

None of This is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer

Benjamin J. Robertson

Overview

None of This is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer contributes to literary and cultural studies in three ways and speaks to several audiences. First and foremost, and at the level of greatest detail, it will be the first scholarly examination of Jeff VanderMeer (an increasingly important and popular, yet understudied writer), namely in terms of his development of “fantastic materialism” beginning in his early fiction in the 1990s and early 2000s, continuing in the Ambergris novels (2002 - 2009), and culminating in the *Southern Reach* trilogy (2014). As such, the book will be of interest to students and critics of VanderMeer, as well as to readers of the middle-brow venues that have helped to put him on the mainstream cultural map. Second, and at a somewhat more abstract level, this book extends and broadens, by way of this examination of VanderMeer’s fantastic materialism, ongoing critical discussions of recent trends in genre fiction and the theoretical questions that surround it, namely those having to do with how particular forms react to and frame specific historical moments. Thus the book will address scholars of genre fiction as well as other scholars who occasionally write about genre fiction without adequate background in its history, conventions, or critical context. Finally, and most broadly, it connects both VanderMeer and the issue of genre to a broader historical context. In an era concerned with the Anthropocene and characterized by pessimistic fictions and critical theories, new generic forms have become prominent. They offer a potential means of complementing or extending theoretical and scientific discussions of the Anthropocene and a means by which to overcome the pessimism that often pervades these discussions. This aspect of the book will be of interest to scholars of post-1945 literature and culture who have worked in recent years to connect literary/artistic form (including realism, meta-fiction, and generic structure) to contemporary political, cultural, social, and ecological issues, including the Anthropocene and climate change.

VanderMeer has become an important figure in contemporary fiction, and a crucial voice in discussions of how humanity interacts with natural and cultural environments, by blending science fiction, fantasy, horror, and the weird without reducing himself to any of these categories. He established himself in mainstream literary circles in 2014 with the publication of his *Southern Reach* trilogy by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, after first publishing in small, independent venues, and earning acclaim from readers of genre fiction. The merits of the trilogy were extolled in such middle-brow venues as *The Los Angeles Review of Books* and *The New Yorker* (the latter of which calls VanderMeer “the weird Thoreau”). Popular venues also praised the trilogy. *Entertainment Weekly* named it one of the ten best books of the year, attesting to VanderMeer’s sudden visibility as a writer as well as to the newfound commercial viability of genre writing that defies conventional designations. Alex Garland (director of *Ex Machina*, writer and producer of *28 Days Later*) is directing the film adaptation of the trilogy’s first book, *Annihilation*, starring Natalie Portman and Oscar Isaac. The film will be released in 2017. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux acquired the follow-up to the *Southern Reach* trilogy (*Borne*, to be published in 2017) for a six-figure deal. Both the film and the new novel suggest that VanderMeer will continue to be a major writer and a driving force for the genres in which he works for the foreseeable future.

Little scholarship on VanderMeer has appeared to date, despite his success, and despite considerable popular and critical attention paid to horror and weird fiction in recent years. For example, in 2015 Penguin re-issued Thomas Ligotti’s first two volumes of fiction with an introduction by VanderMeer. This volume followed from *True Detective* creator Nic Pizzolatto’s claim that his show was influenced by Ligotti. Similarly, in the last decade, VanderMeer (with his wife Ann VanderMeer) has published

None of This is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer

Benjamin J. Robertson

major surveys of weird and New Weird fiction. Scholarly journals such as *Genre* and *Paradoxa* will publish special issues on weird fiction in 2016 and there are cottage industries devoted to theorizing horror (via Zero Books and others) and New Weird writer China Miéville. *None of This is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer* fills a gap in the critical discussion of horror and the weird as it focuses on how VanderMeer's fictions, as well as the genres he works within and deforms, interact with the current historical moment. On one hand, these fictions and genres react to a world that, in contrast to the promises of modern science, has become increasingly inhospitable to human knowledge—whether scientific or humanistic. On the other hand, it offers glimpses of new frameworks for thinking about that world. These frameworks exist outside of norms familiar to the reader and are therefore neither beholden to those norms nor to the pessimism to which they are often joined. These frameworks arise from the native logics of VanderMeer's fictional worlds, logics alien to sensibilities grounded in the reader's world. VanderMeer's stories, novellas, and novels stand in contrast to the cognitive/rationalist science fiction of the past, to the critical discussions of genre that continue to celebrate such science fiction by dismissing texts that do not clearly connect to the reader's world or exhibit a logic reducible to it, and to the current pessimistic trend in theory and criticism surrounding the Anthropocene and such discourses as Object Oriented Ontology.

