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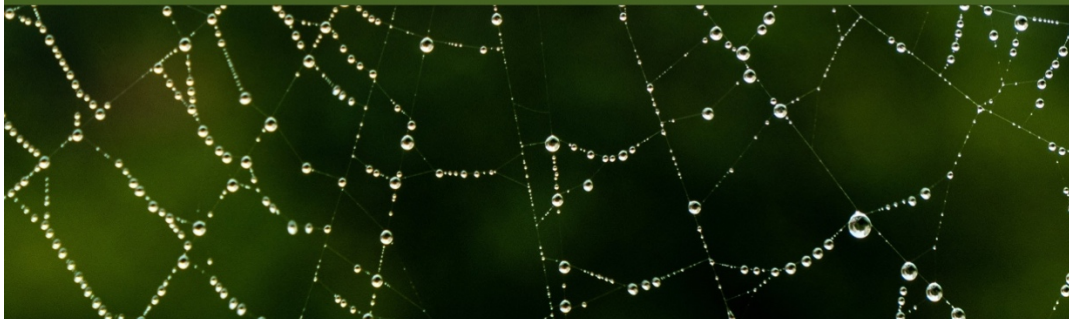
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Ecofear as Visible and Invisible: Conceptual Underpinnings of The Southern Reach Trilogy by Jeff VanderMeer

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Abstract

Human response to ecophobia and ecofear have been mitigated through belief in science and technology that are supposed to establish knowledge and control over nature. This essay will look at the relationship between nature and fear through an ecocritical reading of Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy (2014) titled *Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance*. The first novel *Annihilation* is written from a biologist's view of an ecozone known as Area X in which there is a continuous situation of unknowability and invisibility of the environment that is subjected to study and control in the plot. The second novel carries ecophobia into the very organisation 'Southern Reach' that is investigating Area X. Here the encounter between the protagonists and Area X is mediated by data and the politics of human beings working together, yet keeping secrets from each other. In the third novel, the climax reveals the intelligence that is Area X, yet at the same time masking its intention and the future of human beings and their interests. While analysing the different types of ecofear, I posit that it is possible for a certain kind of literature to evoke a horror of ourselves and transform ecophobia-within our attitudes. This essay concludes with the significance of self-abnegation and a collapse of human arrogance at both the epistemic level and identity-separateness for being with nature. I posit that this kind of novel, a sort of ecologically inspired fiction, renders the human interest invisible, against bio-interest resulting in a foundational shift in our attitude to nature and ourselves.

Keywords: Ecophobia, Ecofear, *Southern Reach Trilogy*, Topophobia, Topophilia, Topophobia

Introduction

Ecofear, a fear of the environment we are in, could be an affect arising out of many factors including threat to survival or aversion to nature and the nonhuman that can be termed as ecophobia. In another way we can say ecophobia is a term used to describe 'fear of the environment,' an attitude that leads to the psychological state of ecofear. This attitude or state of being not only is a state of psychological fear but it also leads us away from caring for or loving our environment. As Simon C. Estok ("Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness" 219) points out, much has been written about our love for environment but less about the negative dislike of the natural world that has permeated a society divorced from nature and its unmediated experience/encounter.

Estok defines ecophobia as an irrational fear or hatred: "Broadly speaking, we may define ecophobia as an irrational and groundless fear or hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism" ("Reading Ecophobia" 4). In another paper, he suggests that ecocriticism takes account of this phenomenon when he suggests

that philosophically addressing ecophobia requires us to understand evil and how “badness in nature” is represented (“Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness” 6-7). One can understand that fear of this “bad” nature and its representations in literature, media and writing in some sense is foundational to ecophobia. While it is easy to theorize ecophobia within texts that are perpetrators of this fear, there are also contradictory texts where the portrayal of nature as avenging or more powerful than human has an ethical intention. While fear itself may lead to dislike, fear also serves as a warning. In his essay on gothic literature and nature, Tom J. Hillard suggests: “... literature matters because it both reflects and shapes values in the “real world” outside of literary texts. Thus, if the canonized texts associated with the development of our modern environmental movement teach us one history of values, we can also learn different histories—ones slightly less encouraging—by studying those that reveal anxieties about nature” (694). He further suggests that the gothic genre already is replete with horror and fear and analysing these fears would only help us understand the role such fears play in the way we treat our environment (694).

“Whenever nature ceases to be invisible...it is possible that some form of ecofear manifests itself.”

