

**IDEOLOGIES OF SOCIAL ISOLATION IN THE NEW WEIRD USING  
ANNIHILATION BY JEFF VANDERMEER**

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**Abstract**

*Within the constraints of theoretical lenses in literary genres, there comes a vast space of possibility when viewing through the appropriate lens in a specific piece. Using the New Weird literary genre as a moving tool for this research, this text offers analysis of a new coming genre through an ecocritical and psychological lens. By looking through specific theories, the research proves that literature can be closely read as a dynamic, powerful tool for interpretation. In this case, the New Weird is looked at for its social isolation cues, disoriental elements, the uncanny and eerie elements, and how global-weirding all work together to create a versatile story emerging in a sub genre that is, while not new in story, new in name.*

**Keywords:** Weird Fiction, New Weird, Annihilation, Theoretical Lens, Social Isolation, Ecocritical, Psychological, Transitional Site, Uncanny, Disorientation, Identity

**Introduction**

With the evolution of literary genres, the emergence of New Weird fiction provides a unique approach to science fiction. Among the application of this subgenre within the boundaries of science fiction, the New Weird provides numerous thematic issues through its individualistic approach to creating an uncanny yet atmospheric and otherworldly association to reality. As this subgenre gives insight and meaning to relevant controversies in a nontraditional way, a gateway novel to understanding the New Weird is *Annihilation* by Jeff VanderMeer. Book one of The Southern Reach Trilogy, the novel portrays Nature and social well-being of humans as they are tested by limitless entities of an eerie environment called Area X. By using *Annihilation* in conversation to understand the New Weird, ideologies of social isolation in both a physical and mental capacity derive through psychological and ecocritical literary lenses. Terminology including disorientation, econarratology, and global-weirding work towards an analytical investigation of social isolation portrayed in this novel in defining it better as a trait to the subgenre. By identifying and creating a web of reasons that factor into these psychological and ecocritical aspects found in the novel, there is a question of whether social isolation genuinely occurs or is just a part of the New Weird's Nature.

The New Weird creates unique boundaries in its setting, as well as in literature, by projecting experiences through character and plot that are unseen in other subgenres, pushing people into desolate situations in these novels. Investigated through an ecocritical and psychological lens, *Annihilation* by Jeff VanderMeer uses the setting of Area X to put members of an expedition in a forced proximity to work together, but from the weirding of the environment in comparison to the reality these characters are used to, naturally, they are set apart. With that in mind, the value of this critical work to the scholarship of the topic serves to distinguish and recognize whether social isolation occurs based on New Weird's genre traits, or if it is truly a psychological condition and mental health challenge occurring in the characters.

***Annihilation* by Jeff VanderMeer**

*Annihilation* by Jeff VanderMeer is a riveting novel which follows an uncanny atmosphere and small groups of volunteers who take expeditions within it. Jonathan Turnbull, Ben Platt, and Adam Searle work towards identifying New Weird and the geography behind it using VanderMeer's considerations in the article "For A New Weird Geography.". They state that there are several spatialities of the New Weird of interest to geographers, of which VanderMeer considers an urban fiction. VanderMeer has taken the logistics behind New Weird and combined traits of an urban fiction story to create an enhanced, uncanny space in his work. The environment, Area X, is based on the author's experiences in different parts of Florida's wildlife, helping to mix realistic observational descriptions of nature with the weirding aspect in which Nature comes to life as a single entity in the novel. Using this subgenre, the author identifies the geographical foundation of the Weird, but analyzing the psychological effects that come with it is in the hands of analytical readers. In this expedition, four women – an anthropologist, surveyor, psychologist, and biologist – take on Area X and the sabotage of humanity that Nature conspires inside. With a goal to observe, analyze, and record Area X with all its unnatural technicalities, the four women's individual skill sets drive them forward together but also sets them apart.

Following the biologist, who narrates the story, the reader takes this journey through a primary yet unreliable perspective. As she states in the novel, "That's how the madness of the world tries to colonize you: from the outside in, forcing you to live in its reality." (VanderMeer, 108). Here the curtain draws for the madness this worldbuilding puts on the characters' psyche; a foot in the door to this critical paper on how aware the biologist is of these effects and where these effects stem from. Between Nature, the women in the twelfth expedition, and the New Weird, all aspects carry secrets in this gateway novel for the subgenre. Complexities and thematic issues that drive the story forward do so through the psychological and ecocritical literary lenses, which help define the display of social isolation and what it means for the characters.