I frame the book in terms of the crisis of scientific and humanistic knowledge revealed by the "Anthropocene," the proposed name for the current geological epoch characterized by humanity's impact on its environment. As recent theoretical work by Donna Haraway, Timothy Morton, Jussi Parrika, Peter Van Wyck, Heather Davis, Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, among others, shows, the Anthropocene demands that humanity rethink its relationship to what we can variously call nature, the environment, or ecology. At the same time, critics such as Stephanie LeMenager and Kate Marshall have sought to identify adequate literary forms for representing this evolving relationship or, in the case of Dana Phillips, have claimed that the Anthropocene always escapes representation (in whatever form). Despite their differences, these thinkers make clear that scientific knowledge does not fully grasp the Anthropocene's complexities, nor does any extant humanistic practice adequately narrate them. As such, humanity needs new modes of thought, new forms, new genres, especially ones capable of being more than pessimistic treatises on the failures of humanity. By paying close attention to the specific sort of estrangement VanderMeer produces for his readers—by way of what I call fantastic materialism—as well as to the generic, critical, and cultural contexts in which he writes, I explain how VanderMeer offers a glimpse of what new modes of thought might look like and how they suggest escape routes from our current pessimism.

"Fantastic materialism" assumes altogether different realities out of which manifest altogether different subjectivities and modes of thought. The term "fantastic" highlights how this materialism is based in something historical materialism (mainly of a Marxist sort) deems impossible. Fantasy, in Tolkien's argument, ideally instills in the reader belief in a secondary world, the rules of which are quite different than the primary world in which the reader reads. However, this belief renders any thought which would challenge belief, especially critical thought, impossible. Starting in his earliest fiction and reaching a culmination in the *Southern Reach* trilogy, VanderMeer borrows from generic fantasy in order to create secondary worlds divorced from the primary world of the reader. However, even as he solicits the reader's belief in these worlds, he calls them into question, thus both asserting their materiality but also rendering impossible any total understanding of them. Moreover, and here is the

None of This is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer **Benjamin J. Robertson**

key point, VanderMeer questions these worlds not from the *outside*, not from the point of view of someone located in the primary world. Such questioning would render them other in opposition to established norms—as merely *fantastic*. Rather, he questions his secondary worlds from *within*, from points of view manifested in and by the worlds themselves, thus establishing for each a particular and fantastic *materiality*. That is, the points of view from which these worlds are presented and questioned are grounded in the worlds themselves, according to the particular modes of knowledge these worlds manifest by way of their specificities. Such ways of thinking must always be alien to a reader conditioned by a very different materiality, the one in which she reads—thus the title of the book, *None of This is Normal*, taken from a passage in 2009’s *Finch*. To be clear: VanderMeer’s worlds cannot be understood according to norms operative for a reader situated in the primary world because these worlds’ alien materialities create different norms. At the same time, these alien norms are neither complete, coherent, nor singular, but are always partial, contradictory, and multiple.

I argue that the estrangements fantastic materialism creates and maintains—not only estranging worlds and environments, but also understandings of that environment which are themselves estranged and estranging—are appropriate for, necessary for, an historical moment in which historical thought fails. Such thought, often involved with conventional realism and the scientific empiricism related to it, is the legacy of modernity. It might be understood not simply as a failed attempt to make sense of the Anthropocene. Rather, insofar as it derives from and feeds into certain forms of anthropocentrism, it actually serves to obscure the Anthropocene as it has developed and thus plays a role in our incomprehension of it in the first place. VanderMeer’s fiction, of course, remains the product of a human mind and human history, and thus remains burdened by many of the shortcomings thereof. However, rather than affording a pessimism that remains humanist by virtue of being unable to see its way past human modes of thought, it seeks to describe what inhuman worlds might look like, as well as the different subjectivities, histories, and epistemologies these worlds might manifest.

