

Terror and Terroir: Porous Bodies and Environmental Dangers

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A body floats on water, alive and surviving; a seething mass travelling across a flooded detention pond (Klaver). It is a single body made up of hundreds, maybe thousands of fire ants. They have banded together for survival, made themselves a raft capable of more than any of the individual ants. They are a single agency, distributed across a plain of participants, a living challenge to the law of non-contradiction in that they are both a single organism and many organisms. They are one and they are many. Philosophy has struggled for well over 2000 years with questions about where to side when faced with a distinction between perception and reality. The floating raft of fire ants answers the question with a both/and.

In 2003 Stuart Kauffman, a prominent biologist and founding director of the Institute for Biocomplexity and Informatics at the University of Calgary, made the claim that anything “that can act on its own behalf in an environment” should be counted as an autonomous agent (358). This entails that agency occurs at the level of single celled organisms “swimming upstream in a glucose gradient” to get food (Kauffman 358). At any one time the human body carries over a trillion single-celled bacteria. A massive amount of life resides on and inside my own body as I go about my daily life. These bacteria maintain and sustain the ecosystem that is my body. I am, like the fire ants, both one and many. Questions of consciousness aside, it is no easy task distinguishing my cells from not-my cells; from those cells that are me and my life from those cells that have a distinct life and agency. In fact, it seems more accurate to say that I am both all of these cells and none of them. Without these trillions of bacteria, I would not be able to live as a recognizable human body capable of doing human things. My own agential power stems from an assemblage distributed across my porous body—my agency is already distributed. As such, I argue that bodies are porous, reliant on this porosity and on the intra-action with other bodies for sustaining equilibrium and activity. Engaging in the material world necessarily entails a deep entwinement and entanglement such that where one body ends and the next body begins is almost impossible

to determine. There is a fundamental breakdown of the law of non-contradiction at the level of bodily action.

My argument will appeal to both Karen Barad's agential realism, as articulated in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, and to Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy*. Barad's agential realism provides good reason for identifying bodies as fundamentally porous. In her account of both intra-action as a mode of fecundity in the material world and diffraction as a way of conceiving the overlap of bodies (where does one end and the other begin?) it is clear that the material world is strange, filled with a horrifying kind of intimacy with all that we rub up against.

The *Southern Reach Trilogy* offers a literary dramatization of this horrifying intimacy. Area X, the main focus of the *Southern Reach Trilogy*, is a terroir of terror, a violent emergence of place that is both environmental disaster and environmental boon—both pristine wilderness and abject horror. In Area X, VanderMeer provides an articulation of a kind of dark garden filled with strange examples of nature's terrifying contradiction—we are both nature and not nature. A lighthouse looms at the center of the story, casting not a revealing light but a revelation that reason and science have done as much to conceal our relation to nature as provide insight into the working of nature. It is a story of borders and bodies that are open and fluid, a maddening insistence that we are always effected by the terroir of place. It discloses the mutual constitution of the material world by articulating nature as simultaneously an alien organism and intimate companion. VanderMeer ultimately leaves us with a sense of being-with nature that violently exceeds scientific inquiry, and is dangerously beautiful as both other and distributed self.

The light of Diffraction

According to Barad, "diffraction has to do with the way waves combine when they overlap and the apparent bending and spreading of waves that occurs when waves encounter an obstruction" (Barad 74). Instead of linear beams of clarity and distinctness, waves of light wrap around objects, changing and constituting our visible space by enveloping bodies and blurring their borders. Diffractive light is not a separate source of epistemic clarity and focus, but an apparatus of entanglement. Through diffractive light, our understanding of the material world derives not from a separation from the object being observed, but from an intimate entwinement of observer and observed. Our bodies are not defined by strict boundaries that divide the material world into isolated pockets of matter. Rather, we are entangled in an overlapping mesh of fleshy mattering that is always in the process of becoming, and therefore, always in the process of being reconstituted. The light of diffraction is not a source of absolute knowledge whereby we, as human knowers, stand outside and peer in with an unobstructed and un-obstructing view. Every measurement entails a reaction; every encounter constitutes a slight shift in meaning as our bodies overlap and seep into the objects of our observation. There is a reversibility inherent in viewing our bodies as porous agents of mattering that entails that we are being measured as we measure, that our bodies are being seen because we see. This reversibility challenges the traditional understanding of scientific observation and material bodies, whereby the subject is absolutely distinct from the object and capable of independent observation. In its stead, such reversibility offers a material and ontological entanglement, such that no clean

separation between observer and observed is possible. Knowledge is therefore a development of intra-action, messy and tangled.

