

The Spiritual in VanderMeer's *Annihilation*

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Throughout Jeff VanderMeer's *Annihilation*, there are subtle religious connotations. The script the Crawler writes seems biblical, the room with the journals resembles a religious grave, and the biologist references cathedrals. This suggests that Area X could be an afterlife. While there are familiar elements of Christianity, the presence of the weird changes our perception of these connotations. As Georgie Newson-Errey says in his essay, *Weird Fiction* tasks itself with "creating creatures and scenarios that subvert the constraints of physical possibility and ordinary language" (370). So, the way spirituality comes up in *Annihilation* will look different than what we are accustomed to—that is the point. Newson-Errey continues by saying the novel "explores possibility of disavowing inherited epistemologies" (370). The eeriness, haunting, and unsettling feeling present while the biologist explains Area X is extremely purposeful. It is clear that VanderMeer is interested in violating our perceptions of reality. The presence of religion also means that he is making a comment on how we perceive the unknown or the greater-than-us. Traditionally, in Christianity, which is the religion I was raised with and thus the one I have intimate knowledge of, there is a heaven and hell; heaven is above, and hell is below. In the middle, we have our world, or reality, and we will only see the angels or the gates once our life on Earth has ended. The most important part though about these places is that they are very distinct and neatly categorized. Heaven is perfectly peaceful, and hell is endlessly grueling, with each never becoming the other. However, Area X does not fit into these categories. VanderMeer includes a lot of what unnerves readers, and one of the ways he does this is by violating what we believe about the unknown. In a positive light, Area X protects the biologist, but negatively, it

sends body-doubles and causes pain; VanderMeer creates a place that is both heaven and hell, where both extremes exist, which intensifies the eeriness of the novel by breaching what we believe about the spiritual realm.

The aid the spores give the biologist is a positive way Area X influences her. When our narrator is exposed to spores, we are first nervous. The lack of information and the weirdness of the novel we already feel has us on the edge of our seats—this could harm her. The biologist agrees: “I was unlucky—or was I lucky?” and continues to be “unnerved,” “borrowing some of the surveyor’s best curses” (VanderMeer 25). However, after the initial shock subsides, she writes: “I replied {to the surveyor}, almost as if in a trance...A calm had settled over me” (VanderMeer 26). The biologist is not having a negative reaction, but we are still cautious due to the lack of an explanation. A few pages later though, VanderMeer instills trust in the spores. He writes through the biologist that “They had made me immune to the psychologist’s hypnotic suggestions” (VanderMeer 33). Because they provide the narrator with access to the truth, we begin to trust their effect on her, as if the particles were the antidote to the lies. Along with us, she realizes the psychologist is not to be trusted. This is a positive influence of Area X because it is aligned with the truth. We already sympathize with the narrator, so when anything aids her, it becomes hero-adjacent. Area X has sided with our biologist. Additionally, the truth is what this text is concerned about (or really, what hooks us in at first), so any step closer means relief. Area X starts to enter the reader’s heart.

By continuing to side with our narrator, the power of Area X is positive. The place saves our heroine again when the surveyor tries to shoot her. The biologist writes: “The brightness within me flared up. I had time to take a half step to the right” before “The first shot took me in the left shoulder instead of the heart” (VanderMeer 144). At this point of the book, we read about

how the biologist is changing, and again we are questioning whether this is a good or bad transformation. More often than not, we doubt the brightness because it pulls her from the human form. But when it acts like a gut reaction, saving her life, the brightness earns our trust in the same way it did with the spores. Area X protects our narrator. Even though the feeling of anxiety is present during the entirety of the novel, Area X becomes less unknown and thus less scary. It has remnants of a safe haven because it continues to serve the hero and not the antagonists.