Little scholarship on VanderMeer has been published to date (although there is at least one essay forthcoming later this year in a special issue of *Paradoxa* on “Global Weirding”). As such, no books directly compare with the one proposed here. Nonetheless, a book on VanderMeer would not only be timely (given his current popularity), but it would also greatly contribute to a field that has already received considerable attention in terms of general theorizing and with regard to two specific writers. Eugene Thacker’s *Horror of Philosophy* trilogy (Zero Books 2011 – 14) does an excellent job establishing horror and the weird as contemporary cultural concerns and informs my work here. However, Thacker spends little time addressing specific writers or texts, even if he sets the stage for such considerations. He also contributes to the pessimism VanderMeer helps us understand and overcome. Other critical texts do address specific writers of weird fiction, but mainly only two: H.P. Lovecraft and China Miéville. Graham Harman’s *H.P. Lovecraft: Weird Realism* (Zero Books 2012) offers an engagement with Lovecraft that says a great deal more about Harman’s interest in Object Oriented Ontology than it does about the weird as a genre or its resurgence in the current cultural moment. *The Age of Lovecraft* (Carl H. Sederholm and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, eds.; U of Minnesota P 2016) and *New Critical Essays on H.P. Lovecraft* (D. Simon, ed.; Palgrave 2013) have something to say about genre beyond their specific object of inquiry and therefore only demonstrate the need for further work in the field, especially with regard to writers other than Lovecraft and topics beyond the Cthulhu mythos. Along similar lines, *China Miéville: Critical Essays* (Caroline Edwards

None of This is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer
Benjamin J. Robertson

and Tony Venezia, eds.; Gylphi 2015) offers excellent readings of weird fiction from multiple perspectives and in manifold contexts, but, again, only with regard to a single writer. *Art and Idea in the Novels of China Miéville* (Carl Freedman; Gylphi 2015), while excellent in its own right, remains tied to a cognitive/rationalist approach to genre that ignores the weird altogether, along with horror and fantasy. It reduces Miéville's fiction by way of a Marxist understanding of science fiction which remains grounded in outmoded understandings of historical materialism. Weird fiction generally, and VanderMeer specifically, seek to overcome such modernist logic.

None of This is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer **Benjamin J. Robertson**

Chapter Summaries

Introduction: Jeff VanderMeer: Fantastic Realism, Genre, and the Anthropocene (~12,000 words)

This introduction accomplishes three things, reflecting the book's contributions to literary and cultural studies. First, it introduces VanderMeer by way of a brief summary of his career as an editor, publisher, and writer, as well as his working relationship with his wife, Ann VanderMeer, herself an influential publisher and editor of genre fiction. Here I note VanderMeer's newfound visibility and describe the ongoing projects I expect to enhance this visibility in the future. Second, the introduction briefly maps the current state of genre fiction. Here I note that science fiction seems increasingly unable to imagine a future that is new, even if critics continue to engage with it in these terms. Both recent "presentist" fiction (by William Gibson, Richard Morgan, and Simon Ings) and a return to space opera that tends to either be defeatist or nostalgic (by Kim Stanley Robinson, Neal Stephenson, and James S.A. Corey) attest to this fact. At the same time, the new weird and other "interstitial" genres (as represented by VanderMeer, Miéville, Steph Swainston, and K.J. Bishop) and new forms of fantasy (by Nnedi Okorafor and N.K. Jemison), have risen to prominence. These new forms react to and help us grasp our contemporary moment. They only do so, however, when readers and critics abandon the anthropocentric, modernist frameworks through which they are received and understood, whether historicist or pessimistic. Carl Freedman's Marxist reading of science fiction generally, and of Miéville specifically, and anti-humanist speculative philosophies serve as my foils here. The context in which these new genres appear is the focus of the third and final part of the introduction, where I briefly summarize ongoing debates about the Anthropocene. My point is not to offer a comprehensive account of this concept, but to make clear the way in which discussions of it suggest that the frameworks that helped produce it will not in the end explain it or solve it. The Anthropocene reveals itself like a monster in a horror story—as something that was *there the whole time* but remained invisible because we have lacked the means to see it. VanderMeer, by way of his fantastic realism, offers new forms through which we might think about the relationship between humanity and its environment. It therefore suggests means by which we might overcome this problem. This discussion anticipates my conclusion, which more comprehensively connects VanderMeer and new forms of genre fiction to the crisis of human knowledge the Anthropocene inaugurates and argues against both "science fictional" and pessimistic accounts of this crisis.

