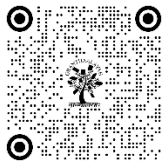


# THE STRANGLING FRUIT: GOTHIC AESTHETICS AND ECOLOGICAL ANXIETY IN JEFF VANDER MEER'S *ANNIHILATION*

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## ABSTRACT

The Anthropocene, a term marking the current geological era dominated by human activity, has become a central concern in contemporary literature, particularly in the context of ecological crises. Jeff Vander Meer's *Annihilation* (2014), the first book of his *Southern Reach* trilogy, merges elements of ecological horror and gothic aesthetics to craft a narrative that mirrors the fears and anxieties of the Anthropocene. This paper examines how Vander Meer uses gothic tropes—haunting, decay and the uncanny—to evoke a sense of environmental trauma, critiquing humanity's destabilizing relationship with nature. Through the mysterious and ever-changing environment of Area X, the novel explores the erasure and transformation of human presence in an unstable world. Drawing on ecocriticism, gothic theory and the works of scholars such as Timothy Morton, Johan Höglund and others, this paper demonstrates how *Annihilation* reflects the environmental trauma of the Anthropocene and the uncanny presence of nature's agency. The novel highlights how ecological destruction haunts both the landscape and the human psyche, creating a narrative where horror and awe coexist in confronting environmental collapse.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, Ecocriticism, Ecological Horror, Gothic Aesthetics

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term "Anthropocene" marks an epoch in which human activity has profoundly altered the earth's ecological and geological systems, leaving a permanent impact on the planet. This period is defined by ecological collapse, environmental trauma and the fragility of human existence within a deteriorating world. Literature has responded to these seismic changes with themes that reflect humanity's shifting relationship with nature. Among these literary responses, the emerging genre of eco-horror stands out for its unique ability to merge the gothic aesthetic with ecological concerns. Eco-horror interrogates how environmental decay, nonhuman agency and haunted landscapes destabilize human perceptions of control and expose the anxieties of living in a damaged ecosystem.

Jeff Vander Meer's *Annihilation* (2014), the first book in his acclaimed *Southern Reach* trilogy, exemplifies this genre through its unsettling and surreal depiction of "Area X". This mysterious and abandoned coastal zone, sealed off from the rest of the world for decades, serves as a haunting reflection of ecological collapse. Vander Meer uses gothic elements of haunting, decay and the uncanny to explore the intersection of environmental devastation and human isolation in the

Anthropocene. Heather I. Sullivan's concept of the "dark pastoral" is particularly relevant to this exploration, as it "reflects several new ideas" about the Anthropocene, emphasizing "industrial cultures' tainted tactics when accessing and using 'natural resources' and the standard obliviousness to the resultant waste" (26). The novel's depiction of Area X resonates with what Rune Graulund identifies as the gothic's exploration of "transgression, excess, and monstrosity," elements intrinsic to the Anthropocene (Edwards et al. xi). The narrative follows a team of four women—a biologist, an anthropologist, a psychologist and a surveyor—on the twelfth expedition into Area X. Previous expeditions had ended in tragedy, marked by unexplained disappearances, suicides, cancer and mental trauma. The story, told through the field journal of the biologist, unfolds with an eerie and intimate perspective. Tom J. Hillard emphasizes that "ecocriticism itself has always been a Gothic story" (22), reflecting how narratives like *Annihilation* evoke hidden or repressed truths about humanity's destructive relationship with the environment.