I believe ecophobia can be theorized as not only a dislike or fear of nature or other non-human species, but it can also refer to the apathy or disinterest shown by people towards the natural environment and its preservation. Just like in sexism or racism, wilful ignorance, and apathy are also subtle forms of the same hatred or dislike—a disinterest that manifests because of non-inclusive thinking. But this apathy is a constant sense of unease about the non-human other; it is not a neutral position. This unease has perhaps not yet been manifest, but it prevails, as a background to thinking and doing. Nature is rendered invisible in our thinking and attitude. It is a backdrop to human activity and presence. Whenever nature ceases to be invisible, and foregrounds its presence to us, it is possible that some form of ecofear manifests itself.

Another aspect of the environment that humans deny is the presence of humans in nature. Humans are blind to the enormous effects of our human footprint on this planet. It is here that the concept of Anthropocene reminds us of the way we have altered the environment. Timothy Morton (1) points out that Anthropocene is a condition of the human world where human actions have had intense adverse effects on the earth. While the earth is affected so much by ecological disasters such as global warming and climate change, newer forms of fiction are emerging that reflect, represent, and build on the political and cultural transformations of this historical epoch (Trexler 5). How does the literary genre represent the complex ecological and political issues without falling into typical dystopian narratives of human destruction?

Adam Trexler critically examines Anthropocene fiction and posits the difficulty of classifying this serious fiction into a category:

...the narrative difficulties of the Anthropocene threaten to rupture the defining features of genre: literary novels bleed into science fiction; suspense novels have surprising elements of realism; realist depictions of everyday life involuntarily become biting satire. For these reasons, novels about the Anthropocene cannot be easily placed into discrete generic pigeonholes. (14)

The novels of *Southern Reach Trilogy (SRT)* written by Jeff VanderMeer may be posited as an example of Anthropocene fiction. They received critical feedback for surrealism and their invocation of the effects of Anthropocene (Coby 15). Besides being acclaimed for following the style of Lovecraft's work (Weinstock 178), these novels also fall under the literature subgenre called the "New Weird." This genre is discussed by Jeffery Weinstock in his essay "The New Weird" where he suggests that this is a kind of literature that engages with real world issues in fantasy worlds where normalcy is challenged (186) and human autonomy is rendered powerless (196). According to the writers, Benjamin Noys and Timothy S. Murphy "The New Weird can be characterized as a new sensibility of welcoming the alien and the monstrous as sites of affirmation and becoming" (125). The monstrous and the alien for them is treated as a form of "subversion" to "power and subjectivity."

These novels are also mentioned with reference to horror literature under the category, "eco-horror." Elizabeth Parker suggests that there is a new way of deconstruction by which environmental themes are explored in horror literature (56-61). "This is representative of an increasing sense that humans have severed themselves from the natural world, which they are consciously—and continually—destroying. In this battle of humans vs. nature, it is clear that people, collectively, are the monsters" (60). The *SRT* consists of the novels titled *Annihilation*, *Authority*, and *Acceptance* in that order. The plot of the novel-series is that there is an unusual event in a coastal region of the United States after which an "Area X" has been created that is different from the nature or the culture that we are familiar with. A boundary has formed, and humans quickly move in to cordon off the area, announcing it as a place of ecological disaster. A secret organisation called Southern Reach has been set up to investigate the phenomenon that is simply known as Area X. Many expeditions of experts are sent, and it is noticed that technology fails within the Area X. Though the expeditions continue, the humans have been unable to understand very little about the area and very few of them return safely to the other side.

The novels and stories in this framework suggest a dark and weird universe that seems to be hidden by a thin veneer of normalcy. The writers such as Miéville, VanderMeer, Kiernan and Barron seek to unravel the horror and give us an experience of fear of "the other and othering effect" (Weinstock 195). While the idea of nature as avenging suggests itself in the novels of *SRT* many times, the protagonists fail to overcome and control the new nature that is Area X. Is it a new form of evolved nature? Is it an alien intelligence? There are no answers for the human characters in the book or for the readers who identify with them, only descriptions of encounters with new realities or 'weird' which renders the human condition powerless.

Estok in his essay "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness" states that "ecophobia is rooted in and dependent on anthropocentric arrogance and speciesism" (216). A part of this arrogance comes from the scientific study of nature, an epistemic conquest of nature and another from conquering ecofear through confrontation and winning through survival. The category of new weird novels is closely related to the taking down of human hubris, thereby creating a rich field of narratives that also deal with the otherness of nature and wilderness in a different way. We become so insignificant that the nature is truly biocentric. "Would that not be the final humbling of the human condition? That the trees and birds, the fox and the rabbit, the wolf and the deer... reach a point at which they do not even notice us, as we are transformed" (VanderMeer, *Acceptance* Ch.5).

