

Materiality, Responsibility and Anthropocene Thought in Robert Macfarlane's and Kathleen Jamie's Nature Writing

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Abstract

The concept of the Anthropocene, denoting humans as geological agents, severely complicates traditional Western distinctions between culture and nature, the human and the nonhuman world. Contrary to anthropocentric accounts, the new materialisms have established a post-humanist reading of the Anthropocene that destabilises such dichotomies, placing human beings on par with the world they encounter. This approach can also be found in the New Nature Writing (NNW), a body of creative nonfiction that seeks to reconnect the "human animal" to nature, with the ever-open question of the nature of nature itself. A reading of Robert Macfarlane's work with a focus on his recent *Underland* shows the ways in which the growing awareness of the Anthropocene has influenced contemporary nature writing, allowing Macfarlane to establish a non-anthropocentric perspective following the new materialisms. While likewise adopting a new materialist stance, Kathleen Jamie's collections of naturalist essays nevertheless question the implications of this ontological framework, in particular with regard to ethics and human responsibility in times of the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Anthropocene, New Nature Writing, ecocriticism, new materialisms, environmental ethics.

Resumen

El concepto del Antropoceno, que denota a los seres humanos como agentes geológicos, complica seriamente las distinciones occidentales tradicionales entre cultura y naturaleza, el mundo humano y el no humano. Contrariamente a los relatos antropocéntricos, los nuevos materialismos han establecido una interpretación posthumanista del Antropoceno que desestabiliza esas dicotomías, situando a los seres humanos a la par del mundo con el que se encuentran. Este enfoque también se puede encontrar en la *New Nature Writing* (nueva escritura de la naturaleza), una creciente colección de literatura que busca reconectar el "animal humano" con la naturaleza, con la pregunta siempre abierta sobre la naturaleza de la propia naturaleza. La lectura de la obra de Robert Macfarlane, con el foco en su reciente libro *Underland*, revela las maneras en las que la conciencia creciente del Antropoceno ha influido en la escritura de la naturaleza contemporánea, permitiendo a Macfarlane establecer una perspectiva no antropocéntrica, de acuerdo con los nuevos materialismos. Mientras que Kathleen Jamie también adopta una posición materialista, sus colecciones de ensayos naturalistas, sin embargo, cuestionan las implicaciones de este marco ontológico, particularmente respecto a la ética y a las responsabilidades humanas en tiempos del Antropoceno.

Palabras clave: Antropoceno, *New Nature Writing*, ecocrítica, nuevos materialismos, ética medioambiental.

Introduction

The past two decades have seen a growing awareness of anthropogenic impact on the Earth's geology and ecology, increasingly imbuing public consciousness through news reports as well as through various forms of art.¹ This thesis of the Anthropocene, i.e., the proposed current geological age that denotes humankind as “a global geophysical force,” severely complicates traditional Western distinctions between culture and nature, the human and the nonhuman world (Steffen et al. 614). As the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has influentially argued, the denotation of humans as “geological agents” implies the collapse of a differentiation between natural history and human history (“The Climate of History” 207). The latter, traditionally focused on the social, or the cultural, now emerges to be inextricably entangled with the history of the planet itself, with the human species having become “a force of nature in the geological sense” (Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History” 207). The recognition of such unprecedented agency, of humankind as “the dominant species on the planet,” invariably poses ethical questions of responsibility towards the Earth and its inhabitants (Chakrabarty, “Climate and Capital” 14). Following the philosopher Clive Hamilton, the Anthropocene's acknowledgment of humankind's dominant role implies an anthropocentric perspective, which should be embraced as a means to meet this responsibility. The new materialisms, however, have established an alternative reading of the Anthropocene: a post-humanist reading that places human beings on a par with the world they encounter.² The present essay aims to locate such an alternative view in the New Nature Writing (NNW), a movement that seeks to reconnect the “human animal” to nature, with the ever-open question of the nature of “nature” itself (Cowley par. 11 of 11). Readings of Robert Macfarlane's and Kathleen Jamie's works will illuminate possibilities of re-interrogating the human condition and the ensuing ethical implications in times of the Anthropocene. A focus on Macfarlane's recent book *Underland* (2019), already counting amongst the most successful works of NNW, will demonstrate the ways in which the growing awareness of the Anthropocene has influenced contemporary nature writing. Whereas *Underland* manages to leave Macfarlane's early anthropocentric tendencies behind, it is in Jamie's work where the ethics of a new materialist perspective is more carefully contemplated and problematised.

First, however, a more thorough discussion of the indeed debated concept of the Anthropocene is needed. It was first mentioned by meteorologist and Nobel prize winner Paul Crutzen in 2000 and reasserted in a short article two years later, which proposed “to assign the term ‘Anthropocene’ to the present, in many ways human-dominated, geological epoch” (Crutzen 23). This sweeping proclamation soon entered academic discourse, with a newly formed interdisciplinary Working Group on the “Anthropocene” (AWG) now calling for a formalisation of the epoch, suggesting the 1950s as its starting point (Zalasiewicz et al. 58). In the humanities, responses are more diverse. In particular

¹ For example, Trexler identifies a growing body of so-called climate fiction, which started to be recognised around 2009 (7).