The biologist's personal connection to Area X deepens the emotional stakes. Her husband, a member of a previous expedition, returned inexplicably altered, unable to recall his experiences and later succumbed to cancer along with others from his team. Motivated by a mix of scientific curiosity and personal loss, she joins the expedition, only to witness its rapid descent into chaos. The team discovers a subterranean structure the biologist names "the Tower", whose walls are inscribed with fungal writing that emits spores. After accidentally inhaling these spores, the biologist begins to transform, gaining immunity to the psychologist's hypnotic control. As paranoia and distrust grow among the group, the anthropologist vanishes, the psychologist dies mysteriously near a lighthouse and the surveyor turns on the biologist in a deadly confrontation. Venturing alone, the biologist uncovers unsettling evidence of past expeditions within the lighthouse, including journals detailing horrific encounters with a monstrous, shapeshifting entity she calls the "Crawler". Her direct confrontation with the Crawler leaves her physically and psychologically transformed. Choosing to remain in Area X, she follows its coastline, seeking answers to its ever-changing mysteries. Through its atmospheric tension and intricate layering of gothic and ecological themes, *Annihilation* critiques humanity's role in environmental destruction. The novel presents Area X as a site of haunting and transformation, serving as a potent metaphor for the Anthropocene's unsettling realities. Sullivan's observation that such narratives illuminate "industrial cultures' tainted tactics" (26) aligns with Vander Meer's critique of humanity's environmental hubris. By blurring the boundaries between human and nonhuman, the novel evokes what Graulund describes as the Anthropocene's monstrous and excessive nature (Edwards et al. xi). Vander Meer masterfully weaves horror and awe to articulate an ecological nightmare where humanity is both the architect and victim of planetary destruction. Widely celebrated for its imaginative depth and unsettling portrayal of ecological horror, *Annihilation* won the 2014 Nebula and Shirley Jackson Awards. Its success marked Vander Meer's transition from the New Weird literary genre to mainstream acclaim.

## 2. THE GOTHIC AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

The gothic genre has long been associated with themes of human vulnerability, supernatural forces and the destabilization of the human subject within oppressive environments. Classic works such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* utilize the supernatural and the uncanny to delve into human isolation, guilt and the consequences of defying natural or social boundaries. In the context of the Anthropocene—a geological epoch marked by humanity's profound impact on the planet—the gothic aesthetic has gained renewed relevance, becoming a potent vehicle for exploring ecological anxieties. Scholars like Timothy Morton and Johan Höglund have emphasized how the gothic's focus on haunting, decay and existential dread aligns with contemporary concerns about environmental collapse and humanity's fraught relationship with the nonhuman world. Timothy Morton's concept of "dark ecology" is particularly significant in understanding how the gothic engages with ecological themes. In Morton's view, the more humans attempt to dominate or control nature, the more it becomes an alien and haunting presence. Morton argues that "dark ecology" confronts the entanglement of humanity and nature by embracing the uncomfortable realities of ecological interconnectedness. In *Annihilation*, this concept is vividly realized in Area X, a place where the natural environment is alien, hostile and unknowable. The region becomes a metaphor for the Anthropocene itself—an era where human actions to master nature have led to catastrophic consequences, creating landscapes that haunt both the physical world and the human psyche.

Building on Morton's ideas, Johan Höglund examines how the eco-gothic portrays nature as an active and sometimes malevolent force. Höglund contends that the uncanny in eco-gothic narratives is not merely a psychological phenomenon but also an ecological reality. This perspective reflects humanity's increasing awareness of its destructive impact on the environment. In *Annihilation*, Area X exemplifies this dissolution of boundaries between the human and the nonhuman.

The biologist's journey into the heart of this mysterious region reveals a world where human identity is destabilized, and the interconnectedness of all life forms becomes an unsettling reality. The eco-gothic framework expands on traditional gothic themes by directly engaging with the crises of the Anthropocene. In *Annihilation*, Area X embodies these monstrous and uncanny elements. The notion of the Anthropocene — an epoch characterized by humanity's overwhelming influence on the planet — forces a re-evaluation of our relationship with nature and our role within it. As Höglund observes, "The notion that Kirksey puts forward is provocative, first because it forces the reader to face the possibility of a complete man-made extinction. Kirksey envisions a future devoid of humans, and of the Nature that once emerged out of Enlightenment epistemologies" (253). This imagined extinction challenges not only the human presence but also the Enlightenment-derived binaries separating humanity and nature. In *Annihilation*, Area X epitomizes this ecological entanglement, rejecting human agency and comprehension. Rebecca Duncan adds that gothic narratives often "retrieve complex and hybrid identities — racialised, gendered, anthropo-ecological—for which the tidy narrative of the human and all its others does not account" (117). This retrieval resonates through the novel, where the landscape undermines the characters' autonomy, echoing Höglund's assertion that "the human body is in itself an ecosystem... host to trillions of other forms of life that nurture the human body but also deny it the homogeneity and sacredness" (254). The biologist's transformations in *Annihilation* literalize this idea, as her exposure to Area X blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman, self and environment. The Anthropocene amplifies these tensions. This is how Sullivan describes the paradox of human agency:

