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FRANZISKA WESTHÄUSER AND HANNEKE STUIT

The Hospitable Parasite: Parasitic Networks in Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach Trilogy

The landscape in Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy (2014) is in an advanced state of transformation, constantly mutating after contact with an alien form that rapidly disintegrates the dystopic "old scars" of the landscape's human habitation (*Acceptance* 165). This form, by infesting humans and nonhumans alike, produces an eerie ecosystem of ongoing metamorphoses in which dolphins have hauntingly human eyes, written texts made of living material appear on walls that breathe, and people change into landscapes and monsters with traces of human features that disguise their originally human core. Because nature (and people) behave in "unnatural" ways in this so-called Area X, the government agency Southern Reach cordons it off and sends in scientific expeditions to investigate and control it. While the agency's endeavors continue to be unsuccessful, the novels contextualize the area's "moment of genesis" through the perspectives of those who get infected, such as the expedition member from the first novel, the biologist, and Area X's "patient zero" Saul Evans. Crucially, the biologist's doppelgänger Ghost Bird, who returns to the outside world after the biologist's infection, offers a perspective from which the mystery of Area X's origins in an alien trace feeding off planet earth's life forms is unraveled.

As Alison Sperling has rightfully argued, one of the trilogy's driving forces coalesces around the effects Area X has on how these human and more-than-human characters "deform and remake the

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presumptions of the [human] body's inhabitance in the Anthropocene" ("Second Skins" 233). The biologist's hospitable response, who accepts her infection and merges with Area X in increasingly physical ways, unmasks the insufficiency of understanding human culture and nature as distinct "sites of knowledge" and shows how a "desperate cleaving to borders and boundaries" stands in the way of acknowledging intra-connectivity between humans and nonhumans (Ulstein 73; Onishi 72). Firmly grounded in the legacies of the weird and new weird, VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy thus crucially demolishes the beliefs propping up bordering practices clinging to the idea that even if what lies on the other side of a border is unknown, it may eventually be "contained by becoming what is on this side—or at least kept at bay as itself on the other" (Robertson 125). In this sense, the trilogy puts serious pressure on any ethical "potential for the assimilation of difference in the context of underlying sameness" that Benjamin Robertson pinpoints as the problematic logic dominating liberal logics for so long (117).

In exerting pressure on borders, the trilogy also speaks to the potency of the written word in coming to grips with what cannot (yet) be expressed, serving "as a crucial hinge between humans and nonhumans" (Strombeck 7). This textual "flight from abstract borders and the distinctions they afford" leads to the question how transgression and transformation is mediated in the novels (Robertson 117) and how these mediations allow for further exploration of what it means to live through the consequences of the blurred boundaries between human and nonhuman, life and nonlife, earth and extraterrestrial, self and other. What does it take, ethically and emotionally, to survive and live through the facts of ecological entanglement in the context of climate change and recurring pandemics?

This article proposes to explore these questions through the perspective of the parasite to address the "difficulty of how to live amidst the transfers, splicings, codings, and retroviral, opportunistic and occult becomings" queried in Environmental Humanities today (Lowe 304). Ghost Bird's vision upon meeting Saul in the form of the Crawler in the third novel, *Acceptance*, functions here as an origin story, as she—one result of the chain of infections—describes how an alien organism triggers Area X's transformative border-crossings and causes a parasitic network. We argue that foregrounding the parasite as a lens and form in the trilogy helps to explore its "process of coming to unknow rather than one that arrives at understanding" (Sperling, "Home" 24). In particular, this reading contributes to unlearning traditional forms of individuation that postulate "an intact, undivided body" as a basic necessity for defense and immunity (Sendur 52). The

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parasite and its existence in an ever-transforming network makes, as we show, "individuation as a process" tangible (52), allowing for a focus on the ethical repercussions and possibilities of acceptance that lie beyond the anxiety, denial, or paralysis that come with the need to rethink human existence on a planetary scale (Ulstein 80). In the face of the catalyzing role played by exacerbated microbic embroilments between wildlife, humans, and animals living under the regimes of agribusiness in the emergence of zoonotic diseases like COVID-19 (Wallace 50–84), the interspecies relations implied by parasitic themes in VanderMeer's trilogy are particularly paramount for thinking about life beyond the ethical confines of immunity.

Socially and culturally speaking, the concept of the parasite marks a field of tension and threat that arises in situations of interaction between human and nonhuman spheres but is also frequently used for the characterization of certain human relationships. In general, the term "parasite" thus does not only refer to microbes, bugs, or germs feeding off other species, but is also used to describe people who live off, for instance, someone else's wealth while not giving anything in return. In *The Parasite* (1980), French philosopher Michel Serres develops a trifold understanding of the parasite: it can be defined as "physical noise (static), living animal, and human relation" (203). This approach creates a layered understanding of the parasite that involves naming certain animals, describing human relations, and creating a metaphor that thinks disruption and change. According to Serres, this parasitic complex should be seen as "*the* atomic form of our relations" (8, emphasis added). In its many transgressions the parasite is both "order and disorder, a new voice" and is equipped with a disruptive dimension that might, simultaneously, trigger change (6). The parasite's doubled quality allows us to think beyond its usual function as a marker of various anxieties around contamination. As science journalist Ed Yong makes clear, parasitic networks constantly invite us "to look at the natural world sideways" and beyond the anthropocentric perspectives that impose artificial boundaries on the role of organisms like microbes. Parasites, Yong suggests, "resist the allure of obvious stories" ("Zombie Roaches"). Attending to the novels' parasitic logic, then, as one of the diegetic conditions for the appearance and workings of Area X, we ask what, in the context of these anthropocentric connotations, can be ethically gained by assuming a parasite's perspective?

