Gothic Nature

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FILM AND TV REVIEWS

Annihilation: A Roundtable Review

(USA: Skydance Media, 2018)

A special collaborative collection from Sara L. Crosby, Andrew Hageman, Shannon Davies Mancus, Daniel Platt, and Alison Sperling

INTRODUCTION

Sara L. Crosby

Drawn primarily from the first novel in Jeff VanderMeer's *Southern Reach* trilogy, director Alex Garland's 2018 film *Annihilation* begins with an interrogation and a cosmic event: Our protagonist Lena (played by Natalie Portman) sits in an empty cell facing a man in a hazmat suit, who asks her 'What do you know?' As she ponders the question, the film flashes back to a meteor silently slamming into a marshy coast, but, instead of disintegrating, it expands outward in a haze of oily color to create 'Area X' – a gorgeous but menacing zone of wild genetic and temporal mutation bounded by a still-expanding wall of leftover 'shimmer'. After Lena's husband Kane (played by Oscar Isaac) returns from Area X, riddled with cancer and dying, she tries to find a cure by joining four other women for another doomed expedition. Once they march in, bloody mayhem ensues, including a terrifying bear-monster attack and a tangle with Lena's doppelgänger, which seems to leave her the sole survivor but ultimately raises the question: Who really returns from Area X? In the final scene, back in the present, Lena and Kane embrace, together and healthy again, but a slick of oily shimmer in their eyes suggests other possibilities.

The story behind the story of *Annihilation* is possibly even more fraught. As Isaac joked, the film was not 'Predator with girls!' (Garland and Isaac, 2018). Paramount suffered a case of nerves worrying that it might be too 'weird' and 'brainy' for audiences, and so after an unsuccessful struggle over the ending the studio dumped foreign distribution onto Netflix and

slashed its American advertising campaign to the bare bone, guaranteeing underperformance at the box office (Lodge, 2018). Nonetheless, critics hailed it as 'a new sci-fi classic' and 'a genre gem, an ambitious, challenging piece of work that people will be dissecting for years' even if it refuses to fall into 'the same neat categories' as other genre films (Taylor, 2018; Tallerico, 2018).

The critics are correct. It is a unique and beautiful film, but it is also an important film with a resonance beyond most other 'sci-fi classic[s]'—at least from an ecocritical perspective—which is the reason we have decided to devote a 'roundtable' discussion to its analysis. In an age of devastating climate change and environmental disintegration, the film brings to a popular audience a cinematic version of the mind-altering 'ecological awareness' that theorists such as the author of the novel *Annihilation* consider essential to human survival. VanderMeer, of course, is a leading figure in the recent upsurge in cosmic horror literature termed 'The New Weird', and the 'weird', he points out, draws attention to how the human is inexorably 'entwined' with the material, nonhuman world. It thus confronts our self-destructive amnesia, our doomed ecophobic 'attempt to transcend our material conditions' which has only seduced us into suicide (Morton and VanderMeer, 2016: p. 58). The film, *Annihilation*, in its weirdness, may evoke such entanglement and, as the following reviews demonstrate, certainly causes us to reflect upon it.

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THE REVIEWS

'Why You Should Lichen Alex Garland's *Annihilation*'

Andrew Hageman

I'll say it up front: I deeply admire both Jeff VanderMeer's novel, *Annihilation* (indeed, the full *Southern Reach* trilogy), and Alex Garland's film of the same name. The film strikes me as an outstanding work of fan-fiction reverence that offers up its own aesthetic contributions to the exploration of weird ecological consciousness. This novel-film duo seems to fit Fredric Jameson's (2011) general claim about literature into film in Colin MacCabe's *True to the Spirit: Film Adaptation and the Question of Fidelity*: that if both texts are equal in value and impact they will diverge in spirit. This review focuses solely on the film and the Gothic Nature elements of its weird ecomedia spirit. And I use the term 'weird' in this review with two points of reference in mind: one is to invoke the idea of surrendering to surreal weirdness that sprawls beyond borders that Ann and Jeff VanderMeer articulate as at the heart of the genre in their anthology, *The New Weird* (p. xvi), and the other is to keep in mind China Miéville's assertion that the New Weird had an important yet short run that's already done (Bould, p. 25). I am specifically entranced by the film's complex invocations and interrogations of 'home', 'family', and 'doppelgängers'. By rendering the home as unsettlingly permeable and permeated by nonhuman lives, framing the family as newly symbiotic with elements of a radically

changed ecosystem, and leveraging doppelgängers to point out the limits of anthropomorphism, *Annihilation* seems to exemplify Gothic Nature.

One of the most recognisable, yet deceptively subtle threads in the film is the heteronormative household. Very early on the film transitions from introducing Lena (Natalie Portman) via her classroom at Johns Hopkins University to a montage of rooms in the house where she and her husband Kane (Oscar Isaac) have lived. The shots are tightly framed and from perspectives that are in threshold spaces inside the house such as corridors and openings between two distinct rooms. As a result, *Annihilation* conjures the feeling of home in a thoroughly eerie way. It does not, however, do this conventionally. Rather than emphasising spookiness contained within the house as seen from outside (as in Hitchcock's *Psycho* [1960]) or the interior as a bulwark against spookiness without the house (as in Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* [1968]), this montage establishes the house/home as *in itself* permeable and permeated. Put another way, the architectural artifact typically associated with dividing inside from outside, private from public, and so on, is implied to be much more porous than all that. And by leaving this focalising agency unidentified, the film enables readers to fill in the blanks of what crosses thresholds and coexists with human beings, from microbes and viruses to ghosts and water vapor. One signal this sends is that the Gothic concept of the home as haunted dilates to a Gothic Nature concept of the planet as haunted by climate change and mass extinction. One other signal, however, is that in order to confront such planetary devastation people will have to shift away from stable notions of inside/outside to an aesthetic and scientific vision of homes and organisms as porous and permeable, differently vulnerable and differently robust through such inherent connection.