² See, for example, Cohen (xxiv-xxv) for such a post-humanist reading of the Anthropocene.

the etymology of the term “Anthropocene” has caused a certain uneasiness amongst predominantly Marxist scholars, since its root, *anthropos*, seems to imply the creation of a unity of all human beings that ignores social and cultural diversities.³ Chakrabarty, however, insists that the impalpable scope of the Anthropocene effectively demands such a thinking in terms of species, arguing that “the analytics of capital (or of the market)” are necessary but “insufficient instruments in helping us come to grips with anthropogenic climate change” (“The Climate of History” 4). Hamilton, although favouring the term “humankind” over “the human species”, seizes this point: “[i]f the Anthropocene is a rupture of the history of the Earth as a whole,” he contends, “then it is also a rupture in the history of humans as a whole” (61-62; 34). Signposting the diminishing economic differences between the North and the South, he remarks that “[b]y 2050 at the latest the objections to ‘Anthropocene’ will seem very dated” (30-31). China, with India hard on its heels, still increases its fossil fuel emissions, justified (following Chakrabarty) as an instrument to lift the poor out of poverty (“Climate and Capital” 12-13). This attempt to advance equality concurrently advances global warming, complicating historical accounts that propose a “Capitalocene” with the North as its primary actor (Malm 391). The Anthropocene hence appears to me as indeed the more suitable term; in any case, it has already been accepted by the natural sciences and as such, Hamilton notes, “it is here to stay” (28). Accordingly, the present essay will use the Anthropocene as a denotation for the current geological epoch that marks humankind as responsible for anthropogenic changes in the Earth System. However, I consider it necessary to highlight that albeit it seems unlikely that the term will be changed, it remains the role of the humanities to critically discuss its possible implications, specifically in regard to the role of humankind itself when meeting this new responsibility.

If we proceed on the assumption, then, that humankind as a whole has indeed “imprinted an indelible mark on the planet” (Zalasiewicz et al. 59), we need to ask the (in Hamilton’s words) “epochal question: what is this being who has changed the course of the Earth itself?” (35) The answer to this question profoundly varies, from radically ecomodernist approaches, elevating humankind to the “creator” of nature (Ellis 321), to absolutist post-humanist accounts that define “human nature” as “an interspecies relationship” (Tsing 141). Whilst endorsing the conviction of a “special” position of human beings revealed by the Anthropocene, Hamilton warns against the *hubris* implied by ecomodernist thought: the unintended creation of the Anthropocene also tells us, he argues, that humans are inseparably embedded in natural processes (52). With human agency being “immersed in an Earth-world built by us out of nature but constrained by it,” Hamilton maintains that “the worlds we make are never solely our creations, and the Modern dreams of infinite world-creation are always subject to the centripetal pull of Earth” (52; 63). The rhetoric discloses that in his “new anthropocentrism”, humankind’s newly recognised collective agency on a geological level still raises us to “the world-making creature” (again, the exceptional status of human beings is emphasised by the

³ See Malm for an influential argumentation against the use of the term “Anthropocene”. In Moore’s “The Capitalocene Part I” and “The Capitalocene Part II”, the argument goes one step further, seeking to contest ‘social as well as environmental reductionism’ (“The Capitalocene Part II” 240).

definite article), albeit straitened by natural forces (Hamilton 58). The new materialisms, describing “a theoretical turn away from the persistent dualisms in modern and humanist traditions” (Sanzo par. 1 of 11), allow to consider the Anthropocene as signalling “the ultimate failure of the modernist project of domination,” as Hamilton puts it (89). The predominant argument emphasises the interdependence of human and nonhuman beings, acknowledged through the Anthropocene as an unintended consequence that lies beyond our control. In stark contrast to Hamilton’s new anthropocentrism, new materialists use this acknowledgment to affirm their strong rejection of any special status being conferred on human beings. As Jeffrey J. Cohen has argued, the lack of intention behind the creation of the Anthropocene separates agency from willpower, giving way to new definitions of agency that equally include nonhuman matters (xxiv-xxv).⁴ By rendering human beings as one amongst many “knots in a vast network of agencies” (Iovino and Oppermann 1), this alternative reading of the Anthropocene advances a post-humanist approach where humans are not “the” special creature, do not “stand out from nature as a whole” but are part of it (Hamilton 99). Hamilton cautions against such post-humanist perspectives, contending that through the way it “deflates the significance and power of humans on the planet,” “anti-anthropocentrism has the perverse effect of *denying* our responsibility for the damage we have caused” (89; 98). I would instead suggest a reading of the new materialisms as a way of endorsing respect for the Earth System that we co-inhabit with various other matters, a respect that implies an invitation to act with caution and care. It is exactly this invitation that we can find in the NNW, too.