A review of the books by Tompkins suggests that this genre of literature captures the “Weird Ecology,” a merger of the natural and unnatural. This trilogy draws our attention to the ecology of present, the irreversibility of our situation in the Anthropocene. We have turned ourselves helpless in the face of the very Anthropocene monsters we have created. This helplessness could be the first step to create an attitudinal change in us. The beauty of the books is that they let the other side win. They offer a collapsitarianism in reverse. Area X represents not ecological collapse but rather human collapse—or, better said, human transmutation. Area X cleanses its territory of anthropogenic poisoning, then sets to work on people themselves. (Tompkins, para. 23)

Anil Narine writes of the phenomena of Ecotrauma and suggests that novels, and movies have an ethical impact on our attitude to the destruction of the environment:

Such creative cultural forms, in their best incarnations, prompt us to consider our quickly evolving subject positions, characterized by oscillating feelings of agency and helplessness in the face of contemporary ecological traumas. The narratives that represent future ecological challenges often aim to do more than merely titillate viewers and readers. (9)

It is easy to misread nature in this book as avenging and read these books as yet another instance of ecophobia-inducing dystopian fiction. However, the trilogy by its subtle nuances and plot allows nature to contact us in alternative ways through the book. In a passage in *Acceptance*, a sample of a plant from Area X that is growing from a dead mouse is found by the new director, Control, in his chaotic office. We read how it seems immortal and does not respond to experimentation. The frustration of the scientists is evident:

The plant will not die.
No parasites will touch the plant.
The plant will not die.
No extremes of temperature will affect it. Freeze it, it will thaw. Burn it, it will regenerate.
The plant will not die.
No matter what you try, no matter the experiments performed on it in the sterile, the blinding white environs of the storage cathedral...the plant won't die. (*Acceptance* Ch.14)

In this above passage one can feel the power of existence of the plant that refuses to bow down to any violent human action. The plant is not attacking or threatening the humans. In that sense its revenge as “nature” is not aggressive. But in a significant move, its resistance to being an object of study, an object that cannot be killed is its revenge. This passage is reflective of the way ecofear in these novels is not generated from hatred of the environment but through a suggestion of human inability to understand or control nature. It is a Baconian reversal as it were. As we read the novels of *SRT*, we find that the fiction continuously invokes ecofear within the characters in the novel and then transposes that phobia into us for our condition, a reminder of our own displaced relationship with the environment.

The novels also rely on the horror created by Area X, the strange fungus like moss that is luminous, a huge creature that chases humans in the reeds. As with Gothic fiction,¹ this genre also relies on evoking different types of horror and fear. Gry Ulstein also writes of the New Weird fiction and its monsters, relating to the way monsters help us rethink the binary of nature and culture.

... it is in the conceptualized, tension-fraught space between that which is (perceived as) “real” and “normal” and that which is (perceived as) “imagined” and “weird,” that “Anthropocene monsters” can be found. (Ulstein 73)

The monsters in the novels represent the non-human. While their form is monstrous and weird, we understand that these moaning creatures were once human. Losing humanity is to lose our Anthropocene selves which transforms us.

Ulstein further adds how the change caused by Area X is actually a merciful act (92-3). It transforms humans into creatures more than human, releasing them from the cage of destructive activity. This intent of the intelligence referred to again and again as that which guides and is present in area X creates ecofear. This language of fear generated by viewing ourselves as the other, as the monsters can encourage us towards a new language of understanding that is not based on the significance of the human. Ulstien further suggests “that words are only words until their message becomes powerful enough to change minds, broaden scopes, and transform reality” (93).

The Novel *Annihilation* is related through the perspective of a biologist who enters the area with three other experts, a psychologist, a surveyor, and an anthropologist. One important feature of the novels is that we rarely know the names of the characters. They are given nicknames or sometimes just known by their function and role.