This subtly-implied permeability is reinforced in the subsequent scene when Kane, just returned from The Shimmer of Area X, explains to Lena how he got home:

> Kane: I was outside.
> Lena: Outside the house?
> Kane: No, no, I was outside the room. The room with the bed. The door was open and I saw you.

The volume of this initial eeriness gets turned way up later in the film when the expedition team enters the house inside The Shimmer where the bear attack occurs. Though one might

overlook it on a first screening, the bear attack house in fact seems to be the same structure as Lena and Kane's house and so provides a provocative reflection of their home. As such, when the home gets weird and threatens to overturn human stability and control—allegorically, when impacts of climate change on Earth upset the fantasies of home planet stability and control—the causes of this are not precisely evil within or without. Rather, *Annihilation* invites spectators to re-envision the home, whether house, ecosystem, or planet, as an intersection of insides and outsides that flow and mix. Here the film and novel converge in a spirit of eschewing focus on evil, as such concerns can function as destructive fantasies and/or escape-hatches of blame. *Annihilation* invites us to wonder if cosy notions of home actually erect barriers to life as wild and radically strange coexistence.

This unsettling depiction of home is intricately entangled with the film's exploration of family through Lena and Kane's marriage. Through Lena's flashbacks, we witness an arc of estrangement. Their love, their very capacity for conversation, had eroded before Kane ever left for Area X. Their marriage was lost. It's the things we lose that we have forever, though. In this case, Lena possesses not only the trauma of the failed relationship, but the alien-infused second chance at making a family with Kane at the close of the film. For, through the refracted (and, to some, horrifying) reproductions of themselves inside The Shimmer, Lena and Kane reenter their relationship, which is changed and made new. The film ends on the embrace of the permeated, mutated Lena and Kane, his words and her eyes indicating that this second chance at love, marriage, family exists for radically altered versions of who they were before Area X. It's a weird rendition of a love's second chance. At this level of intimacy and coexistence, the film is deeply unsettling and provocative as it figures family members as deeply alien. But if an ecological cultural revolution is needed on Earth, wouldn't that include re-imagining the structures of human love and reproduction? At least that's what the heteronormative family in *Annihilation* seems to ask.

In addition to the perturbed depictions of home and family, both of which feature aspects of doubling, another significant Gothic Nature element of *Annihilation* is its use of doppelgängers. These are not Sigmund Freud's doppelgängers; the doubles in this film are not projections of self that generate uncanny reactions still centered on individual egos. Instead, the doubling synthesises the uncanny and the weird as it combines the uncanny disturbance and disintegration of what's inside the self with the startling perspective of a wholly alien other. Take for example Lena's account of her encounter with her doppelgänger inside the

Lighthouse. When the Southern Reach interrogator presumes that the double attacked her, she replies that it was merely mirroring her and she was the one who attacked. She emphasises her point by saying she doesn't know what it wanted or even if it is a thing that wants. By responding to the double this way, Lena perceives what's happening inside The Shimmer as creation rather than destruction or dissolution. She opens herself both to the weird permeability that was always the self and to the new and alien other thing that she is becoming.

I'll close with a pair of *mise-en-scène* features that connect the Gothic experimentations on home, family, and doppelgängers with the lichens of this review's title. The viscous rainbows of The Shimmer haunt *Annihilation* like the monitor-green tint that haunts *The Matrix*. Prismatic splashes of The Shimmer pulse in the peripheries of shots with their viscous double coding of beautiful light and oily pollution. Of note is how The Shimmer's prisms swerve away from the Gothic aesthetics of ruins; instead, the beauty-pollution dynamic is focalised strictly because of an alien intervention, a thorn in the Earth from outer space, to borrow a notion from VanderMeer's trilogy. Echoing The Shimmer's colors are the riotous lichens that abound where Earth is being changed, attached to myriad surfaces from which they broadcast their technicolor colonial presence. As they spread over built and unbuilt surfaces inside of Area X, these lichens signal a radically nonhuman social infrastructure rising. A lot of Anthropocene visual media texts deploy infrastructural objects like elevated highways with plants sprouting from the crumbles and cracks that signal the collapse of the human public, the human social. In *Annihilation*, the lichen and other life forms point more to themselves than to what we human beings could lose. And as they move into the foreground inside Area X, these lichens do not pull people into the environment so much as point to the fact that we've always been inextricable from this complicated planet. Because the lichen, like the surface of The Shimmer, are earthy and alien, lovely and repulsive, they represent the fruiting bodies of ecological awareness as it arises in the Anthropocene.

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'We're all damaged goods here': Gender and Shared Trauma in *Annihilation*

Alison Sperling

I keep coming back to writing about Jeff VanderMeer's 2014 novel *Annihilation*. Its weirdness, by which I mean here its inexplicabilities and ambiguities, continue to suggest new readings and critical engagement the more I reflect on it. But I admit that one of the things that I've never really known what to do with is the all-women makeup of the twelfth expedition into what is called in the novel 'Area X': a biologist, a linguist, a psychologist, and a surveyor. How might we reflect on the shared gender dynamic of these particular four women who *choose* to enter into this most toxic and dangerous space?