As identified by Jason Cowley in 2008, British NNW represents a growing body of creative nonfiction that is united by the aspiration to re-imagine “nature”, and human (inter-)relationships with it in a time of ecological crisis. Some of its key practitioners were and are, following Joe Moran, Mark Cocker, Roger Deakin, Kathleen Jamie, Richard Mabey, and Robert Macfarlane, all sharing the endeavour to find “the extraordinary in the ordinary” (Cowley par. 7 of 11), focusing on everyday encounters with the nonhuman natural world. As we will see, however, the global nature of the Anthropocene seems to have encouraged a widening of scale (see, for example, Jamie’s essay “Aurora” in her essay collection *Sightlines*), which acts not as a replacement of, but rather as an addition to the microscale of everyday spaces. What has remained a key feature of the NNW, regardless of the scale adopted, is its expression of an urgent need to reconnect human beings to the nonhuman natural world, embracing an attitude of regarding the nonhuman world “with wonder, but also with care” (Cowley par. 2 of 11). Alongside this evident parallel to ecocritical thought, the NNW similarly has its roots in the early 1970s, when growing environmental concern demanded a re-interrogation of the meanings of nature and culture (Smith 4). Its much later proclamation by Cowley has caused some discontent amongst critics and so-called New Nature Writers themselves, as the term itself seems to ignore the movement’s concern with cultural processes: “‘nature’,” Smith remarks, “tends

⁴ For an influential theorisation of such “*distributive* agency”, building upon Bruno Latour’s conceptualisation of *actants* as “a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman,” see Bennett (quotations taken from iii-ix, italics author’s own).

to convey an evacuation of politics and ethics" (14). I still find it useful to mark the break from what Cowley calls "old" nature writing (par. 6 of 11), a break that involves incorporating traditionally unconventional settings for encountering "nature" and re-interpreting modes of the pastoral in ways that speak to a world marked by anthropogenic environmental damage (see Lilley, *The New Pastoral*). The present essay will hence continue to deploy the term NWW to refer to this body of writing, asking the reader to keep in mind that the "nature" in NNW is far from seeking to reproduce the old nature-culture binary.

In an attempt to bring the theory discussed above together, the present essay will use Robert Macfarlane's and Kathleen Jamie's nature writing to locate new understandings of "nature", as well as the very nature of human beings itself, that reflect the complications and challenges posed by the Anthropocene. A focus on Macfarlane's *Underland* will illustrate the influence of the growing awareness of the Anthropocene on contemporary nature writing, and demonstrate how the resulting changes in style and settings, combined with the persisting attentiveness to everyday matters that is typical of the NNW, allow to establish a non-anthropocentric perspective following the new materialisms. While Jamie's essay collections bear evident similarities to Macfarlane's recent work, likewise adopting a new materialist stance, I will show how her more tentative and sceptical approach nevertheless questions the implications of this ontological framework, in particular with regard to ethics and human responsibility in times of the Anthropocene.

Robert Macfarlane: Towards Interspecies Discourse and Multi-Species Being

Arguably the most prominent figure in the NNW, Robert Macfarlane has produced a number of critically acclaimed nonfiction books over the past two decades that feature various journeys to, and into near and remote places, driven by an urgent need to rediscover and redefine ideas of the "wild", or the "natural" in times of environmental crisis. In tandem with his literal journeys and discoveries, Macfarlane's writing has travelled, too. While his thematic focus on "the ways in which nature and culture are intricately interwoven with one another" (Alexander 8) continues to be woven into his texts, connecting them as a clearly identifiable golden thread, his methodological approach has set out on new paths—paths that have changed the very nature of the human-nonhuman relationship conveyed through his work. So has his early book *The Wild Places* (2007) been criticised for a resumption of conventional tropes of nature writing, perhaps most trenchantly by fellow writer Jamie in her tellingly titled review "A Lone Enraptured Male". Alongside a critical reading of the enactments of class and gender performed by *The Wild Places*, Jamie scarifies Macfarlane's proclivity for what David Matless identifies as a "foregrounding of the authorial voice" (178): "If there is a lot of 'I,'" she argues, "(and there is, in *The Wild Places*) then it won't be the wild places we behold, but the author" ("A Lone Enraptured Male" par. 12 of 24). Neal Alexander seizes this point, contending that "[s]uch an emphasis upon voice and selfhood implies the persistence of anthropocentrism" and, at the same time, "a lingering Romantic attachment to the

authority of the solitary individual” (3). These anthropocentric tendencies are, as I would argue, amplified by repeated descriptions of enchantment through the “wild” (see, for example, *WP* 234), endorsing a “weak” anthropocentrism that seeks to respect and protect nonhuman matters for their importance for human flourishing.⁵ However, as Deborah Lilley notes, Macfarlane already begins “to refocus his interpretation of nature in all forms” (*The New Pastoral* 94): his initial understanding of wildness as something “outside history” is profoundly challenged when he realises that “[e]very islet and mountain-top, every secret valley or woodland, [has] been visited, dwelled in, worked, or marked at some point,” a realisation that leads him to conclude that “[t]he human and the wild cannot be partitioned” (*WP* 127). Whereas *The Wild Places* does not yet manage to translate this idea of “the intersection of humans and nature” (Lilley, *The New Pastoral* 95) unambiguously into language, Lilley locates a growing “sensitivity towards ways of looking at and interpreting the features and experiences of different landscapes, and the human-nature relations that they signify” (*The New Pastoral* 228) in Macfarlane’s later work *The Old Ways* (2012). The author’s “formula or set of coordinates by which the landscape might be understood or discerned,” Lilley writes, “is understood to be one of many” (*The New Pastoral* 229), suggesting an emerging parting of a univocal rendering of the land and its inhabitants. This attentiveness to the multiplicity of ways of exploring a particular place or landscape, indicating a necessity to allow for multiple perspectives, is further pronounced in *Underland* (2019).