The biologist, who remains unnamed in the novels, survives her encounter with the alien intelligence that is at Area X apparently, a foreign lifeform. The second novel *Authority* shifts focus to a few years in the future where the biologist, who calls herself by the nickname “Ghost Bird” is incarcerated in a mental health facility and is undergoing treatment for loss of memory and simultaneously being questioned for her input on Area X. The humans still know very little about Area X, most of the data collected is fragmented and what happens to the people who enter Area X is still a mystery. The protagonist we follow this time, is John Rodriguez, known as “Control,” who has come to replace the previous director who, we are told, has gone missing. He is confronted at every step by the actions and non-cooperation of Grace, the disgruntled assistant director. The prevalence of Area X’s affect even outside of its boundary is made clear through its artefacts and traces even within the scientific institution. The third of the series, *Acceptance* sees Ghost Bird, Grace, and Control move into Area X together. In this final part of the *SRT*, the past and the present narratives intertwine to reveal to us the final possibility of what the mystery of Area X could be without giving us a clear solution or resolution.

There are many forms of ecofear demonstrated in the novel. Firstly, there is one kind of ecofear that arises from encounters of the expedition members with unfamiliar places such as wilderness and/or because of a threat to life. We could call this a kind of displacement anxiety theorised by the concept of topophobia. The second is a fear arising from ecophobia that is demonstrated by the character Control, caused by inability to control or manipulate nature

physically. Another unique type of ecofear which would be of interest to our discussion would be the one that arises from what I call the loss of epistemic control—a failure of the human to understand and the failure to dominate nature through the act of knowing. And a fourth type of ecofear that arises from the actual possibility of being one with nature in an experiential way—a fear of self-abnegation. Let us examine some of the ways in which these types of ecofears are described in the *SRT* narratives.

Strangeness and Fear: A Geocritical Exploration

In his description of a place-mindedness that humans seem to engage with in literature, *Robert T. Tally Jr.* uses the word ‘topophobia.’ He writes:

Topophobia characterizes the subjective engagement with a given place, with one’s sense of place, and with the possible projection of alternative spaces. Moreover, it requires us to consider the apparently objective structures and systems that condition, not to say determine, our perceptions and experiences of space and place. (23)

He chooses to use the term topophobia, to convey the sense of anxiety and unease that always permeates our estrangement. This unease is heightened in the novels of *SRT*, in the situations when the humans are within Area X. The region draws us into its landscape effect. Tally’s topophobia includes both topophilia and topophobia together and he explains that in literature, this concept goes beyond the mere relationship between a writer and a landscape: "Rather, topophobia suggests the degree to which all thinking is, in various ways, thinking about place, which also means thinking about the relations among places, as well as those among subjects and places, in the broadest possible sense" (23). He further argues for a geocritical reading of texts. I follow his suggestion that "A geocritical approach to reading these narrative maps enables us to sense more emphatically the ways that space, place, and mapping condition our lives, attitudes, thoughts, and experiences, as well as our more critically distant claims to knowledge about them" (12). When we combine reading the landscape of the novel with the reading of the sources of ecofear in both the protagonists and its effect on us as readers, we realise that not only Area X but our own world has also become a source of anxiety for us. The geocritical examination of the novels indicate that ecofear is also created by landscapes, those that are forms of ‘atopia’ or non-places. In his book *Landscapes of Fear*, Yi-Fu Tuan recounts how certain places can cause anxiety and alarm. He points out “every human construction—whether mental or material—is a component in a landscape of fear because it exists to contain chaos” (6).

The landscapes of the novels are drawn from the author’s own experience of trekking in wildlife reserves. In an interview to Mandelbaum (2020) published online, he says:

All of the details of the natural world are from hiking at the St. Marks Wildlife Refuge and other places in Florida, in the Southeast, and even the West Coast. Although strange things happen in them, the bulk of the books are composed of details from our real world. (VanderMeer, “*Annihilation* Author Jeff VanderMeer Tells Us How He Makes His Sci-Fi Feel Authentic”)

This state of ecophobia from landscape as described in this novel spring from two registers of reference, one being the loss of a sense of emplacement or feeling unfamiliar with a place that is threatening and another from our discomfort with boundaries/transition zones.

Unlike stable landscapes that are ecologically classifiable outside, within Area X's boundary, the landscape is not comprehensible as a particular ecotype. This is an important technique by which the author destabilises landscape of the fantasy world he is creating for us within Area X. "The map had been the first form of misdirection, for what is a map but a way of emphasizing some things and making other things invisible?" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, Ch.02). The novel begins with the discovery of the tower that is unmarked on the maps. The tower is not marked on it though it is a prominent feature (VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, Ch.01). The landscape that is transitional and uncategorizable, creates a sense of unease—fear of the unfamiliar.