To start reading the trilogy with the parasite, the focus first lies on Ghost Bird's encounter with the Crawler, which offers a rendition of Saul the lighthouse keeper as "patient zero" of Area X. Using Serres's notion of the parasitic network to read how Saul's contact with the brightness triggers further infections that structure the development of

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Area X, the infection appears as an "effortless manipulation of molecules" that is nonetheless rife with tension (*Acceptance* 189). The push of its logic, in which parasites parasitize other parasites, can be temporarily resisted, as Saul certainly tries to do, but it eventually structures the lives of all of those who are part of its infinitely entangled network. Yet, as the close reading of the biologist's more hospitable response to her own infection suggests, it is possible to imagine a different attitude towards the parasite's destructive force.[1] Reading the parasite alongside Derrida's concept of "hospitality"—the inevitable contraction of hospitality and hostility in the ethical moment—we explore the tensions between the fear instilled and openness required by the parasite. Accordingly, in this analysis of the trilogy, the biologist emerges as a figure of thought that opens up questions about the scrambling of human selfhood in the face of human and nonhuman entanglement and performs a release from paralysis and fear that would otherwise be difficult to imagine.

Extraterrestrial Invasion: Parasitic Themes in the Southern Reach Trilogy

The three novels each offer different perspectives on what Area X is and how it has developed over the years. The first, *Annihilation*, focuses mostly on the biologist's attempts to understand her own transformation after having had contact with the Crawler's writing. The second, *Authority,* revolves around Southern Reach's failed attempts at "producing" satisfactory knowledge that would help to contain Area X's expansion. The third, *Acceptance*, places the reader back in Area X through the different timelines and perspectives of the lighthouse keeper, the psychologist who spearheaded the biologist's expedition, Southern Reach director Control, and Ghost Bird, the "nonhuman, or more-than-human, copy of the biologist" produced by the latter's interactions with Area X (Ulstein 87). This shift to multiple "ethnographic" focalizations and timelines in the last novel is important because every character has different capacities or traits which allow him or her to arrive, although to different extents, at a deeper understanding of Area X (Strombeck 4).

Although none of the characters in the trilogy deny Area X's scrambling of the borders between what are generally thought of as discrete cells, territories, bodies, or minds, the perspectives of the biologist and her double Ghost Bird, as Gry Ulstein also points out, express the most advanced entanglement with Area X (86–90). They form the novels' strongest counterweight to Southern Reach's cover stories that pop up throughout the trilogy and that together form "a myth of ideal

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containment" (Robertson 111). In *Annihilation*, Area X is described by the government as a "localized environmental catastrophe stemming from experimental military research" (94), whereas in *Authority* this explanation is abstracted toward an "Event" that "began to transform the landscape and simultaneously caused an invisible border or wall to appear" (35; Robertson 110). At the end of *Acceptance*, however, it is Ghost Bird, as the privileged "product" of Area X's copying process—its repetitions with a difference—who provides the trilogy's last version of Area X's origin story in her encounter with the Crawler:

> She saw or felt, deep within, the cataclysm like a rain of comets that had annihilated an entire biosphere remote from Earth. Witnessed how one *made* organism had fragmented and dispersed, each minute part undertaking a long and perilous passage through spaces *between*, black and formless, punctuated by sudden light as they come to rest, scattered and lost – emerging only to be buried, inert, in the glass of a lighthouse lens. And how, when brought out of dormancy, the wire tripped, how it had, best as it could, regenerated, begun to perform a vast and preordained function, one compromised by time and context, by the terrible truth that the species that had given Area X its purpose was gone. (*Acceptance* 286-7, emphases in original)

This extraterrestrial reading is made most explicit at the end of the trilogy, during the last encounter with the Crawler. This privileged position of the scene—the chronological "start" of Area X is placed at the textual "end" of the trilogy and calls up readerly associations with climax and resolution—invites further scrutiny of Ghost Bird's vision. As the passage above elucidates, some alien organism dissolved into little pieces that ended up in a lighthouse lens. By this point in the trilogy, the reader knows that Ghost Bird is referring to Saul Evans, who touches one of the shards of this organism when he finds it at the foot of the lighthouse. With "the wire tripped" in this way, a chain reaction is started. The organism begins "to perform a vast and preordained function" that ultimately creates Area X even though there seems to be no ultimate cause and particular direction of development to this creation: "the species that had given Area X its purpose was gone." Nonetheless, Saul becomes the organism's host and enables it to multiply and expand by turning into the Crawler (24–5). This Crawler, in turn, infects the biologist, who slowly merges with Area X's landscape and is doubled into Ghost Bird.

