國立臺灣大學文學院外國語文學系

碩士論文

Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures

College of Liberal Arts

National Taiwan University

Master's Thesis

樂觀的相互依存：《柳林》、《滅絕》與生態哥德式.

Optimistic Interdependence: "The Willows," *Annihilation,* and the Ecogothic

符瑪璉

Mariana Manrique Fuenmayor

Advisor: Manuel Herrero-Puertas, PhD.

指導教授: 曼紐爾 博士

民國114年4月

April 2025

doi:10.6342/NTU202501042

國立臺灣大學碩士學位論文
口試委員會審定書
MASTER'S THESIS ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE
NATIONAL TAIWAN UNIVERSITY

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本論文係符瑪璉君（R07122017）在國立臺灣大學外國語文學系完成之碩士學位論文，於民國 114 年 4 月 30 日承下列考試委員審查通過及口試及格，特此證明。

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口試委員 Oral examination committee:

（指導教授 Advisor）

摘要

本論文透過生態哥德式（ecogothic）的理論框架，探討傑夫・范德米爾（Jeff VanderMeer）的《Annihilation》與艾傑農・布萊克伍德（Algernon Blackwood）的〈柳林〉（The Willows）。生態哥德式揭示了布萊克伍德與范德米爾作品中的生態潛文本，並使他們筆下大自然的陰暗描寫更加明顯。儘管《Annihilation》與〈柳林〉汲取了哥德式意象與黑暗情感（如恐懼、瘋狂與絕望），這些作品的前提卻顯

現出一種樂觀的可能性。〈柳林〉與《Annihilation》中哥德與恐怖的元素對晚期資

本主義中自主且健全主義（ableist）的主體提出挑戰。殖民、瘋狂與死亡的威脅打開了人類與非人存在之間溝通的可能性。

本論文指出，《Annihilation》與〈柳林〉為未來一種新型環境倫理的興起奠定了基礎。本研究的潛線之一，是環境災難在范德米爾與布萊克伍德的哥德想像中所扮演的中介與滋養角色。這種新倫理不應是對自然失落「完整性」的懷舊呼喚，而是一種對我們彼此關聯與相互依存的遲來認知。

關鍵詞：傑夫・范德米爾、艾傑農・布萊克伍德、生態哥德式、環境倫理。

doi:10.6342/NTU202501042

Abstract

This thesis examines *Annihilation*, by Jeff VanderMeer, and "The Willows," by Algernon Blackwood, through an ecogothic framework. The ecogothic brings forth ecological subtexts in Blackwood and VanderMeer, and makes the more evident the dark representations of nature in their oeuvre. Although *Annihilation* and "The Willows" draw from Gothicized imagery and dark affects (fear, madness, despair), the premise of these texts appears optimistic. The Gothic and fearsome elements of "The Willows" and Annihilation challenge the autonomous and ableist subject of late capitalism. The threat of colonization, madness, and death opens up the possibility of communication between humans and nonhumans. This thesis shows that *Annihilation* and "The Willows" set the foundation for a new environmental ethics to emerge in the future. The idea that environmental catastrophe mediates and feeds into VanderMeer and Blackwood's Gothic imagination is an undercurrent in this thesis. The new ethics cannot be a nostalgic call for a lost 'wholeness' in nature, but it is instead the belated recognition of our interconnectedness and interdependency.

Keywords: Jeff VanderMeer, Algernon Blackwood, Ecogothic, environmental ethics.

doi:10.6342/NTU202501042

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Introduction

It is a common trick of Nature – and a profoundly significant one – that, just when despair is deepest, she waves a wand before the weary eyes and does her best to waken an impossible hope.

"The Dance of Death," Algernon Blackwood

We must love what has been damaged, because everything has been damaged.

Hummingbird Salamander, Jeff VanderMeer

I set out to find environmental optimism in the works of Algernon Blackwood and Jeff VanderMeer. The two texts to be analyzed, "The Willows," by Blackwood, and *Annihilation*, by VanderMeer, are paradigmatic in their representation of nature's agency. Both Blackwood and VanderMeer bring to life narrators that are profoundly awed and humbled by outrightly hostile and overpowering natural landscapes. Blackwood and VanderMeer's texts are not only rich in environmental subtexts, but they are also celebratory and hopeful. This thesis underscores the hope they seem to find in the dark swamps and woods. This study answers the question: How can an ecogothic reading of "The Willows" and *Annihilation* bring forth a hopeful reconceptualization of nature? This thesis departs from some ecogothic theories to, instead of underscoring their pessimist and fear-inducing possibilities, illuminate the celebratory undertones of these texts. This is not to say Blackwood's and VanderMeer's treatment of nature is naïve or unthinkingly optimistic. Nature in "The Willows" and *Annihilation* appears opaque, hostile, and ambiguous. But it is precisely through dark affects, fears, and anxieties about nature that the

doi:10.6342/NTU202501042

authors can reimagine the relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds. "The Willows" and *Annihilation* advance a new understanding of nature that opens up a new way of being and inhabiting the world. This new opening seems urgent during our time of environmental catastrophe.

Through an intertextual dialogue with ecogothic theorists and philosophers, this thesis frames the overpowering agency of nature in these texts as the opening up of the possibility of interdependence and communication between humans and nonhumans. What is at stake is the challenge of an idea of nature as a timeless transcendence in the face of the Anthropocene. The old division between nature and culture cannot abide in a world where the human collective is a geological force. The Anthropocene, which has material causes and consequences, challenges us to reimagine nature and its relationship with us. That is to say, environmental catastrophe forces us to recognize that we are embedded in an ecological grid and that we depend on nonhuman agents to survive. There is a Gothic shift in fiction and theory: from pastoral and picturesque representations of nature to a dark, Gothicized nature. This shift implies, as the blurring boundaries of the natural and cultural in Gothic does, that nature is recognized as natural, social, and discursive at once. In this study, I also demonstrate how this reconceptualization (of nature as social, natural, and discursive) is outrightly Gothic. This Gothic imagination draws from and comes to be because of environmental catastrophe. The Gothic stands as a locus of the concepts and problems this thesis touches upon (trans-corporality, nature/culture, hybrids, monsters). But it is also a moment, a still frame, of the state of ecocriticism, which has entered a Gothic stage.

The comparison between Blackwood and VanderMeer is long overdue. Not only do both authors seem to have an ongoing dialogue, as Area X in *Annihilation* and the outlandish willows in Blackwood's novella prove voracious colonizers. VanderMeer also revitalizes Blackwood by

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putting him in dialogue with our contemporary preoccupations and twenty-first century enviromentalist activism. The more political and social elements of Blackwood's writing are made more visible via VanderMeer's critical prose. Through an ecogothic frame, "The Willows" and *Annihilation* act as sites to think through the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. Both VanderMeer and Blackwood set the foundations for a hopeful future in which new environmental ethics will emerge.

The first authors to coin the term "ecogothic" were Andrew Smith and William Hughes in their 2015 anthology of essays titled *The Ecogothic*. The study of the Gothic from an ecocritical perspective is belated for Smith and Hughes (1). They argue that Jonathan Bate's study of the Romantics is foundational for ecocriticism and challenge the absence of the Gothic, as the presumed counterpart of the Romantics, in ecocritical works. Smith and Hughes assert that "nature becomes constituted in the Gothic as a space of crisis which conceptually creates a point of contact with the ecological" (3). This assertion is echoed, in this study, as the power of the Gothic to reconceptualize nature. The Gothic as a "space of crisis" translates into the Gothic as a site to think through environmental issues. It is this thinking through that allows Blackwood and VanderMeer's works to bring about a new conception of nature: one that offers hope instead of despair.

An essay in *The Ecogothic* is dedicated to Algernon Blackwood. In the same vein as Susan Johnston's *Talking to the Gods*, David Punter makes a historiographical account of Blackwood's association with occultist circles in his "Algernon Blackwood: Nature and Spirit." The possibility of expanding one's consciousness was one of Blackwood's utmost preoccupations, according to Punter (43). Blackwood's keen interest in mystical orders, the unconscious (44), and other forms of beyondness account for the negative theology of his prose.

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There is something mystical about the bronze figures in “The Willows.” Although this enigmatic element does not make of Blackwood a mystic, as Punter argues, Blackwood’s pseudo-mysticism implies the existence of a connectedness between human consciousness and the non-human, a sort of Anima Mundi (Johnston 96).

As Johnston states, Blackwood’s involvement in occultist circles permeates his fiction. Blackwood entered the Order of the Golden Dawn on October 30, 1900, but even before his 30th birthday, he had been a member of several other organizations dedicated to the occult. Participating in the same circles as Machen and Yeats, Blackwood’s aim, we can speculate, was to refine his spirit to apprehend higher levels of understanding. Untamed nature would be the portal to this super-consciousness (98) he worked to attain. Blackwood himself had a sense of kinship with the natural world, “a dim sense that some kind of consciousness struggled through every form, even that an inarticulate sort of communication with this ‘other life’ was possible, could [he] but discover the way” (qtd. in Johnston 96). Though an anthropocentric nature’s “consciousness,” the nature of Blackwood, when read through his involvement with the occult, becomes the manifestation of a supra-human order.

This thesis does not discern connections, kinship, or even pity between the human and the non-human world in Blackwood, for which an attentive reading of his occultist affiliation would be critical. Instead, the moments of disruption in “The Willows” are seen under a more provocative light. One methodological aspect seems to distance this thesis from seminal works by Punter and Johnston. More than a theoretical effort, these critical texts are deeply anchored in literary history and a profound interest in Blackwood’s historical context. My reading of Blackwood in this thesis is more attuned to present-day concerns. Furthermore, instead of focusing on the disruptive, and thus, as Smith and Hughes argued, Gothic elements of “The

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Willows," a mystical reading of Blackwood underscores the more systemic aspects of his worldview. On the other hand, keywords like "disruption," "trespassing," and "blurring" will reappear throughout my reading of Blackwood.

A more materialist account of Blackwood's "The Willows" is given by Elizabeth Parker in *The Forest and the Ecogothic*. This volume is "devoted entirely to our more ominous depictions of the forest as a site of trial, trepidation, and terror" (Parker 2). Parker's study is not only a critical account of a literary motif. It provides its readers with a scholarly review of the ecogothic as a discipline. Parker situates the origin of the emerging ecogothic field in Simon Estok's "ecophobia" and Tom Hillard's response to Estok: "Deep Into That Darkness Peering." According to Parker, Hillard is the first to coin the term "Gothic nature" (16). Hillard asks his readers: what would happen if we use the Gothic's interpretative tools to "bear on writing about nature?" (qtd. in Parker 16). That which Hillard seems to be doing is untying the Gothic's association with the domestic space of the house and expanding it to engulf the natural world as well. The ecogothic appears in Parker as a theoretical framework, more than a genre intrinsic to the texts (19). This circles back to Hillard's foundational article: the ecogothic would frame and provide critical tools to analyze nature's (dark) representations in literary texts.

Parker devotes her first critical study to Blackwood. In the chapter "What If It Is the Trees: The Living Forest," she foregrounds Blackwood's "The Man Whom the Trees Loved" and "The Willows." Both texts depict a forest that is "ostensibly alive" (Parker 71). The theme of the animation of the forests traverses this chapter. Parker concludes: "The trope of the moving, thinking wilderness challenges our conceptions about the degrees of 'aliveness' in the human and nonhuman—and provides a striking visualization of ecophobic dark ecology and trans-corporeality" (76). Both dark ecology and trans-corporeality will reappear later in this thesis. If

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we follow Parker, the agency of the willow bushes in Blackwood redraws the boundaries between human and nonhuman. This idea will prove foundational to the first chapter of this thesis, dedicated to Blackwood's "The Willows."