### **Area X as a ‘Transitional’ Site**

In attempt to identify approximately what Area X is and how it involves the New Weird’s aspects, Jonathan Turnbull, Ben Platt, and Adam Searle continue to supplement meaning in the article, stating that “VanderMeer’s Area X could be considered an emblematic weird landscape: a ‘transitional’ site, abandoned by humans due to the presence of a weird entity that permeates everything.” (Turnbull, 1214). Furthermore, this landscape blurs the line between species and individuals, and the environment does not serve as a backdrop to the plot, but rather an incorporation to the stakes. On page forty-six of *Annihilation*, the biologist acknowledges the tower that she and the other women are exploring as not just a solid foundation or place, but a living organism: “...the tower was *breathing*. The tower breathed, and the walls when I went to touch them carried the echo of a heartbeat... and they were not made of stone but living *tissue*... The tower was a living creature of some sort. *We were descending into an organism.*” (VanderMeer, 41). The tower is a small-scale representation of Area X as a whole; how a fixture, manmade or natural, may be confined into one encapsulated living entity. From an ecocritical standpoint, in which the environment is analyzed for its effectiveness in literature, this observation made by the biologist early on in the novel is a first glimpse at not only her critical thinking skills, creating an empathetic standpoint for her as a character, but also the unreliability the New Weird puts on the story as her role as narrator.

### **New Weird Fiction**

The New Weird subgenre has distinguished factors from science fiction, but also offers similarities and enhancements to the genre’s roundtable. Science fiction, according to Turbull, Platt, and Searle, meshes current politics with futuristic imagined factors in order to prove the malleability of social worlds. Science fiction helps to distinguish where literature and culture fits within the societies they take place in. This leads into New Weird, which is established as a progressive literary style in the article, branching from science fiction. Simply put, it can be seen as a complex real-world. “New Weird is a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticized ideas about place found in traditional fantasy, largely by choosing realistic, complex real-world models as the jumping off point for creation of settings that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy... New Weird fictions are acutely aware of the modern world, even if in disguise, but not always overtly political.” (Ersoy, 253). Quoted by VanderMeer in “Crossing the Boundaries of the Unknown with Jeff VanderMeer,” Gözde Ersoy opens the scope of VanderMeer’s outlook of the New Weird. It transcribes an author’s creative perspective into an understandable depiction of how Weird comes from science fiction and paves a new literary perspective towards ‘transitional’ sites in storytelling. This transitional mechanism works towards enhancing and creating new pathways in science fiction, as Weird fiction cannot maintain the restraints of science fiction the way the ordinary cannot withhold itself within projected boundaries. George Newson-Errey presents subversion as a tool in that ‘transitional-site’ in creating a new scope towards ecological awareness through a clearly established

subgenre. By implying that this subgenre attempts to ‘escape from the prison-house of the known’ using creatures and scenarios that subvert ordinary language and possibilities, this connection to Ersoy’s definition on the ‘transitional’ site and subversion works to build a foundation on the New Weird through a critical eye of psychology and ecocriticism.

### **Weird Fiction in Historical Context**

Weird fiction can be identified as an attempt to revive old weird tales from historical and classic literature. From an interview with James Machin, author of *Weird Fiction in Britain 1880-1939*, conducted by Ransom Center Magazine at the University of Texas, the New Weird can be seen as a mode rather than a genre. As he identifies this through historic literature research and states that New Weird is an aspect of fiction that uses fantasy, horror, and supernatural fiction, Machin states that “weird fiction was an identifiable tradition, and one that has had an enduring impact on genre fiction and wider culture.” (Neuharth). This begs the question of which historic landmarks of literature known today as dark, gothic, or horror fiction can be identified as Weird, and in turn, do readers consider the psychological foundation and effects these classic authors were trying to get across.