In the introduction to *Arts of Wonder*, Jeffrey Kosky details a short history of light as metaphor for knowledge. In so doing he claims that the two most prominent sources of light in western thinking come from God and human reason. Both offer a revelation of that which is observed, allowing the observer to stand in a distance and revel in the minute details of objects brought to light. One of Kosky's major examples is a picture of a lighthouse that not only reveals a distance between observer and observed, but also a recasting of nature as superfluous, the sun replaced by electricity (10). Kosky writes, "human calculative powers have produced a light of calculated effect, and this light clears the way for a world on which you can count" (10). Viewing the material world as both manipulable and calculable ushered in technological progress as well as a broad disenchantment. The world is at our control, and in our bored disenchantment we have failed to sustain the sense of danger appropriate to the wild.

Diffraction light is not a light that reveals the truth of the observed. Rather it demonstrates the entanglement, often dangerous, of bodies in intra-action. The world is constituted by our engagement and involvement with it. Meaning is generated from this interaction but is often covered over by our own scientific projections. Suddenly, and without warning, the danger and terror of the natural world surges up, breaking through the artificial boundary of nature and culture to remind us that we cannot subdue its wildness, and that we are, in fact, a component of that wildness. We can see this in the swirl of hurricanes and the rising of sea levels, and in the sting of the wasp and the venom of the snake. We can see this in the "accidental wildness" that brings forth the seething body of a fire-ant raft (Klaver) and the creation of Area X (VanderMeer). Diffraction "is marked by patterns of difference" (Barad 71) that intertwine in the generativity of the material world, constituting new phenomena in the ongoing becoming of the material world.

Diffraction light is powered by what Barad calls intra-activity. Intra-action is distinct from interaction because it constitutes new phenomena through relation rather than relying on previously existing agencies. In Barad's words, "intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action" (33). My body and my subjectivity are both open to new becomings contingent upon the various relations in which I participate. I operate as different phenomena when operating a car, typing on a keyboard, or walking through a forest. Intra-action allows for the ant raft to be a new thing, both singular and complex. The body of the ant raft is not merely individual ants banded together, but a new agency, distributed and strange. If we accept the ontology of intra-activity, then we must reject Cartesian inert matter and the simple efficient causality concomitant to classical materialism whereby one body moves another body by bumping into and forcing the second body to move. A world reduced to such efficient causality 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. Barad's 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.

James VanderMeer's *Southern Reach Trilogy* dramatizes this strange porosity by depicting a kind of dangerous garden, an edenic ecology that expels totalizing human understanding. Expeditions go in to Area X in an attempt to analyze and discover only to find the subtle terror of "pristine wilderness." Modern science has been built on the idea that there is a distinct distance between observer and observed. Like Barad's agential realism, Area X rejects this operational notion. According to Barad, "To theorize is not to leave the material world behind and enter the domain of pure ideas where the lofty space of the mind makes objective reflection possible. *Theorizing like experimenting, is a material practice*" (55). Likewise, it is only when observations are made from within the terroir of Area X that the terror subsides.

Area X is described as an "environmental disaster" because it lacks the toxicity that has become ubiquitous in our own world. It is alien to our own "Anthropocene," which thereby renders it an other whose danger is constituted by our inability to master, organize, and subdue it from a distance. Area X is dangerous precisely because it does not reflect human activity or show a human footprint. That is, the measurements taken by the expeditions sent to investigate have not really engaged or observed the true Area X because they have not allowed themselves to become entangled in the terroir and engage in a viscerally open way. Barad's use of diffraction requires that we focus on modes and patterns of difference rather than on reflection (71). But in so doing we either have to accept our total entanglement with the material world, or we risk facing a state of affairs both alien and terrifying.