Though Alex Garland's film adaptation of the novel takes a lot of liberties in transitioning to the big screen, one of the elements that stays the same is that it is a team of all-women that embarks on the mission into what is called in the film 'The Shimmer'. But in the film, a new dimension is added, or at least made more explicit: Each of the women has and continues to deal with an explicit trauma. In a scene near the start of their expedition, Cass and

Lena share a short canoe trip that in turn reveals a whole lot to Lena about the rest of the team members. Lena tells Cass that she recently lost her husband, to which Cass replies:

> Cass: I'm sorry to hear that. I guess there had to be something.
> Lena: What do you mean?
> Cass: Volunteering for this. It's not exactly something you do if your life is in perfect harmony. We're all damaged goods here. Anya's sober…an addict. Josie wears long sleeves because she doesn't want you to see the scars on her forearms.
> Lena: She's tried to kill herself?
> Cass: Oh I think the opposite, trying to feel alive.
> Lena: Ventress?
> Cass: Yeah. As far as anyone knows, no friends, no family, no partner, no children, no concession in her at all.
> Lena: You?
> Cass: I also lost someone. Not a husband, though, a daughter. Leukemia.
> Lena: God, I'm sorry.
> Cass: In a way its two bereavements. My beautiful girl, and the person I once was.

Distinct to the film adaptation, each woman enters The Shimmer having already experienced some form of trauma or loss. Each carries with her a personal history that, according to Cass in this scene, informs their decision to embark on what they know is likely a one-way trip into uncharted and inexplicable territory.

Why does the film take such care here to establish these character histories that we might understand as a shared sense of trauma (being careful of course not to level all trauma as equivalent)? Indeed it seems crucial in the film, at least to Cass, that their pasts somehow unite the women. It is as if only with nothing to lose would one consider entering The Shimmer, only having already lost (all or part of) oneself would one be willing to do it all over again. As Cass says, the loss of her daughter required two bereavements – one for her 'beautiful girl', and one for 'the person I once was'. As someone admittedly unfamiliar with the field of trauma studies, I wonder how this notion of trauma as loss of self trucks with scholarship in the field. If one thinks about the self as already 'annihilated' before entering Area X in the way that Cass describes, what is left to annihilate once inside The Shimmer? As the notion of bounded (human) subjectivity literally merges more and more with the animals, the plant life, the

landscape of Area X, how might the women's pasts inform the kinds of subjectivity with which they entered in the first place? The film suggests that trauma informs the subject in crucial ways that serve to blur its bounds, even open one up in weird ways to the unknown on the other side of The Shimmer.

To further de-center the human, a gesture that both the novel and film arguably make, we might also ask how the women's varied histories of loss operate in relation to the trauma or ecological changes that nonhuman nature is also undergoing. In short, though I don't have the space to fully explore the question here, I wonder about the relationship between gender, trauma, and the kinds of weird ecological changes that occur in the film. And I'm interested in how the novel and the film draw connections between (the) women and a dramatically changing ecology, and what role their shared sense of being 'damaged goods' links them or distinguishes them from the damage that the landscape and nonhuman beings that populate it are likewise undergoing.

Imperial EcoGothic and the Soldier/Scientists of Alex Garland's *Annihilation*

Daniel Platt

In a recent interview (Barber, 2018), a reporter from Military.com asked *Annihilation* director Alex Garland about his interest in the intersections 'between science, research, and military application'. In his response, Garland strikes a measured but cautionary tone, warning about the 'power embedded within tech and science' and pointing to the ethical questions that researchers must ask themselves when considering military applications of their work. *Annihilation* is a much more fully realised answer to this question: it speaks to the tension between science and militarism both through its Gothic and ecoGothic elements and through the troubled relationship between Lena (Natalie Portman) and her husband Kane (Oscar Isaac), which, I argue, can be read as an allegorical representation of national anxieties. I would place the film in a category that scholar Johan Höglund (2016) terms 'the American Imperial Gothic', texts that seem haunted by threats to U.S. global hegemony and by the legacies of U.S. imperialism, particularly in the post-9/11 era. Lurking beneath the threatening landscapes and horrific creatures of *Annihilation* is a fear that the marriage of military might and scientific

innovation that made the U.S. a dominant global power in the second half of the twentieth century is crumbling in the face of environmental threats that the nation is not prepared to understand *or* fight.

Garland's *Annihilation* presents both Lena and Kane as veterans of the U.S. Army whose romantic relationship begins in the service. However, it soon becomes clear that Kane's ongoing commitment to the Army—and Lena's new career as a university researcher—have become a fault line in their marriage. As Lena's colleague Daniel (David Gyasi), with whom she is having an affair, asserts: 'You can't talk to him about work, and he won't talk about his'. This breakdown of communication is dramatised early in the film, when a version of Kane returns from 'The Shimmer': a slowly-expanding territory where strange phenomena occur. Lena seems to believe that he has been away on covert operations in Pakistan. When she presses him for details about his absence, Kane exhibits behavior that could be mistaken for symptoms of PTSD: He appears emotionally distant and seems unwilling or unable to recall basic details from his deployment. This troubling scene can be read as an example of the Gothic return of the repressed, as the distant violence of U.S. military interventions overseas resurfaces in the homeland in the form of haunted veterans like Kane carrying secrets they can't disclose. But this scene also fits within a larger pattern of unsettling failures of communication in the film, which seem to speak to broad national anxieties about the ability of military and scientific institutions to respond effectively in the face of crisis.