While the psychologist convinces herself that it was a storm that uncovered the entrance, the biologist is not so sure in her mind. She calls it a tower, yet physically it is a tunnel that burrows underground. So, the sense of unease pervades the explorers on this discovery. The fear of the unknown feature is certainly described as a fever: "The entrance to the tower leading down exerted a kind of presence, a blank surface that let us write so many things upon it. This presence manifested like a low-grade fever, pressing down on all of us" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation*, Ch.01). The features that are causes for fear are not the landscape but these unusual structures in the landscape—the land itself has become an Anthropocene monster.

Another feature of the landscape that causes the discomfort and fear for the protagonists is the border. The Area X is sought to be enclosed by boundaries that are human-made, for instance, military zones, fences, barriers and perimeter checks. But the Area X itself has created a transitional zone for itself and the boundary keeps shifting and expanding northwards. Edward S. Casey describes the nature of a boundary in contrast to the idea of 'limits.' He writes: "To be a boundary, by contrast, is to be exterior to something or, more exactly, to be around it, enclosing it, acting as its surrounding. As such, a boundary belongs to the container rather than to the contained" (63). Though the humans enclose it within a perimeter, the Area X owns the boundary. Thus, in the novels, the boundary of Area X is not its containment but its reach, its expanse.

On the side adjoining the human borders, the Area X intelligence seems to be humouring the scientists. The border does not move forward and when it does, we do not know if the boundary was actually present or if Area X had already expanded far beyond its limits.

Wilderness, Threat and Fear of Monsters

Another trope that reveals itself with relation to the landscape of Area X is the idea of wilderness. The contemporary narratives of wilderness are like that of the idea of paradise and are supposed to provide sublime experience. But it was not always so. The idea of nature as wilderness is derived from the older biblical narratives. Cronon points out that earlier versions of wilderness were considered to be barren or a desert or a wasteland. He writes: "Wilderness in short, was a place to which one came only against one's will, and always in fear and trembling. Whatever value it might have arose from the possibility that it might be "reclaimed" and turned towards human ends—planted as a garden, say or a city upon a Hill" (473). Nature in paradise was perfect but

with the banishment of humans to the earth, nature was no longer benign and became wilderness (Cronon 473).

The interesting aspect of the literary geography of Area X is that in contrast to a landscape of a completely fictional world or an unknown fantasy land (such as Tolkien's middle earth), is that it is the nature we are familiar with on earth. We are perceiving the landscape through the scientific eye of the biologist, a member of the expedition. She (nick named Ghost-Bird later in the novels) becomes our alter ego, giving us a superior epistemic advantage as agents because we can "know" the living presences in the ecosystem that is Area X. So, the wilderness becomes a comforting presence for us, though it is not benign and any less dangerous. The biologist herself is an oddity, a human with deep sympathy for nature. In the end of the first novel as she realises that she is turning into something not so human, she writes in the journal that her loss of humanity would be such a bad thing, given that nature is being restored to a pristine condition in contrast to its damaged and altered state outside (*Annihilation*, Ch.05).

The ecofear caused by threat is similar in many instances. Like all humans who face an animal in the wild, the protagonists display fear of confronting something that can cause them bodily harm. As we read the story, in the beginning, we are exposed to the thrill and horror of facing these creatures. For instance, when the protagonist of *Annihilation* encounters the threatening creature and situations of Area X, she is afraid and runs away. There are moaning sounds in the reeds and creatures that chase them through the area. It is a natural human reaction to the wild to be afraid of predators.

I hesitated for just a moment. Some part of me wanted to see the creature, after having heard it for so many days. Was it the remnants of the scientist in me, trying to regroup, trying to apply logic when all that mattered was survival? If so, it was a very small part. I ran. It surprised me how fast I could run—I'd never had to run that fast before. Down the tunnel of blackness lined with reeds, raked by them and not caring, willing the brightness to propel me forward. To get past the beast before it cut me off. (*Annihilation*, Ch.04)

But this is only one of the very few instances in the novel, of seeing nature as a malevolent being. For most part, nature of Area X does not actually kill or hurt the humans deliberately, instead we see that the members of the expedition turn on each other and become more dangerous than the landscapes. The narrative points to the opinion that humans are more violent. The psychologist hypnotises the anthropologist and forces her to undertake a suicidal mission. The biologist falls prey to the surveyor's ambush and is injured by a gunshot. We come to know that Control's mother sends him in to Area X so she could understand if the institution Southern Reach had been compromised by alien doppelgangers.