In all the expeditions into Area X, the lighthouse is an important object of investigation. It is as if the Southern Reach is convinced that the light of the lighthouse can be revived, and with it a safety returned to Area X. But the light of Area X is not a source of safety, a beacon in the dark by which to map out a course of action. It is a foggy, elusive light "like a glowing flower in a hole at the bottom of the sea" (VanderMeer 397). According to Kosky, "modern disenchantment is founded on the exclusion of clouds, fog, mist" (64). The science of modernity rejects "blurred edges and hazy borders, indistinct places and insubstantial things" because they lack the clarity and stability that renders them observable (Kosky 64). At its origin, Area X was "a kind of ghost," a permeable border with "light as fog" that immediately struck terror into those that lay beyond its boundaries (VanderMeer 154). The fog and mist of Area X eludes the controlling and revealing light of science, stands outside of our simple epistemic categories and thus resists the attempts to master it. There is not revealing light that lights the way into Area X, and thus there is no certainty available to the expeditions sent to investigate. There is only the terror of a light that does not reveal.

The Sanity of Terroir and the Semiosis of Terror

The observational distance between observer and observed in diffractive intra-action is partly reliant upon notions of sanity and logical cogency. The meaning of a place is rendered through linguistic projections that rationalize and organize the wild. Language is distinct from the body, emanating from an insistence on a Cartesian dualism that separates mind from body. In the tower, often referred to as the "topographical anomaly," there are words written by a monstrous creature, a crawler that expels words of living flesh. The words themselves make little sense until The Biologist is penetrated by spores from the physical manifestation of the words she is trying to decipher. This penetration allows The Biologist to adapt to the transformations induced by Area X. She embraces the porosity of

her body and mind, emerging as a body subject that erases the division between those dualistic poles. The Biologist's encounter with the spores discloses that linguistic expression exceeds physical markers. As Eduardo Kohn puts it, linguistic signs "don't squarely reside in sounds, events, or words...signs are alive" and capable of a kind of internal growth (Kohn 33). By the end of *Acceptance* (the final book in the trilogy), The Biologist's 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 her function (The Biologist), embracing her ecological niche and embedding herself deep in the terroir of Area X. This is not to say that she rejects biology as such, but only that she no longer separates herself from the constitution of meaning in her biological work. She embraces the material practice of experimentation described by Barad, resulting in a capacity to shed the restrictions of linguistic meaning and to communicate with Area X on a viscerally semiotic plain. The tower's text literally bursts forth, penetrating The Biologist's body, and dissolving the distinctions between body and mind, materiality and thought. She is no longer under the spell of human language (hypnosis), but engages in the enchantment of the material language of her surroundings. 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.

The causality of Area X is a strange causality, constituting new phenomenal objects and new semiotic meanings through intra-action. The strangeness of this causality emanates from a rejection of the law of non-contradiction just as much as it does from the rejection of independent agencies existing prior to relation. The penetration of The Biologist by Area X produces an ontological coupling, a new phenomenal object that in turn births something strange and contradictory. Ghost Bird, The Biologist's uncanny other, emerges in her own unruly garden as she returns from Area X. She is found occupying a contradictory terroir, a lot that is both "empty" and filled with a rich biotic community of plants and insects and birds. She embodies a break with the law of non-contradiction as both The Biologist and not The Biologist.

The implicit terror of "pristine wilderness" is precisely the fact that it is wild. The intra-active bursting forth of new and strange objects disturbs the organization and projection of human science and human language. There is a fear of losing oneself (mind) amidst the sensuous spell of nonhuman materiality. The law of non-contradiction protects us from the possibilities and intensities of porous bodies. We can never be ourselves and not ourselves, always sheltered from the wild being creeping beyond my impermeable skin. Every breach is already a wound, every broken boundary already an invasion. Accepting the agential realism of Barad, accepting the diffractive power of intra-action requires that we also question the law of non-contradiction and allow ourselves to embrace the wound of wonder that opens us to new bodily intensities, new ontological couplings, and new material becomings.

The Dangerous Garden

The constitution of a garden includes a myriad of contradictions. Garden's, especially botanical gardens, activate invisible participants that work to sustain the visible manifestation. Roots grow beyond the boundaries of a garden, the bee and the wind carry pollen to and from the bounded space of the garden, and sun and rain nourish the garden from above. This is no small observation. According to Robert Pogue Harrison, "Almost all the words for "garden" in world languages have etymons linked to the idea of fence or boundary. A garden is literally defined by its boundaries (Harrison 56-57)". But if a garden *is* its boundaries, then the roots that grow beyond the boundaries are both garden and not garden. The worm that digs and eats and shits in order to maintain and nourish the garden is both garden and not garden. It is within the garden's boundaries, it helps to sustain the garden's growth, and yet it is not part of the phenomenal experience of the garden.