Human agency in the Anthropocene is taking on newly paradoxical aspects: on the one hand, the human species has achieved the (scaled-up) status of a geological force that has strewn industrial particulates across the entire surface of the planet... on the other, our individual choices for change diminish down proportionately in contrast to the vastness of our species-wide planetary impact. (27)

This duality of influence and impotence mirrors the struggles of the expedition team in *Annihilation*, whose attempts to assert control or even understand Area X are systematically subverted. The environment resists their efforts, embodying Höglund's claim that "the human being appears more like a complex wilderness than the bounded characters readers encounter in the realist novel" (256). Hillard situates this phenomenon within the Gothic tradition, asserting that "ecocriticism is having a Gothic moment," as Gothic narratives expose "a repressed or unacknowledged story that refuses to remain hidden" (23). This idea aligns with the way *Annihilation* uses Area X to reflect on the buried truths of human environmental impact. Such gothic storytelling uncovers the "dark terrains layered by plantation slavery and petro-economic cultures", as described by Edwards et al., where ecological crises intersect with histories of exploitation and systemic violence (ix).

By weaving together horror, decay, and the uncanny, *Annihilation* bridges traditional gothic themes with contemporary environmental concerns. Area X, with its eerie transformations and inexplicable phenomena, challenges the anthropocentric worldview by positioning nature as an active and dominant force. This blending of the gothic with ecological critique makes *Annihilation* a compelling reflection on the uncertainties and crises of the Anthropocene, where humanity is both the architect and the victim of a profoundly altered world.

### 3. GOTHIC LANDSCAPE OF AREA X

In *Annihilation*, Area X serves as a vivid representation of a Gothic landscape where desolation and transformation dominate. Vander Meer writes, "The beauty of it cannot be understood, either, and when you see beauty in desolation it changes something inside you. Desolation tries to colonize you" (Vander Meer ch.1). This passage captures the paradoxical allure of a decayed, unstable environment, resonating with Gothic themes of ruin and nature's haunting agency. Sullivan's concept of the "dark pastoral" complements this imagery, highlighting how narratives like *Annihilation* expose the ecological consequences of human neglect. The interplay of beauty and desolation in Area X destabilizes traditional perceptions of nature as a passive or benevolent force, inviting deeper reflection on humanity's role in environmental collapse. The biologist's description of the Tower further emphasizes the mysterious and uncanny qualities of Area X: "At first, only I saw it as a tower. I don't know why the word tower came to me, given that it tunneled into the ground" (Vander Meer ch.1). This contradiction reflects the instability and unreliability of human perceptions in the face of nature's overwhelming presence, aligning with Timothy Morton's "dark ecology," where the boundaries between the human and nonhuman blur. The Tower's paradoxical nature challenges the characters' ability to define and understand their environment, embodying the Gothic tradition of unsettling spatial anomalies.