As science fiction combines current politics with curated futuristic factors to create imagined worlds, New Weird fiction does so with extended social and cultural effects on characters. This can be seen in characters’ of VanderMeer’s work as a gradual progression in Area X. So, although prolific writers in historical dark fiction were aware of the Weird, their focused genre has its own realm of psychological interpretation, making the ecocritical lens in this critical research essential for elucidating New Weird’s unique style. Machin displayed interest in authors such as Edgar Allen Poe and H.P. Lovecraft, who of the two provided research on Lovecraft’s statement towards New Weird fiction, proving the root of this subgenre dates back centuries. According to Neuharth, Lovecraft believed it was a formula of an atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of unknown forces. In retrospect to the New Weird, alongside its apparent factors in *Annihilation* through psychological and ecocritical lenses, there is an umbrella of examples in all of these prolific writers’ texts under the horror, gothic, and supernatural fiction realms that allow room for them to be considered New Weird. However, through Jeff VanderMeer’s work, which was originally published in 2014, the ecocritical lens – guiding the term ‘global-weirding’ – and the psychological lens – associated here with use of the ‘uncanny’ – dive into weird fiction and circulate around ideologies of social isolation occurring within the webs of the subgenre.

### **Global-Weirding**

‘Global-weirding’ is a term coined by Turnbull, Platt, and Searle in “For a New Weird Geography” where it is considered a contemporary ecological condition. This term is used to explain “anthropogenically changed worlds and the experience of dwelling within them.” (Turnbull, 1207). The “dwelling” in terms of New Weird fiction and *Annihilation*, being the occurrence of social isolation through this global-weirding and uncanniness of Area X. The

stylistic approach VanderMeer uses in his novel aids this analytical mindset a reader must have to understand psychological effects through an ecocritical cause. Weirdering, according to “For a New Weird Geography,” has a way of altering human attention and positioning of themselves in ecological environments. In saying so, ‘global-weirdering’ goes hand-in-hand with the inspiration in which New Weird draws from nonhuman worlds and authors of New Weird dabble in ‘weird biology,’ which can be seen heavily in Jeff VanderMeer’s gift.

In addition to the tower becoming a living organism on page forty-one of the novel, humanistic features given to a dolphin on page ninety-seven condone the ‘weird biology’ standpoint. The biologist sees dolphins, and in an instant one stands out to her and gives her a familiar look with its eye that looked “painfully human, almost familiar.” (VanderMeer, 41). The ‘almost’ aspect of this provides reason to believe these humans were put in an altered world, otherwise known as a nonhuman world, which capacitates uncanny features and leads to inevitable psychological problems, such as social isolation. The global weirdering that VanderMeer has created in this novel leads to psychological routes each expedition member takes. This implicates the research on defining social isolation through only one character’s viewpoint, but also strengthens the analysis using her skill sets as a biologist for the ecocritical lens, her history of social isolation in reality, and reaction to Area X through the psychological lens.

### **The Uncanny**

The ‘uncanny’ serves as an experience that is strange and familiar in tandem. It causes a surge of disorientation, as will be discussed in further analysis, and it adds to the psychological condition of the Weird when looking at *Annihilation* through the ecocritical lens. In the book *The Uncanny* by Nicholas Royle, published by Manchester University Press, ‘uncanny’ work serves as a source of suspense that leads those within and outside a story uncertain. Further, Royle establishes this term in association with thresholds and borders, as Area X can be considered a separate form in spatiality from reality. This altered environment manipulates and transduces the characters with its uncanny experience, leading towards mental disorientation. But there is an establishment to be made with this term, Royle comments that “the uncanny is not simply an experience of strangeness or alienation. More specifically, it is a peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar.” (Royle, 1). In saying so, the hypnotic, trance effect that this author compares to one experiencing the uncanny correlates to the women in Area X, as well as all of the other expeditions whom of which pass away shortly after or are left with long term chronic illnesses. In all of this, a circulation of social isolation can be identified as a factor of where these effects stem from.

### **Question in Conversation**

After understanding the New Weird and its traits of the ‘uncanny’ and ‘global-weirdering’ in *Annihilation*, it serves the question: Do characters in the New Weird understand this social isolation occurring to them to the same degree that we readers are able to perceive it as a sign of

mental disarray, or is social isolation a factor interwoven into New Weird that characters in stories cannot perceive?