The way Area X invades and threatens the world is explained through the story of the biologist. After she has been invaded in her body by the alien species from Area X, she gradually transforms into a huge being, a monster. At the same time, a shadow self of the biologist is created, a doppelganger who is an improved biocentric human being who calls herself Ghost Bird. Nature even recreates a better human. According to Ulstein, Ghost Bird is endowed with a better

empathetic imagination towards nature, in a sense a better nature-centric human who has been redesigned by the alien entity (87).

The first encounter of fear with the monster is when the biologist faces the Crawler. The Crawler is a being that creates scribbles on the wall of the tower, an unknowable entity who fascinates and scares the biologist. When the biologist faces the Crawler, there is both fear and fascination expressed. As something that cannot be grasped by senses, the Crawler is perceived only as distorted vision, through variations of light and sound, baffling the human by its unknowability and by being unclassifiable. In *Annihilation*, (Ch.04), the biologist attempts to describe this creature's form and ends her note by admitting that it overruns boundaries both in space and time as something that is a shape that spreads across where it should have not been, an amorphous presence that couldn't be pinned down to a form or a particular shape.

Fiction in the Weird genre (and by extension the New Weird) deals with monsters metaphorically, following the tradition of Lovecraft, suggests Ulstein. They (the monsters in the stories) are responses to cultural tensions (81-82). The VanderMeers in their introduction to an anthology suggest that: "The Weird can be transformative—sometimes literally—and it entertains monsters while not always see [sic] them as monstrous. It strives for a kind of understanding even when something cannot be understood and acknowledges that failure as sign and symbol of our limitations" ("The Weird: An Introduction").

When the members confront the biologist, who has become a part of Area X, a large being, herself a monster now, there is only weirdness in the new creature, a curiosity about its intelligent form and being. The language used to describe the monster attends to its intelligent design that is adaptive to the environment, a design better suited to live in nature than the human form and intelligence.

Nothing monstrous existed here—only beauty, only the glory of good design, of intricate planning, from the lungs that allowed this creature to live on land or at sea, to the huge gill slits hinted at along the sides, shut tightly now, but which would open to breathe deeply of seawater when the biologist once again headed for the ocean. All of those eyes, all of those temporary tidal pools, the pockmarks and the ridges, the thick, sturdy quality of the skin. 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*, Ch.11)

The reaction of the better and more than human doppelganger Ghost Bird to this form of the biologist is surprising. She makes physical contact and stares into its eyes, unafraid. This shows how the monster is not a monster but a vaster intelligence, both in design and form for a human. She is confronted by her own original, realising she is but a shadow, a copy. In contrast to the experience of the first encounter of the human biologist with the Crawler, the encounter with the doppelganger of the biologist with her trans-mutated original is one of enchantment. Ghost bird then becomes the medium through which the reader encounters the monster without fear as enchanting or weird.

While a clear idea of transgression and invasion can be found out by humans by checking if the border has advanced evenly on all sides, it seems that the Area X invades the very humanity by biologically taking on the human shape, infiltrating the species in the real world. In a reversal of humans imitating and saturating nature, nature has begun to saturate the human world in ways that cannot be understood. The human containment of Area X fails, time and again. In fact, we discover that the alien/nature intelligence has created doppelgangers to replace humans of different expeditions and sent them on the other side into the normal world, transgressing the safety perimeter created by the borders of Area X.

In the second book of the *SRT* series, *Authority*, a new director of the organisation, John Rodriguez, known to us as “Control” is appointed to replace the earlier director, a woman who has gone missing. He fails to make sense of the data on Area X left by his predecessor and sometimes strange objects and incomplete notes turn up in his office and desk. Confoundment and lack of information, inability to recognise nature, fills the other characters in Southern Reach organisation with irrational fear. Wilderness, even within an institution cannot be conquered with human effort. Nor it is benign enough to be worshipped on a pedestal of detachment. Control represents the rational, organisational and political character in the novels. His fear springs from ecophobia. The inability to control Area X or the chaos in his office both represent for him a challenge. When faced with the same leviathan presence, of the biologist monster, Control experiences the fear of extreme rejection (*Acceptance*, Ch.13).

A sensation of loss of control and yet of worthlessness assails Control on during the encounter with the biologist’s many-eyed form. He is shaken but still tries to plan a way ahead to neutralise the Area X. This may be because he seemed to be rejected by the new biologist being, instead of the usual response to his inability to control his environment. The ecofear arising from inability to master nature has two sides, one is loss of control and the other, unable to belong or unite with nature, a fear of alienation.