Being Macfarlane’s most recent and so-far most celebrated single-authored work, *Underland* deals also most explicitly with the looming presence of the Anthropocene and its implications for human-nonhuman relationships, ultimately taking a new materialist approach that is enhanced by stylistic features. In what the book’s blurb describes as “an epic exploration of the Earth’s underworlds,” the author travels to both literal and metaphorical underground spaces, embarking on “a deep time journey” (as the subheading proclaims) that encompasses Greenland’s glaciers as well as the city catacombs of Paris, “starless” river systems as well as a laboratory studying dark matter, Bronze Age burial chambers as well as a contemporary burial place for nuclear waste. Albeit not fully able to uncouple itself from what Phil Hubbard and Eleanor Wilkinson call “the conventional masculinist trope of the male wanderer who boldly strides into the wilderness” (3), *Underland* represents a refined version of exploring the interrelations between human and nonhuman matters that goes beyond the integration of traditionally unconventional settings for nature writing. It is a version that focuses less on the author himself but rather gives space to accounts from various experts in their own fields, an exchange of knowledge often rendered in dialogical form. In further contrast to Macfarlane’s earlier works, *Underland* incorporates a number of women’s voices, still outnumbered by male contributors but slowly surfacing in his writing, alleviating the gender bias criticised by Jamie (see “A Lone Enraptured Male”) and opening up new perspectives. Advancing his continuing quest to find a language for our “more-than-human world” (see Abram), Macfarlane’s attempt to deploy what he calls, after Robin Wall

⁵ See Norton for a first discussion of this concept.

Kimmerer, a “grammar of animacy” (*Underland* 112) also gives more agency to nonhuman matters through consciously coupling them with action verbs, such as in the beginning section of the book: “[i]ce breathes. Rock has tides. Mountains ebb and flow. Stone pulses” (*Underland* 16). These changes in style allow for a more clearly and consistently articulated understanding of the world in materialistic terms, compounded of “networks of mutual relation” (*Underland* 418) that, as we will see, are most tangible on the microscale associated with the NNW, creating an intimacy towards nonhuman matters that emphatically illustrates their intrinsic value.

The struggle of coming to terms with the age of the Anthropocene is more decidedly discussed on a macroscale, in particular in the chapters “The Blue of Time” and “Meltwater”, where the influence of the current environmental crisis on contemporary British nature writing comes patently into view. Covering Macfarlane’s travels around Kulusuk Island in Greenland, these two chapters open up a global space going far beyond the British Isles. The literal and metaphorical explorations of the local glaciers and bergs, slowly melting into the ocean, intensify this globality through their symbolism for an all-pervasive climate change, using a specific locale to create the “sense of planet” Ursula Heise urgently demands (see *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*). At the same time, they epitomise the tension between humankind’s simultaneous significance and insignificance in this global, “more-than-human” world. Amidst “[t]he immensity and the vibrancy of the ice,” Macfarlane feels hugely aware of the smallness and ephemerality of humans as a species when viewed “in deep time, even in the relatively shallow time since the last glaciation – the notion of human dominance over the planet,” he writes, “seems greedy, delusory” (*Underland* 362). While the reference to “deep time” illustrates a thinking that goes beyond conventional timescales, the “vibrancy” Macfarlane bestows on the ice evokes Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matters* (2010) and its theory of distributive agency, outlining agentic power as “a power possessed by nonhuman bodies too” (32). As his descriptions of, and reflections on ice as a substance show, Macfarlane acknowledges this inclusive definition of agency: “ice is a shape-shifter and a state-shifter,” he muses a few pages later. “It flies, it swims and it flows. [...] Ice erases mountain ranges, but preserves air bubbles for millennia” (*Underland* 379). In finding this epiphanic realisation of “the vibrancy of the ice” in seemingly untouched nature, far from human civilisation, the journey through Greenland bears resemblance to a traditional motif of pastoral escape in the sense of “expectations of relief and restoration”, as Lilley describes it (*The New Pastoral* 8). However, the moment of “relief and restoration” is severely qualified by a sense of ecological crisis. “Looking out from that summit, I no longer feel awed and exhilarated, but instead faintly sick,” Macfarlane writes shortly after his revelation, remembering “the melt that is happening, that has happened, that *is hastening*”: he feels “[s]ick at Greenland’s scale – but also by our ability to encompass it. [...] The ice seems a ‘thing’ that is beyond our comprehension to know but within our capacity to destroy” (*Underland* 362-3). What we encounter here is the deployment of what Lilley calls the “new” pastoral, namely a reformed version of traditional pastoral conventions emerging in contemporary British writing, caused by “the impact of contemporary environmental conditions” (*The New Pastoral* 7). Instead of finding retreat and relief in the nonhuman

natural world, the awareness of anthropogenic climate change, induced by the melting landscape, seems to pose only more questions to Macfarlane, charging ice, as a metonymy for the Anthropocene, as “a ‘thing’ that is beyond our comprehension to know”. This moment shows quite plainly how any contemporary attempt at reinvigorating the pastoral escape into “nature” will invariably, and inexorably serve as a reminder of human influence on the nonhuman natural world; of an influence that appears both unavoidable and unfathomable.