The garden likewise represents a microcosm of our relation to nature. It is the subdued, controlled, and organized growth of bounded biotic communities. It promotes the idea that humans have control over the natural elements and are within the bounds of reason to bring forth the seeds of fruit and flower for our own use. However, the garden always exceeds the gardener's intentions. Whole industries grow out of the desire to regulate weeds and to keep the uninvited from taking up residence. Hours and hours of human labor are devoted to manipulating the earth to bring about an edenic landscape safe from the wild emergence of life. The garden is a safe zone for cultivating nature as we see fit, yet one that always fails. But as an intended safe zone, the garden turns everything outside, everything unintended and wild into an enemy of sanity.

Area X is a dramatization and reversal of the cultivated garden. It is a dangerous garden full of wildness that not only expels the totalizing knowledge of human project, but works to capture and restore a sense of wildness to the human. When The Biologist enters the tower (topographical anomaly), she is penetrated by the words that live on the walls. She is impregnated with a new semiotic meaning that is the result of the intra-action of alien bodies and results in a new "brightness" that helps her to intuitively and viscerally "understand" her environment. Her brightness, like that of diffractive light, does not reveal a stagnant truth but works to open up new possibilities and new intensities. Her brightness is a generative wound, requiring that she maintain a literal openness and porosity to the material world that surrounds her in order to survive.

As she travels through Area X, The Biologist encounters a moaning, boar-like creature that was once The Psychologist of a previous expedition. Similarly, she meets a dolphin with an all-too-human eye, and an owl that might be her husband. All the while many of the missing members of previous expeditions into Area X seem to have returned home, back beyond the borders of Area X. Yet the bodies that have returned are only apparitions of the fully realized (cultured?) human. They are walking contradictions, both themselves and not themselves. It is as if Area X has appropriated their bodies as a kind of human garden cultivated to "bring forth the seeds of the dead," as the words on the wall of the tower (topographical anomaly) proclaim.

The use of bodily apparitions as gardens of contradictions are well documented in non-human organisms. The *Elysia chlorotica*, for instance, is a green sea slug that seems to steal "algal nuclear genes" from their food source in order to sustain the process of photosynthesis (Schwarz, Curtis, and Pierce, 300). Ultimately, the *Elysia chlorotica* is a kind of contradiction by itself, forming an endosymbiotic relation with its food source,

simultaneously ingesting and becoming its food. Beyond contradiction, many endosymbiotic organisms demonstrate a distributed agency similar to the fire ants previously mentioned. They cannot manifest or express their qualities without a host. That is, they are only fully themselves when attached to and intimately intertwined with another organism. I argue that humans are just as reliant upon other organisms to reveal or express our full range of qualities. Not only do we rely on trillions of bacteria to sustain our body's ecological health, we are always enmeshed within assemblages of intentionality. Whether we are driving a car, buying food at a grocery store, or splashing in river on a Sunday afternoon, we are always doing and acting through material couplings and collections so that our own agency is intertwined with our material surroundings. When we reject the porosity of our bodies or the entanglement of our materiality with the materiality of the environing world, we lose out on the richness, beauty, and fecundity of the danger concomitant to the wild. Which isn't to say that our recognition of our entanglement with the material world keeps us safe. It is only that we fail to embrace the beautiful terror and the fecund wonder of the wild.

The garden is a plane of distributed agency. Each aspect of the garden, including weather patterns, paths of migrating birds, the whimsy of the gardener, and the direction of the wind, all work to contribute to the ongoing becoming of a garden. Acknowledging such a distributed agency, where the ability to act otherwise is only constituted through the intra-action of a community of participants, entails a kind of wildness and porosity of the unintended and unanticipated. Here intentionality is, as Irene Klaver claims, operative such that it is "no longer located in the human subject, neither is it now placed in the object, but it is operative between the two" (50). In "Accidental Wildness" Klaver describes a beautiful scene in which "[a] haphazard accidental community of herons, fishermen, dog walkers, brushy vegetation, kids, paddlers, beaver, migratory birds, ducks, disc golfers, turtles and skunks" emerges around a flood detention pond (54). But the unintended consequences of wild distributed agency doesn't always lead to such a calm and welcoming environment. There is an environmental danger in the potential for an Area X, which not only demonstrates the fecundity of materiality and the importance of place, but also a wild nature that permeates our unrealized porosities and surprises us with unexpected fleshly intensities.