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Throughout *Annihilation*, the biologist tries to frame her encounter with Area X through "rational biological theories" (17). She relies on the model of "parasites and other hitchhikers of a neurological nature"[2] and speculates about Area X as a "creature living in perfect symbiosis with a host of other creatures" (17, 191). As Ed Yong also emphasizes in his reading of microbic relations in *I Contain Multitudes*, such interventions are far less outlandish than the trilogy's extraterrestrial plotline would lead one to assume. Microbes structure many of the "messy, fractious, contextual relationships" of everyday life, even if humans tend to disregard the realities of their existence (75). Some of these microbes are parasites, "selfishly reproducing at the expense of their hosts, with detrimental and often fatal results" (72), while others enter into more symbiotic and beneficial relations. Where such symbiotic relations end, however, and the parasitic ones begin is not always clear. In the case of Area X, which eats the world and spits it out transformed, the lack of purpose on the part of the organism puts further tension on the possibility and necessity of making moral distinctions between symbiotic and parasitic relations in the first place.

Finola Prendergast's analysis of *Annihilation* allows for an extension of the biological simile of the parasite to the trope of mind control with which Southern Reach directs its expeditioners (348). For Prendergast, the mind control largely serves to entice readers to accept "that environmental ethics would not entail restrictions on their autonomy any more radical than they already experience" (349), ultimately to conclude that "exclusively human communities are stifling" (355). In the novels, however, mind control also takes a nonhuman form that is outrightly violent and invasive. The psychologist falls victim to a parasitic logic when she jumps to her death from the lighthouse tower without willing to do so. Similar to the mind control exerted by parasites like the horsehair worm which "programs" crickets to kill themselves by jumping into the water that the worm needs to reproduce (Yong, "Zombie"), the psychologist jumps because of an inexplicable "trigger" between her own infection and the biologist that "betrayed [her] sovereignty" (*Acceptance* 4). Prendergast thus importantly acknowledges the restrictions of human fears of immersing oneself into the nonhuman world, but leaves the ethically ambiguous, affective intensity and parasitic logic of these relations undiscussed. Whereas the biologist indeed displays a particular aptitude and desire for the nonhuman in general and fundamental physical transformation in particular, Ghost Bird's narration of Area X's originating moment makes clear that the mechanism is deeply invasive and does not seek out harmonious relations *per se*. Instead, the relations in the trilogy carry signs of a spreading disease that, once triggered, takes over, changes, and

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sidelines any category of the human needed for straightforward notions of community.

As Sperling notes, this notion of a sickness running rampant should be understood as the "primary organizing theme of the series" ("Second Skin" 230). The brightness felt by the biologist and Saul "is identified in each as sickness, a change and deterioration of systems and functions of the body" (236). Indeed, it is not only Saul and the biologist who transform, but other characters who have been inside Area X also become sick in a more "comprehensible" way; they develop cancer, like the biologist's husband and the psychologist. In line with Heather Houser's framing of sickness as "epistemically, ethically, affectively, and representationally disruptive" (12), the disruptiveness is not only expressed as, but also beyond, a mere weakening of these bodies. Especially in the case of the biologist and Saul, their sickness leads to a paramount transformation: while their human form vanishes or transforms to a significant degree, they do not die. In this sense, their living on in new forms far exceeds notions of sickness structured around a body zoned off by social or physical immunity.

In *The Parasite*, Serres states that "[s]ickness, in general, is parasitic" because it "intercepts a function; it is noise that mixes up messages in the circuits of the organism, parasiting their ordinary circulation" (197). As a deviation occurring in a system because of a chance occurrence, the parasite can either disappear from that system, or it "can grow until it transforms a physiological order into a new order" (198). A similar pattern recurs in Ghost Bird's "founding history" of Area X. The particles of the original organism infest a foreign body during a moment in the life of the parasite that was itself "compromised by time and context" (*Acceptance* 287), a moment that allowed it to survive the destructive disruption of its own system. By first analyzing how Saul's own perspective on his infection is scrambled and largely elicits a response of resistance before tracing the biologist's more patient and hospitable disposition towards what befalls her in Area X, we seek to shift focus away from the intent of the parasite (a refrain of survival) toward the structural cascade of change effected by how the parasite interacts with what will become Area X. In comparing Saul's and the biologist's responses to their infections, we aim to flesh out what forms the parasite takes in the case of these two characters and how these forms help us to think through what an open-minded attitude might actually entail, in terms of ethical and affective ramifications, when it comes to rethinking human–nonhuman relations.