In a sense, however, this acknowledgment of the limits of human knowledge can be read as a new understanding, too. Through imagining “our capacity to destroy” together with human incomprehension of their own doings, with ice as “ungraspable to human habits of meaning making” (*Underland* 379), the distributive nature of Bennett’s model of agency becomes more visible, signifying an attempt “to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world” (Bennett xvi) while still recognising the extent of anthropogenic environmental damage. His depiction of the interaction of glacial agency, reaching back millennia, with contemporary human doings allows Macfarlane to achieve what Chakrabarty sees as so crucial when imagining the Anthropocene: “to think about different scales simultaneously” (“The Climate of History” 3), both spatially and temporally. In *Underland*’s chapter “The Understorey”, we will see the scale narrowing again, moving the inherent value of nonhuman matters closer into focus and, in this process, extending this new understanding of the world as composed through human and nonhuman interactions.

As I have adumbrated, the “networks of mutual relation” between human and nonhuman beings (*Underland* 418)—the “big picture”, so to say—materialise most tangibly on the microscale adopted in “The Understorey”. In her essay “Unruly Edges”, Anna Tsing draws on the “interspecies companionship” between “fungi and plant roots” (143) to envision human nature as an “interspecies relationship”, too (144); in his impassioned exploration of what he calls, after forest ecologist Suzanne Simard, the “wood wide web”—a forest’s underground network composed of roots, soil, and thread-like fungi filaments—Macfarlane arrives at a very similar conclusion. Building on biological research, he describes it as a “mysterious buried network, joining single trees into forest communities,” forming a “subtle mutualism with plants” that allows them “to communicate with each other,” in “ways we have scarcely begun to understand” (*Underland* 88, 96). The “mysterious” character of this “interspecies aid-giving” (*Underland* 88), lying just as the vast agencies of Greenland’s glacial landscape beyond human comprehension, is pronounced more emphatically in a later scene, helping to recognise its inherent value. Spending a night in London’s Epping Forest as part of a larger group of people, talking and music-making, Macfarlane finds himself within “[d]rums, songs, stories. The trees shifting, speaking, busy making meaning that I cannot hear” (*Underland* 115). These trees, figured as meaning-making actants, and with them the entire subterranean web connecting them, emerge as what Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann describe as “storied matter”: “a material ‘mesh’ of meanings,” interlocking human and nonhuman matters “in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces” (1-2). This notion is further intensified by the reference to “stories” that may be produced

through the singing humans, the shifting trees, or both. By imagining the trees as meaning-makers through “speaking” to other matters, speech and meaningful communication lose their Cartesian status of being solely reserved for human beings, recognising meaning in Karen Barad’s terms as “an ongoing performance of the world in its differential intelligibility” (335) and, at the same time, emphasising the integrity of nonhuman matters. But while Macfarlane “cannot hear,” cannot fully apprehend the more-than-human communication humming beneath and around him, it does, in a vibrant example of interspecies discourse, influence the way in which he experiences the nonhuman natural world, and the very nature of human beings. So he writes that “nature seems increasingly better understood in fungal terms: [...] as an assemblage of entanglement of which we are messily part. We are coming to understand our bodies as habitats for hundreds of species of which *Homo sapiens* is only one, our guts as jungles of bacterial flora, our skins as blooming fantastically with fungi” (*Underland* 103-104). Here, Macfarlane zooms in even further, deep into the human body, and the human condition itself. As Tsing, he perceives fungi, so small and often-overlooked, as “indicator species for the human condition” (Tsing 144); as Tsing, he begins to understand humans “as multi-species beings” (*Underland* 104) through fungi and their symbiotic networks.

By “high[lighting] what is typically cast in the shadow,” as we have seen, namely “the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite-human things” (Bennett ix), Macfarlane adopts what Bennett calls an “*ecological sensibility*” (xi, italics author’s own), contemplating these symbiotic networks as a model for new ways of living in the spirit of Albrecht’s “Symbiocene”. Albrecht, to whom Macfarlane directly refers (see *Underland* 113), suggests letting the Anthropocene and its oppressive social (and ecological) systems “become redundant as soon as possible” (13). Instead, he urges us to enter a new epoch that he names the “Symbiocene”, marked by “symbiotic and mutually reinforcing life-reproducing forms and processes” (14). In Macfarlane’s writing, a similar appreciation of, and desire for such alternative and all-inclusive reciprocal systems is inspired by the wood wide web. “Recent studies suggest that well-developed fungal networks will enable forests to adapt faster at larger scales to the changing conditions of the Anthropocene,” he notes, already adumbrating that such mutually beneficial networks may allow humans to “adapt faster at larger scales,” too (*Underland* 103). A few pages later, this idea of embracing “mutualism”, “a prolonged relationship that is interdependent and reciprocally beneficial,” is stated more explicitly (*Underland* 97): “[i]f there is human meaning to be made of the wood wide web, it is surely that what might save us as we move forwards into the precarious, unsettled centuries ahead is collaboration: mutualism, symbiosis, the inclusive human work of collective decision-making extended to more-than-human communities” (*Underland* 113). Animated by both the “mysterious buried network” of the forest (*Underland* 88) and Albrecht’s reflections on the Anthropocene, the formulation of this vision of “collaboration”, “extended to more than human communities,” illustrates once more an example of interspecies discourse, of how “human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces,” to quote Iovino and Oppermann again (2). And it is a vision that lasts, for it returns in “Surfacing”, the very last section of the book (curiously titled identically as Jamie’s latest essay collection). Here