Knowing Nature, Invisible Presence and Oneness

According to Bruce Foltz, nature is only an exteriority for modernity. Such exteriority, he suggests, is relational to the “knowing subject” (331). That means when we try and understand what nature is, we are only able to grasp nature that is given to us through our own perspectives of how it should be rather than what it is. In the novels of *SRT*, the knowing subjects, the protagonists such as the expedition members or the officials of the institution, treat nature as an object and consider that nature should be malleable to human machinations. When humans in the novel discover they cannot control or contain Area X, or even understand its intent purpose or its characteristics, they experience a continuous wariness. Estok in his essay “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness” also remarks on the idea that our interference in nature and our interest in trying to control it and its subsequent failure results in ecophobia (208).

In the *SRT*, (*Acceptance* Ch.03) the Anthropocene has been reversed in Area X, humans are excluded and devoid of agency. This message comes across in the response of Area X to the effects of human artefacts such as technology and buildings. They are rotted and there was a sense of erasure of all things made by humans.

Area X actively depollutes and degrades the human impact on nature, restoring it to a pristine state. Though nature is threatening and dangerous for the human in these novels, the agency given to Area X somewhat reverses the ecophobic stance in these novels, the stance that Estok refers to: "...ecophobic stance, a stance whose enthymematic assumption presupposes that it is ultimately the human (not the nonhuman natural) that takes ethical and ontological priority and has agency" ("Painful Material Realities, Tragedy, Ecophobia," 132). The idea that ecocritics suggest is that controlling the environment doesn't actually work that easily but the more we seem to try and control the environment, the lessor we are actually able to (Estok, "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness," 208; Tally 5).

One of the ways to control nature is through science. Understanding, categorising, naming labelling, measuring, describing in language are all parts of a human process to control nature through knowing, through epistemic superiority. Historically the purpose of science was visualised by Francis Bacon who regarded nature as existing for and because of humans (Estok, "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness," 210).

As humans are subject to the utter failure of "making sense" of the events transpiring in Area X, science and control cannot provide humanity with familiarity and concreteness in terms of the events that unfold. One confronts the absurd represented in the novels by the alien lifeforms and monsters of Area X. We see the protagonists confronted with the evolved trans-mutated intelligence, the monster that was the human biologist earlier, there is a loss of "*res cogitans*," the human ability to make sense of what is in front. The reader who has been introduced to the Ghost Bird doppelganger as the same protagonist realises the original biologist has actually transformed into a non-human. This creates a state of ecofear where a confrontation with nature, as a mere object of our scientific enquiry is no longer possible. As with the indestructible plant or the crawler in the novels, science and rationality fail to make sense of these creatures or events. As the novels progress, the purpose of Area X to reverse the human effects on the environment becomes clear. It is only when the humans become nature that the total cleansing is possible. The protagonists (and by extension the readers who identify with them) cannot deal with the tension between staying separate or merging into a collective ecosystem, a threat of identity loss. The more the humans try and grasp Area X, the more they experience themselves as humans who are becoming invisible.

Such unease of not being able to know or make sense of something creates a kind of cultural tension. A part of this unease is also what inspires people to learn and know about the natural world and overcome the ignorance. Human beings describe, catalogue, and document nature. On the other hand, the surrealism projected in these novels make it possible for the author to highlight the failure of human understanding when confronted with the interiority of nature. When a subject confronts nature that is no longer a mere exteriority, and faces its interiority, there is an experience of a breakdown of the boundaries. Foltz writes for instance: "Nature is substance, self-subsistence that is exterior to knowing, standing opaquely on its own over against the self-transparency of consciousness" (331). Yet, such encounters have been common to human experience.ⁱⁱ

When one encounters nature as the other, one can have two reactions. As the biologist does in the novel, we can feel enchanted. We do often say, "I feel a part of nature," but what we actually mean is we feel that we are 'inside nature,' nature surrounds us, and our boundary of self is cocooned within an environment. Writing about the way ecological writing has concentrated on

our relationship to nature so far, Morton suggests that the narrative of being “embedded in nature” imagines nature as an envelope around us 4-5). Surrounding mediums are never clearly definable or graspable, creating an ambiguity that is detrimental to the environmental discourse. He explains that ecological writing cannot capture nature except as an object of veneration and the narrative ends up in a form of dissociated romantic worship that is hypocritical.

On the other hand, in such an encounter, when we let our boundaries drop, we lose ourselves. We could experience some exhilaration if we are prepared for it. However, it is likely against the background of ecophobia, we usually experience panic and fear, born out of an existential threat of dissolving boundaries of the self. We do not like to be invisible in the presence of nature.