Unlike other works of post-9/11 U.S. cinema, such as Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (2005), which evoke U.S. imperialism and the global 'war on terror' through the invasion of monstrous bodies like zombies or 'alien' others, *Annihilation's* invasion seems more like a local 'environmental' phenomenon. With The Shimmer, *Annihilation* points to a military/industrial/academic complex that both contributes to and often *benefits* from global environmental catastrophes (by way of 'disaster militarism' and its companion 'disaster capitalism') in ways that are often hidden, repressed, or denied. In Jeff VanderMeer's novel, which inspired the film, the initial public explanation for the evacuation of territory near 'Area X' is an environmental catastrophe caused by experimental military research; in the film, the evacuations are conducted under the pretext of a chemical spill. By juxtaposing these 'ordinary' and 'acceptable' catastrophes with the 'extraordinary' and unsanctioned phenomenon of The Shimmer, *Annihilation* defamiliarises the everyday environmental violence of U.S. militarism

and raises questions about the complicity of scientists and researchers in that violence. As a phenomenon that defies scientific explanation and renders conventional military interventions useless, The Shimmer also seems, like the rift in Kane and Lena's marriage, a symbol of the failing union between science and military.

The film's second act launches Lena—along with four other scientists—on a heroic quest into The Shimmer to heal these two traumas: to restore Kane and to understand and undo the strange phenomenon that seems to be destroying the land. As the team makes their way through The Shimmer, they encounter military bases crumbling and overgrown like Gothic ruins. Three years of expeditions into The Shimmer have resulted in failure: With the exception of Kane, no one has returned. Dr. Ventress (Jennifer Jason Leigh) suggests that Lena's ability to bridge the worlds of military power and scientific research gives her a unique advantage: 'Soldier/scientist: You can fight. You can learn. You can save him'. Initially, she seems to be right: Monstrous creatures are defeated with automatic weapons, and Lena and her colleagues seem to uncover a scientific explanation for the strange transformations that occur within The Shimmer. With a hand grenade and a deft dance move, Lena brings down The Shimmer and revives Kane. But *Annihilation* refuses a neat resolution in which the union between science and militarism is restored and the repressed national anxieties are re-buried. Instead, Lena's reunion with Kane is veiled in uncertainty: Neither seems to know who they are or how to resume a relationship that has been fundamentally changed by their experiences in The Shimmer. Ultimately, *Annihilation* asks its viewers to think critically about the permeability of borders—between self and other, human and nonhuman, place and planet—but also to reconsider what is possible to learn and what is possible to fight.

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Prison/Prism: Refraction as Radical Praxis in *Annihilation*[1]

Shannon Davies Mancus

For most of the modern Western environmental movement, there has been a strong strain of thought that operated in accordance with what social scientists who study climate change messaging call the 'information deficit model'(IDM). This lens treats the problem of environmental communication as one of a deficit of exposure to good facts and assumes that the reason that the general public is so reticent to acknowledge and act on climate change is due to a lack of understanding of empirical data. This is also the operative assumption of most climate change documentaries and a vast swath of ecomedia: that more, better, and clearer information will result in a change in hearts and minds and an uptick in political will.

The information deficit model, however, has proven dangerously ineffective, and even, at times, counterproductive (Kahan, 2012: pp. 732-735). Social scientists have conducted research that proves that narratives are more effective than a simple communication of facts (Greenberg, 2010: pp. 16-34; McComas & Shanahan, 1999: pp. 30-57; Dahlstrom, 2014: pp. 13614–20; Boykoff, 2011). Environmental psychologists have noted that cognitive dissonance causes individuals to sift facts through a filter of personal identity; in this way, people bend facts to match their interpretive models of the world rather than the other way around (Stoknes, 2015).

Storytelling, then, has a key role to play in coaxing individuals to understand themselves as part of larger environmentalist narratives, and *Annihilation* is an entry into a canon of ecomedia texts that seek to alter people's ideas about their relationship to the

[1] I am grateful to the students in my honors Environmental Film class, with whom I engaged in robust discussion about this film. Their insights in our conversation about this topic helped shape this essay.

biosphere. Though far from a perfect film, *Annihilation*'s structure proves an interesting case study for how we might tell new kinds of stories about ecological collapse. Instead of taking a straightforward approach to communicating to the audience what an environmental apocalypse might look like, *Annihilation* centers around the concept of refraction – a phenomenon in which a wave travels between two or more mediums which deflect or bend the wave resulting in the wave progressing at two simultaneous different speeds. Like the alien shimmer that serves as the primary antagonist, the film bends its spatial and temporal constructions in ways that subvert some of the primary problems with climate communication.

One of the major barriers that environmental storytellers face is representing what Rob Nixon (2006) calls 'slow violence'. Environmental issues, he notes, often '[require] creative ways of drawing public attention to catastrophic acts that are low in instant spectacle but high in long-term effects'. This poses narrative issues for climate communicators, because '[t]o intervene representationally requires that we find both the iconic symbols to embody amorphous calamities and the narrative forms to infuse them with dramatic urgency…to render slow violence visible entails, among other things, redefining speed' (p. 15).

One common way storytellers have faced this dilemma is by projecting narratives into the future to demonstrate the dramatic outcomes of the slow violence of environmental crises. Another method has been to hyperbolise slow violence into sudden violence, a lá *The Day After Tomorrow*, wherein environmental catastrophes that are projected to occur over a long period of time occur suddenly and all at once. In both cases, these dystopian narratives serve as a warning to the present by showing us a planet irrevocably and globally altered.