Terror and Terroir

Terroir is a wine term used to describe the specific qualities of a place that result in particular characters of wine, including its flavor profile (Saltzman 1368). The climate, the soil, the local biotic community (among others) work together to constitute and activate qualities that render unique flavors and textures. The grapes absorb the surrounding environment and result in a taste derived from the communal intra-active entanglement of a specific place, leading to the creation of something extraordinarily singular. Terroir can literally be translated as "Earth or soil" (Saltzman 1368), but includes a much broader range of influences, including human deliberation. It speaks to the distributed constitution of a place and requires an inclusion of wildness even as it enables a reduction of terroir to a mode of capitalist marketing.

While not etymologically related to terror, I argue that there is a dangerous quality to terroir, especially if unpacked within the context of Area X. Area X, as the name indicates, is a kind of nowhere. It is a stand in for all of nature as wild expulsion of human culture. And yet, it has a specific terroir, a particular sense of place that is marked, at least partly, by an

uncanny terror. Area X is a mystery. It is a mystery of origin (where did it come from?), of power (what is it capable of?), of purpose (why is it doing this?), and even of place (where is it?). The tensions that arises in the *Southern Reach Trilogy* emanate from the inability of the Southern Reach to understand or solve the mystery of Area X. It is not *that* they cannot solve it. Rather, it is that they are *trying* to provide definitive answers that reduce a complex terroir to epistemologically digestible units. Terroir, as a sense of place, is that which exceeds epistemological reduction and poses a challenge to the rationalization of the garden. That is, terroir explicitly and terrifyingly reveals the excessive wildness of the material and biotic world.

Perhaps the most terrifying aspect of terroir is that it always evades a direct glance. It is a specter of a quality, hauntingly there and not there. In the Copenhagen view of quantum physics, reality is constituted by measurement. That is, reality does not exist prior to the act of measurement. Barad clearly takes this position in her agential realism, appealing to a mutual constitution of agencies that did not exist prior to relation. If terroir cannot be directly observed, if it evades direct measurement (how do you measure a sense of place?), then it also, in a sense related to quantum physics and intra-action, both exists and does not exist. It haunts the grapes and the garden from the corner of your eye, escaping the moment of observation.

There are uncanny moments in the *Southern Reach Trilogy* where objects from Area X are said to change when unobserved, as if the observer can catch a slight glimpse of some invisible manifestation from just beyond their visible scope (VanderMeer 213). There is something beyond the surface of perceptual reality, some agential vibration that evades human observation and dances when “freed of the terrible limitations of the human gaze” (VanderMeer 214). The very act of observation constitutes the object, either as a lie, or just as a thing capable of being related to. Is the object really what it says it is? The bodily manifestation of identity is called into question over and over again, resulting in a lack of confidence in perception to capture the object’s being. So who is lying—the object or my perception? However, it not is not merely a simple question of human constitution. It is hubris to think that only humans are capable of observation or measurement. If we grant that other entities, organisms, or assemblages of participants can observe and measure, then the constitution that occurs in intra-action may be different on different temporal and spatial scales. Even in human experience, there is a kind of reversibility that takes place such that to see an object requires that you are also able to be seen—to measure opens up the possibility of being measured.

This concept of reversibility is articulated clearly in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s later ontology. In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty claims that “he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is* of *it*, unless, by principle, according to what is required by the articulation of the look with the things, he is one of the visibles, capable, by a singular reversal, of seeing them – he who is one of them” (134-35). When I touch a material object, I am also being touched. The object touches me back in an uncanny revelation of my own constitution. The very possibility for this reversible intra-action is that both my body and the body of the object are entwined by a singular flesh. Meaning emerges in the communication of the visible tactile body. The body is always open to the other because it is already entangled in the other in the elemental being of flesh (Merleau-Ponty 147). Yet neither object is exhausted by the entanglement. Bodies are open

and porous, but not in an absolute sense. There is always room for the diffractive patterns of interference and difference.

Merleau-Ponty goes on to describe this reversibility of the flesh as a kind of chiasm. According to Ted Toadvine, who has written extensively on the subject of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature, the figure of the chiasm is derived from the Greek word *χιασμος*, meaning "a cross like or diagonal arrangement, such as the letter X" (Toadvine 107). If we look closely at the figure X, it is impossible to tell which line is crossing over the other and where one line begins and the other ends. For Merleau-Ponty, the body and the world form a similar kind of chiasm such that their intersection involves a mutual activity of touching and being touched. Yet, this chiasmic relationship does not reduce both to a kind of homogeneity or monism. Rather, like the two arms of the X, the body and the world remain distinct yet unified. Thus Merleau-Ponty uses the figure of X to mark the inseparability of the human body with the material world. Both are caught up in a chiasmic relation—two sides of a deeply entangled polygonal flesh.