we accompany Macfarlane and his youngest son on a walk through Nine Wells Wood, Cambridge. "Lumps of white chalk lie among the ivy," Macfarlane observes, "glowing in the day-dusk of the wood. Dragonflies hunt the spring stream where it flows away from us. Beneath and around us, invisibly, the fungal network connects tree to tree. [...] My son and I talk quietly about nothing much. We feel small in the universe, and together" (*Underland* 425). Such as his early work *The Wild Places*, Macfarlane's *Underland* ends with a return to "nature" that is only a few miles from his home, following the common thread in NNW of finding meaning "not in the rare or exotic but in our everyday connections with the non-human natural world" (Moran 50). Quite in contrast to *The Wild Places*, however, where such connections are elevated as evoking emotions like "hope, joy, wonder, grace, tranquillity and others" (WP 236), Macfarlane now merely describes the glowing white chalk, the dragonflies, the fungal networks, without attempting any valuation. Through his engagement with different modes of living, and different ways of imagining such modes, he has arrived at a point where he can "simply all[ow] nonhumans to be what they are" for their own sake (Morton par. 14 of 17): at Bennett's ecological sensibility. While the final scene reaches its climax with Macfarlane's realisation "that [his son] will die," emphatically representing a more or less covert plea to consider "the generations that succeed us," the self-evident presence of nonhuman matters, co-inhabiting and co-forming the universe with nonhuman beings, underscores how his urgent question (after Jonas Salk) whether we are "being good ancestors" refers to "the epochs and species that will come after ours," too (*Underland* 425, 410). The intricacies of translating such an all-inclusive ethos into action, or, even before that, into a consistent ethical framework, are weighed more nuancedly in Jamie's work.

Kathleen Jamie: Complicating Matters

Perhaps not as widely known as Macfarlane, the Scottish poet and essayist Kathleen Jamie nevertheless counts amongst the leading voices of the NNW, having published a number of award-winning collections of both poetry and essays that seek "to capture a sense of nature as the interweaving of human and non-human relationships" ("Rethinking" 17). While Macfarlane's early work remains somewhat conservative in both style and settings, Laura Severin contends that Jamie already starts "to escape the centripetal force of past environmental narratives" with *Findings* (2005), her first collection of naturalist essays (101). Indeed, several critics have commented on her incorporation of a "plurality of perspectives" (Marland, 9; also see "Rethinking" and Dziok) that helps "to form a universal image of nature," including nonhuman as well as human beings, the inside as well as the outside of human bodies (Dziok 18). So contemplates Jamie upon her visit of the "Surgeon's Hall" in Edinburgh's Royal College of Surgeons, where she examines human specimens and body parts in glass jars, most of them marked by disease: "[w]e consider the natural world as 'out there', an 'environment', but these objects in their jars show us the forms concealed inside, the intimate unknown" (*Findings* 141). But "[i]n explaining our innate sameness with the rest of nature," Lilley argues, Jamie still "takes care to maintain attention to our difference," recognising our

concurrent sameness with, and otherness to the nonhuman natural world (“Rethinking” 22; also see Severin). This is a recognition reminiscent of Barad’s “difference amidst relationality,” to borrow Adrian Tait’s term, and in fact, Jamie’s exploration of “the porous margins between culture and nature, human and non-human worlds,” as Alexander puts it (10), has explicitly been linked to the new materialisms.⁶ Following Pippa Marland, Jamie’s work, and the NNW in general show, in their imaginative, non-apocalyptic engagement with “nature”, a potentiality to articulate new materialist thought (3)—a potentiality that we have already seen fulfilled in Macfarlane’s *Underland*.

Jamie’s and Macfarlane’s approaches have, despite their initial differences, effectively moved closer towards each other, in particular with their respective 2019 books *Underland* and *Surfacing*, Jamie’s third collection of naturalist essays after *Findings* and *Sightlines* (2012). Of course, differences in tone remain; Macfarlane’s prose continues to be “less guarded” and “more expansive” (Moran 56), while Jamie’s is self-conscious and often ironic: “in the great scheme of things,” she writes in *Surfacing*, “we’re living through a warm bank holiday weekend,” contrasting Macfarlane’s impassioned reflections on anthropogenic global warming with dry wit and a matter-of-fact attitude that is typical of her writing (3). Still, it seems nearly uncanny *how* close the two authors have converged with their recent books: both make explicit references to the Anthropocene; both engage with Inuit cultures; both explore Neolithic cave paintings; and both even end with a nearly identical setting: a walk through a local wood. However, considering that both *Underland* and *Surfacing* have been published in a time where the concept of the Anthropocene continues to seep into public consciousness, the apparent uncanniness of these similarities slowly dissolves into thin, carbon-rich air. They can much rather be read as a more general, and perhaps even unavoidable response of nature writing to the omnipresence of the Anthropocene; a response that involves a widening of scales, both spatially and temporally, but nevertheless maintains the endeavour to “[pick] out the hidden detail in the everyday, to illuminate what is overlooked” (“Rethinking” 18), not fully abandoning but rather broadening Cowley’s initial conceptualisation of the NNW.