### **Social Isolation in Combat to *Annihilation* and New Weird**

Between the uncanny style of the novel, which is largely due to Weird fiction, as well as a look through the psychological lens, social isolation is interwoven between *Annihilation*'s lines. In Graeme Hawthorne's article on "Measuring Social Isolation in Older Adults: Development and Initial Validation of the Friendship Scale"... "Social isolation refers to the living without companionship, social support or social connectedness. It is the absence of significant others someone interrelates with, trusts, and turns to in time of crisis." (Hawthorne, 521). In defining social isolation as it pertains to modern understandings, recognizing it in New Weird writings is apparent when humans are pulled into an otherworldly or nonhuman reality. The biologist in the novel loses her husband from cancer six months after his return from a previous expedition to Area X. While this ignited her social isolation in reality, it also grew her independence for the long run that led to the success of reorientation after disorienting alongside the other women, as will be further explained. Social isolation's first step in Area X is obvious, as each of the women in expedition twelve are stripped of their names and instead are given titles that pertain to the individual skill sets they provide, with expectations to do none other. A source of limitation in power and role play works as a stimulant for isolating the women even if working in a group setting. In Esroy's article, associations to social isolation include suicide attempts, distress, and mental illness. As *Annihilation* explicitly displays that characters on previous expeditions committed suicide, contracted illnesses, and passed away in or abruptly after their time in Area X, it is controversial whether social isolation occurs as a mental effect of Area X, or if it is an aspect inevitable in New Weird fiction. Direct examples of behaviors and mannerisms committed by the characters in *Annihilation* aid in deciphering which side of this controversy holds stronger validity.

The biologist identified isolating factors within her husband's personality towards the end of his lifespan. As she observes and reflects in the novel, "The last few hours I had coexisted with him in a kind of rising panic, more and more convinced that whatever has happened to him in Area X had turned him into a shell, an automaton going through the motions." (VanderMeer, 82). The lasting impacts of this otherworldly society, moreso seen as an environmental arena encased within reality, but with its own boundaries separating it as its own entity, the biologist was able to see these isolating effects without realizing what was truly going on since she had yet to experience it. This reflection and flashback within her monologue once in Area X proves her awareness and critical skill beyond the skill sets of a "biologist," which hints to her succession in reorientation compared to the other women. In saying so, however, this awareness she has only reaches so far. Soon after this reflection occurs, the biologist concurs with the forces of Area X, stating that "You had to fade into the landscape... To acknowledge it, to try to name it, might be a way of letting it in. (For the same reason, I suppose, I have continued to refer to the

changes in me as a ‘brightness,’ because to examine this condition too closely – to quantify it or deal with it empirically when i have little control over it – would make it too real.)” (VanderMeer, 116). Her identification of Area X putting her husband in a shell is a cause for either fight or flight, in this case her choice to fight is, in all actuality, a flight mechanism of beating around the force rather than becoming a force against it. In doing so, social isolation continues to creep into the foreground as a further cause towards disorientation in the characters.

These factors of social isolation in not only *Annihilation*, but the New Weird as well, interweaves the interactions between the psychological and ecocritical lenses. As the biologist narrates the novel, the story can be established as unreliable, speaking on terms that not only is the reader getting the viewpoint of a single expedition member, but the biologist undergoes changes throughout the plot too. Using the psychological lens in identifying examples of social isolation in the biologist, this connects with the ecocritical lens of Area X and how Nature within its margins brings forth a different perspective of distress and isolation. According to Jon Heggland, author of “Environment and Narrative, New Directions in Econarratology,” with use of Nature in twisting psychological viewpoints, in this case of social isolation, the unnatural narratology brings forth the explicitness of the psychological literary lens, tying into the ecocritical one. As the reader gains an understanding of the biased journaling of the biologist throughout the novel, this narration works towards analyzing the psychological effect of the unnatural nature of Area X. So, although the biologist is an unreliable narrator due to her individual experience of disorientation, plus a lack of multiple perspectives, this unnatural narratology serves a bigger purpose in analyzing the ideology of social isolation in the scope of the novel and in New Weird fiction.