According to Parker, two leading contemporary ecogothic theorists are Timothy Morton and Simon Estok (11). Both will appear in this study, although Estok will do it briefly, when considering the ethical aspects of Blackwood's and VanderMeer's prose. Timothy Morton's dark ecology will be structural to my understanding of nature in "The Willows" and *Annihilation*. Morton's *Dark Ecology* and his short essay *All Art Is Ecological* advance a haunting vision of the Anthropocene. From the perspective of Object Oriented Ontology, Morton argues that "ecognosis," our knowledge of nature, is "like a knowing that knows itself" (5). However, beings are also "surrounded by mysterious hermeneutical clouds of unknowing" (Morton 6). For Morton, the fundamental issue that philosophers must face regarding the Anthropocene is ecognosis. However, dark nature is like a riddle. Ecology brings forth the interconnectedness of looping beings and the knowledge about ecology is darkly enigmatic. One must, for Morton, "let nature be known" (5) rather than seek knowledge of nature. This ties back to Stacy Alaimo's "trans-corporality": because we are traversed by nature, gnosis about nature will always come back to us.

Stacy Alaimo is another foundational author in the field of the Ecogothic. Her work in the environmental humanities has always tended toward dark and gothic representations of nature. Alaimo's *Bodily Natures* advances a central concept for this thesis and recent ecocriticism in general. Trans-corporeality "explores the interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures" (Alaimo 2). Alaimo underscores the material aspects of human beings' affiliation with the nonhuman. If there are any transits between the human and the

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nonhuman, they are permanently anchored in matter. A body is never a discrete entity; it is always traversed by and implicated with other bodies (thus the term "trans-corporeal"). The first site in which we are affected by nature is our own body.

The idea of a body affected by others reappears in a theorist who is not so outrightly ecogothic. Judith Butler's doctorate thesis, *Senses of the Subject*, argues that the possibility of subjectivity emerges when a newborn is touched by and acknowledged by others (15). Subjectivity would be, from its origin, interdependent. Butler underscores interdependency over autonomy in subject formation. Read back-to-back with Alaimo and in dialogue with Blackwood and VanderMeer, Butler seems to be advancing the paradigm of interdependence and, thus, an urgent call for new ethics to be brought forth. Their doctoral thesis, and their subsequent work, may be of interest in dialogue with recent ecogothical texts because the foundational claim in *Senses of the Subject* is that we must depart from a new paradigm of subjectivity in order to establish ethics that are truly inclusive of women, minorities, and —that which I will advance even if its not mentioned by Butler— nonhumans.

The ground upon which subjectivity depends is still the touch of and care from others. An ethics that underscores interdependence over autonomy and self-possession would be, above all, inclusive of more living beings: not only humans, but also nonhumans. The self that is affected by and depends on others will eventually be able to say: "I," according to Butler (3). After all, subjects do not find grounding in their autonomy and their ability to speak, subjectivity is grounded in a common world, the earth, and in mutual relationships to fellow humans and other nonhumans. Even though nature is not able to speak— to utter "I"—one can make it speak— one could argue fiction is a privileged place for the nonhuman to speak.

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How can nature be made to speak? How to convey the social and cultural dimensions of nature? Anneke Lubkowitz, in her book *Haunted Spaces in Twenty-First Century British Nature Writing*, argues that "haunting functions as a way of conveying the sociality and culturality of 'natural' space" (12). Lubkowitz also argues that, as I claim in this introduction, there is a Gothic or noir moment in nature writing (18) that derives precisely from the recognition of the social and cultural aspects of nature. This Gothic or noir moment extends to philosophical texts as well. We could also think of a Gothic shift in environmental studies, if we follow Lubkowitz. That is to say, one contemporary way of conveying nature's social and cultural dimensions is through haunting landscapes, like miles upon miles of willow bushes ("The Willows") or extraterrestrial pristine areas (Area X).

Bruno Latour's network theory will be read in this thesis as part of this Gothic shift identified by Lubkowitz. Although, as an anthropologist, Latour does not explicitly affiliate with Gothic authors, he does draw from Gothic imagery. His network theory relies on the figure of the hybrids. The monster-like hybrids that proliferate in Western modernity lead us to recognize that everything simultaneously partakes in a natural, social, and discursive existence (132). I claim that Latour's hybrids are Gothic-like figures and that, as Lubkowitz stated, the idea that nature is social can always be traced back to Gothic migrating motifs.

What emerges in an intertextual dialogue between these authors is a network of concepts and texts preoccupied with matter, interdependence, and hybridity. Nature becomes a contested site to think through a wide range of issues: colonization, gender, science, epistemology, and the Anthropocene. Thinking these issues alongside Blackwood and VanderMeer brings forward the need for new ethics to emerge in the face of the threat of mass extinction. I will demonstrate that the reconceptualization of nature in VanderMeer and Blackwood brings about a hopeful future in

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which a new ethical paradigm will emerge. Human beings are already embedded and implicated with other nonhumans. Our legal and ethical systems and imperatives only need to catch up. And fiction seems to open spaces of thought in which new futures can be imagined and old ideas, for example nature as a timeless transcendence, can be exorcised and deconstructed.

This new ethical project implies, first, the dethroning of the autonomous subject of late capitalism. The ravaging individualism that this worldview champions will be overthrown by the belated recognition of interdependence. Legislation would need to come to the realization that nature, and nonhumans, are subjects of law. Law must need to protect diverse subjectivities and, accordingly, our conception of subjectivity would need to encompass all sentient beings. This is perhaps a utopian project, but it is the one, I claim, that Gothic texts like "The Willows" and *Annihilation* pioneer.

This thesis has two chapters that follow a chronological order. The first chapter will be dedicated to "The Willows," and the second to *Annihilation*. The first chapter is titled "Algernon Blackwood and the Wilderness: The Call of Nature." Through the lenses of the Ecogothic, the chapter delves into the polysemy of nature in Blackwood's work. "The Willows" becomes a text where different conceptions of nature are contested and even deconstructed. The Gothic, in Blackwood, is highly oppositional. It seems to ironize romantic, and even realistic, accounts of the natural world. "The Willows," and this has become commonplace in the criticism of this text, is truly frontier writing in a geological but also ideological sense. In Blackwood, a simmering new sensibility seems to emerge: nature becomes an immanent network, instead of an idealized transcendence. In "The Willows" we find in their embryonic form many of the issues— nature's agency, hybrids, sociality of nature, Gothic motifs— that will find full expression in VanderMeer's work.

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The second chapter examines *Annihilation*. The chapter is titled "Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* and Nature as Colonizer." This chapter is concerned with the intricacies of nature in VanderMeer's work. I demonstrate that VanderMeer's Area X is an optimistic tableau of undifferentiated matter. The idea of communication between bodies, through colonization and mimesis, will be central in the chapter. Nature will appear as a network of agencies that have agency because they are embodied. The fact that nature is an immanent network in VanderMeer's work will finally dispel notions of nature as a purified transcendence.

The two chapters are connected through the reappearance of ecogothic motifs and intertexts. Both authors set out to reconceptualize nature and challenge old ideas about the natural world. At the core of this MA thesis is an ethical question: how can we reimagine the boundaries and frontiers between the human and the nonhuman in order to bring to light our interdependency?

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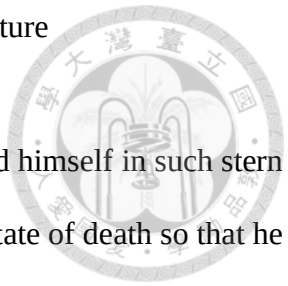
Algernon Blackwood and the Wilderness: The Call of Nature



> He never wholly understood, I think, the reason why he found himself in such stern protest against the modern state of things, why people produced in him a state of death so that he turned from men to Nature—to find life.
>
> *The Centaur*, Algernon Blackwood

In his seminal essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, H. P. Lovecraft believed Algernon Blackwood to be one of the greatest forerunners of the tradition Lovecraft helped conceptualize and canonize: weird fiction. According to Lovecraft, the weird appears in the anglophone tradition as a narrative mode concerned with deeply terrifying philosophical questions: the menacing beyond that is indifferent and at times hostile to human beings (3). This cosmic outside reveals the artificial and absurd workings of the social world. Although in this chapter I will eventually depart from the weird as a critical category, it is important to signal that Lovecraft opposed Blackwood's weird to the tradition of the realist novel. If we are to follow Lovecraft's argument, Blackwood was well beyond the preoccupations of nineteenth-century realism with social totality. Although, contrary to what authors such as Eugene Thacker and Jonathan Newell claim, the weird will not be the cornerstone of this opposition in my analysis. I would like to advance that Blackwood prophesizes the material turn of the ecogothic. Furthermore, the ecogothic, as much as the weird, also opposes the bourgeois worldview that the realist novel engenders.

Although Blackwood had little interest in the political aspects of realism, his works are deeply rooted in a literary tradition that I call here the ecogothic. In the epigraph to this chapter, Blackwood turns toward nature and away from the social world. Blackwood's rejection is no

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different to the foundational enviromentalism of *Walden*, in which Henry David Thoreau retreats into the woods in search of the authentic life. Thoreau's memoir is one of the intertexts of *The Centaur*, Blackwood's spiritual autobiography (*The Lost Valley* 19), and serves as a counterpoint to what Blackwood considered to be wilderness or, in a wider perspective, nature—an alternative and somewhat mystical, authentic way of being in the world.

And yet, one cannot approach the problem of nature uncritically. The concept of nature has been deemed, after the advent of deconstruction, wildly problematic; that is to say, it must be denaturalized and scrutinized. Throughout this chapter, I will try to understand what Blackwood understood by nature. And, by doing so, I need to address foundational ideas like nature as the outside of culture (Pogue 247) and nature as the home of authentic beings (Bate 245). These two claims have been heavily critiqued by authors like Timothy Clark, Bruno Latour, and Murray Bookchin in the awakening of an understanding of the porous boundaries between what is cultural and what is natural (and those hybrid in-betweens) (Latour 368). Furthermore, a discourse about nature that ignores colonial, gender, and class struggles can always be read as reactionary (Bookchin 4). The necessity of this study does not stem from an intention to mark Blackwood's racialized others and constructs of an asocial nature as problematic, but instead from the richly productive gothic imagination that mediates Blackwood's understanding of nature.

Blackwood's writing is, like Thoreau's, nature writing. This concept, as coined in Lawrence Buell's seminal *The Environmental Imagination*, implies a representation of nature beyond a mere setting. It signals, instead, an interest in nature's own agency and an emerging environmentalist ethics (Buell 7). *The Environmental Imagination* opens as a critique of Thoreau's *Walden* but ends up being a response to turn-of-the-century literary criticism and its

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hostility towards the environmental humanities. To read a text's relationship with nature would be to recognize there is a reality outside of textuality, and to recognize that that reality exists outside of the subject (Buell 8). The concept of "green writing" emerges in the context of a problematization of the relation between text and referent that opposes the now commonplace Saussurean dislocation between sign and referent (10). Blackwood thus becomes a useful author for understanding this overarching interest in the irruption of nature, as the real, in the text.

Blackwood, as much as Thoreau, is emmeshed in the tradition of anglophone eco-centric nature writing. As Buell argues, this implies a relinquishment of the self (153). In the American long-standing tradition of agrarian utopias, in which the individual is effaced in a localized community, Blackwood appears as the nightmarish counterpart of this self-relinquishment. Instead of a sense of order or even entropy as exemplified by poets like William Carlos Williams and Robinson Jeffers, the overpowering thereness of the nonhuman world triggers a descent into madness and the threat of death. Blackwood's green nature writing would, nevertheless, like Walden, unbridle the agency of the natural world.