Annihilation, however, is able to isolate its radical change behind the oily, petro-fantastical curtain of The Shimmer, while simultaneously giving us the sense that it might not be too late to save the rest of the planet. In *Annihilation*, time is refracted, and not just in terms of the non-linear storytelling. The narrative itself flashes back and forth between the past and the present for the protagonist, but the film also speeds up, slows down, and collapses time in other ways. The event that causes The Shimmer—and ultimately threatens the human species with the titular crisis—is brought about by a meteor impacting the earth in a clear echo of the extinction of the dinosaurs. Rapid cell division and bodily alteration within The Shimmer echo but exaggerate the aesthetics and speed of the cancerous growth shown early in the film. Time operates differently within The Shimmer, both literally and metaphorically: While the world

outside The Shimmer reflects our current moment, the world inside The Shimmer luridly evinces an ever accelerating and slowly expanding environmental calamity; it lets us see what an apocalyptic future might look like without sentencing its protagonists to a totalising dystopia. This is because The Shimmer also serves as a spatial laboratory that subverts another issue that much cli-fi narratives face: Because the effects of climate change, though uneven, cannot be contained, most dystopian cli-fi can only offer visions of an environmental future that are devastating on a global level. By constructing The Shimmer as a kind of cataclysmic snow globe, the film is able to both show us a catastrophic environmental future while still presenting hope that the world as we know it can be saved.

To combat annihilation, the film prescribes radical, uncomfortable, fundamental transformation for the human species in the face of malignant growth. The Lena and Kane hybrids that we see at the end of the film are able to take a blueprint for survival out of The Shimmer. The key to avoiding a violent death inside the dome of environmental chaos is articulated first by Josie: As she notes that death has come to those who want to face the forces of The Shimmer or fight them, she declares that she doesn't want 'either of those things'. Instead, she tentacularly merges with the forces of The Shimmer by growing vines and disappearing into the landscape. In The Shimmer, the plants and the animals, and the animal/plant refractions that radically disrupt human notions of species hierarchy, are thriving; it is the people who refuse to evolve that are dying in gruesome ways. The outcome of these mutations are sometimes nightmarish, sometimes beautiful, but it is these alterations that allow for survival. Lena and Kane become messengers for this uncomfortable but necessary adaptation when they are forced to face themselves—quite literally—and radically adjust by abandoning prior notions of individualism and what it means to be human.

In the end, the ubiquitous refraction in the film seems to be asking us to think about radical flexibility. At the climax of the story, Lena's interviewer asserts that The Shimmer 'was mutating our environment, it was destroying everything'. To this, Lena responds by applying a different lens to the phenomenon, saying 'It was changing our environment. It was making something new'. In the face of annihilation, then, the metaphor of refraction works with those who bend and breaks those who remain rigid. It also rewards those who can see in new ways. A tertiary definition of the word 'refraction' relates to the mechanisms that focus an eye; it is interesting, then, that confirmation of The Shimmer's presence inside Lena and Kane at the

very end of the film comes in the form of a psychedelic swirling in their irises. Survival is predicated on literally seeing through new eyes.

One of refraction's primary aesthetic qualities is that it can make things appear closer than they are. In using refraction to remodel space and time, *Annihilation* closes the distance between our present and an environmentally calamitous future and offers up an alternative mode of storytelling that is uniquely suited to bypass some of the most stubborn problems with our current narrative canons.

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The 'Neuro-washing' of *Annihilation*

Sara L. Crosby

Annihilation by Jeff VanderMeer is my favorite book. And it's my favorite book because of one striking innovation: the protagonist's adaptive, posthuman neuroatypicality, which impels her to identify more strongly with ecosystems than with human individuals. It's also the element that Alex Garland's film gets profoundly wrong.

In the novel, 'the biologist' never gives a name. It's not important to her. She barely talks of her parents or even her cancer-stricken husband, who had ventured into and then out of Area X to die. She relates his death as a puzzling fact, but not one that explains her own compulsive pilgrimage into that uncanny new wilderness. The novel (unlike the film) refuses to portray her as emotionally damaged or disabled. Humans—and even her own identity—simply fail to interest her. They are just not that bloody important.

What is important to her is a neglected swimming pool. She remembers it abandoned in the backyard of her parents' rental, slowly filling with rainwater, algae, frogs, turtles, and dragonfly larvae, until it became a 'functioning ecosystem', a 'miniature paradise' that she observed with obsessive fascination and with more than fascination: with love. 'One of the great traumas of my life', she admits, 'was worrying about that pool', after her parents like so many other working people in our age of advancing inequality could no longer afford the rent and she was expelled from her paradise (pp. 45-6). She nonetheless avoids Adam and Eve's self-pity and instead agonises about the ecosystem's suffering: 'Would the new owners see the beauty and importance of leaving it as is, or would they destroy it, create unthinking slaughter in honor of the pool's real function?' (p. 46).

Ecological 'trauma' caused by this hubristic ecosystem 'slaughter' is the heartbreak that marks and motivates her: 'There are certain kinds of deaths that one should not be expected

to relive, certain kinds of connections so deep that when they are broken you feel the snap of the link inside of you' (p. 46). The death of the pool and her mourning for it mime in miniature the melancholia provoked by the human-driven Anthropocene and its 'end of nature', as Bill McKibben (1989) famously put it. Sorrow for that loss drives her forward past the shimmering wall, into an alien ecosystem too strong for us humans, too resilient to be reduced to its human-determined 'real function'. She goes into Area X to find her lost, *nonhuman* love.