As the team explores the Tower, the biologist notes, "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 ch.1). This description exemplifies the Gothic trope of an oppressive environment that imposes its will on the characters, reinforcing the idea of nature as an active force that resists comprehension. The Tower becomes a site of psychological projection and disorientation, amplifying the sense of dread and alienation that pervades Area X. In *Annihilation*, Area X functions as a quintessential Gothic landscape—alien and eerily familiar, simultaneously decaying and transforming under enigmatic forces beyond human comprehension. The environment is not a passive backdrop but an active, almost sentient force that shapes the characters' experiences and challenges their perceptions of reality. The ruins scattered across Area X, overtaken by resilient and invasive nature, serve as poignant reminders of humanity's inability to control or coexist with the natural world. These ruins evoke a sense of loss and decay, not merely of human constructs but of the boundaries separating humanity from the nonhuman.

This performativity comes alive in Vander Meer's depiction of Area X, with its shifting and mutating qualities defying human attempts to map or master its terrain. Sara L. Crosby expands on this idea, noting that Gothic eco-narratives like *Annihilation* reveal that "horror is becoming the environmental norm," laying bare the suppressed consequences of human exploitation and environmental degradation (qtd. in Hillard 24). The sense of instability within Area X aligns with the Gothic trope of decay, which traditionally symbolizes societal or moral collapse. In Vander Meer's novel, however, this decay is not limited to human constructs; it extends to the natural world itself. The abandoned research stations, rusting machinery, and other remnants of civilization are overtaken by a nature that is neither benign nor comforting. These ruins exist in a liminal state, no longer fully human nor entirely natural, mirroring the erosion of boundaries between humanity and the environment.

Area X is a place where the natural order appears to have been fundamentally altered, suspending or rewriting the laws of nature. The Shimmer, a mysterious force encapsulating the area, is described by the biologist in terms both beautiful and menacing. It is both alluring and terrifying, embodying nature's dual power to inspire awe and provoke fear. The Shimmer becomes a boundary between the human world and an alien, unsettling reality, reinforcing themes of transformation and environmental instability that are central to the novel's Gothic undertones. Moreover, Area X evokes a layered history of human exploitation and nature's subsequent reclamation, a theme Dawn Keetley identifies in similar eco-Gothic spaces, such as the Louisiana bayous in "True Detective's Folk Gothic". These landscapes, she argues, expose historical residues of exploitation, symbolizing intertwined ecological and societal degradation. Similarly, Area X is haunted by the remnants of failed human incursions, including journals from past expeditions and grotesque evidence of encounters with an incomprehensible nonhuman presence. Edwards et al. describe this as the "uncanny presence" of environmental crises that blur temporal and spatial boundaries, erasing distinctions between past, present, and future (xiii).

The transformative power of the landscape is another key Gothic element in *Annihilation*. As the biologist ventures deeper into Area X, she undergoes profound physical and psychological changes. After inhaling fungal spores within the Tower, she becomes immune to the psychologist's hypnotic control and begins to experience what she calls a "brightness" within herself. This transformation reflects the eco-Gothic tradition of characters being irrevocably altered by their encounters with the supernatural. Yet, in *Annihilation*, the transformation is not merely supernatural but deeply ecological, illustrating how nature exerts its agency and disrupts human certainty. Moreover, Area X's transformative power challenges the anthropocentric worldview. The biologist's gradual mutation after inhaling fungal spores illustrates this disruption. Her transformation is not only Gothic in its defiance of natural laws but also ecological, reflecting Höglund's assertion that "stories for living in the Anthropocene demand a certain suspension of ontologies and epistemologies... in favor of a more venturesome, experimental natural history" (258). Her evolving perception of the landscape symbolizes a broader shift toward acknowledging nature's agency. Through its mutable, decaying, and transformative qualities, Area X embodies the core tensions of the Anthropocene. The Gothic landscape becomes a site where human hubris meets nature's overwhelming autonomy.