But Blackwood is an anti-Thoreau, given that the gothic mode allows him the ambivalence Walden seems to lack. Through my close reading of "The Willows" (1907), I trace how nature haunts the gothic mode, but, in a double movement, also how the gothic invests nature with a mobility and underdetermination that can prove useful to today's environmentalist movement. In this chapter thus I set out to answer one latent question in Blackwood's thinking in "The Willows": How does Blackwood in "The Willows" draw from and give back to the ecogothic tradition? By framing a nature that haunts through the gothic tradition, which is deeply concerned with the self and the other, we would start to acknowledge the nature within us; the animal, in other words, thwarted by the faculty of imagination. Enlightened reason, and not

doi:10.6342/NTU202501042

nature, would be, like the explorers in “The Willows”—foreigners striving to chart unknown and sacred regions.

“The Willows” is Blackwood’s best-known novella, one that is commonly framed by ecogothic theories, as exemplified by David Punter and Elizabeth Parker. Part of its allure is due to Lovecraft’s mention of the story in his seminal essay, but we can also attribute it to the novella’s paradigmatic depiction of nature’s agency. “The Willows” centers on two explorers that chart unknown marshes near the Danube in the modern state of Hungary. Their presence seems to awaken some primitive force that is tangibly hostile to human beings. “The Willows” contains many of Blackwood’s obsessions, such as the vegetal world’s will to life, mystic overtones and pantheistic deities, and the human characters’ descent into madness or death. Although it shares many themes with other Blackwood stories such as “The Wendigo,” *The Centaur*, and “The Man Whom the Trees Loved,” “The Willows” is unique in the eerie power that the landscape exercises over the reader. This chapter will, then, elucidate the thought-provoking agency and power of the miles and miles of willow bushes in the story.

Why is the ecogothic an apt theoretical frame for “The Willows”? The ecogothic has emerged recently as an expanding field of study. It is mainly concerned with dark, unsettling representations of the nonhuman world. Although it has produced mainly literary criticism, the few theoretical efforts surrounding the Ecogothic often go back to psychoanalytic language (as a homage to, now outdated, gothic studies) and, as in works by Stacy Alaimo and Timothy Morton, it often touches upon more contemporary theories: disability studies, new materialisms, and Deleuzian critiques of psychoanalysis. The gothic has always sustained an ongoing interest in “framing devices,” “sleeplike and deathlike states,” and “a wild landscape” (Sedgwick 10). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies the main conventions of the Gothic early in her critical study:

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> Surely no other modern literary form as influential as the Gothic novel has also been as pervasively conventional. Once you know that a novel is of the Gothic kind (and you can tell that from the title), you can predict its contents with an unnerving certainty. You know the important features of its mise en scène: an oppressive ruin, a wild landscape, a Catholic or feudal society…The chief incidents of a Gothic novel never go far beyond illustrating these few themes, and even the most unified novel includes most of them. (10)

From the conventions that Sedgwick identifies and lists, it is evident most have to do with the nonhuman, or with the monstruous transformation of the human in the nonhuman. In the Ecogothic studies that I place in dialogue with Blackwood and VanderMeer in this thesis, the subject is always embedded and haunted by the nonhuman world.

The first efforts to approach Blackwood from an ecogothic framing come from Elizabeth Parker's *The Forest and the Ecogothic* (2020), a book that devotes its first critical study to "The Willows." Also in the foundational Ecogothic, an anthology of critical essays that also features a chapter dedicated to "The Willows." Both works strongly emphasize the agency of the willow bushes in the novella as an example of a nature that is not merely a setting for human action and motivation, but becomes instead, an interconnectedness of beings with their own will and motivation, in which humans are always implicated.

Smith and Hughes, in their introduction to *Ecogothic*, choose as a starting point the Gothic as the counterpart of Romanticism. The authors quote Jonathan Bate, for whom Romanticism sees the emergence of an ecological understanding of the earth. By asserting Romanticism as the grounding of ecological thought, Smith and Hughes see the ecogothic as a more ambivalent take on Romantic wholeness in nature (Smith and Hughes 2). The Romantics, according to Bate, seek to reestablish our bond with nature (245), severed by technological

doi:10.6342/NTU202501042

domination and the opening of a chiasm between language and reality. Poetry would conform then an elegy to the lost continuity between human and nonhuman worlds. Smith and Hughes flesh out the assertion by alluding to *Frankenstein* and its muddling boundaries between nature and culture. Whereas the Romantics seek, in Bates's criticism, to affirm a continuity between subject and landscape, the gothic elucidates a disruption (3). Concepts such as disruption, discontinuity, ambiguity and ambivalence pervade gothic representations of nature and, more broadly, the nonhuman.

In her introduction to *The Forest and the Ecogothic*, Parker grounds her study on contemporary man's yearning to re-enchant nature, a claim that follows authors like Harrison Pogue and Timothy Morton. The haunting and dark representations of the nonhuman return a primal sense of an ambiguous and menacing interconnectedness of all beings. The ecogothic, according to Parker, would have a seat at the table in environmentalist forums precisely for its capacity to re-enchant and to invest the wilderness with a sense of awe (22). This awe is neither pre-Enlightenment nor part of the Enlightenment. Like the Gothic, it seems to inhabit a parallel, intrusive time (that of a collective dream or collective unconscious—a time that does not follow linear, causative time). Parker's interest in cultural studies, in broader cultural artifacts such as movies or comics, bespeaks a deep interest in understanding the forest as a trope not only in our collective memory, but also, and more importantly, in our collective unconscious.

Parker opens her chapter on Blackwood by alluding to Simon Estok and his concept of "ecophobia," that is our fear of nature's agency. Parker seems then to underscore the aliveness of the willow bushes and their outright hostility towards human beings. Parker departs from Pogue Harrison's allegory of the clearing and the forest, by which the clearing that the explorers inhabit would become civilization and the enclosing willows would oppose it, being them the forest.

doi:10.6342/NTU202501042

Furthermore, Parker delves into interpretations of Blackwood as ecological (Ashley), grappling with Golden Dawn's ideas of nature and mysticism (Punter), and "The Willows" as a reaction to new Victorian technologies of domination over nature (Sullivan). The most salient idea in Parker's analysis is this:

> [t]he final image we are left with is a detailed description of the corpse. It is punctured, all over, with small holes—which we are told symbolize "the awful mark" of the woods. The image suggests not only that the trees have fed, but that humans are indeed only "ostensibly-bounded" and far more porous than we like to imagine. (84)

Not only do the willows align with an ecological paradigm, they also appear as trans-corporeal and rhizomatic. The human body appears porous and open to the willows' influence. And yet the willows' seduction, their power, is firstly aesthetic. "The Willows" opens mapping out mashes of bewildering beauty. Miles upon miles of willow bushes unfold upon the explorer's eyes. The grass-like quality of the willows allows for the impression that "the entire plain is moving and alive" (34). The uniformity of the plain is not the only aspect acting upon the explorer's minds; the elements are at play: the wind and the river have an unparalleled vitality. The composition of the landscape generates awe and a sense of insignificance in the explorers.

Their experience hints at the sublime. The sublime calls into question the subject's position; it introduces a moment of disorientation and fear when facing nature's prowess, and then one of transcendence. The sublime beauty of the river in the story would lead to the dissolution of subjectivity and its reconfiguration (Hitt 604). Christopher Hitt retools the concept of the sublime, opposing recent trends in ecocriticism that harshly critique the tradition's implied subject (male) sovereignty. Coining the term "ecological sublime," Hitt asserts that the sublime, since Immanuel Kant's theorization, always has to do with humility (611). This humility can be

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resisted, repressed, or domesticated, as in conventional accounts of the sublime, or it can conduct to a deep ecological awareness of our own mortality and thus our belonging to nature (Hitt 612). Furthermore, Hitt's mathematical sublime, in which the fertility of earth is overwhelming (610), keeps a resemblance to the vast extension of the willow bushes. Framing the story as an explorer's tale, Blackwood would reenact the ecological sublime in "The Willows" just as Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. By making "The Willows" a tale of exploration, the willows become an object framed by the subject's account. On the one hand, the novella brings the willows forth: it depicts them, mimics them, represents them. On the other hand, the willows resist being framed. And yet, they never become a discrete object, fully fleshed out, and separated from the subjects and their bodies. The expectation of the formative and invigorating quality of the sublime (Newell 8) vanishes in face of the terrors the explorers must face.

Sublime horror, in Newell's words, is quite distinct from cosmic horror, because, although they overlap to an extent, the sublime always reconfigures the subject—a sort of return to the self —while cosmic horror always implies the dissolution or death of the subject (8). Although Newell's theorizations are closer to Lovecraft than to Blackwood, the Kantian sublime does not fully encompass the explorer's experience of the willow bushes. After all, the roar of the elements overpowers the human voice:

> Great revelations of nature, of course, never fail to impress in one way or another, and I was no stranger to moods of the kind. Mountains overawe and oceans terrify, while the mystery of great forests exercises a spell peculiarly its own. But all these, at one point or another, somewhere link on intimately with human life and human experience. They stir comprehensible, even if alarming, emotions. They tend on the whole to exalt. With this multitude of willows, however, it was something far different. (Newell 37)

doi:10.6342/NTU202501042

The subject is truly encumbered. The mind is under siege and retreats instead of triumphantly overcoming the outside to returning to the self.

This retreat closely resembles the haunted psyches of classic Gothic tales. The psychoanalytical approach, which goes back to Freud and his theorizations of the *unheimlich*, also seems distinct from the subjectivity of the explorers. “The Willows” is a Gothic tale, but fairly distant from the domestic and familial preoccupations of the *unheimlich* . As Newell asserts, cosmic horror disavows the domestic reading of the novel and the human drama that psychoanalysis normalizes (17). And yet, it is not only domesticity what problematizes a psychoanalytical reading of “The Willows.” The uncanny has been revisited by environmental humanities scholars such as Rod Giblett. Giblett asserts that the womb is the loci of the uncanny in Freud’s essay, but also “the wetland is the uncanny place and process par excellence” (12). Both “The Willows” and Annihilation feature uncanny swamps. The uncanny, for Giblett, relates to an ambivalent affect (of love and hate) toward the swamps or the dark waters (15). The swamp would be a figuration of both birth (the womb) and death (slime and decay). Its undifferentiation, and its relatedness to smell, touch, and other bodily senses hint toward a return of the repressed, in this case nature in the form of the maternal womb (Giblett 17). Although the willow bushes can be imagined as the repressed maternal womb, we can delve further into the power of the willow’s agency as an utterance on an unbridled, not repressed, nature.

If philosophical categories like the sublime or the unheimlich seem to elude the subject configuration of “The Willows,” one needs to turn to more contemporary conceptualizations of the relationship between subject and place. Morton, in *Dark Ecology*, reframes the interconnection between subject and place as a series of monstruous loops. This Gothicized

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theory recalls authors like Blackwood. The concept of "loop" traverses Morton's work, explained in these terms:

> The loop form of beings means we live in a universe of finitude and fragility, a world in which objects are suffused with and surrounded by mysterious hermeneutical clouds of unknowing. It means that the politics of coexistence are always contingent, brittle, and flawed. (6)

According to Morton, the loop-quality of beings bespeaks interconnectedness, but also contingency. The myth of a constant presence that is knowable (and easily quantifiable and exploited) gives place to "hyperobjects," localized places so complex and populated that they are empirically ungraspable (the earth itself would be a place, a hyperobject) (Morton 36). "The Willows," just as Morton's looping, displays a place that is unknowable and impossible to subsume by a seemingly dominant, epistemologically superior subject. The explorers are emmeshed in a nonhuman world that they do not, and cannot fully, understand.