This is not how humans, particularly modern humans, with psyches shaped to suit an environmentally-exploitive settler-colonial or capitalist mentality, are 'supposed' to structure our attachments. In 1630, that great coloniser, John Winthrop, prepared his Puritan followers for their brutal conquest of American nature by affirming that 'dissimilitude' leads to 'disaffection', but 'the ground of love is […] resemblance' (p. 42). Such love builds out from ourselves, seeking similarities, loving mirrors or projections of self, and rejecting or destroying and exploiting the different. But the biologist lacks this supposedly healthy psychology. She loves the nonhuman: the unfettered pool 'as is' and its even more unruly and nonhuman macrocosm, Area X. This difference in her emotional structures leads her to engage with Area X from a standpoint beyond the solipsistic mentality that enabled our current ecological crisis. And—trilogy spoiler alert—it allows her to adapt and become the 'final girl' (or gelatinous blob) of a post-human world.

The film, unfortunately, fails to understand the protagonist's adaptive neurodiversity and actually reintroduces a conventional love plot that washes out her neuroatypicality altogether, reducing 'Lena' (Natalie Portman) to just another of Hollywood's romantic heroines, whose self depends on and derives from a man. The film skips her true love interest—the pool—and entangles her with men: an adulterous colleague, a mysteriously distant husband. Although Portman is ostensibly the star, the movie makes everything she does about and for her character's husband. The film flips the book's characterisation, making him the unattainable, outer-directed one, and her the clinging, needy supplement who spends the first half of the movie crying over his portrait and the second half desperately searching for a cure for him. In fact, that is why she ventures into Area X. As she tells the psychologist, now named Dr. Ventress, 'I owe him. So I went in'. Lena's subsequent flashback—nakedly riding her illicit, African-American lover—suggests that she owes her husband because of this sexual (and racial?) betrayal. But after sacrificing herself to Area X for him, she returns cleansed and changed like he was and so able to embrace him in their renewed 'resemblance'. That's how

the film ends – with the Edenic pair changed a bit, maybe enhanced by a drabble of alien or mutant DNA like the X-Men, but essentially restored to healthy human form and ready for a new kind of human dominion. New boss, same as the old boss. This plot tells us once again that the world revolves around the human, the male human in particular, the very inverse of the book's critique of the exploitive and egotistical psychology that murdered the pool and our planet.

The film has been criticised for whitewashing the protagonist, but I think its erasure of her neurodiversity, its 'neuro-washing', is also deeply problematic. It fails to represent her neuroatypicality, the ecological consciousness, the posthuman identity, that was the book's most insightful look at and beyond our current ecocidal Anthropocene. Without that, the film is only another shiny Hollywood melodrama reinstating old, broken Edenic dominion narratives and maladaptive psychologies. No promise of a different relationship to ourselves and our world, it's just one more stop on the way to annihilation.

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THE RESPONSES

Andrew Hageman

It's an intellectual pleasure to be part of this *Annihilation* response roundtable. Each response seems to explore contradictions that arise or become more visible through fiction (such as *Annihilation*) as the act of actively and critically engaging such films parallels and assists the work of learning how to live and plan for the future in the current phase of extreme transition precipitated by climate change and mass extinction. Crosby's response highlights several of the deepest contradictions between the novel and Garland's film adaptation. Without the defunct swimming pool or life-changing tide pools of the novel, the film creates a protagonist who is very differently ecologically attuned than her literary counterpart. Crosby's piece prompts sustained contemplation of the particular prospects and pitfalls that inhabit different media forms and marketplaces: Adaptations are not required to replicate their literary progenitors, but when they do swerve, it's productive to ask questions driven by the doubled text dynamics. Davies Mancus' piece makes critical note of how The Shimmer offers a 'cataclysmic snow globe' within which radical ecological changes are happening rather than a global-level vision of climate catastrophe. Davies Mancus' connects this isolated zone with her argument that by swerving wide of a globe-totalising perspective, *Annihilation* retains sufficient space to maintain hope so long as new strategies for coexistence can be adopted. While reading this piece, I was reminded of how Dr. Yamane in the original Japanese film *Gojira* (1954) is immediately frustrated by everyone around him desiring to kill the kaiju while he alone sees its disruptive arrival as an unprecedented opportunity to learn how to survive extreme radiation. Davies Mancus identifies a similar contradiction in how Lena, like Dr. Yamane, confronts the horror as an awful yet powerful opportunity to re-think resilience in a radically altered world. Platt's piece identifies the contradiction of recognising that, just as a conventional confidence in militarism blended with scientism is no longer viable, one response to this realisation can be to retreat to a desire for precisely the protection that that same blend previously promised. One of the great insights from Platt's piece is its identification of the single, simplified representation the film assigns to militarism-scientism. Finally, Sperling poses some very insightful and provocative questions that get at crucial intersections and potential contradictions of gender and trauma in the film (as well as the novel). On the one hand, as Sperling points out, Garland's emphasis of traumatic pasts potentially undermines and/or disempowers the women entering The Shimmer as they may appear capable of this risk only because they are 'damaged goods'. Yet, Sperling adroitly suggests there may be useful parallels to draw between their individual traumas and the ecological trauma at the center of *Annihilation*'s narrative. Sperling's piece prompts me to think together *Annihilation* and Jeff Nichols' 2011 film *Take Shelter*. The latter is among the films that E. Ann Kaplan analyses in

Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction. Together, this pair of films provide a contrast between paternal/patriarchal masculinity confronting the psychic pre-traumatic stress of global warming in *Take Shelter* and the range of women working through post-traumatic stress in *Annihilation*. As trauma and its gendering is so integral to the Gothic, close attention to gender dynamics in Garland's and other ecocinema texts has a key role to play in theorising Gothic Nature.