Chapter 1: Underground Presses, Underground Worlds: The Early Fiction (~12,000 words)

This chapter describes VanderMeer's early fiction as doubly characterized by an engagement with the "underground" in order to describe how and why he was able to develop his fantastic materialism. On one hand, this early work tended to be published in independent venues, the genre fiction equivalent of the small presses of the poetry world. Little presses have made possible alternative voices within contemporary poetry. Likewise, the "underground" presses in which VanderMeer published both his own work and, as editor, the work of others (including the 1997 Philip K. Dick Award winner, Stepan Chapman's *The Troika*), allowed for the development of generic forms at odds with those touted by commercial presses. On the other hand, VanderMeer's fiction throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s often describes and traverses underground environments, subterranean spaces which become exponentially stranger and more hostile to human life the further into them we venture. Such a space is especially prominent in VanderMeer's first novel, *Veniss Underground* (2003), and the several short

None of This is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer Benjamin J. Robertson

stories set within the same world, including “Balzac’s War” (1997) and “A Heart for Lucretia” (1993). Each of these stories, and others, tells a tale of love and heartbreak involving a quest, successful or otherwise, to restore a humanity victimized by inhuman technologies, often by way of these same inhuman means. Characters, such as *Veniss Underground*’s Shadrach, display a strange stoicism in the face of the horrors they witness and carry out, horrors involving grotesqueries of hybrid creatures and invasive biotechnologies. This affect, endemic to a world distinct from that of the reader, is part and parcel of VanderMeer’s fantastic materialism. However, the estrangements made possible by this affect are muted in the earliest fiction because the novels and stories through which this iteration of fantastic materialism develops tend to be fairly straightforward with regard to structure and point of view. They give us a far more coherent world than later fictions produce. Overall, this chapter begins to explore VanderMeer’s initial development of fantastic materialism by way of alien, if somewhat simple, worlds—a development made possible by the relative freedom his publication venues afforded.

Chapter 2: Experiments in Fiction: The Contested City of Ambergris (~15,000 words)

Chapter two investigates the development of fantastic materialism by way of the second phase of VanderMeer’s career, here defined by the loose trilogy set in the city of Ambergris: *City of Saints and Madmen* (2002 – 04), *Shriek: An Afterword* (2006), and *Finch* (2009). These novels are connected to VanderMeer’s earlier fiction by way of their publication history, which takes advantage of small presses and print-on-demand technologies, as well as their portrayal of a mysterious, if rarely seen, subterranean realm (home of the so-called mushroom dwellers). However, VanderMeer’s experiments with design, materialist revision, and narrative structure in these novels render Ambergris far less coherent than the settings found in the fiction of the 1990s. The mushroom dwellers and their fungal technologies, and the larger world in which they live—which mixes the domestic with the miraculous, the banal with the horrific—are worthy replacements for the biotechnological monstrosities and hellish landscapes of the earlier work. However, the book forms through which he mediates all of this, the characters through which he describes it, and the structures through which VanderMeer animates it, do not allow readers the relative comforts the earlier fiction offered by way of its stability. This chapter, then, focuses on the multiple channels through which VanderMeer presents information about Ambergris, beginning with the fragments of writing—narrative, expository, and unclassifiable—that make up *City of Saints and Madmen* as well as the experimental, and material, design of the book which collates these fragments for the reader. The second Ambergris novel, *Shriek: An Afterword*, purports to be the biography of a famous, if heterodox, historian of Ambergris (Duncan Shriek) written by his estranged sister. It continues the experimental nature of the series by way of textual interventions more subtle than those of *City*. In a manner reminiscent of Charles Kinbote in Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (which VanderMeer claims as an influence), Shriek interpolates himself into his sister’s manuscript, “correcting the record” even as he obscures it, and, at the same time, hinting at a secret (and nigh impossible, according to the conventional wisdom of the city) history of Ambergris. Finally, *Finch* is a noir detective story and the most recent novel in the series to date. It is notable because its detective novel structure, a structure conventionally deployed to organize chaos as the detective moves from a state of ignorance to one of knowledge, fails to make sense of Ambergris’s history or materiality. Rather, it proliferates the mysteries offered in *City* and *Shriek*. In the Ambergris books, fragmentary writing and experimental design (*City*), materialist revision and interpolation (*Shriek*), and the failure of narrative structure (*Finch*) render an already unimaginable world even more incomprehensible to the

None of This is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer

Benjamin J. Robertson

reader. Nonetheless these devices work to create a definite materialism insofar as they make visible the capacities of those who live in this world to make claims about it from the particular points of view the world grants them. These points of view allow the reader to imagine modes of thought at odds with, if not directly opposed to, those she assumes based on the primary world in which she reads.