#### 4. AGENCY: UNCANNY AND NONHUMAN

The uncanny lies at the heart of *Annihilation*, especially in the biologist's interactions with the alien ecology of Area X. Her initial encounter with the fungal writing on the walls of the tower is both cryptic and disturbing: "Where lies the strangling fruit that came from the hand of the sinner I shall bring forth the seeds of the dead to share with the worms that..." (Vander Meer ch.2). This fragment of text, simultaneously organic and textual, epitomizes the collapse of



boundaries between human and nonhuman. It mirrors Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny, where the familiar becomes alien and menacing. Language, typically a human tool for understanding the world, here transforms into an unsettling, living entity, destabilizing the biologist's sense of normalcy. The natural environment of Area X further amplifies this effect. The biologist reflects on the eerie quality of her surroundings: "If you looked out through these areas, toward the ocean, all you saw was the black water, the gray of the cypress trunks, and the constant, motionless rain of moss flowing down" (VanderMeer ch.1). This haunting image conjures a landscape that defies human understanding, evoking timelessness and otherworldliness. The natural world is portrayed as autonomous, resisting categorization or control. Such moments underscore the ecological uncanny, where nature itself becomes an active, enigmatic force.

The uncanny, first articulated by Sigmund Freud in 1919, describes the unsettling sensation of encountering something simultaneously familiar and alien. In *Annihilation*, this concept transcends psychology to become ecological, exposing the porous boundaries between human and nonhuman. Area X undermines human perceptions of control and categorization, fostering awe and dread. The biologist's journey into this mysterious realm forces her to confront phenomena that defy natural laws, compelling her to grapple with the uncanny in her surroundings and within herself. The "shimmer," a zone of distortion where nature's laws collapse, epitomizes the role of uncanny in *Annihilation*. This space is not just a narrative device but a visceral challenge to human comprehension. The shimmer symbolizes a domain where human concepts of time and control dissolve, mirroring broader ecological crises. As the biologist navigates its unstable terrain, she confronts her own powerlessness and humanity's limited grasp of the forces shaping the natural world.

In the Anthropocene, the uncanny resonates with the realization that human and nonhuman realms are inextricably linked. As Ghosh explains, Anthropocene events often "acquire the status of the returning repressed," with ecological crises becoming a manifestation of the uncanny (qtd. in Duncan 117). Edwards et al. expand on this idea, asserting that "hauntings and similar manifestations become emissaries or transition points between the human sense of time and the geological sense of time" (xiii). In *Annihilation*, Area X's haunting presence embodies this temporal collision, serving as a stark reminder of humanity's tangible impact on the environment. The gothic undertones of *Annihilation* further highlight this uncanny interplay. As Hillard observes, gothic narratives often reveal "the dangers that lurk off-screen," portraying the Anthropocene as a monstrous force hidden beneath human negligence and environmental exploitation (24). Area X, with its alien yet organic horrors, becomes a site where humanity's destruction of the environment is rendered vividly and viscerally.

Ultimately, the uncanny in *Annihilation* functions as a powerful metaphor for the ecological crisis. The biologist's experiences in Area X force her to confront the alien and incomprehensible nature of the environment while recognizing humanity's complicity in its degradation. The blurring of boundaries between human and nonhuman underscores the fragility of human existence in the face of ecological collapse. Through this lens, the uncanny reveals the inescapable truth of humanity's entanglement with the planet, emphasizing the urgency of addressing environmental crises before they become irreversible.

## 5. TRAUMA OF HAUNTING ECOLOGIES

Haunting permeates *Annihilation* through its depiction of ecological trauma and the remnants of human incursions into Area X, serving as a powerful metaphor for humanity's fraught relationship with the natural world. The journals discovered in the lighthouse symbolize the erasure of human agency and the futility of attempts to control or understand the unknown:

The journals and other materials formed a moldering pile about twelve feet high and sixteen feet wide that in places near the bottom had clearly turned to compost, the paper rotting away. Beetles and silverfish tended to those archives, and tiny black cockroaches with always moving antennae. Toward the base, and spilling out at the edges, I saw the remains of photographs and dozens of ruined cassette tapes mixed in with the mulch of pages...The scene obliquely embodied the scrap of writing I had encountered on the Tower wall: ... 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 ... (Vander Meer ch.3)