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"Effortless Manipulation of Molecules": Entanglement in the Parasitic Network

At the very beginning of *The Parasite*, Serres recounts Aesiop's fable about the country rat and the city rat. In this fable, the country rat invites the city rat to the tax farmer's table to feast off the food:

> But we know that the feast is cut short. The two companies scurry off when they hear a noise at the door. It was only a noise, but it was also a message, a bit of information producing panic: an interruption, a corruption, a rupture of information. Was the noise really a message? Wasn't it, rather, static, a parasite? A parasite who has the last word, who produces disorder and who generates a different order. (3)

In his reading of the fable, Serres is concerned with who is parasitizing whom and with the generative force of that dynamic. The city rat is the one inviting the country rat to feed on the tax farmer's leftovers, which makes both rats parasites that give nothing in return. The tax farmer suspends the parasitic feast of the rats. By producing a noise, i.e. the creaking of the door, however, he also acts as a parasite on the rats, who leave the site because of this disruption. This leads Serres to argue that it is not possible to speak of the noise as "the ultimate parasite [which], through its interruption, wins the game" (3). Instead, this parasitization of a parasite by another parasite constitutes a "parasitic chain [in which] the last to come tries to supplant his predecessor" (3–4). In this mechanism, the chain can either collapse on itself, as is the case when the noise in the fable turns out to be produced by the tax farmer who thereby saves his own food from the rats. Or the mechanism can become "more and more complicated, [making] a chain, then a network" (37). This network is ongoing, a constant interruption and change of the system that "produces disorder and . . . generates a different order" (3).

Like the fable of the city rat and the country rat, the Southern Reach trilogy triggers the logic of the parasitic network. The interplay between order and disorder in this network becomes clear from Saul's scrambled perspective on the moment of his infection. One day, he sees something on the ground amongst the leaves of a plant. Intrigued by this vision, he approaches and touches the shimmer in the lawn:

> Whatever it was, it was delicate beyond measure, yet perversely reminded him of the four-ton lens far above

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> his head. . . . Nothing existed in that moment except for the plant and the gleam he could not identify.
>
> He had gloves on still, so he knelt beside the plant and reached for the glittering thing, brushing up against the leaves. . . . But whatever it was, it was swirled and glinted and eluded his rough grasp, and he began to feel faint. . . . He felt a sliver enter his thumb. There was no pain, only a pressure and then numbness . . . . Nothing now glittered on the ground in front of him. No light at the base of the plant. No pain in his thumb. (*Acceptance* 24-25)

As Sperling argues about this "first instance of the contaminant," the brightness is figured as external, but without a clear origin ("Second Skin" 235). It has a form that "eludes Saul" (235). Nonetheless, the agent "is seductive and seems deliberate" (235). Just before Saul notices the glittering, he sees Henry, who is a member of the mysterious Séance & Science Brigade investigating the lighthouse lens for paranormal activity at the top of the lighthouse. When Saul looks up, Henry "waved, or was it some other gesture?" (*Acceptance* 24). The sun blinds Saul and he turns away, whereupon he notices the shimmer in the grass.

The sense of deliberateness and intent in this passage thus emanates from various sources. Henry may or may not have thrown a piece of the lighthouse lens down to Saul, whether the sliver is a piece of glass, whether the shimmer is caused by Saul's blurred vision from looking straight into the sun, or has yet another origin, is emphatically unclear. The only thing that seems unambiguous is Saul's attraction to the shimmer; he is so absorbed in "placing" the gleam that the world around him disappears completely. The first encounter, then, comes from Saul's desire to know what he is seeing as much as it does from the shimmer itself. In this sense, the sliver closely resembles Serres' "best definition" of the parasite as a "thermal exciter," who "animates the event" (190). Once the parasite has interrupted, however, it "consolidates when you look again" (14); once touched by the brightness, the moment of interruption has passed, nothing is left in the grass, and a new order is established within Saul.

How such parasitical occurrences or moments of contamination consolidate into forms and patterns, is discussed by Eduardo Kohn. By tracing the effects of the parasite *Microcyclus ulei* on rubber trees, Kohn shows how it organized the economic and social patterns of the rubber trade in the Amazon in the nineteenth century. The mere existence of the parasite, which damages rubber trees, made it impossible to grow

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these trees on plantations and determined the spatial distribution of trees throughout the forest. The entire subsequent arrangement of the rubber trade along the Amazon river, from the social relations between the rubber harvesters and traders that sprung up accordingly, to the different levels of productiveness of the port cities from which the rubber was shipped abroad, happened as a result of this specific parasite's effect on the growth of the trees. Kohn writes: "Rubber falls into a form. . . . An interaction with the parasite results in a particular pattern of rubber distribution. . . . The result is that rubber 'explores,' or comes to occupy landscape in a way that manifests a specific pattern" (161). This translation from circumstantiality to pattern leads Kohn to emphasize that "[b]eing inside form is effortless. Its causal logic in this sense is quite different from the push-and-pull logic we usually associate with the physical effort to do something" (163).

A similar logic is expressed by Ghost Bird, for whom Area X is fundamentally about the "effortless manipulation of molecules" (*Acceptance* 189). She is not interested in capturing that manipulation into a push-and-pull logic, retorting to Contol's fear that Area X's goal is to destroy mankind, that an "organism can have a purpose and yet also make patterns that have little to do with that purpose" (189). In this way, Ghost Bird sidelines discussion about Area X's intent or Southern Reach's interests, redirecting the reader's attention to the type of patterns and structures that mushroom in and around Area X. The parasitic nature of these patterns is further emphasized by Southern Reach itself, with its probing expeditions and its buildings popping up in response to Area X only to be invaded by it. Most tellingly, Southern Reach is itself controlled by Central, the mother institution of the agency, which descends "on the Southern Reach like a many-limbed über-parasite" (*Authority* 111).