### **Disorientation**

As Area X causes dissociation behaviors and disoriented perception, as can be seen with instances of the biologist’s explanation of the tower coming to life, her husband slipping away, and the eerie and uncanny familiarity of a dolphin eye, disorientation is a heavy term which links the culprits of New Weird fiction and these ideologies of social isolation. As “For A New Weird Geography” discusses beyond the scope of global-weirding, disorientation occurred to each of the women in Area X through individualistic ways as mental disarray also occurred. Because of this, it adds to the unreliability of the reader towards the biologist and her unnatural narratology, as her disoriented perspective in the uncanny environment is different from the rest. “Disorientation occurs when things drastically change, causing worlds to appear out-of-joint with normative spacetimes.” (Turnbull, 1212). The disorientation is an internal cause from the external environment. Linked with global-weirding, disorientation is the experience one goes through in an Anthropocene, as will be further discussed, which is the terminology for the contemporary socio ecological condition in which global-weirding is described. Each expedition member experiences disorientation, but the further critical elements of reorienting in the otherworldly space shows effects of how one deals with social isolation. As Area X was initially

described as a ‘transitional’ site, in accordance to Turnbull, Platt, and Searle’s analysis of the New Weird, the complication of borders between species and individuals may be the root cause for disorientation. This confusion of how to act and deal with familiar surroundings that have become anything but. Now that these margins are blurred, the women in Area X are led down a mental tunnel of isolation. Their names are wiped, tags of authority are made based on the professional roles they play. Social isolation becomes a self-induced act, all based around the factors that Area X, which portrays a small-scale example of what Weird fiction has the power to do.

### **Question in Conversation**

Circulating to the root of this isolation, through the psychological and ecocritical lens, another critical question raises the psyche tone of this critical analysis: Does social isolation truly occur or is it just an effect of disorientation?

### **Disorientation and Social Isolation Through the Biologist’s Character**

Disorientation occurs within the lines of Area X, which is the environment conducted primarily from Weird subgenre traits. As seen with the biologist, her reflection of experiences before entering Area X gives leeway to her possible disorientation due to social isolation in reality, but in this case, it is being dealt with primarily in regard to Area X’s effects of so. Nature plays a huge role in this breakthrough novel of the New Weird, stretching into coexistence with an uncanny tone, which in turn connects the psychological and ecocritical literary lens used in this analysis. According to Jon Hegglund, who of which wrote a journal on econarratology in The Ohio State University Press, his explanation of unnatural narratology further expands to the connection of Nature to this ecocritical lens: “Nature is no longer a pure, idealized Other to a normative human Self but is rather composed of the endlessly complex material interactions in which individual and collective human and nonhuman life exists.” (Hegglund, 29). Understanding Nature in *Annihilation* as anything but pure relays as an explanation for the disorientation of the expedition members almost instantaneously upon entering the altered environment. VanderMeer uses real world experiences in nature and composes a Weird reality in the novel to build stakes upon the psychological aspects of humanism in an ecocritical way. This econarratology, as Hegglund expresses through its unnaturalness in Weird fiction, adds to the disoriented feeling the biologist experiences. Her disorientation is a fallback to the feeling that isolation is the reasonable response to weird situations occurring, further leading to the disorientation. As the biologist acknowledges within herself, “I could easily lose hours there, observing the hidden life of tidal pools, and sometimes I marveled at the fact that I had been given such a gift: not just to lose myself in the present moment to utterly but also to have such solitude, which was all I had ever craved during my studies, my practice to reach this point.” (VanderMeer, 108). The biologist is connecting before experiences to those in Area X, talking through with herself that her life’s purpose was this expedition. Whether that deems true, the psychological effects of Area X were not known or factored in beforehand, proving her thought



in the present a process of disorientation. As VanderMeer uses the biologist as a bridge of econarratology between the Weird and the otherworldly atmosphere he has created, reading through the thought process of disorientation in an unnatural space is apparent. And as many situations in reality cause fight or flight responses, the biologist's only logistical response to this situation was to agree upon herself that social isolation is the correct response to these sensations.

### **Disorientation, Dislocation, Destabilization**

The biologist's character is efficient when defining social isolation occurrences through a psychological and ecocritical lens. With her personality, experience, and skill sets as a biologist in alignment with the psyche manipulated in Area X, using her perspective is a resourceful way of diving past the novel and into deeper thematic meaning. This pivots into global-weirding, New Weird fiction, and unnatural narratology. These building blocks to the psyche, through the unreliability of the biologist, derive first from disorientation, but in a spread of three terms to describe all the actions and emotions she goes through, which are dislocation, disorientation, and destabilization. "Jeff VanderMeer calls weird fiction's ability to 'entertain while also expressing our own dissatisfaction with, and uncertainty about, reality' (VanderMeer, xv). Rather than being a form in which the reader finds a sense-of-place in the literature, weird authors use signifiers of dislocation and disorientation to convey a unique sense of *weirdness*, creating a dislocating dialectic between the weird spaces of the literature and the reader." (Hugel). The disorientation, dislocation, and destabilization of the biologist can be seen in the past and present causation for her social isolation, but the foundation these factors are built upon come from New Weird fiction. These psychological ideas would not have the same effect on a character in a novel of a different subgenre that did not pertain to ecocriticism and otherworldly, unnatural natures that New Weird provides in *Annihilation*. The three terms can be bundled together and used throughout the subgenre to analyze alterations made to nature that affect the expedition members in Area X and create symptoms of social isolation.