While for our biologist Area X showed her the truth, it also perpetuates its own misinformation. In her husband's journal, she finds out why he seemed so vacant when he returned. She relays to us that he watched "a ghastly procession...including a doppelgänger of my husband" (VanderMeer 165). In his journal, he writes: "'And there before me, *myself*'" (VanderMeer 165). We find out that Area X produced a look-alike that came home to the biologist. It is possible that the Southern Reach knew this and added to the cover up, but it is not likely. Because we slowly realize the power of Area X—from the morphed humans, alive buildings, and inconsistent borders—we at the same time understand that the Southern Reach is not who's in control. They were in the dark as well about why her husband seemed so empty, which means this was purely Area X's doing. Now, Area X is acting in the same way the psychologist did—with deceit. At first, it aided the truth, but it still works to evade it. By sending replacements out into the world, it shows that Area X is actively shielding the outside world. It could have not done so, and its secrets would have still been kept to those who enter, but it takes action to portray a different story. This is why the place takes on hell-ish qualities, for its deception.

The hell-like qualities show up again with the presence of suffering. Another moment of hell in Area X is when the biologist encounters the Crawler. She already experiences

transformation, but this is when she fully becomes a part of Area X. She describes the pain of the moment as “the awful form-less panic of a child who had fallen into a fountain and known, for the first time, as her lungs filled with water, that she could die” (VanderMeer 180). On an even more unsettling note, she writes: “I smelled a burning burning inside my own head...my skull crushed to dust and reassembled, mote by mote” (VanderMeer 181). As Newson-Errey says, this moment was “both physically torturous and psy-chologically traumatic” for the biologist (373). Similar to the mainstream description of hell, there is a misery present in Area X, a necessary suffering. We now can’t accurately place Area X in the box of heaven or hell because we see both present. While the brightness helped her, and even has a warm visual connotation, Area X is not an Eden—luscious and sweet. This reminds me of a recurring theme throughout the semester: seeing nature and the people associated as only pure is disastrous.

We began this conversation with *Arctic Dreams* by Barry Lopez and *Inuit Poems and Songs* by William Thalbitzer. Similar to the “Noble Savage,” Western culture is conditioned to believe that nature and anything natural is virginal, uncontaminated and free from evil. If anything, this is what we ought to strive for. But, we see that this perspective perpetuates stereotypes and continues to evade the internality of non-dominant peoples. Putting these groups in a box labeled “good” still hurts them because it doesn’t allow for the totality of a human, one that is good and bad—imperfect. We learn about the ever present violence the Arctic holds, and how life away from the industrialized, Western world still has heroes and villains. With this education, we want people, and any life form, that exists outside this Western bubble to exist in a state of being, not as an accessory to the lives of those inside the bubble. This concept continued to quietly exist throughout the semester. In *The Hungry Tide* by Amitav Ghosh, we learn about the local culture of the Sundarbans, and how just because they live without the excessiveness of

the US or mainland India, they are not fragile beings. Violence is constantly lurking. With *Annihilation* and the pain the biologist experiences, we understand that again, the unknown or faraway is not able to escape the tension of positive and negative. This time, we are shown that this is also true with the spiritual and religious.

Area X, which VanderMeer writes with religious undertones, cannot be labeled as a heaven or a hell. The biologist says this: “Death, as I was beginning to understand it, was not the same thing here as back across the border” (VanderMeer 144). Outside of Area X, death in the religious culture I know is categorizable, much to the relief of humans. The thing most unknown to us—the afterlife—has been neatly figured out; we can modify how we behave to control where we end up. We, as humans, have tried very, very hard to control the unknown so that it becomes less of a threat and more of a solace. VanderMeer destroys this peace that we have constructed by creating a place separate from our reality, similar to how we view the afterlife, that somehow has moments of both heaven and hell. Our boxes have been lit on fire. As a result, we are fearful, unraveled, and reeling. This is why his novel is horror-like and anxiety producing.

Works Cited

- Newson-Errey, Georgie. "Weird Horizons and the Mysticism of the Unhuman in Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy." *The Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 4, Dec. 2021, pp. 368–388.
- VanderMeer, Jeff. *Annihilation*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.