In line with "a legacy of associations that link [explorers] to militant imperialism, colonization, science and authorship" (Carroll 69), Southern Reach's expedition members can also be seen as parasites who leech off Area X which is, in turn, parasitizing the landscape and the expedition members. These members are then themselves parasitized by Southern Reach and their use of hypnosis to control their minds once they are sent into Area X. In short, a parasitic network structures the relations between the different actors in the narrative and offers an overall pattern of intensified entanglement that ultimately diffuses the distinction between hosts and parasites. As Serres also suggests, "any given position in the ternary model [of host, parasite, and interrupter] is, *ad libitum*, parasitic. Who is the third? Someone, anyone. The noise stops; someone leaves" (55). For Serres,

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the parasite is really a nexus of relations, where all positions are interchangeable in the sense that they are all potentially parasitic.

This confusion about the entanglement of the parasite and the host does not, despite both Ghost Bird's and Kohn's phrasing of the effortlessness of forms and patterns, take place without struggle in the trilogy. The parasite's circumstantial disruption may fall into a form that seems effortless in its powerful shaping of the relations that encounter it, but the personal and emotional labor inside the parasitic nexus is not that easy to digest. This is especially true for Saul, for whom the infection is accompanied by a sense of bewilderment and uncertainty. Immediately after Saul feels the parasitic disruption of the sliver of light entering his body it almost seems as if nothing has happened. When Saul looks again, the light is gone and his thumb seems fine. This state of confusion returns throughout his transformation. He keeps denying his symptoms even in the final moments before he, like the psychologist after him, jumps from the lighthouse and brings on the bodily demise that ushers in the next stage of his metamorphosis into the Crawler:

> Near the top, the wind whistled down briskly and he welcomed the chill, the way it told him a world existed outside of his mind, helped him deny these symptoms which had now crept back in. (*Acceptance* 304)

In true anthropocentric fashion, Saul continues to gauge himself against the world he lives in, a world that is deemed reliable in providing unalterable sensations like chill, but has in fact changed beyond measure. Even if Saul wills the world to be steady, it can no longer be used as a yardstick of how he used to exist before he got infected. Regardless of his denial, a new normal is instigated by the initial disruption of the sliver, and Saul turns into an element of the parasitic nexus in the form of the Crawler.

When Ghost Bird encounters the Crawler writing deep down in his subterranean lair at the end of *Acceptance*, she sees its arm "[perfecting] the letters on the wall" and notes that it "was the agent of the message, and from that instrument flowed the letters" (284–5). Decoupled from any intention Saul may have in regurgitating the sermons he wrote before he became the light housekeeper, once he has become the Crawler the words move through Area X's landscape by infecting those who enter the Crawler's den. The writing thus exists through Saul's encounter with the parasite as "a hybrid of human and inhuman expression" that effortlessly perpetuates the parasitic form of Area X (Strombeck 7). Despite his rigid attitude and confusion—his desire to not register the change and to maintain his sense of self—he cannot help but fall in line

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with the parasite's form, as it consolidates Saul's qualities as a priest into a function of its own pattern. In this sense, the work of the parasite is as contingent and effortless as it is forceful and irreversible.

Saul is not the only character for whom Area X is difficult to digest. The lion's share of the trilogy's character's thoughts and conversations are invested in their struggle to understand the purpose of Area X, expecting there to be a specifiable goal to its expansion beyond the borders the Southern Reach has placed around it. Although the biologist, too, searches for answers, she is also something of an exception. Rather than swimming against the current of the parasitic network, the biologist seems to embrace it, parasitizing Area X in turn as she grows ever more entangled with the landscape. Contrasted with Saul's entrapment in the parasitic network, the biologist's attitude suggests that different actors may share a vulnerability to the circumstantiality and ease with which parasites disrupt the status quo, but that the effects and outcomes of such parasitic interruptions also differ. In the next section, we analyze the biologist's response to Area X and explore how she, as a hospitable parasite, allows for a reorientation of the force of the parasite, in which its creation of a new order is welcomed rather than denied.

The Hospitable Parasite and the Impossibility of Containment

The parasitic network is a multifaceted system of connections and relations that complicates drawing clear-cut boundaries between actors and breaks up long-standing understandings of the society–nature divides used to differentiate between human and nonhumans. As the analysis of Saul in the previous section makes clear, this parasitic entanglement is predicated on a principle of invasion, not just of the body of the host, but also of that host's sense of self. The parasite, in scrambling the very meaning of subjectivity, is thus also an ethical concept which "[has] the ability to cross ontological boundaries and [confuse] ... subjectivities" (Candea and da Col S13). It allows for an awareness of the fact that when relating to others, these others are, like the self, "doubled" from the inside by fulfilling the role of parasite and host at the same time. This shift in awareness requires a dynamic politics of immunology—a balancing act between openness towards parasitic change and a delineation of the constellation of the self—that is most evident in the biologist's response to Area X.