This scene underscores the ephemerality of human endeavor and knowledge, as the writings—symbols of human attempts to make sense of Area X—vanish into obscurity, unacknowledged and unretrieved. Sullivan critiques "industrial

cultures' tainted tactics", a sentiment echoed in the journals' silent testimony to failed expeditions and unlearned lessons. Their very existence is a haunting reminder of humanity's transient and ineffectual efforts to dominate an entity beyond comprehension. Similarly, the fate of previous expeditions highlights the psychological toll of ecological trauma, with participants succumbing to an eerie dissociation from reality. The biologist recounts:

The members of the last expedition had eventually drifted off, one by one. Over time, they had returned to their families, so strictly speaking, they did not vanish. They simply disappeared from Area X and, by unknown means, reappeared back in the world beyond the border. (VanderMeer ch.1)

This unsettling phenomenon, where individuals ostensibly return but remain irrevocably changed, blurs the line between presence and absence. It exemplifies the lingering psychological scars left by encounters with ecological extremities, reflecting the pervasive and inescapable consequences of human interference with nature. The theme of haunting in *Annihilation* is intricately tied to its exploration of ecological trauma, with the novel's depiction of Area X functioning as a chilling reminder of humanity's failure to control and comprehend the natural world. As Duncan notes: "The Gothic provides a vocabulary uniquely suited to our present geohistorical moment, in which unfolding transformations to the Earth System are placing the biosphere in the shadow of existential threat" (114). In *Annihilation*, this Gothic vocabulary is embodied in Area X's eerie transformations, the reclamation of human structures, and the obliteration of boundaries between life and death. These elements evoke the traumatic ecological changes wrought by human interference, emphasizing the environment's capacity to surpass human influence and redefine itself on its terms.

Sullivan expands this perspective by linking haunting with ecological trauma, arguing that eco-gothic narratives reveal "the seemingly hidden and ignored costs of global industrial capitalism," a dynamic vividly represented by the spectral presence of Area X (27). Within this space, remnants of human expeditions—abandoned buildings, decaying artifacts, and traces of lives interrupted—become ghostly markers of ecological destruction. These fragments testify to humanity's failed efforts to master nature, serving as tangible echoes of environmental degradation. The biologist's gradual transformation into something unrecognizable reflects humanity's broader erasure in the Anthropocene. Her loss of identity and humanity mirrors the Earth's relentless alteration under ecological trauma, underscoring the inability of human agency to halt or reverse the destructive consequences of industrial exploitation. The haunting in *Annihilation* reflects a larger ecological truth: the past is not easily erased, and humanity's exploitation of nature reverberates endlessly through the present. Physical remnants—such as ruins—do not simply decay but undergo transformations, mirroring the psychological and physical changes in the characters themselves. The biologist's deepening sense of alienation and isolation amidst Area X's shifting landscape exemplifies the psychic weight of ecological trauma. In a world where human agency is diminished, the environment itself becomes a mirror of humanity's gradual erasure.

Ultimately, the haunting in *Annihilation* is not just a metaphor for ecological disaster but an embodiment of its unspoken, ongoing impact. By intertwining haunting with ecological trauma, Jeff VanderMeer crafts a narrative that forces readers to confront the enduring consequences of humanity's actions on the natural world, offering a sobering reminder of the planet's resistance to human control.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In *Annihilation*, Jeff VanderMeer uses gothic aesthetics and eco-horror to explore the environmental anxieties of the Anthropocene. The novel's portrayal of Area X as a decaying, uncanny landscape reflects the disturbing consequences of humanity's environmental impact. Through its unsettling landscapes, uncanny transformations, and lingering sense of ecological trauma, *Annihilation* evokes the deep horror and wonder that come from confronting a world in which human agency has been destabilized by the very forces it sought to control. By blending gothic tropes with ecological concerns, VanderMeer's novel articulates an ecological nightmare in which humanity's role in the destruction of the planet is both the cause and the subject of the haunting.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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