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Alison Sperling

Together, these responses to *Annihilation* bring out related questions about narrative, climate change, ecological trauma and its temporalities, and the ways in which institutions in place can or cannot address questions of planetary destruction and catastrophe. Daniel Platt's reading convincingly argues that the film resists the celebration of either science, militarism, or their union in its approach to The Shimmer. As Platt explains, Lena is framed as one who can both 'learn' and 'fight', which is, according to Ventress, the ideal qualifications needed to save her husband, (though whether that's really what Ventress is concerned about is debatable). But it's not always clear that the best response to The Shimmer and the drastic changes it forces is either to understand it or to fight it – both seem futile. Platt's review thus asks the implicit question: what structures are in place, if any, to respond to crisis (in the Anthropocene), and, if neither understanding nor fighting the emergent forms of crisis are sufficient, what other responses and forms of engagements are possible?

Shannon Davies Marcus reads the refraction of The Shimmer in the film to suggest that knowledge about the climate is itself refracted, and reflects on how climate-storytelling might play with temporal and spatial dimensions in order alter the viewer's understanding of herself in relation to the biosphere. I really like thinking about the kind of 'radical flexibility' (particular with eco-temporalities, or the slowness of climate change) that can be imagined inside what Davies Marcus calls the 'cataclysmic snow globe' of The Shimmer. The response really gets at not only the problem of time in storytelling about the climate but also the problem of scale, the relationship between local the global. Andy Hageman's response, especially his really smart focus on the home in the film and its disruption of the inside/outside dynamic that is central to the Weird, also points to problems of scale, but shows how the film both stages intimate encounters with perhaps the most local locale, the home, as itself already infiltrated by the outside, as porous and permeable, eerie and unsafe.

I was especially struck by Sara Crosby's response, particularly because of its resonances with my own – the focus on ecological trauma that serves as a driving force for the biologist's 'love for the nonhuman' in the novel, which, according to Crosby, the film simply gets wrong. I too absolutely loved the descriptions of the pool in the novel, of the biologist's obsession with it, of the way it stood in for other kinds of perhaps more familiar human attachments. So, although the film does retain some focus on trauma of at least some of the women on the twelfth expedition, the trauma is different from that of the novel, and may, as Crosby suggests, have different implications.

Daniel Platt

I walked into Alex Garland's *Annihilation* with a giant bucket of popcorn and a thin shield of skepticism. Like the other reviewers, I had first read and enjoyed Jeff VanderMeer's novel, and I felt protective of the experience I had as a reader. By the end of Crosby, Stills, and Nash's 'Helplessly Hoping'—which plays over a montage of Natalie Portman's Lena tearfully remembering her missing husband—I had come to accept that this film would diverge meaningfully, and at times maddeningly, from the spirit of the book. The ideas and images that this surprising and tone-setting early scene introduces—the permeable borders of house and

home that Hageman explores, the theme of trauma as 'loss of self' that Sperling discusses, the familiar patterns of Hollywood melodrama that Crosby critiques—have haunted me like few other scenes in recent cinema. Like Crosby, I was disappointed by the centrality of the love story and by the absence of strange wonder and love that the novel's 'ghost bird' possesses for the nonhuman world. But I also found my own wonder at the oddly beautiful and eerily familiar creatures on screen, like the 'pale riotous lichens' that Hageman observes. And I was inspired by the film's vision of radical flexibility and adaptive alternatives to individualism, which Mancus' review points to. While the world of Garland's *Annihilation* might only differ cosmetically and not structurally from our own—a set of blossoming designer antlers on top of a suburbanised deer—I'm grateful that it helped me to imagine for a moment that another world *is* possible, and that it might be contained within the one we inhabit.

Shannon Davies Mancus

Reading the stimulating pieces of the other contributors led me to realise how deeply anti-melodramatic *Annihilation* is. The narrative mode of melodrama has been articulated by Linda Williams in *Playing the Race Card* as the most popular mode of storytelling in American life. Melodrama is defined by several specific narrative characteristics, including the need for an in-the-nick-the-time rescue and a clear separation between heroes and victims and the villains who menace them. In such stories, villains are evil forces with no redeeming qualities and heroes earn the virtue necessary to defeat villainy by performing suffering. Melodramatic rhetoric is often deployed to address moments of communal crisis. Elisabeth Anker, for example, in *Orgies of Feeling*, has explored how the rhetoric that justified the Iraq War was intensely melodramatic. I have written elsewhere about how this rhetoric also predominately structures narratives about climate change. These two international crises are linked; as Platt observes, anxieties about the environment and national security are intertwined.

Nearly every author in this roundtable points to ways in which *Annihilation* is anti-melodramatic. Hageman identifies that *Annihilation* does not allow for a simple displacement of responsibility for environmental problems onto an external 'villain'. Instead, it is our doppelgangers and the sacrifice zones we create to maintain 'the good life' that come back to confront us. Sperling observes that suffering does not transform characters into victorious

heroes; in fact, fighting the 'weird' forces in The Shimmer most often backfires, until Lena figures out that fighting malignancy really means fighting aspects of yourself rather than external forces. As unusual as it is to see these tropes in a Hollywood film, Crosby points out that compromises were made in translating the novel to the screen by highlighting the ways in which the book is even more radically anti-melodramatic than the film: Instead of celebrating individualism, it embraces nameless actors, and the only suffering that is foregrounded and recognised is directly tied to environmental loss. In these ways the narrative breaks from traditional filmic rhetoric and denies the audience an easy scapegoat for environmental peril.