On her first encounter with the Crawler's writing, the biologist, as an explorer in search of answers about Area X, is a parasite who interferes with a landscape constructed by extensive parasitic

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transformations that have preceded her. She seems aware, however, that she is simultaneously vulnerable to invasion, even while she is being prodded by one of her fellow expedition members about the letters on the walls of the Crawler's underground tower:

> "Give me a moment. I need to get closer." Did I? Yes, I needed to get closer.
>
> What are they made of?
>
> I hadn't even thought of this, though I should have; I was still trying to parse the lingual meaning, had not transitioned to the idea of taking a sample. But what relief at the question! Because it helped me fight the compulsion to keep reading, to descend into the greater darkness and keep descending until I had read all there was to read. Already those initial phrases were infiltrating my mind in unexpected ways, finding fertile ground. . . .
>
> I leaned in closer, like a fool, like someone who had not had months of survival training or ever studied biology. . . .
>
> I was unlucky – or was I lucky? Triggered by a disturbance in the flow of air, a nodule in the W chose that moment to burst open and a tiny spray of golden spores spewed out. I pulled back, but I thought I had felt something enter my nose, experienced a pinprick of escalation in the smell of rotting honey. . . . (*Annihilation* 24-25, emphasis in original)

Like the lighthouse keeper before her, the biologist is intrigued by the appearance of the parasite and is lured into approaching it. Like Saul compares the glitter with the lens of the lighthouse, the biologist attempts to find her footing by comparing the letter's material texture to things that she is familiar with by trade: nodules and spores. Regardless of her attempts to retreat into scientific interest, however, she is unable to overcome her intuitive fascination and leans in too closely. The W of the word "chose that moment to burst open," which makes it sound as if it actively decided to infect her. Yet, the nodule is also merely "triggered by a disturbance in the flow of air" and the air disrupts the nodules, like Saul who interfered with the "dormancy" of the alien element appearing in Ghost Bird's vision. As in the description of his infection, questions of intent and agency are scrambled in favor of the interplay between parasite and host.

In contrast to Saul, who prefers to question the reality of the changes going on inside his body from the moment he is contaminated,

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the biologist is readied for the strangeness of the encounter. She does not push it away and considers herself fertile ground for the writing's infiltration of her mind. From the beginning of her transformation, she carefully registers the changes in perspective her infection seems to have caused. She can hear the tower breathing and comments on how the Crawler's words immediately start to interrupt the conversation of the expeditioners after their first encounter, infecting "our own sentences when we spoke" (*Annihilation* 47). She quickly becomes aware, too, that all members of the expedition have been held under hypnotic control by the psychologist, but that she has become immune to performing tasks the expedition members had "been willed to do by another" (65). As she comments later in the novel, the hypnosis had been "an invasive price to be paid in return for access to Area X" (127). The biologist thus seems aware that one form of mind invasion is supplanting another, becoming increasingly hostile to the Southern Reach's hypnosis and more hospitable towards the consequences of interacting with Area X's environment.

The biologist knows perfectly well that this welcoming is not without risk, a threat echoed in the semantic and etymological connections between parasites and hospitality. In several languages the term "host," which describes the organism infected by a parasite, also denotes a person offering hospitality to another person: *host* in English, *hôte* in French, *Wirt* in German, and *gastheer/vrouw* or *waard* in Dutch. Parasitism and hospitality both evoke situations governed by oppositionality (host versus parasite and host versus guest) where both guest and parasite are understood as a threat to the one giving hospitality. As Derrida writes of hospitality:

> [T]he word for "hospitality" is a Latin word . . ., a word of Latin origin and troubled and troubling origin, a word which carries its own contradictions incorporated into it, a word which allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, "hostility", the undesirable guest [*hôte*] which it harbors as the self-contradiction in its own body . . . . (3-4)

It seems more than coincidental that Serres speaks of hospitality in his discussion of the parasitic chain in the fable of the country rat and the city rat, while Derrida resorts to parasitism to get to the core of his argument about hospitality. Receiving a guest, Derrida suggests, is never a superficial formality, but always a potentially parasitic mechanism that brings the Other into one's household, mindset, or body. Thus, hospitality, ridden by the unknowable threat of hostility that the guest

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(or the parasite) represents, can only ever be what Derrida dubs "hostipitality"—a contraction of hospitality and hostility.

This double logic dominates everyday readings of hospitality, where the other is "invasive of the integrity of the self, or the domain of the self" which explains why "[t]here is a historical tendency for the language and practice of hospitality to 'turn' against the guest" (Still 13). Yet, Derrida argues that in order for hospitality to fulfill its ethical potential, one needs to be aware that hospitality's threat cannot be prevented or contained; a welcome in which the host determines the conditions under which hospitality will be extended, is not hospitable in the "true" sense of the word. Absolute hospitality, instead, "can only take place beyond hospitality, in deciding to let it come, overcoming the hospitality that paralyzes itself on the threshold which it is" (Derrida 14). In order to fully give way to the Other, then, a risk, a potential sacrifice of the well-being of the individual is needed.