"The Willows" emerges under the lens of Morton's theory as an ecological parable of ontological proportions. The explorers operate as a proxy for enlightened reason and the willows —darkly ecological, looping impossibilities— would stand for a monstruous nonhuman object that cannot be fully grasped by human reason. Here, the empirical failure to apprehend nature appears as a gothic tale. When OOO (Object Oriented Ontology) is taken seriously, as Morton does, the withdrawal of the object bespeaks the object's unknowability, but does not negate or occlude its existence/reality. This idea does not depart from the sovereignty of Kant's subject, but rather from the impossibility for the subject to grasp all available data. Reality is there, including phenomena such as global warming and mass extinction, but humans cannot empirically grasp it.

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"The Willows," just as the title hints, displaces the human subject from the center of the plot. An agential nature opens the novella: "the Danube here wanders about at will." The river "wanders," "pours," "makes," "tears," "carries," "forms," "shapes," and "possesses" (Blackwood 17). Instead of "Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress" (Eliot 1), we are greeted by "a region of singular loneliness" (Blackwood 17). Miss Brooke, and with her human action, are decentered. The eerie agency of nature in this region is disquieting. An active nature frames the story and situates us outside the bourgeois, domestic opening of the Victorian novel that *Middlemarch* exemplifies. Even within the genre of horror, we are well distanced from M.R. James or Arthur Machen. As it happens in tales like "The Ash Tree" or the slimy "Novel of the Black Seal", James and Machen seem less concerned with the natural world than with human action. Conversely, Blackwood's "swamp for miles upon miles … [that] gives the impression that the entire plain is moving and alive" already exercises power over us (17).

As the pair of explorers enters a frontier region between Austria and Hungary, navigating the Danube River, there is neither a human hut nor boats—nothing but willows in this isolated land. We know little of the travelers' motivations. The river has the orientation that humans lack, "following the growth of some living creature" (Blackwood 19). The Gothicized nature of the landscape settles, at the beginning of the story, in a Romantic continuum between the narrator and the landscape: "it told us so much of its secret life" (Blackwood 19). Currents of communication open a spectacle in which the river is at times "friendly," and "looks dark and angry" (Blackwood 21) other times. This emotionally volatile nature soon evokes equally affective responses of the narrator to the willows: "midway in my delight of the wild beauty, there crept, unbidden and unexplained, a curious feeling of disquietude, almost of alarm"

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(Blackwood 22). This evocation of romantic sympathy between the subject and the landscape is placed in tension with the bare materiality of the landscape, and how diminished the subject appears in comparison. The alarm at being taken over by an unbridled nature is already embryonic but suffused under a, still possible, Romantic continuity between narrator and landscape:

> The willows connected themselves subtly with my malaise, attacking the mind insidiously somehow by reason of their vast numbers, and contriving in some way or other to represent to the imagination a new and mighty power, a power, moreover, not altogether friendly to us. (Blackwood 23)

Situated in a geological frontier, the willows appear as transitional figures. When contemplating the vast extension of flooded land, the narrator abandons his romantic overawe over the elements and feels, instead, a sense of alienation and threat. The nature full of agency that opens the narration turns, for the first time, hostile to the subject. Even though a source of uneasiness never manifests explicitly, it is evident that the power of the willows is not altogether human, familiar, or comprehensible. Two elements are brought to light in this passage: the willows escape aesthetic categories; and, secondly, the willows colonize the human subject (an inversion of the explorer trope).

When describing the river, Blackwood brings to life a suggestive landscape: “all these faint, sweet whisperings when the sun caught it fairly in some slow curve and poured down upon it till the steam rose” (20). The luminosity of the scene evokes Turner’s paintings of the Thames. The play of water, light, and steam not only embodies idealized beauty, but also serves as a correlative of the romantic subject’s feelings of awe and exaltation. In “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth describes a similarly aestheticized river:

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These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs

With a soft inland murmur.—Once again

Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,

That on a wild secluded scene impress

Thoughts of more deep seclusion. (1)

Here the landscape not only participates in the remembrance of times past, it also affects and gives shape to the subject's beautiful, good, and true feelings and thoughts. The picturesque landscape impresses itself on the poet's sensibility. This idealist suffusing of the inside into the outside is completely absent from the willows in Blackwood's story. The willows "crowding", and "swarming" take possession "by reason of their vast numbers" (Blackwood 23). The natural world has an agency and orientation completely alien to the human observer. Nevertheless, this cannot be mutual ignorance or indifference: there is an affective side to the experience of Gothicized nature, that is horror. The subject is colonized, taken over, possessed by acres and acres of willows.

The nonhuman nature bears on the problem its own agency and orientation (the willows move overnight), but it is moreover hostile. The human mind, the human as a privileged point of reference, "would succumb under the weight of the awful spell" (Blackwood 50) of the otherworldly region. A realistic form struggles with the maddening content it tries to convey and contain. The narrator and the Swede find themselves on the verge of madness throughout the tale. This trespassing of frontiers opens the possibility to denaturalize and re-conceptualize reality (particularly conceptions of the natural world), although the realistic form of the text (the reality effect) appears conventional. Furthermore, the literary form must take root in conventional

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realism if it is to question our sense of reality. Gothicized nature is made more frightening, thus hostile, by the collapse of the subjectivity that experiences its horrors. The human world and the non-human agencies erect and undo each other: in Blackwood we face true frontier writing.

The story closes with a haunting vision: "[a]nd when I turned my eyes again from his ghastly face to the river, the current had done its work, and the body had been swept away into midstream and was already beyond our reach and almost out of sight, turning over and over on the waves like an otter" (Blackwood 62). In the first scenes of the novella, the Swede points at a floating figure in the river; he thinks it is a drowned man. An otter going in and out of the water is then revealed. The closing image of "The Willows" is the exact reverse: a dead body, which looks like an otter, floats away from the explorers. Perhaps shockingly, the metamorphosis of the human body into the animal body captures our attention. Here is where Gothicized nature puts us in checkmate: the tragic recognition that our body is natural, and nature bodily. Despite our disavowal of matter, the "materiality of the human" (Alaimo 4) manifests, in Blackwood, in the dead body floating in the river. The menacing unhuman nature is "as close as one's own skin, perhaps even closer" (Blackwood 2). The willows barricade the mind as much as they seize the body.

"The Willows" thematizes the frontier. We are presented from the beginning with a geographical and natural border-like region. Romantic notions of nature are contested by the Gothicized willows; the realism of the tale is unmade by its maddening content; the human body becomes animal. The polysemy of the narration enables a reconceptualization of nature. But this re-making of the relation between subject and nature cannot be made by means of a monolithic, authoritative gesture. The text does not advance a single notion of the natural; it only stages its unmaking. The text is the frontier. Only in the frontier the outside can be made palpable.

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Gothicized nature emerges like the dead body from the river, sometimes one thing, sometimes another. The ambiguity of the movement of the dead body denaturalizes the world: we are freed from immediacy. By liberating nature from an immediate, in-the-world instrumental relation to the human subject, we may truly experience a horror that cast shadows over our overly illuminated (both in the sense of presence and in the sense of Enlightenment) modern world.

What is the source of such a complex conception of nature? In his short biography of Blackwood, S.T. Joshi underscores the most significant aspects of his life and personality. Blackwood was born in Kent in 1869, although he spent the years from 1890 to 1899 seeking fortune in Canada and the United States and he traveled extensively in subsequent years. He never established a family and, even if industrious, he would often flee from social obligations. He was fervently devoted to the natural world. In that sense, works like *The Centaur* are largely autobiographical (*The Lost Valley* 3). He traveled down the Danube River in a canoe during the summers of 1900 and 1901. He wrote a piece for *Macmillan's Magazine* titled "Down the Danube in a Canadian Canoe," in remembrance of those trips. "The Willows" would appear years later. Substantial fragments from this ecogothic tale were inspired by real occurrences (Blackwood did encounter a desolated region populated by willows and an otter in his expeditions). His relationship with nature was "the most important influence of his life" as the author himself asserted in *Episodes Before Thirty* (11). Not only does "The Willows" have a largely autobiographical aspect, but the author's passion for the natural world establishes a fertile dialogue with the everchanging landscape of this time. Blackwood emerged as a post-Victorian writer. The preoccupations of the nineteenth century with the natural world, technology, and urbanization permeate his fiction.

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The late Victorian era in England marks the period of a Gothic renaissance. As Kelly Hurley argues in *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle*, the Gothic mode in the late nineteenth century works through anxieties brought about by the destabilization of discrete identity that happened in scientific discourse (28). The Gothic is speculative and productive of knowledge and theory, and yet it is distinct from science fiction (Hurley 58). Whereas, in science fiction, there is a new model of reality, the Gothic confronts and opposes models of reality. Furthermore, the Gothic is the site of the ruination of the body. In it, the injured body becomes the locus of anxieties about the place of the human in the natural order (a crisis caused by the advent of evolution theories, psychoanalysis, the taxonomy of pathologies, and new technologies like the microscope). These significative scientific discoveries listed by Hurley (28) are part of Blackwood's context. The rise of technologies of domination, epistemologically like taxonomies or material like urban planning, serve as the background of Blackwood's story about nature's aesthetic, and even religious, primacy.

For Hurley, the Gothic is always implicated with scientific discourses. *Frankenstein*, a foundational nineteenth-century Gothic text, juxtaposes the spectacular landscapes of the North Pole and the idyllic landscapes of the country. These landscapes, in a Romantic fashion, serve as an extension of the soul of Frankenstein and his creature. Furthermore, different from *The Castle of Otranto* (the first Gothic novel), the material entanglement between humans and nonhumans has the body, not the castle, as the site of crisis. *Frankenstein* problematizes the body as a natural site. By animating a body, a monstruous maternity, Victor Frankenstein confounds the boundaries between the natural and the cultural, nonhuman and human agencies. *Frankenstein* has been read as the staging of the creative process of writing, the figure per excellence of intertextuality (Halberstam 14). The body has a double existence, in *Frankenstein*, as text/artifact

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and material nature. This articulation will reappear in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Dorian Gray*, *Dracula* and other canonical Gothic works. It is precisely this doubleness of nature and culture that makes the monstruous intelligible. The Gothic monster, in these works, has "yellow skin, white eyes," but it is also a "jew," "a figure of Enlightenment," and a "sexual deviant" (Halberstam 86). In "The Willows," the figure of the Swede, who had the skill of a "red Indian" (Blackwood 49), partakes in the doubleness of the monster as nature/culture. But even more encompassing, and perhaps more representative of the story, is the overarching analogy of the sacrifice. The sacrifice of the dead man in the story, sacrifice being the master metaphor of "The Willows," overinscribes the natural landscape with a cultural, racialized script.

But, interestingly enough, the Gothicized woods as the place for sacrifice can also be a site for religious allegory. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" is a good example of a man who loses his way in the woods at night. The woods are, in the story, a purely allegorical place (not distant from Dante's *selva oscura*). And, although Hawthorne's figuration is vastly different from the environmental politics of "The Willows," a case can be made for the religious and even mystical aspect of Blackwood's novella. The bronze figures are erected as polytheistic gods and the woods appear again as an allegorical site. Instead of a contradiction between speculative fiction (that responds to scientific advances) and an atavistic mysticism, one may choose to see "The Willows" as a polyphonic text that, as mentioned before, unmakes and never fixes notions of the natural world.