And yet Jamie’s interpretation of our entanglement with the nonhuman world differs from Macfarlane’s in other ways than simply matters of style, particularly regarding the negotiation of the ethical implications of the new materialist perspective they have begun to share. As I have already touched upon, and as has been noted by several critics, Jamie recognises the human body, “our own intimate, inner natural world” (*Sightlines* 24), as an integral part of “nature” (Alexander 10; Dziok 18; “Rethinking” 21; Severin 103). With this recognition comes an awareness of the natural ephemerality of our own being; of the human body’s continuous exposure to death and disease, a theme that is woven into all three of Jamie’s collections of naturalist essays (see “Fever” and “Surgeon’s Hall” in *Findings*; “Pathologies” in *Sightlines*; “Surfacing”, “A Tibetan Dog”, and “Elders” in *Surfacing*). It is in her essay “Pathologies”, involving her visit to a pathology lab after the death of her mother, where she moves closest to the very nature of human disease: examining tumours and infections, “colons and livers and hearts,” Jamie observes

⁶ See Barad’s chapter on what she terms “agential realism” (pp. 132-185).

“the bacteria that can pull the rug from under us” – the “[n]ature we’d rather do without” (*Sightlines* 40; 24; 36). Referring to “our guts as jungles of bacterial flora, our skins as blooming fantastically with fungi,” Macfarlane similarly points out that encountering ourselves as multi-species beings happens “not always comfortably or pleasantly” (*Underland* 104). But while he quickly goes on to speak of humans as “collaborative compound organisms,” foreshadowing his sympathy towards the idea of a mutually beneficial Symbiocene (*Underland* 104), Jamie halts at this inclusive definition of nature. If all organic matters are part of the nature “we [are] exhorted to reconnect with,” as she repines after attending a conference “about humanity’s relationship with other species,” what about the intrinsic value of bacteria and viruses, then? (*Sightlines* 23, 22) “What are vaccinations for,” Jamie ponders, “if not to make a formal disconnection from some of these wondrous other species?” (*Sightlines* 23) What are these “other species,” what is this “nature” we seek to protect? What, exactly, counts worthy of so-called protection and reconnection? “I wondered,” Jamie writes, “if there was a distinction somewhere I simply failed to understand” (*Sightlines* 24). Her feeling of forlornness, of helplessness, in a way, poignantly illustrates the difficulty of putting a non-anthropocentric approach, dismissing human superiority and hence their entitlement to greater ethical consideration, into a consistent ethical framework. “[T]he becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter,” Barad writes (185), but then concludes “with an all too brief discussion” (in Tait’s words) what an ensuing ethical approach, including both human and nonhuman beings, could entail. As Bergthaller notes, the new materialisms tend to “merely [beg] the question how exactly [...] human value and human agency are to be weighed on the onto-ethical scales,” without providing a clear answer. Jamie’s essay “Pathologies” joins the ongoing search for a cogent resolution, alluding that the multi-species relationships Macfarlane imagines may likely struggle to fulfil their aspiration to be “reciprocally beneficial” (*Underland* 97).

In her more recent essay “In Quinhagak”, published in *Surfacing*, Jamie shifts her focus to human lives and traditions, bringing forward a version of Val Plumwood’s conceptual vegetarianism that could perhaps be read as a more general model for life in tune with the nonhuman natural world. Upon her visit of a Yup’ik excavation site in Alaska, she comes to know the contemporary Yup’ik culture, too. “Living off the land,” as Darren, one of the natives, puts it, the lives of the indigenous people are still entangled with the land and its nonhuman inhabitants; their “culinary year” is organised through the natural cycles of “the land and sea and river,” through hunting and fishing and berry picking according to the seasons (*Surfacing* 22, 63). But as the Anthropocene has invariably changed the landscapes of Kulusuk Island, where Macfarlane experiences age-old traditions like hunting “under threat of erasure” (*Underland* 335), climate change is similarly felt in the lives of the Yup’ik people: “winter was bad,” Darren recalls. “Same last year too. And then April, May, June were too hot” (*Surfacing* 22). What shimmers through the text is a certain nostalgia for a time before anthropogenic climate change, for “a time when the Yup’ik were hunter-gatherers and fended for themselves, when they did just fine” (*Surfacing* 18). How does this fit in a new materialist perspective, when their “doing-just-fine” involves the killing of nonhuman animal beings, lifting the wellbeing of the human species above that of others? Not an explicitly materialist theorist herself (likely

