

Terror and Terroir: Porous Bodies and Environmental Dangers

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Abstract

A lasting consequence of Cartesian substance dualism is the idea that material activity is fundamentally a result of efficient causality. One body moves another body by bumping into and forcing the second body to move. A world reduced to such efficient causality also requires that bodies are static, able to conform to the laws of physics and nature because they are ontologically dumb, both in terms of existing without thought and without speech. Recent insights from quantum physics reveal that this view of material bodies is too reductive and does not capture the full complexity of the material world. The material world, rather, is fundamentally unknowable and strange, porous and agential. This paper will argue that the porous and diffractive intra-action of bodies opens up spaces of ecological intensities that are both wonderful and dangerous. More specifically, I will appeal to the intra-active bodies displayed in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy* and argue that bodies and thoughts exist on a similar plain and that thoughts have a material existence.

VanderMeer's trilogy depicts a kind of dangerous garden, an edenic ecology that expels totalizing human understanding. It is only The Biologist that is capable of adapting to the transformations induced by Area X because she embraces the porosity of her body and mind, emerging as a body subject that erases the division between those dualistic poles. By the end of *Acceptance*, her body expands to giant form, her previously bounded bodily limitations adapt to the meaning of Area X's edenic danger. In her monstrosity she embodies the tower's text, bringing forth the "seeds of death" to a world built on totalizing knowledge. She rejects the scientific attitude of her biological training and becomes The Biologist, capable of shedding the restrictions of linguistic meaning to communicate with the owl on the island, and perhaps even Area X itself. The tower's text literally bursts forth, penetrating the Biologist's body, and dissolving the distinctions between body and mind, and materiality and thought. Neither the text nor Area X causes this change in The Biologist because prior to their intra-action there was neither Biologist nor text, nor even an Area X in the way she encounters it. Rather, they are each constituted in the exchange, generating a new phenomenal object that cannot be reduced or exhausted by any of the constituting parts.

While such an analysis of VanderMeer's text seems to indicate an emergent ecological framework, I will focus on the porosity of bodies and the diffractive relation between bodies and thoughts rather than on the relation between parts and wholes. This reading of both VanderMeer's text and the material world demands a framework that provides the material world with an activity and fecundity beyond Descartes' *Res Extensa*. As such, I will appeal to Karen Barad's philosophy-physics, articulated most clearly in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. But the semiotic and textual intertwining of thoughts and bodies in the *Southern Reach Trilogy* also requires that thoughts extend beyond the solipsistic prison of consciousness and exist in the material world. That is, I will argue that thoughts and agency are distributed across multiple bodies, capable of action not limited by autonomous units of consciousness separated by an infinite gap of immanence. When the seed of the tower's text penetrates the biologist's body, the meaning and the thoughts of the tower are communicated, spewed into the world via materiality. I will also, therefore, appeal to Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think* to extend Barad's philosophy-physics beyond the laboratory and into the semiotic garden of Area X.

Area X presents dangerous garden, a terroir built on terror that threatens to "bring forth the seeds of death" to a world covered in projected meaning. But it also presents a possibility for redistributing agency, for recalibrating ecologies to embrace the porosity of bodies, and for opening spaces for a distributed material thinking. As such, Area X provides a new grounding for an environmental ethic where humans, as encased in impermeable bodily penitentiaries, are the endangered species. The pristine, edenic existence of the material world never invites the impermeable human, but calls for an intra-action with an embodied, distributed thinking, an embrace of the terroir and the terror of "the strangling fruit" that will "bring forth the seeds of death to share with the worms that gather in the darkness and surround the world with the power of their lives" (VanderMeer, 2014).

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