By reclaiming categories like the Gothic for Blackwood, instead of positioning him in the tradition of the weird, one is able to bring to the surface Blackwood's deep entanglements with contemporary preoccupations about the natural world. There is a speculative aspect to "The Willows" that grapples with contemporary questions about the place of humans in nature. The

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crisis brought about by the dissolution of discrete identities in scientific discourses permeates the maddening influence the willows seem to have over the explorers. The continuity between landscape and human is not grounded in a Romantic wholeness, but in monstruous science.

The fantastic, as theorized by Todorov, a category now classical in the study of "The Willows," demarcates the oppositional and ambivalent quality of the story: the willows' function is, then, to put into crisis conceptions of nature that relegate it to a slave of human reason. But one cannot simply oppose the dialogism of literary texts to a monolithic science: science itself is contradictory, oppositional and plural. In that sense, "The Willows" can be speculative and highly productive because the story imagines, reconstitutes, puts into crisis nature, that is, discourses about nature, but also real, tangible landscapes.

It is not ghostly terror that which makes "The Willows" contemporary. The terror experienced by the subjects would be but the staging of an aesthetics of will, autonomy, and vitality; an atavistic modern subjectivity, superannuated by advances in genetics, ecology, and quantum physics. Discrete subjectivity has been reimagined by science as never before. In terror, the undoing of the subject remains a sophisticated faculty of the sovereign subject's mind. Terror as theorized by Lovecraft, Stephen King, and Ann Radcliffe implies a preoccupation with the unknown, a metaphysical void, that, nevertheless, does not make for an undoing of the modern subject (Lovecraft 1; Radcliffe 12; King 25). Terror disavows the bodily affects, the unseeingly bodies, the crass violence characteristic of the Gothic mode and by doing so it occludes its contemporary urgency. It is in the violent remaking of the body, and not in a terrific sublime, that Gothic texts can still speak.

Just as in in "The Willows," *Annihilation*, by Jeff VanderMeer, is deeply concerned with matter. The fiction of VanderMeer is highly speculative and productive; it stages the remaking of

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the relationship between subject and nature. It also has the body as the locus of key oppositions and contradictions. But beyond these thematic continuities between the two works, a comparison between Blackwood and VanderMeer foregrounds the contemporary urgency of the ecogothic. Instead of a solid genre demarcation like the weird (that has deep metaphysical undertones), the Gothic as a mode breathes a new life into these texts and expands their reach. The second chapter of this thesis grapples, then, with *Annihilation* as an ecogothic text.

doi:10.6342/NTU202501042

Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* and Nature as Colonizer

Annihilation is the first book of the Southern Reach Trilogy, a series about a government ongoing investigation of a U.S. coastline colonized by an extraterrestrial entity. It was authored by Jeff VanderMeer, writer and environmentalist, in 2014 and soon reached critical acclaim. *Annihilation* complicates and questions discourses about man's dominance over nature in the Anthropocene. The extraterrestrial entity that transforms Area X─the name of the colonized coastline─uses mimicry, so that the area resembles a pristine natural landscape. However, the pristine landscape takes over the human subjects in the novel, not the other way around. Just as in Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows," the human subjects are colonized by an uncanny, eerie landscape. What in Blackwood was latent in VanderMeer becomes fully visible: the literal and metaphorical colonization soon turns out to be the interpretative key of the text. It signals the remnants of agrologistics' nature─a term coined by Timothy Morton (37)─and bespeaks the problem of the colonized human identity. Colonization thus becomes the cornerstone of this chapter, both as a master metaphor in *Annihilation* and also as a framework for identity formation in the novel. As violently as it unfolds in its undifferentiation of matter, the colonization of human bodies comes across as, in VanderMeer, an optimistic promise. In this chapter, I set out to understand how mimicry and colonization are central to VanderMeer's critical reading of the Anthropocene. That which is at work in the novel is a reconceptualization of nature, now not only by representing an unbridled non-human colonizer, but also by a critical gauge of the concept of nature. I set forth an optimistic reading of the novel in which a utopian coexistence of the human and the nonhuman is reimagined.

"The beauty of [Area X] cannot be understood, either, and when you see beauty in desolation, it changes something inside you. Desolation tries to colonize you" (*Annihilation* 6).

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This is one of the earliest mentions of Area X, and it foreshadows Area X as a colonizer. Colonization as a motive appears early in the text and soon becomes its encompassing theme. In this chapter, I will advance the notion that colonial mimesis opens the possibility of communication between bodies in *Annihilation*. As a colonizer, nature does not become a monolithic nonhuman antagonist that takes over the earth and effaces human civilization. Instead, it paints a tableau of bodily undifferentiation, a violent yet hopeful exchange. I will also touch upon the notion of a network of subjectivities in the novel that gives Area X its ambiguous, Gothic atmosphere. What we understand as nature in *Annihilation* comes forth from this immanent network of human and nonhuman agents, not from some purified transcendence. Through concepts such as Bruno Latour's actor-network, René Girard's mimesis, and Morton's dark ecology, my reading of VanderMeer is optimistic: it creates the condition for a future coexistence of the human and the nonhuman in the Anthropocene.

This celebratory tone is echoed in recent critical accounts of the novel, although it is has not been linked with its ecogothic aspects or with a wider ethical project, something I set out to do in this chapter. Lara Choksey approaches the *Southern Reach Trilogy* from the perspective of the genome. She conceptualizes VanderMeer's trilogy as speculative fiction that exposes the postgenomic future as unknowable and undecided. VanderMeer's narrative, Choksey argues, is about the annihilation of discrete subjectivity, a literary site in crisis that echoes the scientific uncertainty surrounding the genome. On the same line of thought, Kaisa Kortekallio coins the term "becoming-instrument," a term that, departing from Deleuzean posthumanism, posits that humans are transformed by, intertwined with, and becoming themselves the nonhuman. The emphasis both critics place on the dislocation of the human subject in VanderMeer's trilogy aligns with an ecocritical stance that underscores the ecological and political consequences of

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such decentering. Closer to my research, in "'Through the Eyes of Area X': (Dis)Locating Ecological Hope via New Weird Spatiality," Gry Ulstein interrogates the ecological potentialities of the genre of the new Weird as exemplified by VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*. Contrary to the weird cosmic horror epitomized by Lovecraft, VanderMeer finds in the genre the possibility for affirmation and hope in times of the Anthropocene. All these critical accounts share something in common: VanderMeer sets a foundation; he opens the space of possibility, of new ways of coexistence between the human and the nonhuman. This chapter is embedded in this ecocritical wave.

The Anthropocene and Agrologistics: Nature as Blank Canvas in *Annihilation*

I chose the concept of the Anthropocene to frame VanderMeer's work because it encompasses contemporary issues with which his prose is intimately intertwined. To offer a clear-cut definition of the Anthropocene appears challenging. It is a contested category. Sections of the scientific community have rebutted its existence. According to Alexa Weik von Mossner, the Anthropocene stands for a stage in which "biological agents become geological agents" (83). That is to say, humans have an impact on the planet on a geological scale. To bring forth the Anthropocene entails inevitably conjuring the ghost of mass extinction. The changes to the functioning of the Earth are deemed a threat to human civilization. Morton proposes that nature as we understand it, and with it the Anthropocene, started with the invention of agriculture: "A 12.500-million-year-old social, physical and philosophical logic is showing now its true colors. And for many years the name of this logic was nature" (37). In this understanding of nature, the beautiful landscape is no different from the extension of fields in agriculture: both are designed by and for humans. According to this paradigm, how can humans impose a design upon nature

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and yet show indifference to the nonhuman world? This indifference stems from the human as the only point of access to the real: "Thinking has been closely associated with humans for a long time. Humans have been the only ones granted the access to other things in any meaningful way" (Morton 18). The Anthropocene appears as the consequence of this indifference to the nonhuman world.

Area X could be read as a figuration of mass extinction in times of the Anthropocene. In *Annihilation*, Area X first poses a threat to human existence. In the novel, it is made explicit that this area expands every year (129). Entire expeditions commit murder or suicide under its influence. The area appears hostile to human beings. Such a degree of hostility is easily related to climate change. A group of incompetent bureaucrats also manages Area X's project (although this does not appear in *Annihilation*, it will open *Authority*, the next novel in the trilogy [3]). The novel becomes thus an allegory for mass extinction under the light of the zone's ever-expanding border. Area X thus reflects VanderMeer's contemporary preoccupations about the Anthropocene.

Morton argues that the Anthropocene is as old as agriculture (37). That means that the climate, the soil, and the atmosphere were molded by human action from the beginnings of agricultural activity. However, according to Morton, agriculture, by itself, is not the only origin and cause of the Anthropocene. Agrologistics is the propelling force behind it. Latent in Morton's theorizations is the intertwinement of textuality and agriculture. In order to understand Morton's agrologistics, one must go back to Jaques Derrida's *Plato's Pharmacy*, especially the philosopher's concept of "logos." Derrida defines "logos" as the condition of appearance: "The Good, in the visible-invisible figure of the father, the sun, or capital, is the origin of all *onta*, responsible for their appearing and their coming into logos, which both assembles and

doi:10.6342/NTU202501042

distinguishes them" (82). The sun reigns over the visible. Derrida's quote shows a metonymic movement, a sort of slippage, between the terms "sun," "father," and "capital." Ontology and logos appear intertwined under the sign of a perpetual presence. Logos rules over what is. Thus the term "agrologistics."

Besides the Derridean influence (as seen in the term agrologistics), Morton approaches the Anthropocene from OOO theory (Object-Oriented Ontology). In his book *All Art is Ecological*, he states that agrologistics becomes a logic of perpetual presence, while OOO theory argues for objects' withdrawal and even mystery. Graham Harman is one of the key thinkers of OOO. This is how he defines the central principle of this theory:

> As OOO sees it, the true danger to thought is not relativism but idealism, and hence the best remedy for what ails us is… reality. Furthermore, since reality is always radically different from our formulation of it, and is never something we encounter directly in the flesh, we must approach it indirectly. This withdrawal or withholding of things from direct access is the central principle of OOO. (Harman 14)

For Graham Harman, the problem is not that objects are passively inaccessible, but that they are always actively withdrawing. Even in their withdrawing, objects are always agentic. OOO theorists depart from the idea that our formulations of reality are always detours. Furthermore, humans are not the only points of access to the real: all beings access reality through detours or, in Morton, loops. The idea that the world is readily accessible to the subject is circumvented by this theory.

In *Annihilation*, the biologist says: "Our mission was simple: to continue the government's investigation into the mysteries of Area X" (4). The mysteries of Area X may echo

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the mystery of objects in OOO —and traces back to conventional Gothic motifs. The narrator in *Annihilation* continues: "The entrance to the tower leading down excited a kind of presence, a blank surface that let us write so many things upon it" (9). At first the tower, the novel's mystery, was but "a blank surface that let us write so many things upon it." The tower, at first glance, seems to perpetuate the logic of perpetual presence that OOO opposes. The tower, as an allegory of nature, would be a blank canvas upon which the subject would impress orientation and meaning—the subject being the only point of access to the real. The two landmarks of *Annihilation*'s topography are the lighthouse and the tower:

> However, as soon as I saw the staircase, I remembered the lighthouse on the coast and had a sudden vision of the last expedition drifting off, one by one, and sometime there after the ground shifting in a uniform and preplanned way to leave the lighthouse standing where it had always been but depositing this underground part of it inland. (6)

The earliest mention of the tower as somehow related to the lighthouse appears on page seven. Although the contrast is expressed spatially, the lighthouse is built from the ground up, in a phallic resemblance. The figure of the father has to do with the emergence of agency in Freud, and the phallus with the emergence of desire and subjectivity in Lacan. By resembling a phallus, the lighthouse seems to reactivate the psychoanalytical matrix of the formation of the subject. And yet, the tower is buried in the ground and plunges into the earth, like an opening or a void. It has a maternal, even abject, imagery. Both (tower and lighthouse), in the first thoughts of the biologist, would be one and the same building, one same organism: a two-faced creature of sorts.

