantasy. The task facing human beings in this new world is not to quarantine the infecting force, as the Southern Reach tries to do, nor to seek a cure to reverse its effects, as the biologist's husband might urge. It is instead to become part of the place, to let infections run their course, to reconcile themselves to the new kind of organisms Area X has made of them, with whatever dignity they can muster. It is, needless to say, a difficult, even impossible task; most of the series' characters cannot face it. Only the biologist—she who has made a habit of secreting away sickness and evaporating into ecosystems—can conceive of acceptance as a viable strategy rather than a hopeless defeat. She is, as [Mac Rogers writes](#), "the only hero equal to this story, VanderMeer's one example of a way forward for humanity."

It takes her—even her—a long time to reach acceptance. The trilogy's third volume contains, as a kind of epilogue to *Annihilation*, the final journal pages of the biologist, recounting thirty years of fighting to stay human inside Area X. She can counter the spread of her infection, she learns, with pain; she writes circumspectly of the self-inflicted wounds she applies regularly as a kind of medicine, temporarily shoring up the borders of her waning humanity. Eventually, she ceases treatment; she lets the "brightness" take hold. What she becomes is something profoundly, magnificently other-than-human: a vast, amphibious creature who moves like the flow of lava and communicates in eerie moans, her body covered

with hundreds of barnacle-encrusted craters and glowing, thick-lashed eyes “like flowers or sea anemones spread open” (*Acceptance* 493).

From an anthropocentric perspective, the biologist’s fate is a tragedy. The transformation of a woman into a lumbering leviathan represents the loss of all those qualities that make humanity special: bipedalism, manual dexterity, cognitive intelligence, rational thought, speech and language, technology, community. Yet VanderMeer’s text opens up space for a monster to be just another form of life: not necessarily worse or better than a human being, but simply *different*, with different capacities and functions. The biologist, in her human form, maintains an indiscriminate affinity for life in all its diversity. From that biophilic perspective, what happens to her is not a perversion or debasement, but a metamorphosis; it allows her to inhabit Area X in novel ways, to make her home at land and sea, to perceive her environment more expansively than ever before. The place has impressed itself upon her; she has become part of it with an ease far greater than what she found in the human-dominated world.

The biologist’s final form confirms her as a creature of borderlessness. She becomes, in the eyes of one observer, “an animal, an organism that had never existed before or that might belong to an alien ecology. That could transition not just from land to water but from one remote *place* to another, with no need for a door in a border” (*Acceptance* 494). Her massive, mobile body overflows the boundaries proper to a human, a woman, a mammal, an individual. She is an organism who has ceased to maintain any border that might inhibit her biological development, even the parts of it that appear, from a normative human point of view, deeply unnatural. This, the story suggests, is what might come of letting borders be breached, letting infections take hold: not pollution but evolution, not sickness but glorious vitality. What the biologist helps bring about is not, after all, the end of the world, but the end of the Anthropocene; the border that finally crumbles is not merely the line between Area X and civilization, but the ideological border holding humans apart from and above the rest of the living world. Area X re-situates humans as organisms in an ecosystem—not masters, not users, but simply fellow beings engaged in the everyday work of being alive. VanderMeer’s trilogy does not shy away from the horrors of this speculative future. Yet the biologist serves as a figure of its exhilarating possibilities. Through her, the text considers how contamination is a necessary part of coexistence, exchange and adaptation the basis of survival. The threat to humanity cannot be contained, only accepted with more or less grace. If we were to allow what we think of as “our” world to be permeated by all those others we keep out, VanderMeer’s novels ask, what surprising transformations might result?

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