because her writings appeared before the rise of the new materialisms), Plumwood argues that, while continuing to “[reject] human-centered assumptions of mastery over animals,” “we can still justify well-contextualized forms of vegetarianism” – forms that include, perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, a contextually justified consumption of animals as well (298). She contends that “the successful human occupation of many places and ecological situations in the world has required the use of at least some of their animals for food and other purposes,” naming “places like the high Arctic regions, where for much of the year few vegetable resources are available,” as “[t]he most obvious examples” (305). Rather than shipping or flying in resources from other parts in the world and, in the process, further stressing the Earth’s ecological system, the use of locally available foods appears as the “more” ethical choice in Plumwood’s model, even if it includes the harming of some of this system’s participants. Jamie links this “use” to tradition and, above all, to subsistence, as opposed to, for example, “sports fishing” that is associated with “anglers from the southern USA” (*Surfacing* 44). It is hence a model that allows the sacrifice of individual beings for the sake of the survival of a species, putting the value of a whole species and, by extension, the ecosystem, of which we are all integrally part, above that of the individual. In this way, Jamie’s take holds evident similarities to an ecocentric perspective, which foregrounds “the intrinsic value in ecosystems” rather than that of individual entities (Gray, Whyte and Curry 130). Thinking back to Barad’s account of the world in its “ongoing reconfiguring,” arguing that “[e]xistence is not an individual affair” but emerges through “entangled intra-relating,” it is a take that appears very much in line with new materialist thought (338, ix).

But the all-pervasive human impact through ongoing globalisation processes that are part of the Anthropocene affects such subsistence cultures, too, as Jamie’s experiences in Quinhagak show, underscoring once more the intricacies of integrating this ecocentric, and new materialist perspective into an ethical framework. While still “living off the land” to a certain extent, the Yup’ik people have not been spared from modernisation; they have become “[h]unter-gatherers with a grocery store,” as Jamie ironically puts it (*Surfacing* 32), smoking Marlboro (79) and watching Netflix (90). Such implications of a globalised world reach deep into age-old tradition, for instance changing the preparation of Yup’ik food. When a local girl tells Jamie that she will make *akutaq*—“eskimo ice cream,” as she explains—Jamie asks what kind of fat is used to prepare it: “Seal fat? [The girl] pulled a face. ‘No, something we buy from the store’ (*Surfacing* 43). This example touches upon an important point raised by Tait, namely that an ecocentric perspective “requires us to identify what humans themselves need (as opposed to want or demand), and how those needs might be balanced against the earth’s needs.” If there are alternative resources available, the question arises whether it can truly be justified to hunt animals for food, and because it is tradition; after all, the locals do not “need” the hunted animals to survive, and traditions “need” to be adapted “to take account of new contexts,” as Plumwood herself has argued (306). But demanding of an indigenous culture that is part of “the precariat of a volatile, fast warping planet,” to put it in Macfarlane’s words (*Underland* 335), to give up on age-old traditions while the Western world continues to emit a much larger amount of greenhouse gases, picking at their not-even-vegan meals, clearly appears

too short-sighted. “We can’t go on like this,” Jamie states in a later chapter of *Surfacing*, adding: “but we wouldn’t go back either” (156). Reinvigorating hunter-gatherer traditions is no more an option than continuing to disrupt the Earth System at the unprecedented pace that is happening today, producing agential forces that lie far beyond human control. Contemporary nature writing shows that these ubiquitous implications of the Anthropocene have made it virtually inevitable to imagine this interdependent system as fundamentally material and co-constitutive. Now it is high time to imagine new, more inclusive ways of living, as Macfarlane has already begun to do, and to formulate a clear ethical framework that helps to make such “new ways” possible, as Jamie’s work urgently expresses.

Conclusion

We have seen how the immeasurable scale of the Anthropocene with its enormous implications has influenced contemporary nature writing, too, namely in a way that seeks to do justice to both the interplay of human and nonhuman agencies, and to the immensity of this scale itself. And still, zooming in on everyday encounters with “nature” in all its forms, with that what often remains overlooked, seems necessary to comprehend our entanglement in this more-than-human world; to create an intimacy towards nonhuman matters that emphasises their intrinsic value. Bennett has argued that such “moments of sensuous enchantment with the everyday world” (referring to “that strange combination of delight and disturbance” rather than moments of rapture) may provide the necessary motivational force that leads humans “to the actual practice of ethical behaviors” (xi). Macfarlane’s engagement with fungal networks shows how this “sensuous enchantment” may encourage an envisioning of new, more inclusive forms of living; Jamie’s work portends that it remains unclear what, and whom “the actual practice of ethical behaviors” could effectively entail. Perhaps this is the reason why she is, outside an academic circle, not *quite* as often referred to as Macfarlane: because, just as the new materialisms themselves, she “offers no single, obvious, commanding answer,” to put it into Tait’s words; “no new dogma, no straightforward rallying cry around which to gather a new form of radical environmental activism”. But instead of lapsing into resignation at the sight of all those unanswered questions, she urges us to go on, to keep looking—“because if you don’t look, you don’t see” (*Surfacing* 95). Or, as Jamie puts it in *Surfacing*’s last chapter, where she finds herself “lost in the wood”: “[t]he path is at your feet, see? Now carry on” (245). Similarly, we need to carry on along the path towards new understandings of this ever-changing world; of this web of relations we are intricately part of. Both Macfarlane and Jamie spur us on to move towards such new ways of thinking, even if these ways are sometimes not pleasant or comfortable, and this is what makes their work so necessary in these uncertain times of the Anthropocene.

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