Area X exemplifies and personifies this concept of flesh. Its name is already a chiasm, already a mysteriously entangled mass. Entering it through the door of the border is like entering into the sinews of an alien being, an "invisible skin" (VanderMeer 317) that is both absolute other and intimately reversible. The "all-too-human dolphin eye" encountered by The Biologist is said to be "subsumed in the flesh that surrounds it" as the terroir of Area X "thickens" (VanderMeer 482). In many instances both The Director and Control are overcome by the feeling that their surroundings are watching them, the "landscape...curling over from behind to peer" at them (VanderMeer 361). All the while Area X is being interrogated, the expeditions seeking clues to answer the mystery of its being, it interrogates back (552), measures those who measure, and laughs at their failure (421).

As is the case with the Copenhagen view of quantum physics, this mutual interrogation and reversibility works to constitute and to shift reality. The unsettling terror of Area X is that it is a representation of pristine nature. It is the wild upsurge of the material world, and as such, it is a force of change and of measurement that works to effect the continual becoming of intra-active diffractive being. We are not always capable of directing this change, of determining the outcome of our mutual constitution. We can see this most clearly in the grotesque museum curated by the enigmatic Whitby (313). The museum has its own terroir, its own sense of place that is deeply terrifying. Whitby has drawn a spooky menagerie of strange combinations, animal and human bodies combined in knotted masses of horror and porosity. The drawings are not merely the product of Whitby's imagination. Rather, they seem to depict the transformations occurring inside Area X. The Psychologist of the last Eleventh Expedition, the moaning creature The Biologist encounters on her solitary journey, has been rendered a massive hog with mottled skin and too many appendages, its face contorted into a look of overwhelming torment (313). Whitby is a bodily breach, a "human beacon" (329) without light, a singular pore of Area X that lets in all of its monstrosity and terror through acts of grotesque representation. His museum expresses the messy entanglement of bodily reversibility and an incubation of the wild in material being.

The museum is an apt metaphor. From the collections of relics in medieval churches (Mauries 7) to the anthologies of 16th century aristocrats and assemblies of Renaissance monsters (Davenne 111), early museums were known as cabinets of curiosities and were constructed from a collection of strange and wondrous objects. These collections both

exceeded the expectations of the known world (including monsters and prodigies), and attempted to capture the whole of reality. That is, they were a means of organizing, cataloging, and representing the breadth and interconnectedness of reality. The cabinets of the 16th century, for example, mixed naturalistic classification and religious symbolism to present an organized and unified picture of the world (Davenne 85). Ulisse Aldrovandi, sometimes referred to as “Pliny of Bologna” for his attention to classificatory detail, left a collection of “more than eighteen thousand pieces” which became “one of Europe’s first museums of natural history” in 1617 (Davenne 92). Aldrovandi’s cabinet of curiosities, like those of his contemporaries, mixed scientific naturalism with myth and narrative in an attempt to display reality as a dynamic and wondrous whole (Davenne 93).

At one point during the originating event of Area X, Saul the Lighthouse Keeper, describes a tidal pool as a “living cabinet of curiosities” (VanderMeer 518). Like the garden, the secret of all cabinet of curiosities is that they are already alive. The terror of Area X is the swelling surge of its excessive elemental being bringing forth the seeds of the dead that “shall blossom within the skull and expand the mind beyond what any man can bear” (VanderMeer 194). The living cabinet of curiosity that is Area X, that is the complexity and process of the material world, always exceeds the organization and representation of the human mind. It always changes in the diffractive light of new relations and new intra-actions, bringing forth the ongoing birth and death that is material becoming. “Pristine nature” as a living cabinet of curiosity is already a terroir of terror.