According to Priscilla Wald, many human narratives about contagion revolve around this double bind and explore the dilemma that "[t]he interactions that make us sick also constitute us as a community" (2). Wald's insight about outbreak narratives can be extended to the human and nonhuman interactions in the Southern Reach trilogy. As the analysis of Saul's denial suggests, hospitality towards the parasite entails an uneasy and dynamic relationality. The parasite emerges as the "uninvited guest who takes up the hospitality of the host" (Lowe 303); it is an intruding form in Jean-Luc Nancy's sense, as it infests and transgresses Saul's body and subjectivity "without . . . right and without having first been admitted" (1). Thus, despite the circumstantial effortlessness of the form the parasitic network creates within the novels, acting within its pattern requires a determined vulnerability that acknowledges the difficulty of the process. As Saul concludes in the moment his body gives in to the parasite:

> [H]e was never going to understand it, even as it took him over. His last thoughts before the thoughts that were not his, that were never going to be his: Perhaps there is no shame in this, perhaps I can bear this, fight this. To give in but not give up. (*Acceptance* 325–6).

Saul's hard-won reflection that giving in to the parasite does not equal giving up who he is, is reflected in the biologist's description of the moment she encounters the Crawler Saul has become as "an encounter with the most beautiful, the most terrible thing I might ever experience" (*Annihilation* 178). She sees "on those features the endurance of an unending pain and sorrow, yes, but shining through as well a kind of grim satisfaction and *ecstasy*" (186, emphasis in original). In the

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course of his transformation, then, Saul/the Crawler seems to have found a way in which to accommodate both the pain and ecstasy of change.

The biologist's process of transformation, which is more open-minded than and perhaps inspired by Saul's experience, is also characterized by an admission of her failure to understand. She deems her own speculations about Area X "incomplete, inexact, inaccurate, useless," but also suspects that Area X is "rousing itself from slumber, changing, becoming *different* than before" as the potential reciprocal effect of the biologist's input in the area (192, emphasis in original). As a result, the biologist is unsure about whether "there are sides, or what that might mean" that separate Area X and the devastated world outside of it (192). It is this openness towards the potential destruction of her own physical boundaries that slowly but surely allows her to embrace "the porosity of her body and mind" and to emerge "as a body subject that erases the division between those dualistic poles" (Onishi 64). While the parasite's intrusion into the biologist's physical and mental space is as violent an act as Saul's infection, the biologist is able to see it as not only "an invasion, a breaching of boundaries" but just as much as a "becoming with" (Lowe 301).

Compared to the Crawler, the biologist's acceptance of her entanglement with Area X goes much further. Instead of staying in one place, she transforms into a leviathan[3] that is described as "a blurred and rising wave" spreading through the landscape (*Acceptance* 196). In contrast to Saul's disconcerting struggle and existence as a monster trapped in a subterranean tunnel, the biologist thus offers an anticipatory and climactic image of the entanglement of host and parasite. When Ghost Bird encounters the biologist as leviathan, "[i]n all her glory and monstrosity," the wave is both "gliding yet ponderous" (193). She is "muffled darkness, reduced to kindling by the muscle behind the emerald luminescence that glinted through the black" and is "somehow half there and half not" (193-4). Yet, she is not just a wave of hillside, she also still has corporal features such as eyes, a back, head, and brain, building herself by feeding on the landscape, constantly changing and coalescing "out of the night, her body flickering and stitching its way into existence" (193-194). The biologist is created by and co-creates a landscape consisting of "the world-making activities of many agents, human and not human," a landscape that is, despite the biologist's movement through it, also the product of an "unintentional design" that interweaves human and nonhuman elements, none of whom have planned the landscape's effects (Tsing 152). Accordingly, the biologist's body is not just an "object of

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contamination" but also an "individuating, ever-changing event that sets other events in motion" (Sendur 51).

To speak with Anna Tsing, then, disturbance of a landscape "is not always bad—and not always human" (160). Instead, the biologist's disturbance of the Crawler's letters "opens the terrain for transformative encounters, making new landscape assemblages possible" (160). Crucially for Tsing, such encounters take place precisely in ruinous zones created by the capitalist upscaling logic characteristic of plantation models. In this sense, the biologist's attitude towards the futility and impossibility of cordoning Area X off in order to understand it can also be read in the context of histories of land use causing ecological and social disturbance amongst people, and between people and the environment (Tsing 39–40, 5). The disturbance that has caused and is caused by Area X, like the parasite, cannot be measured or known because disturbance "is always in the middle of things" (160). It does not interrupt "a harmonious state before disturbance" and any description of a disrupted status quo is the result of an artificially fixed perspective (160). The biologist's decision to stay in Area X can thus be read as a choice to stay "in the ruins of the Anthropocene, to see what she will become" (Sperling, "Home" 24). This attitude helps to suspend morally rusted responses to disruption and to discern that parasites parasitizing on other parasites in patterns of entanglement deeply implicate humans and non-humans, material and immaterial factors. Her perspective as a hospitable parasite throws hierarchies of fixture into disarray– whether these pertain to social structures, interspecies relations or to the emergence of landscapes.