Disorientation, dislocation, and destabilization, as outlined by William J Hugel, work to interweave the idea of how this subgenre is comprehended by a reader and makes a mark in literature. As disorientation has already been identified, and dislocation is the placement of the expedition members from reality to Area X, destabilization works in grounding the unnatural state of Area X into the characters. It brings forth the isolation factor by connecting the psychological literary lens and aligning the reader to 'how' Weird fiction displays so. This rounds back to how Jeff VanderMeer uses New Weird fiction to bring about the psyche of its effects, in this case social isolation, using ecocritical and psychological lenses.

### **Anthropocene**

Anthropocene, as an ecocritical tool for bracketing the psyche in the New Weird, is a term used beyond the subgenre, but rightfully so a mechanism in understanding its contributions to science fiction. From the journal "For a New Weird Geography," in which global-weirding

and science fiction were defined, Anthropocene has become a figment of crises for authors when using geographies in science fiction. As Jonathan Turnbull, Ben Platt, and Adam Searle were able to analyze the Anthropocene, it can be seen as fitting present politics, from science fiction ideas, of social isolation into the New Weird. This aspect of weirding “illustrates the disorientation that, for some, has come to characterize this epoch. The way New Weird characters ambivalently accept disorientation, difference and change – offers geographers inspiration for thinking through the affective dimensions of living through socioecological crises.” (Turnbull, 1209). In the New Weird’s specialized way of ‘weirding’, or in the case of *Annihilation* in which global-weirding occurs, the disorientation that occurs is unique to other subgenres. This also includes other literary lenses in the New Weird aside from an ecocritical one, which is a source of implication in this research. In the context of VanderMeer’s work, however, the socioecological effects of weirding endured by the biologist through social isolating factors create tension in the work of the subgenre... “Specifically, weirding gives space for wider tensions in geography between approaches associated with affirmation and negation, offering avenues for thinking through and dislodging such tensions.” (Turnbull, 1209). The tensions vaguely presented here can compare to the social isolation ideologies in New Weird fiction. As the biologist endures affirmation and negation, which can be seen through her disorientation and reorientation stages in Area X, these new avenues of thinking are seen through the inner monologue in the novel where unstable, discombobulated thoughts derive. Ranging from her experience with her husband before entering Area X, all the way to experiencing Nature within the otherworldly atmosphere, the biologist’s psyche is altered due to high impact with social isolation.

### **‘Mysticism of the Unhuman’**

A previous source by James Machin provided evidence to historical classics in literature that adapted Weird fiction traits, but were not established during that time frame as so. Horror being one of the genres explored in the conversation of Weird fiction in Britain centuries ago, Georgie Newson-Errey delves into the term ‘mysticism of the unhuman,’ which contrasts horror elements into the New Weird. The common thread of mysticism here, specifically in “Vandermeer’s texts, is that they function as means by which an individual can recognise the essentially limited nature of human subjectivity.” (Newson-Errey). The paradox of expedition members in *Annihilation* knowing this limitation, whereas in reality a person would likely not understand, provides context to the ‘unhuman’ nature of Area X as well. This combines the ecocriticism and psychological literary lens towards social isolation depiction in the New Weird genre. In Area X, social isolation thrives through the limited yet wide reach of nature in humans, both in social connectedness and human agency. Uncanny traits and examples of Nature as a living creature surrounding the biologist further implies a disoriented perspective, or an unreliable and unnatural narratology, that provides to the mysticism of the unhuman elements. Weirding in *Annihilation* thrives off of the otherworldly, backwards behaviors of every element

in the story; plot, settings, and characters. In saying so, the disorientation faced by the characters becomes realistic when the social isolation factors set in as practical fight or flight responses, just to an abstract situation known as Area X.