Living with the Danger

There is a danger to the material world. An excessive matrix of bodily intensities and porosities demand that an open wound be maintained to avoid an ontological and ethical separation between humanity and the rest of the material world. Many of the current ecological disasters, including global warming, water and food shortages, and mass extinctions have originated from the hubris of this assumed separation between human and nature. We, as the imagined community of human agents, desire carefully manicured gardens, trees that line our freeways, and “pristine wilderness” with a gift shop. We do not want to acknowledge that the danger of the natural world is always just across a permeable border, always seeping in through the diffractive intra-action accompanying our physical existence that threatens the very existence of this supposed “we”. There is value to living with the danger, and of recognizing that there is a danger. The recognition of wildness is an important step in an ethical treatment of the natural world that includes human, animal, and ecosystem in an ongoing spectrum of the same becoming.

Following the Copenhagen view of quantum physics, Barad situates humans as crucial participants in the creation of reality in the sense that we are what Timothy Morton calls a “correlator” (17). We constitute reality through measurement, observation, and through the intra-active entanglement of our material being with the material world. Meaning emerges through this entanglement that is explicitly bodily, physical, and diffractive. But humans are not the only correlators that work to constitute the meaning of the world. To quote Barad, “causal intra-actions need not involve humans. Indeed, it is through such practices that the differential boundaries between humans and nonhumans, culture and nature, science and the social, are constituted” (140). To accept that reality is constituted through the intra-actions of an incalculable number of bodies is to understand that the world is fundamentally ecological and unknowable.

Living with environmental danger is not only an acknowledgment of noetic failings. It also entails a realization that an ecologically oriented ontology and epistemology does not lead us directly to clearly defined ethical decisions. If we must attend to non-human entities and assemblages as correlates, capable of constituting the material world through measurement and intra-action, then we must rearrange our ontological commitments to reflect what Levi Bryant calls a “democracy of objects.” No thing or group of things has ontological priority over the next. That is, there is no hierarchical order of nature. Rather, there is only embedded matterings, diffractive brightness, a flesh of things marked by a unity in difference.

It is easy to see environmental disaster, to accept the broad terror of global warming and rising sea levels. But to acknowledge that our ethical relation to the material world cannot be defined by calculation, that we need to reorient our deliberations toward entanglement is extremely risky. We cannot simply devise new strategies for clean technologies like sending new expeditions into Area X. Rather, we need to face “the task of thinking at temporal and spatial scales that are unfamiliar, even monstrously gigantic (Morton 25). There is something unsettling when we realize that the fossil fuels that are simultaneously powering and killing the planet were formed through the grinding of bodies over centuries and millennia. Our world is fundamentally alien, built and constituted by agencies existing in different temporal and spatial scales than our own bodies. To acknowledge the danger of the environment is to acknowledge the very likely possibility that we as a community of correlates will be subsumed, buried, grinded, and rendered anew through the deep time of geological temporal scales—our bodies returned to the dust of the earth.

There is a precedent among new materialists (Barad being a prominent contributor) to make the leap from ontology to ethics. In the introduction to *New Materialisms* Diana Coole and Samantha Frost write that an “urgent reason for turning to materialism is the emergence of pressing ethical and political concerns that accompany the scientific and technological advances predicated on new scientific models of matter and, in particular, living matter” (5). They go on to clarify that they are building on the Cartesian legacy of materialism, yet rejecting the “conceptual and practical domination of nature” often associated with Cartesian thought (8). As such, “new materialist ontology is consequently more positive and constructive than critical or negative” and “sees its task as creating new concepts and images of nature that affirm matter’s immanent vitality” (8). I would add to this argument that “matter’s immanent vitality” is a dangerous force that is wholly indifferent to the organized projection of human science. The danger is that once we become intimately embedded in the various temporal and spatial scales of the surrounding material world, the prioritization of the human becomes dislodged. An ecologically driven ethics based on a rejection of calculation and control provides little grounding for a human centered ethics, which is a strikingly risky endeavor.

The final book of *The Southern Reach Trilogy* is appropriately titled *Acceptance*. The risk associated with an ecological ethic powered by a diffractive ontology ultimately requires a dissolution of strict boundaries, including the dualistic relations of nature and culture, human and nonhuman, and reason and unreason. In *Authority* (the second book of the trilogy), Control is given instruction by an unnamed “voice.” In some sense “the voice” occupies the role of the mind, reasonably and calculatedly manipulating Control (the body)

to act in ways that may contradict his own desires. Yet, at the same time “the voice” is alien to Control, a manipulative force that marks Control’s distinct lack of control. It is as if he were hearing voices in his head that tell him what to do, his own faculty of reason as a symptom of insanity.