Endings: Beyond Invasion

The parasite in VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy is many things. It destroys and creates. It is guest and host, threat and enrichment. It is an invasive alien microbe, a thermal exciter of existing systems, and it is what happens inside bodies without their knowledge or permission. Above all, it is a figure of thought that reshapes the patterns of nonhuman and human entanglement beyond the "push-and-pull logic" that biases humans toward their actions' importance and tends to structure their relation to their environment (Kohn 163). As the analyses of Saul and the biologist show, parasites achieve this by scrambling and reorienting their host's constitution and sense of self, thereby insinuating the bodies and minds they infect towards changed patterns. These patterns, as Ghost Bird so succinctly puts it, should not be conflated with the purpose or intentions of any one organism. In any case, the original forms of the organisms that come into contact

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with each other are not what is at stake in VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy. Area X and everything it touches is change.

The novels showcase different responses to these infractions on the integrity of form, which range from troubled denial in Saul's case, the extended and equally invasive measures taken by Southern Reach to contain, study, and make familiar Area X's alien system, to the biologist's acceptance of her altered state. The fact that Area X remains unconfined at the end of the trilogy suggests that, for better or worse, it cannot be prodded into predictable responses. In this sense, Area X defies common sense logics of invasion and defense that were given such decisive shape by Ilya Metchnikoff's discovery of the theory of immunity. As Ed Cohen has compellingly argued in relation to this experiment, Metchnikoff replicated a preconceived idea of a natural invasion of the integrity of the body by stabbing a starfish larva with a rose thorn and assumed that the larva's response automatically constituted a defense. "With this flash of insight," Cohen writes, "Metchnikoff conceives a definitive *and defensive* way to understand how organisms coexist in environments replete with others of different sizes and scales" (2, emphasis in original).

Writing from within the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic while the world awaits vaccines, we in no way wish to insist that the discovery of immunity is to be downplayed for the wellbeing of humans. But reading the Southern Reach trilogy against this backdrop, we also want to ask how humans can learn to think beyond the principles of immunity. What "economic and political horizons" would have emanated from Metchnikoff's discovery, if it had not taught humans to consider immunity and defense as "a *natural choice of images* for our ability to live as organisms among other organisms" (Cohen 3, emphasis in original)? What if the concept of parasitism and its attendant awareness of hospitality and vulnerability, of contamination and circumstantial change, would have found historical traction in influential political and economic theories, relegating immunity and defense to the background? What forms of living with would have become visible then?

Reading the Southern Reach trilogy with the parasite is therefore not a reading from invasion to defense, from a to b, but instead, an attempt to see the parasite as, "the inverse, the opposite, the contradictory. *A* is *b*" (Serres 207, emphasis in original). This doubling is pushed to its logical conclusion in the metaphorical extremity of the biologist as leviathan, who stops prodding and starts accepting. It is also abundantly and inescapably present in the rest of the trilogy, as every entity is figured as both host and guest, host and parasite, human and nonhuman even before they start their "full" interaction with Area X. They

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are all contaminants, just with different starting points and to different degrees. Tsing's take on contamination fits seamlessly with this aspect of the trilogy: "[e]veryone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option. One value of keeping precarity in mind is that it makes us remember that changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival" (27). In turning to the poststructuralist legacy of the parasite in reading VanderMeer's provocative text, we have attempted to think through what such survival looks like by attending to the affective and ethical consequences of giving up on the inadequacy of binary oppositions. When seen through the lens of the parasite, the novels produce an uncomfortable but necessary awareness of the far-reaching consequences of what an unconditional ethical stance actually entails in the context of climate change. They push for the need to stop thinking situations from within one single organism or purpose and to start thinking opposites simultaneously. They create a doubly affirmative logic that acknowledges how (re)acting with hostility limits the opportunities that lie in much-needed ecological forms of hospitality. These Others, the Southern Reach trilogy reminds us, are always already part of the self.

NOTES

1. This comparison inevitably triggers normative/moral? Distinctions between good and bad, which do not necessarily apply to the process of becoming inhuman under discussion here. Instead, the aim is to highlight a multiplicity of responses in the face of parasitic entanglement.

2. Other direct mentions in *Annihilation* occur in crucial moments in the plot: When the biologist contemplates the relation between the underground tower and the Crawler (93) and when she examines the dying psychologist (133). By the end of the novel, when she finds the killed anthropologist in the tower, she refers to the parasites living in the Crawler's writing (171).

3. The leviathan is also the well-known shape Hobbes gives to the social contract to overcome the natural state of constant war. VanderMeer's decision to make the biologist a leviathan forming from the landscape interestingly mirrors Hobbes' choice for "the Jobian Leviathan . . . over the figure of evil in Isaiah" (Mintz 3). The leviathan, while it might seem horrific and dangerous, can thus also be understood as a balancing and unifying form.

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