### **Psychological Fight or Flight Response Mechanisms**

With these fight or flight responses made by each expedition member, but specifically the biologist in regard to the psychological and ecocritical lens, the social isolation that comes about does so in a division. A division of man versus self, man versus man, and man versus nature. Though disorientation is the fundamental factor towards the character's psyche and social isolation, each of the three disorientation, dislocation, and destabilization align with the responses presented here. Together, a cohesive conversation as to 'why' each character reacted to them, others, and Nature in unique ways is presented, though here only focused on the biologist. Here, correspondence of New Weird fiction and social isolation occur. For instance, in *Annihilation*, disorientation can be seen through the man versus man concept, where each of the expedition members are labeled solely on their skill sets, not names. Dislocation occurs through man versus nature, where Area X is a landscape stitched from reality but has unnatural ideologies of nature woven into it, making the location and borders a foreign aspect to the expedition. Finally, destabilization, which can be seen in man versus self as the biologist no longer has a stable connection with herself due to hypnosis by the psychologist, effects of Nature around her, and exposure to uncanny atmospheres.

The uncanny here, intertwined with these correlated concepts, work in a conjunction towards defining New Weird fiction as a placeholder for deeper psychological thematic meanings. In this case of social isolation, each of these interactions of terms work like mathematical equations to answer the 'how' and 'why', rather than 'what' is creating the disturbance of normality to the unusual in such a subgenre.

While each expedition member works alongside one another, they all have ulterior motives and individual goals while in Area X. The disoriented effects of the atmosphere force a stray from these initial plans, but the biologist's recognition of her husband's changes from a previous expedition help her identify the psychological effects of Area X before they completely destroy her in ways it does to others. This identification factor in her is a strength in the man versus self concept, where she subconsciously works to stabilize herself, alongside the man versus man concept of her and her husband, where the recognition of Area X's effects on him help her to reorient. "Whatever had happened in Area X, he had not come back. Not really... Even farther down into the darkness we went, and I had to ask myself if any of this had been experienced by my husband. I did not know how my infection changed things. Was I on the same journey, or had he found something completely different? If similar, how had his reactions been different, and how had that changed what happened next?" (VanderMeer, 58). The instability that the uncanny environment causes on humans is refracted by the biologist's monologue of reflection and social connectedness to her surroundings, though this is only

successfully done so through elongated social isolation. Each of the women in her expedition continuously try to work together in figuring out the environment and its features, but through the biologist's individualistic journal entries and experiences on her own time, such isolation pushes her forward in the plot compared to others.

The global-weirdness in this version of an Anthropocene that VanderMeer has created leaves a lot of room for different psychological routes the expedition members can take. By using the biologist as a bridge towards an ecocritical perspective of Weird fiction to the psychological social isolation effects the subgenre may cause, the implication still remains of whether her specific character is a result of social isolation, or if the Weird environment carries such psychological effects in a general sense. Even the biologist asks so by pondering whether her husband was on the same journey, but by introducing factors of identity into the disorientation and man concepts, the question of social isolation actuality in the novel can be defined.

### **Disorientation and Identity**

Peggy A Thoits conducted research on identity and found that psychological well-being correlates to multiple identities. The article, titled "Multiple Identities and Psychological Well-Being: A Reformulation and Test of the Social Isolation Hypothesis" further reaches to understand the psychological connection between social isolation and psychological well-being. The multiple identity aspect of this research means that a person has a multitude of positions and roles in their life, which conversates with *Annihilation* in a contradictory yet explanatory way. In so due to the loss of names and singular identity given to the people in the expeditions traveling to Area X, implications of an individual becoming aware of their social position in a group or society is a dominating factor to this interactionist tradition. Simply put, the way each character in the novel is unique due to their skill sets rather than personality traits works towards a dystopia of generalized "names" with overly specific choices in which type of roles were chosen to work together in each expedition. How each role – anthropologist, surveyor, psychologist, biologist – are meant to serve each other is never seen, as the point of each expedition may truly be to lead each character to mental and physical destruction through identity confusion, disorientation, all done through an initial social isolation. "Privileges and resources may be used to free the individual from constraining or overwhelming demands and to increase prestige, while sheer occupancy of multiple positions may enhance general feelings of security and a sense of personal worth, and buffer the effects of identity loss." (Thoits, 176). This provides that Area X in *Annihilation* works for the opposite, as in social isolation and specific individual identities, which leads to a lost sense of identity and the biologist's break through of the tension in the story.