The tower is a metaphor for nature: "I was still engrossed in examining the walls with my flashlight. Their very blankness mesmerized me" (21). The blankness of the walls, a blank surface, emerges as a metaphor for nature being a sort of blank canvas, an unwritten page. After

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the hypnotic command wears off, the tower looks like an organism again at the beginning of the protagonist's transformation. This suggests that VanderMeer, in a metatextual gesture, strips away the conception of nature embraced by agrologistics (a blank canvas), and so the novel returns an organic and living quality to the concept of nature.

Nevertheless, the logos of agrologistics is historical and VanderMeer locates, as much as Derrida, the origin of nature as a resource, a blank canvas, in the Abrahamic tradition: "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…" (*Annihilation* 23). This is the first time this sequence of words appears in the novel. The religious subtexts take centerstage at first: "sinner," "shall," etc. The writing makes an actual thing out of biblical language. However, it is weirdly organic—"fruit," "seeds," "worms." Although the writing is almost surreal and nonsensical, it hints at motives of death and regeneration. Once again, it has doubled religious and organic imagery. This is furthered in the text by "as if a battle raged for its meaning" (24), referring to the script on the wall. To investigate the metaphor further, later in the novel we learn that the writing comes from the diaries that decompose at the lighthouse's base (118). This entanglement suggests a possible reading: discourse has material consequences. Moreover, an Abrahamic, or even Judeo-Christian, conception of nature seems to be leading us to mass extinction.

Under the light of Morton's reading of the Anthropocene, Area X's haunting landscape withdraws from the naked presence of agrologistics' nature. In *Annihilation,* we are distant from Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim in Tinker Creek,* where "the texture of the world, its filigree and scrollwork. . . means that there is a possibility for beauty here, a beauty inexhaustible in its complexity. . . which trains me to the wild and extravagant nature of the spirit I seek" (45). The transcendental tone of Dillard and Thoreau is altogether absent in *Annihilation*. Furthermore, the

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sublime musings of Blackwood in the opening pages of "The Willows," which retain a Thoreauvian wonder, are pretty distinct from the topographic enterprise of the Area X expedition. Nature in *Annihilation* is neither beautiful nor sublime. Even more emphatically, it is not transcendental. VanderMeer goes against the grain of the American tradition of nature writing and reconceptualizes nature through a Gothic, speculative sensibility. In *Annihilation,* we face a mysterious, inaccessible, and even outrightly inhuman landscape. As Anneke Lubkowitz makes explicit in her book *Haunted Spaces*, nature writing "is an American genre, founded in the tradition of Emerson and Thoreau" (15). The term "nature writing" was often bound to an idyllic and pastoral gaze in which nature would be invested with "stability, indestructibility and permanence" (20). In recent years, Lubkowitz argues, nature writing has turned toward haunting landscapes:

> The figure of haunting in these texts is implemented by a complex web of images and allusions to human presences which destabilize "natural" space and thus perform a process of dismantling on the level of language and narrative. In this sense, haunting functions as a way of conveying the sociality and culturality of "natural" space. (30)

As seen in *Annihilation*, a new paradigm of the "sociality and culturality" of the natural place gives rise to, a term Lubkowitz coins, the "Gothic or noir moment" (20) of nature writing.

Place as Unbridled Colonizer

Annihilation consists in a first-person account of a four-women expedition to a mysterious coastline called Area X, under the government's surveillance. The team has four members, of which only the narrator will survive: a biologist (the narrator), an anthropologist, a psychologist (the team leader and hypnotist of the others), and a surveyor. The story opens when the team

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discovers a tower or tunnel not shown on the map. The exploration of the building will lead to the contamination of the narrator, who will experience some sort of transformation, and the demise of the other three expedition members. *Annihilation* is an explorer's tale, a narrative that frames an unknown natural territory under the ruse of exploration. This allows VanderMeer to map out, describe, and materialize a place (a relational network) more than a void. After all, the aim of the expedition is, foremost, topographical. Malpas speaks of topographies from a Heideggerian point of view (Heidegger, after all, is the departing point for OOO theory):

> The connection of place with space, while central to any understanding of place, nevertheless presents a problem for the attempt to arrive at such an understanding. The philosophical history of the concept of space in Western thought is a history in which space has been increasingly understood in the narrower terms that tie it to physical extension. . . The concept of void brings with it the idea of a homogenous and undifferentiated realm of pure extension—the idea of a pure realm of "containment" of the sort that is arrived at, for instance, when one abstracts the thing from its enclosing surroundings so that what is left is nothing but an empty and open "space"— precisely the idea that lies at the heart of thinking about space in the work of Descartes and Newton. (29)

Malpas responds thus in the fragment to a vein of criticism that conflates the concept of space with colonialism. Only when space is a void, assert these theorists, can the colonial enterprise take root. Colonialism refers, too, to the bureaucratic language that gives place to environmental policies: deforestation, allotted parcels for cattle, or construction. When entire ecosystems are considered void or empty, Malpas argues, we talk about Newtonian space, not place.

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If Newtonian space tends toward abstraction, place is a network of localized relations. Area X brings forth the story of a place: a living landscape. In fact, Area X was inspired by VanderMeer's home in Florida. Transitional places proliferate in Florida, says VanderMeer:

> The setting in Annihilation is, more or less, a transformed version of the fourteen-redmile hike I have done for almost twenty years at the St. Marks Wildlife Refuge here in North Florida. It is a landscape and a series of transitional ecosystems that have enchanted me, fascinated me, and at times scared me. I've seen a Florida panther in that place, and turned a corner right into the gaze of a bobcat, been charged by a wild boar, seen dolphins swimming up the brackish marsh canals at high tide, and had to jump over an alligator on a raised path with water on either side. It's a place where you need to live in the moment, and yet can also, by doing so, be transported deep into memory and catharsis. (*Jeff VanderMeer's Blog* 2).

This is mirrored in the descriptions of Area X: "In few other places could you still find habitat where, within the space of walking only six or seven miles, you went from forest to swamp to salt marsh to beach" (Annihilation 12). This habitat in Florida comes to the forefront of the story. Colonialism in the novel does not depart from the void space of early settlers or contemporary governmental authorities. For example, early settlers in North America imagined the New World as an empty space:

> Women seem not to have reacted against the land with violence not simply because they never dreamed of it as an object of sexual conquest, nor simply because they had evaded the frustrations of irreconcilable desires. They had, in addition, taken on a set of images that limited the very contexts of imaginative possibility. Thus, women avoided male anguish at lost Edens and male guilt in the face of the raping of the continent by confining

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themselves, instead, to the "innocent. . . amusement" of a garden's narrow space. (Kolodny 8)

Annette Kolodny explores early North American settlers' fantasies about the frontier. These fantasies are gendered: while the male settlers fantasized about an erotic conquest of the virgin, female continent; women settlers return in their writings to garden imagery. In both continuums, the empty landscape ought to be transformed by human labor. The colonizer in *Annihilation* is not a venturing settler who finds his or her way through a void wilderness. Florida's wilderness and the Area X it inspired becomes instead the novel's unbridled colonizer.

In *Annihilation*, the colonized subject is implicated in the relationality of Area X. Relationality, for Malpas, is the hallmark of place: "Place is that bounded open region of possibility," says the philosopher, that is "fundamentally relational" (40). This take on place is similar to the contemporary notion of ecosystem, even to Morton's dark ecology. This subversion of the colonial trope, from space to place, makes of the subject's trans-corporeal identity its vulnerability and openness to nature's colonization. Stacy Alaimo coins the term "trans-corporeality" to speak about the interconnectedness of agency: "The trans-corporeal subject, however, is not so much situated, which suggests stability and coherence, but rather caught up in and transformed by myriad, often unpredictable material agencies" (Alaimo 146). Nature's colonization would not be the taking over a situated subject, but instead the subject would have an openness to colonization and contagion. The subject would always be trans-corporeal, and thus implicated, caught up.

This circles back to the category of place. Maplas writes: "The connection of subjectivity with place indicates the need to view subjectivity as tied to agency and embodied spatiality" (33). Although the locus of agency in Maplas's *Place and Experience* is still human, taken to its last

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consequences, agency can be conflated with embodied spatiality. A body, an embodied spatiality, can impress upon, influence, or even colonize the human mind. Subjectivity appears as the condition of embodiment and agency. A place would be, then, the interrelation of embodied entities. If embodied agency is subjectivity, the ecological entanglement is close enough to the social space of intersubjectivity. The trans-corporeal emerges as both an ecological and a social paradigm. The relation between bodies is both an ecology and a socio-political configuration. When we bypass top-down abstractions and instead come down to the immanent interrelations of place, we not only bring forth an ecological paradigm but also challenge disembodied politics and privilege grass-root movements. Maplas does not recognize the nonhuman as a "quasi-subject." However, VanderMeer's political subtext will reemerge later in this essay through Latour's call to legislate about humans and nonhumans as both "quasi-subjects" and "quasi-objects." Politics in the Anthropocene, VanderMeer contends, must mobilize both human and nonhuman subjectivities.

Literal and Metaphorical Colonization in Annihilation

Relationships between human and nonhuman subjectivities are not always cooperative or beneficial. The imagery of hosts and parasites has remained a staple of the Gothic genre. Canonical films in gothic lore such as Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) take inspiration from parasitic insects. In the film's most emblematic scene, the alien creature emerges from the insides of one of the spacecraft passengers. In another canonical monster film, Boon Joon Ho's *Host* (2006), the monster is a parasite; the titular "host" seems to be an allegory of the Korean nation. Imagery of parasites, cannibalism, and other forms of feeding proliferate in the global Gothic. In *Annihilation*, this imagery concentrates on vegetal and fungal reproduction. The main human

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character is contaminated by inhaling spores from the writing inside the tower (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 25). Instances of biological fusing and trespassing (parasites, fungus, fertilization) reframe colonization as a crossing of skin boundaries. It is an irremediably bodily and even reproductive affair. Colonizer/colonized identities need to be differentiated but come together instead, irremediably fused.

In *Annihilation,* the anxieties that emanate from the contamination of the biologist have to do with the ambiguity of her passive body. VanderMeer represents the biologist's body as permeable, vegetal, and slimy, just as much as her mind. Her body had a "green glow" (169); she passively "could not move, could not think" faced with the Crawler (181)— the Crawler is the monster that lives in the "tower," it represents the agency of Area X. The Neoplatonic spirit imprisoned in a carnal body comes undone when the human body and mind appear vulnerable to contagion. The edifice of a free-standing subject crumbles down in the face of contamination, contagion, and slime. In order to be open to contamination, humans must be of the same order as nonhumans: a thing between things. The human as a thing between things is one of the centerstage ideas of both the Gothic and new materialisms, the other being the menacing agency of the nonhuman. As Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock states, "[t]he Gothic. . . has always been about how human beings relate to the nonhuman world, what happens when objects assume a kind of mysterious animacy or potency, and what happens when human beings are reduced to the status of things among other things" (viii). If the biologist in the novel is a thing amongst things, then *Annihilation* would explore a commonplace theme in Gothic texts. After all, the protagonist's biological body comes to the forefront, and her boundaries, as an individualized subject, give way to a more encompassing identity. The "brightness" (144), as she names her transformation, makes her an extension of Area X. Her thingness derives from her openness: she also partakes in the

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trans-corporeal Area X. Her brightness is not an ability or a depiction of super-humanity; it instead manifests her passive transformation, her body as recipient/object of an alien force. The brightness is the locus of her ambiguous thingness.