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Sara L. Crosby

One urgent concern binds together these reviews, as well as most ecocriticism these days: To quote Professor Davies Mancus, how can we 'tell new kinds of stories about ecological collapse' that impel audiences to rethink 'their relationship to the biosphere'? Old ecophobic ways of thinking that relationship have led us to the edge of global ecosystem collapse and into an extinction crisis that will include humans, unless we can change our minds and practices quickly and dramatically. My colleagues are hopeful that Alex Garland's *Annihilation* contributes to this critical change in thinking, what Professor Hageman terms an 'ecological cultural revolution', and, to some extent, I agree. As Professor Platt points out, the film 'refuses a neat resolution' with one of our most pernicious environmental practices, military imperialism, while, as Professors Davies Mancus and Sperling observe, its depiction of the permeability and 'radical flexibility' of human identity 'open one up' to posthuman ways of conceiving the connections between human and environment.

Very true, yet, I can't help worrying about the *story*, which is to say I worry about love. Many of the innovative epistemological and aesthetic gestures that my colleagues identify curl around a central love story, which, despite the holes Professor Hageman observes it poking in the solidity of the heteronormative household, has not changed fundamentally from the narrative John Winthrop told. As Winthrop knew, constructing ecological relationships goes hand in hand with telling love stories, and, whereas the novel recounts a truly new story of biophilic love, Garland's film defaults to the same old ecophobic romance plot. Replacing the lost and beloved pool with the lost and beloved Kane re-centers the narrative on the human, and then reuniting The Shimmer-improved couple, rather than killing one and turning the other into a massive blob monster, resolves that love story once again in their attachment to each other rather than to the overtly nonhuman environment. Even if the new Adam and Eve survive because they are now super-powered by alien DNA in some evolutionary fantasy, they are still just human 2.0, and the old exclusionary ecophobic structures of feeling that facilitated dominion over nature remain comfortably in place.

Okay, maybe I'm being too harsh. Maybe that old dominion love story has become so embedded in our cultural DNA that we need to work with it, rather than rejecting it wholesale. Just recently, I had a frank conversation with a colleague who admitted that he preferred the movie over the book because he found the novel 'cold'. After I harrumphed, he shrugged and confessed that maybe he was just old-fashioned in his need for narratives of human connection. I can understand that, but I just can't bring myself to see VanderMeer's narrative as lacking connective warmth or romance. It's just a new kind of romance, a love story that attaches us to the nonhuman and that values—loves—the nonhuman for its own sake. That kind of love, the kind of the love the biologist had for the pool, creates rather than stymies an ecological consciousness. It is truly revolutionary, and I wish the film had given that love a chance.

BIOGRAPHIES

Sara L. Crosby hails from an island off the coast of Louisiana, and she is currently an associate professor of English at the Ohio State University at Marion where she teaches classes on everything from early American literature to pop culture to environmental writing. She is a former NEH fellow and a 2018 Ratner Distinguished Teaching Award recipient. She

has authored a number of articles, including 'Beyond Ecophilia: Edgar Allan Poe and the American Tradition of Ecohorror' (*ISLE*) and two books, *Poisonous Muse: The Female Poisoner and the Framing of Popular Authorship in Jacksonian America* (University of Iowa Press, 2016) and *Women in Medicine in Nineteenth-Century American Literature: From Poisoners to Doctors, Harriet Beecher Stowe to Theda Bara* (Palgrave, 2018). Her current book project investigates why the U. S. is allowing South Louisiana to wash away—specifically, how the interplay between extractive interests (like the petroleum industry) and American popular culture's representation of South Louisiana as a place of ecohorror has and continues to enable this unnatural disaster.

Andrew Hageman is Associate Professor of English at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. He researches intersections of technoculture and ecology in film and literature, and his publications range from ecology and food in David Lynch's tv and cinema and the roles of infrastructure in literary works by China Miéville and Tom McCarthy to a recent exploration of how speculative fiction writers are imagining blockchain driven futures. Related to his work in this issue, Andrew co-edited the 2016 issue of *Paradoxa* with the theme 'Global Weirding'.

Shannon Davies Mancus is an Associate Teaching Professor at the Colorado School of Mines and the director of the Nature and Human Values program, which introduces future engineers to general and environmental ethics through composition. Her work can be found in publications such as *Performing Ethos*, *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction*, and the *Bloomsbury Handbook of Twenty-first Century Feminist Theory*. Her manuscript project focuses on the ways in which genre functions as a performative framework for environmentalist narratives. She is one of the current heads of the ecomedia working group for the Association of the Study of Literature and the Environment, as well as the Digital Humanities Liaison for the Environment and Culture Caucus of the American Studies Association. Her work focuses on the political performativity of environmentalist media in visual and popular culture.

Daniel Platt is an Assistant Professor of English at Graceland University in Lamoni, Iowa, where he teaches U.S. Literature, Composition, and Film Studies. He received his PhD in English from the University of Oregon in 2015. His current projects include research on Midwestern environmentalism and Richard Powers' *The Overstory*, working with ASLE to develop open educational resources for the Environmental Humanities, and the launch of a new interdisciplinary undergraduate program in Sustainability Studies at Graceland.

Alison Sperling received her PhD in Literature and Cultural Theory from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2017 and is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICI) Berlin. Her book manuscript, *Weird Modernisms*, examines the temporality of weird embodiment in Modernist literary texts through queer and feminist science studies and theories of the nonhuman. Her publications include essays and reviews in the journals *Rhizomes, Girlhood Studies, Paradoxa, Kunstlicht, PhiloSOPHIA: A Society for Continental Feminism, Science Fiction Film and Television,* and the *Los Angeles Review of Books.* She has chapters in *Lovecraft Annual* and in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of 21st Century Feminist Theory*, with chapters forthcoming on Star Trek ecologies and on plants in speculative fiction. Her research interests include The Weird, queer and feminist theory, 20th and 21st Century American Literature, nuclear culture, contemporary science fiction, and the Anthropocene.