The results of Thoits' research state that a gain of identity leads to more benefits in the individuals who participate versus a loss of identity. Those in the expedition who attempted to socially interact suffered more as they gradually lost their identity, which contrasts to the

biologist, who was mentally isolated to begin with. This draws back to how each person in the expeditions to Area X voluntarily went through the process of doing so, and naturally lived social lives beforehand. Because of this jump into a new world of global-weirding, isolation, and loss of identity, they suffered much more than one would if they experienced any of these prior, which is what makes the biologist special in terms of this conversation. As she still did suffer in the expedition, her reliance on the self through disorienting, man versus self moments, as well as through the uncanny spurts of Nature throughout the entirety of the experience, the biologist did better on her own since she was an isolated individual in her previous reality. Not only from her status as a widow, but also since the passing of her husband dealing with Area X and her expertise in biology. Through a monologue discussing her traits as an avid researcher in her daily lifestyle, the biologist naturally looked through the ecocritical lens in the novel, leaving the reading with an econarratology standpoint though unreliable and unnatural. “I didn’t know that while I was applying this Band-Aid to my need to be unconfined, my husband was dreaming of Area X and much greater open spaces. But, later, the parallel helped assuage my anger at his leaving, and then my confusion came back in such a changed form... even if the stark truth is that I still did not truly understand what I had missed about him.” (VanderMeer, 157). The regain of identity and awareness the biologist goes through compared to the reflection earlier on in the novel about her husband is a sign of her acknowledgement towards succession on the trip. This is a sign of reorientation from the disorientation spiral initiated in the ‘transitional site’ and weird entity of Area X. Without time and space provided by social isolation during the tensions which the uncanny atmosphere forced on the biologist, this resignation of evolution in her character would not have occurred.

### **Conclusion**

New Weird fiction brings both new and old aspects of science fiction to the table of storytelling through various literary lenses. In terms of a psychological and ecocritical perspective, using *Annihilation* by Jeff VanderMeer to uncover thematic values of the subgenre was crucial for digging deeper into the psyche of storytelling in this mode and in the story as well. As the biologist provides the unnatural narratology with unreliability and econarratology traits interwoven, aspects of social isolation in this novel’s uncanny atmosphere add to the complexity of not only the weirding of the subgenre, but to her character arc as well. Through phases of disorientation, dislocation, destabilization, Nature as its own living being, and various functions of identity throughout, using the biologist and VanderMeer’s work as a guidance tool for understanding a specific psyche foundation of the New Weird was essential. Through this conversation, questions were raised on whether the social isolation factors appearing in the novel work as psychological plot points for the novel alone or if the New Weird subgenre carries aspects of social isolation with its other complexities without identifying it as such a psychological term.

Critically so, this research aimed to target whether the social isolation, through psychological and ecocritical literary lenses, is the same ideology as understand in modern practice, or if it never truly occurs in *Annihilation* at all and is just an aspect of disorientation that New Weird fiction naturally applies in its work. Based on gathered information from sources which either analyze the novel or simply identify terminology used in this analysis for other findings, correlating, contrasting, and putting into conversation such varied findings was essential in building a foundational framework for this thesis. After creating a web of reasons that factor into psychological and ecocritical aspects found in the novel, the question of whether social isolation genuinely occurs or is just a part of the Weird's Nature is the critique which probes new light on various topics presented. Those include New Weird, Nature, weirding, econarratology, and disorientation, all under the umbrella framework of how it intertwines with social isolation. From here, this conversation should spread beyond the scope of literature and into deeper psychological and ecocriticism developmental issues.

Whether the altered environment titled Area X or the uncanny disruption to reality set forth effects as traumatic as death to the expedition members in *Annihilation*, there is enough displayed to prove that New Weird fiction has complexities not fully understood. By looking through the theoretical lenses of psychology and ecocriticism, readers can understand how this evolution of an emerging genre works to provide deeper insight into mental health and psychological issues through a source of entertainment. Fantastical, otherworldly elements of reality are used in the New Weird to relate humanity to ideas of weirding, and further stretch into conceptualizations of social isolation. Intentional by the author or a natural occurrence due to the subgenre, one phenomena asserts itself through critical observation; underlying themes of social isolation are inherent to the New Weird.

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