In no other scene the thingness of the human is more foregrounded than when the surveyor and the biologist find the anthropologist's corpse:

> There was not much left of her face, and odd burn marks were all over the remaining skin. Spilling out from her broken jaw, which looked as though someone had wrenched it open in a single act of brutality, was a torrent of green ash that sat on her chest in a mound. Her hands, palms up in her lap, had no skin left on them, only a kind of gauzy filament and more burn marks. Her legs seemed fused and half melted. (VanderMeer, Annihilation 61)

Bodily horror bespeaks this materiality of the human. Xavier Aldana Reyes states about bodily horror: the "gothic is an experience and an aesthetic concerned with the vulnerability of flesh" (3). Then he clarifies that he considers "corporeal transgression to mean instances of dismemberment, mutilation, mutation, extreme disease or transformative surgery" (Aldana Reyes 12). The ruined body comes forth as punctured matter and excessive flesh. The anthropologist's body stands for a spectacle of flesh and slime. The final reification of the body, after all, is death. However, the abjection of fluids, a "torrent of green ash," a "gauzy filament," and a melting of the flesh represents the human body's thingness and its ambiguous permeability.

VanderMeer is deeply preoccupied, in *Annihilation*, with Gothic atmosphere. If we were to consider the form of the novel, the text is often descriptive. Long paragraphs of description speak of a thingness in that which is described:

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> Within the hour, the lighthouse had disappeared into the night, and with it the beacon the psychologist had become. The wind picked up, the darkness intensified. The ever-more distant sound of waves was like eavesdropping on a sinister, whispering conversation. I walked as quietly as possible through the ruined village under just a sliver of moon, unwilling to risk my flashlight. The shapes in the exposed remains of rooms had gathered a darkness about them that stood out against the night and in their utter stillness I sensed an unnerving suggestion of movement. (VanderMeer, Annihilation 139)

Plot and action slow down and become subordinated to the author's topographical exploration of Area X. The violent ruination of the anthropologist's body, or even the psychologist's dead body, is an expression of this pictorial and descriptive flair. The pictorial, the composition of visual grotesqueries, is accompanied by the impossibility of imagining them: VanderMeer has an obsessive drive to bring to life Area X's weird landscape. The landscape is weird precisely because it is impossible to imagine. The weirdness of *Annihilation* stems from a preoccupation with grotesqueries, things that do not belong together: "Incredibly, a human face seemed to be rising out of the earth. . . I shone my light on it again and saw it was a kind of tan mask made of skin, half-transparent, resembling in its way the discarded shell of a horseshoe crab" (140). Agency is also diffused and seems to emanate from all things: the landscape in *Annihilation* is not only weird but also eerie, according to Fisher's definition (75), precisely because it is impossible to focalize agency in the discrete body of a human being. VanderMeer himself names *Annihilation*'s landscape as eerie from the first pages: "We encountered eerie signs of human habitation" (5). The eerie and the weird terrify because they are ambiguous. The pictorial in *Annihilation* is outrightly Gothic: VanderMeer brings forth an atmosphere of ambiguity and uncertainty through weird and eerie landscapes.

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Moreover, in no other figure is an eerie ambiguity more evident than in the Crawler. The monster, the embodiment of boundaries' transgression, is localized in the Crawler:

> Novels in a Gothic mode transform class and race, sexual and national relations into supernatural or monstrous features. The threat posed by the gothic monster is a combination of money, science, perversion, and imperialism, but by reducing it to sexual aberrance, we fail to historicize Gothic embodiments. (Halberstam 21)

Through the lens of Halberstam's theory of the Gothic, the Crawler can be read as the monstrous figure in *Annihilation*. A kaleidoscopic organism (the Crawler), unseen until the novel's last pages, it writes the words of former expeditions on the skin of a larger organism that resembles a tower buried into the earth. When identified as a monster, it becomes clear that the Crawler transgresses human and nonhuman boundaries. The Gothic is precisely "the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities" (Halberstam 27). However, VanderMeer's monster does not stage the making and unmaking of the normal, non-pathological subject as the monsters from fin de siècle Gothic did (according to Halberstam). It offers, instead, an optimistic collapse of categories. The undifferentiation of a human face and an extraterrestrial, yet deeply natural, creature brings about the possibility of communication between bodies:

> Then I felt the impression from behind me of hundreds of eyes beginning to turn in my direction, staring at me. I was a thing in a swimming pool being observed by a monstrous little girl. I was a mouse in an empty lot being tracked by a fox. I was the prey the starfish had reached up and pulled down into the tidal pool. (VanderMeer, Annihilation 180)

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The biologist has this vision when faced with the Crawler. She is soon able to empathize with and even become several nonhuman creatures. The possibility to sense, and even to be, another unmakes the distinctions between human and nonhuman. In the novel, this is almost celebratory from the protagonist's perspective. This undifferentiation is unthinkable because it brings down the taxonomies that have structured the world since Victorian times. However, instead of the preoccupations about race or sexuality of canonical Gothic novels such as *Dracula* (1897) and *Frankenstein* (1818), the monster in *Annihilation* celebrates the crossing and muddling it enacts.

Why is VanderMeer's trilogy optimistic, then? Because it opens up communication channels between the human and the nonhuman:

> Imagine these expeditions, and then recognize that they all still exist in Area X in some form, even the ones that came back, especially the ones that came back: layered over another, communicating in whatever way is left to them. Imagine that this communication sometimes lends a sense of the uncanny to the landscape because of the narcissism of our human gaze, but that it is just part of the natural world here. (VanderMeer, Annihilation 192)

Mimesis stands at the center of an optimistic undifferentiation. In "The Plague in Literature and Myth," René Girard advances a structuralist project. At the boundary between literature and anthropology, he seeks to grasp the underlying structure of the plague motif, which would be intertwined with ritual sacrifice, doubles (mimetic violence), and the dissolution of social order. The linkage between plague and sacrifice is essential because it illuminates the structure of drama (in particular Shakespearean drama): the sacrifice on stage becomes a communal catharsis. The structure of social dissolution becomes in Girard's terminology mimetic violence (by this, I mean the overturning of hierarchies, sameness in place of differentiation), scapegoating, and the

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restitution of the social order. Girard traces this structure from Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Dostoyevsky, to films by Visconti and Bergman.

It is worth noting that, although the plague does not appear as a theme of *Annihilation*, the cognate contagion turns into the novel's central theme. "We must note that we are no longer dealing with a single theme, with the isolated plague, but with a thematic cluster that includes, besides the plague or, more generally, the theme of epidemic contamination, the dissolving of differences and the mimetic doubles" (Girard 840). Under the light of Girard's mimetic violence, contagion clusters too "the dissolving of difference and the mimetic doubles." The biological or medical preoccupation doubles the social unrest. Once again, biology turns social: the contaminated body of the biologist serves as a metaphor for the contaminated social body. Anthropology and Girard's theory on human violence seem far from VanderMeer's isolated characters. And yet, one of the most striking passages of the novel, which has more salience in the film adaptation, is the one in which signs of human struggle, or violence, are all over the lighthouse. This leads us to think that Area X's celebratory undifferentiation echoes Shakespeare's, Dostoyevsky's, and Bergman's depiction of the plague and social unrest. *Annihilation* also participates in the cluster of themes and the structure Girard depicts. The protagonist, the biologist, would be both the scapegoat and the locus of purification and catharsis in the novel—her body is both a sick body and a metaphor for a political body returning to health.

Mimesis also appears as the grounding metaphor for this chapter, especially in connection with the key theme of colonization. Homi Bhabha opens his "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" with the following argument: "[C]olonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but

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not quite" (126). The elusive formula through which Bhabha conceptualizes identity production in colonialism is "almost the same, but not quite." Bhabha tries to elucidate how the colonial discourse produces colonial subjects not through heroic epics but through low literary forms like mimicry. The formula "almost the same, but not quite" implies a partial recognition of the Other that, ironically/self-referentially, would be a discursive affirmation of the colonizer's static identity. Nineteenth-century colonial discourses turn the colonizer's identity into a fetish and the colonized subject into a negation: the colonized is but a repetition, an artifice. In Bhabha's account, a dialectic between two poles─colonizer/colonized, static/contingent, natural/historical, metaphorical/metonymic─creates the intricacies of colonialism's authority. The master metaphor of the text appears in Jacques Lacan's epigraph: mimicry is a war tactic (125). The colonized subject is a threat to the colonizer, not in its radical difference but in its parodic resemblance: form and not substance, the colonized subject ironizes the hegemonic identity of the colonizer. Mimicry reproduces and yet undoes colonial discourse.

Mimesis, as seen with Bhabha, becomes center stage in postcolonial theory. In *Annihilation*, the amnesic husband is the subject, per excellence, of mimesis. He is pure form and non-substance, the narrator said: "I could never get beyond the mask, could never find the man I had known" (57). If we follow Bhabha's theorization of colonial mimesis, the amnesic husband becomes an avatar for the colonial subject. His cancerous and amnesic body expresses latent anxieties about colonialism and the impossibility of erasing the bodies of the colonized.

Not only are these amnesic doppelgängers human bodies, but the gothic doppelgänger reappears throughout Area X. Doppelgänger is a German word coined by Freud in his essay about the uncanny. Emerging from the context of psychoanalytical narratives about the subject, it plays out the familial drama that underpins the history of the family to the functioning of society

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and the production of subjectivity. Although the doppelgänger usually doubles the human, in *Annihilation*, the inhuman landscape, as a dispersed subject, is doubled, too. The two landmarks of the story are the tower and the lighthouse. While one is a building becoming an organism, the other is a human ruin, yet both reflect each other. Their immediate resemblance is structural: they are vertical structures, the two sites in crisis in the novel, and they emerge as beacons in the narrative.

The lighthouse is central in mapping Area X. Metaphorically, it represents everything human. The journals are at its base. In the structure's upper levels, signs of human violence and struggle are evident. We could say the lighthouse stands for human constructs like history or even humanistic ideas about humans: "Behind me lay the increasingly solemn silhouette of what was no longer really a lighthouse but instead a kind of reliquary" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 138). The lighthouse is the double of the buried tower of the biologist. If, on the one hand, the lighthouse structures the map and gives a false sense of safety to the expeditions (in the form of human and historical coordinates), the tower becomes its slippery counterpart. The "tower" is a building, a thing, becoming an organism.

Today, Deleuzean becoming has turned into Latour's network theory, especially after the publication of *We Have Never Been Modern*. According to Latour, modern colonization is not a matter of expanding occupied surfaces. It is instead the casting off of a network (Latour 170). To maintain their legislation/constitution, Western modern subjects carry out parallel tasks: for one, they undergo purification. Nature and society would be two poles, differentiated and purified: the nature of the moderns is universal, while culture is immanent. Nature, in what Latour calls the "Modern Constitution" (32), would exist independent of the network of circulating nonhuman and human agents that bring it into existence in their labs and their experiments. Latour

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decolonizes this universal by referring to the lower task upon which modernity depends. The lower, occluded task that the moderns carry out is the proliferation of hybrids. The circulation of nonhuman subjects and subjects becoming objects. These entities are not fully subjects, not entirely objects, not wholly discursive, but somehow natural, social, and discursive simultaneously. Moreover, it is upon these hybrids, Latour concludes *We Have Never Been Modern*, that we nonmoderns should legislate (208).