“What if you become the very thing you fear?”

Is it possible for nature to be visible when we do not become invisible? The author seems to suggest this. In these novels, the writer VanderMeer suggests a unique resolution to our own hubris. In the surreal world of Area X we stop being with Area X, as humans, when we have become Area X. The self-abnegation is complete, there is only acceptance. In a strange way, we are made to realize that we are the monsters, the intelligence of nature is more evolved than us as readers who have identified with the human protagonists. In giving up our own monstrosity as humans who have destroyed nature, we inhabit not only the quasilocal wilderness given by literary imagination of *SRT*, but we are also made aware of the real world of phenomenological inhabitation—nature is rendered visible to us. In this state the divide between the human non-human breaks down. The monsters that is a human becomes a monster that is natural.

In the last novel, the invisible fear of losing control, the subtle presence of the intelligence of nature in Area X is revealed. The biologist represents, for us, the readiness to give up control. Both as a knower and as someone who seeks to retain her humanity. In a letter written to the survivors, the biologist recounts her unwillingness to merge with nature: “But this encounter did affect me in one way. I became resolved not to give into the brightness, to give up my identity—not yet. I could not come to terms with the possibility that one day I might put aside my vigilance and become the moaning creature in the reeds. Perhaps this was weakness. Perhaps this was just fear” (*Acceptance* Ch.02). The visible letting go of control, accepting the evolution of herself into a more than human entity becomes the way to overcome the ecophobia. What if you become the very thing you fear? This unique kind of Ecofear that is overcome of this sort is a representation of our own fear of change. We are vigilant about our identity as human, as different from nature. We strive to be visible against nature, careful not to lessen our importance even as we venerate living with ecophilia. In some way this fear to a lesser degree even represents reluctance we have for the kind of smaller changes we are likely to make in our life that are pro nature. It is not fear of nature, a direct fear but a fear of the changing perspective. We may fear for instance if we do not use plastic how will we keep things waterproof? The way nature is represented in these novels challenges both our affiliation and fear of nature. Area X, as the new nature is both within and without the humans. It is an ecotone, a place where ecosystems merge and emerge as new zones of experience. It is what we would call a boundary-place, a place where one transitions. This ecofear would be beneficial from the perspective of ecophobia that yields unto us a mirror into our own condition as very powerful, yet very powerless in front of the nature.

Conclusion

The analysis of *SRT* suggests for us a new direction of thought around ecological fear. The descriptions of the types of ecofear do make for an interesting reading but I have attempted to articulate a different function of ecofear that may not relate to ecophobia causally, particularly in novels like *SRT* where the purpose is to create awareness of ecological issues in a provocative way. While predictive fiction and dystopian novels sometimes portray nature as a villain and support the creation of ecophobia (Estok, "Painful Material Realities, Tragedy, Ecophobia," 133), the *SRT* novels have a contrary effect. Through the stylised form of the new weird fiction and through symbolic destruction of human importance, materially and intellectually, in these books, a different outcome awaits the reader. The ecofear generated does not fall under the fear that causes ecophobia. Instead, we could say that it is possible to experience a sort of ecofear when we shift perspectives from an anthropocentric to a biocentric view. Area X represents the collapse of the human. Unlike the Anthropocene where human activities create monsters in nature, here a reversal happens, nature creates monsters by transmutation of humans. It cleanses the anthropogenic effects establishing a new order—a new control, a new intelligence. The monster created by Area X from the human is unlike our monsters, it is a monster whose semantics force us to relook at fear at ourselves as human. We are the monsters.

The shifting of our perspective results in a vague and irrational fear as we come to terms with a new way of looking at things. As we lose our protection of hubris and control, our knowledge of nature as an object fails, we render ourselves invisible and small, allowing nature to overwhelm us. Far from directing our phobia towards an avenging nature, the types of fiction that we can call "Anthropocene fiction" (Adam Textler) in any genre tend to push us towards a self-horror, a disgust towards humankind, shifting our foundations of ecological ethics. Our interests are rendered invisible against the interest of the nonhuman, displacing ecophobia.

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Notes

ⁱ For more on gothic fiction, fear, and ecophobia see Hillard, 2009.

ⁱⁱ There is scholarship on the idea of oneness with nature and ecological-self put forward by the Eco-philosopher, Arne Naess. I deliberately avoid that philosophical perspective here, preferring to stay with the realm of feelings and sensations of a normal experience.