Chapter 3: Generic Terroir: The Southern Reach Trilogy (~15,000 words)

This chapter concludes the investigation of fantastic materialism by way of an examination of VanderMeer's most important, and popular, work of fiction to date: the *Southern Reach* trilogy, which tells the story of a seemingly unknowable environment (Area X), produced by an unknowable event, and explored by a mysterious agency (the Southern Reach) and the flawed people who work there. The trilogy contributes to the idea of fantastic materialism by way of "terroir," an important concept in *Authority*, the trilogy's second novel. "Terroir" refers to the specific factors that influence the ways in which plants express their genotype when grown in a given environment—in short, the conditions that ground what takes place or comes to be in a given place. The several environments described in the trilogy—Area X itself, the labyrinthine yet familial bureaucracy of the Southern Reach, the world into which Area X intrudes—each exhibit their own terroirs, which constitute the individuals who traverse them. Likewise, the trilogy's generic form exhibits its own specificities, which allow for its effects. In the trilogy, borders—between human and animal, between one space and another, between knowledge and ignorance, between genres—don't exist. More to the point, borders become in the trilogy the points at and the means by which one thing bleeds or folds into another. These transformations involve both a loss of self/particularity and its retention *simultaneously*. Area X is something radically specific, a set of environmental conditions that induces individuals to achieve a status of being both this and that without being reducible to one or the other—or a simple hybrid of the two. More broadly, the trilogy itself exceeds and transforms the genres with which it interacts, rendering the borders that divide science fiction from fantasy or horror from the weird as alchemical reactions rather than means of distinction. These genres thus interact to overcome certain limits endemic to each: the rationality of science fiction, the atavism of fantasy, the pessimism of horror, the racist and misogynistic legacy of the weird. The *Southern Reach* trilogy's form includes its own specific problems, of course, but its terroir nonetheless is a fecund ground upon which to think new thoughts, specific to this historical moment and no other. In short, if VanderMeer, and genre fiction broadly, offer means by which to think through the problems presented by the Anthropocene, they only do so by radically transforming formal structures and by way of a materialism alien to our assumptions about our world.

Conclusion: Fantastika in a Time of Horror (~7,000 words)

The conclusion to *None of This is Normal* picks up where the introduction leaves off, with a discussion of the Anthropocene and critical and theoretical reactions to it. In the context of VanderMeer's fantastic materialism, which offers a glimpse of new modes of thought, these responses to the Anthropocene begin to appear outdated. The need for new modes of thought becomes pressing in the face of a critical insistence on older modes of thought and the generic forms to which they are bound, such as science fiction. For example, in order to reframe the ongoing discussion of the Anthropocene, Donna Haraway coins the term "Chthulucene," but makes clear that her term ("Chthulu" rather than "Cthulhu") in no way refers to the "racist" monstrosity created by Lovecraft. In the course of her argument, Haraway insists that the world continues to need science fiction in order to tell the stories necessary for the epoch

None of This is Normal: The Fiction of Jeff VanderMeer
Benjamin J. Robertson

her term designates. Similarly, McKenzie Wark champions Haraway (as well as science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson) as a thinker capable of theorizing the Anthropocene. Both Wark and Haraway write from post- or neo-Marxist perspectives, rejecting the classical dialectic and insisting on new modes of thought apposite the historical transformations enacted by late capitalism. And yet each seems to wind up where Carl Freedman does with regard to China Miéville: with science fiction, the model genre of modernity, as the genre which will solve the crisis created by modernity. Haraway's argument against Lovecraft is worthwhile given his appalling politics (which too often manifest in his fiction and are too often ignored by his interlocutors). However, her retreat from the weird—and the other subgenres of fantastika involved with the supernatural and the irrational, namely horror and fantasy—is unproductive. Likewise, pessimistic or cynical accounts of human subjectivity, by way of speculative realism, Object Oriented Ontology, accelerationism, and eliminativism, often imply that the modes of thought that have led to the Anthropocene are the only ones of which humans are capable. As this book shows, in an epoch characterized by weirdness and horror, we need to think weirdly. By way of conclusion then, I make use of the arguments developed in chapters one, two, and three—especially those regarding the nature of fantastic materialism—in order to counter these discourses, as well as their modern underpinnings.