"The quasi-subject, quasi-object" (136) of Latour finds a correlative in Area X's hybridization. Although the landscape expresses its hybridity in weird forms and shapes, the site in crisis appears to be the human body. In *Annihilation*, the biologist becomes an instrument in several passages of the book: a microscope, a camera, a tube, and a journal. She is mainly instrumental: her function, diegetic and nondiegetic, is to record what happens in Area X. Even from the opening lines, her being a quasi-object traverses the narrative and makes sympathy possible between her and the other "quasi-subjects, quasi-objects" of Area X.

Nevertheless, the plot is one of transformation: from the biologist-instrument to something else. There is a dislocation between the nonhuman instruments that the biologist brings with her and Area X. In the narrative arch, the protagonist abandons the microscope, the camera, and the lab. She abandons everything but the journal. Science fails to account for the strange phenomena of Area X and the biologist soon discovers this landscape cannot be understood through measurements or human-made scales. This epistemological shift not only transforms her inner experience but also her body. She may no longer be an instrument, but she is becoming something else: "I believe I qualified because I specialized in transitional environments, and this particular location transitioned several times" (11). Not only does the environment transition several times, but the body of the biologist is itself transitional. The

doi:10.6342/NTU202501042

brackishness of her body, the mixture of sea water and fresh water in the transitional ecosystem, make of her body a locus of transformation.

VanderMeer can materialize eco-narratives both from a naïve and an ironic reading. No modern technology can enter Area X. In the novel's world, this is justified by an extraterrestrial entity that mimics what it comes into contact with. In one possible reading of this choice, to cast off a category of nonhumans from Area X, we would sustain that VanderMeer is outrightly antimodern: the extraterrestrial entity would be but a novum that would return the natural world to its original pristine form. A novum "is [a] central imaginary novelty in an sf text" (Csicseri-Ronay 47). If we insist on being antimodern, the transformation of the biologist would be one of purification: the old division abides. Nature and society are, as the country and the city, antipodes, almost moral opposites.

If VanderMeer is not antimodern, if he recognizes (after Latour) the proliferation of hybrids, then *Annihilation* is ironic. The city reappears, although effaced, through haunting images and visions. We are not only meant to recognize the human biologist as a quasi-object but instead to also see nature as social, discursive, and nonhuman. The literary images that traverse the narrative buttress nature's hybridization: a script made of fruiting fungus, an animal with a human visage, a monster that evokes the most intimate memories of the human subject. VanderMeer does not make a pristine transcendence the main feature of Area X; he brings forth a tableau of base undifferentiation of matter. Everything in Area X─even the novel-journal, in a metatextual gesture─ partakes in a discursive, social, and natural existence.

Annihilation's nature, furthermore, is sustained by a network of quasi-objects, quasi subjects that embed it in an ecological grid. Although Latour's hybrids and networks bring forth nonhumans made in labs and factories, VanderMeer's dispersed agencies are not human. This

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gives an ecocritical turn to Latour's theorization. By appearing in the world as "spatiality embodied," organic nonhumans can also be read as quasi-objects, quasi subjects: their visages are imbued with emotion, their cries with meaning. The human body is no longer the site of power, will, or agency─loss of power is thematized in the book's depictions of hypnosis and suicide (echoing Blackwood). Taking a step further, the eeriness of Area X emanates from the dispersion of agency. In Area X, things, such as humans, buildings, and animals, are never entirely a subject or fully an object. We are not simply facing that classic Gothic trope by which animals or the nocturnal wind have an ill intent, but their agency is rather dispersed in a network. Area X is a network of human and nonhuman agencies, not a monolithic nonhuman antagonist.

The environmentalist subtext of VanderMeer's *Annihilation* recognizes nature as both social and discursive. Thus, VanderMeer's novel does not nostalgically call for older conceptions of nature. It instead revitalizes the ecogothic tradition by bringing forth the political, social and discursive consequences of acknowledging nature's agency. The metaphorical and literal colonization of nature in the novel opens up new possibilities of coexistence between the human and the nonhuman through communication. Language, and with it logos, is not the privileged locus of communication. Mimesis, violence, and contagion configure a new paradigm that brings to life the subjectivities of the nonhuman and the thingness of the human.

doi:10.6342/NTU202501042

Conclusion

In this study, I set out to answer a pressing contemporary question: how do *Annihilation* and "The Willows" speak to our current anxieties about the Anthropocene? How would a comparison between "The Willows" and *Annihilation* revitalize the ecocritical subtexts of these Gothic texts? Through a constellation of concepts—monstrosity, the ecogothic, the weird, the thingness of the human, and trans-corporeality— this study thinks through ecocritical problems: How can humans relate to nature in the Anthropocene? Are humans indeed the only quasi-subject, quasi-object bestowed with agency and meaning? Is nature an immutable transcendence severed from the social world?

Throughout this thesis, the Gothic has been center stage. The unsettling Gothic agency of weird and eerie landscapes makes them open to ecocritical musings. The ecogothic became thus the theoretical framework at the foundation of the comparison between Jeff VanderMeer and Algernon Blackwood. Departing from the notion that the Gothic is highly speculative and always has to do with the muddling and retracing of identities, it appears in this comparative study as a privileged site to think through environmental catastrophe and its consequences for subject formation. Our anxieties about the Anthropocene bring forth new ways of being. Although the climate catastrophe implies grieving a world loss, I advanced that the Gothic in these texts is outrightly celebratory. Blackwood and VanderMeer reimagine a future where a new ethics can emerge. Bodies become trans-corporeal and subjects interdependent, this undifferentiation is celebratory rather than fear-inducing.

Setting aside the biographical affinities between Jeff VanderMeer and Algernon Blackwood, their narrators are awed and even humbled by the Gothic landscapes they encounter

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in Area X and the Danube respectively. The biologist is "colonized" (VanderMeer, *Annihilation* 12) by desolation, and the explorer in Blackwood's tale is "sieged by" (30) willows. A re-enchanted Gothic swamp threatens to take over human subjects. The narrators face an existential threat that transforms them. They seem to acquire an understanding that surpasses their previous conventionalism through their contact with the natural world. Although nature presents itself as an unbridled colonizer, at times an angry god demanding a sacrifice, the texts are celebratory. "The Willows" and *Annihilation* teach us to embrace a celebratory approach in the face of environmental loss and catastrophe. Even in VanderMeer's dystopian fiction, the threat of death or madness promises the readers a liberation from social and human conventionalism. A sort of tableau of undifferentiation makes visible, finally, our interdependence and connectedness.

This deep awe for the nonhuman does not necessarily contradict a deep-seated fear or other negative affects related to nature as the outside of civilization. Simon Estok argues, in *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, that we all unconsciously fear nature. This fear breeds contempt of and/or indifference toward the natural world. When commenting on Seungho Choi's poem "Above the Water, Under the Water," Estok departs from an ethical lack:

> The contempt and fear for waste are unambiguous, as is the ethics of waste disposal that the poem describes. Nothing is ambiguous about the disregard for nature, the indifference about its integrity and rights, and the outright ecophobic contempt for its autonomy and agency (each carefully controlled in the recreation park) that dumping and pollution implies. It is not an ecoambiguous ethics that we observe but rather what is more properly understood as a lack of ethics due to ecophobia. (146)

Choi's poem poses the problem of waste as an ambiguous nonhuman presence—once human, now not quite natural. However, the problem of waste is ethically "unambiguous." There

doi:10.6342/NTU202501042

is a lack of ethics in our management of waste. Waste brings forth the problem of disavowal. The lack of ethics that Estok exposes is, furthermore, a lack of recognition. Our outdated ethical frameworks disavow the nonhuman world by making the human the locus of not only agency and will but also recognition and reciprocity. This is the poem that Estok discusses:

> While the tourists are crossing the tranquil lake
>
> divers descend to the bottom of the lake
>
> to recover a corpse,
>
> and at the bottom a colossal tomb of garbage… (146)

In the poem, the picturesque landscape holds a secret: that of the corpse and the "colossal tomb of garbage." The landscapes of Blackwood and VanderMeer appear pristine, but the Gothicized nature of these works reveals the concealed social and cultural aspects of nature in them (just as in the poem the pile of garbage is at the bottom of the lake). The ethical recognition necessary for the opening up of new ways of relating to the nonhuman world takes us to the realization that we are immersed in hybrids. All things partake in natural, social, and discursive networks. A reactionary environmentalist ethics, that champions eugenics and a return to nature, such as the Deep Ecology of the 1980s, takes us to ideas about nature that overlook the "colossal tomb of garbage" at the bottom of the lake. The nonhuman does not only have a transcendental and revitalizing influence over the human. Estok's claim, and for what it is worth Morton's claim, is not to have a unidimensional, outrightly positive and life-affirming relationship with the nonhuman. These authors advance instead the need for ambiguity.

Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation* and Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows" partake in this ambiguity. As Anneke Lubkowitz argues in *Haunted Spaces* there is a Gothic or noir

doi:10.6342/NTU202501042

moment in nature writing at the turn of the millennium. However, there is also a spectral turn in critical theory (the author quotes Timothy Morton, Mark Fisher, Derrida, and Butler). Lubkowitz argues that Derrida's hauntology "deconstructs the binary of culture and nature" (42). The divide between nature and culture does not abide. If the ecocriticism of the 1970s and the 1980s was deeply anchored in referentiality (nature as the referent), says the author, then, at the turn of the twenty-first century, we become aware that nature is not natural but supernatural (Lubkowitz 40). Nature hovers over us like a ghost in the sense that it is not entirely an abstraction nor a pure referent. This spectrality, and even virtuality, of nature complicates not only utilitarian discourses (and their subject/object binary), but also environmentalist discourses that structure their thought around the nature/culture opposition.

Although nature as a specter implies the temporality of mourning and repetition (Lubkowitz, 43), the Gothic in *Annihilation* and "The Willows" allows for a celebratory muddling. If identity is trans-corporeal, the subject is liberated from ableist imperatives of independence and autonomy. The muddling of identities that these texts enact—the Crawler or the otter— reconceptualizes nature. A discursive, social, and natural network of immanent agencies, nature is outrightly hostile and opaque. The opaqueness of the nonhuman agencies makes them ethical subjects. If nonhuman agents are recognized as subjects, we should conduct ourselves to, as in Latour, legislate over them. The ethical subject is not the free and autonomous individual but one enmeshed in this ecological grid.

Recognition precedes ethical imperatives. The notion of recognition (*Anerkennung*) is foundational to continental ethics, particularly Hegel. Subject formation and mutual recognition are intertwined in the philosopher's identity dialectics. Butler, in her *Senses of the Subject*, argues that there is a sense of belatedness in subject formation: the "I" that speaks has already been

doi:10.6342/NTU202501042

"affected" (12). The *Anerkennung* of Hegel in Butler is a "phantasm" (Butler 11), an impression that preceded the emergence of the self and that served as its opening or grounding. If in Hegel the dialectics of identity is given between two able-bodied, free-standing subjects; in Butler we encounter in the senses the "animation" of the spirit that is "affected" (15), the grounding of the subject's emergence.

In one of the few conferences Butler has given about the Anthropocene, they depart from grief and mourning to talk about climate devastation. Art makes it possible to comprehend climate catastrophe's timeframes, otherwise unthinkable in quotidian life. Climate catastrophe is, furthermore, an ongoing loss. And yet, climate catastrophe makes visible that there is a dependency on each other and the earth. "The self is not a substance, but a relation" (2023, 25:53), claims Butler, and this interconnectivity gives us a sense of a shared world. Butler echoes VanderMeer and Blackwood's hopeful intermingling. Contemporary anxieties about climate catastrophe, mass extinction, and the Anthropocene bring us a silver lining: the belated realization that we are all interconnected, dependent, and relational.

doi:10.6342/NTU202501042

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