“The Voice” is merely an illusion of sanity, which is the same illusion at play when we organize the garden, plan the wild in urban spaces, and project our epistemic reality as the only reality (what we know *is* reality). Area X, in a strange reversal, is a beacon of sanity. This dangerous, terrifying terroir unveils a light that does not reveal an ontological singularity, but is itself the diffractive, fissuring surface of a fleshy ontological plurality. What is left when you take away all of the insane people? “The birds and the deer and the otters...the hills and the lakes...the snakes and the ladders” (VanderMeer 426). Sanity is not the deliberate projection of control and organization or the teleology of cause and effect, or even the purposive action of individuals with full cognitive functionality—sanity is not the working lighthouse. It is the acceptance of multiple temporal and spatial scales and the dissolution of the law of non-contradiction. It is the attunement of The Biologist to her surroundings that results in her acclimation into the terroir of Area X, not as an invasive species, but as a contributing part of a developing ecology.

In the end, the Biologist is a monstrous, massive creature stalking the depths of Area X and existing “across locations and landscapes” (494). Her body is covered by “many glowing eyes” (493) that blossom and spread across its mass. She is the flesh of the world, seeing and being seen by the landscape in which she exists. Her attunement to Area X has made her a monster, and yet she is able to live and thrive within a dangerous terroir in violent harmony with her environment. When she encounters Ghost Bird, the two share an uncanny recognition of their identity in difference. The monstrosity of The Biologist and the humanity of Ghost Bird, itself a strange reversal, are mutually reflected in the other. If we can draw ethical conclusions from an ontology of diffractive, intra-active matter, then they must be done within the language of embeddedness, entanglement, and ecology. In order to do so, I argue that we must also attend to a danger inherent to the wildness of nature. We must seek an attunement with the living material world that accepts that this wildness does not need sanitization, and that humans are not the only correlates working to constitute its becoming.

Such ethical considerations seem remarkably unfeasible. How can we enact a letting be of wild nature and become open to the dangers of our porous bodies? Surely the answer is not a program of ethical postulates or policy changes. In many ways our smart watches and wearable tech already speak to a kind of mutual intra-action with our material environment. We cannot occlude cell towers and skyscrapers from our terroir. Rather, we must embrace the “vibrant materiality,” as Jane Bennett calls it, of material artifacts produced by human culture, and remain open to a kind of animism that allows a terroir to emit semiotic meaning through bodily means of communication. This kind of animism allows for the world to speak and vibrate and spew forth meaning like the spores from the pods and for us to respond by accepting this semiotic and fleshly intertwinement.

When The Biologist is infected by the spores of the tower (topographical anomaly), there occurs a communication between her and Area X. While the words themselves (*where lies the strangling fruit*) have little decipherable meaning, the act of penetration is itself a means of communication. This communication is a manipulation that subtly transforms the

human into the nonhuman (VanderMeer 491), calling out for intra-action that brings forth new phenomenal becomings. In the intimacy of touch and infection, spoken language becomes an inadequate and futile means of translation. In the closeness of infection, The Biologist, like *Elysia chlorotica*, is both herself and not herself. She becomes not two things in one body, but one body as a distributed agency. Infection, like a wound, allows the porous body to remain open to the wondering world where distributed agencies are constituted through intra-action, and where phenomena cycle through life and death at every moment.

Conclusion

There is meaning latent in the material world, an open possibility to a vast array of translations. Yet we are cut short by limiting our responses to sedimented meanings of bodily gestures and linguistic expression. Infection as communication, as translation of a corporeal superposition would open new phenomenal combinations and thereby allow new agents of translation and measurement. Pristine wilderness is a nightmare vision of impossible monsters because we are not open to living with the danger of our environmental and material entanglement. I argue that we must work to constitute a terroir that changes terror into a wondering brightness, an open wound of attunement that enables a symphony of ululating voices. Area X reminds us that we must live dangerously on the rocks rather than to pave over them, to live in the misty light of our diffractive being without need of a lighthouse beacon to reveal a static reality, and to recognize the mutual agency in the living, breathing materiality of the world we help constitute. The unruly wildness of nature is not the true danger, for it brings “forth the seeds of the dead...that shall blossom within the skull and expand the mind beyond what any man can bear” (VanderMeer 194). It is only the desperate cleaving to borders and boundaries separating our diffractive agencies that generates the true danger. It is the Southern Reach, not Area X, that is on the wrong side of the border. And it is we that must take a leap into the fuzzy, unfocused light of an undulating terroir so that control might fall away.

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