The Ocean in Contemporary Norwegian Literature[1]

Călina-Maria Moldovan
Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania
calina.moldovan@ubbcluj.ro

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse the way in which the ocean is depicted in several contemporary Norwegian literary works. The analysed volumes are *Mandø* (2009), by Kjersti Vik, the so-called *Barrøy Chronicles*, by Roy Jacobsen (2013-2020), *Shark Drunk* (2015), by Morten Strøksnes, and *The End of the Ocean* (2017), by Maja Lunde. This research is situated at the intersection between ecocriticism and new materialist theories. In this sense, it draws extensively on approaches such as Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's material ecocriticism, as well as on more recent scholarship that integrates literary theory with new materialist thought. Building on Juha Raipola's critique of material ecocriticism, this article argues that if the behavior of the more-than-human world remains inaccessible to humans, it can only be approached through speculation. Speculation becomes particularly relevant when it comes to literature, as, according to Kerstin Howaldt and Kai Merten, it celebrates human finiteness. The human characters in the selected volumes seek connection with the more-than-human world by projecting human stories onto places where they are clearly absent: some read whales as planets, other interpret the movement of waves as a sea chantey. Most of the times, these characters are fully aware of the insurmountable rift between them and the nonhuman environment they inhabit, and this is what engenders the speculation in the first place.

Keyworks: Contemporary Norwegian literature, blue humanities, blue ecocriticism, material ecocriticism, new materialism.

Resumen

Este trabajo pretende analizar cómo se retrata el océano en varias obras literarias noruegas contemporáneas. Los volúmenes que se analizan son *Mandø* (2009), de Kjersti Vik, las llamadas *Barrøy Chronicles*, de Roy Jacobsen (2013-2020), *Shark Drunk* (2015), de Morten Strøksnes, y *The End of the Ocean* (2017), de Maja Lunde. Esta investigación se sitúa en la intersección entre la ecocrítica y las teorías del nuevo materialismo. En este sentido, recurre ampliamente a enfoques como la ecocrítica material de Serenella Iovino y Serpil Opperman, pero también a aproximaciones más recientes que unen la teoría literaria a las teorías del nuevo materialismo. Partiendo de la crítica que Juha Raipola hace de la ecocrítica material, este artículo sugiere que, si el comportamiento del mundo más que humano es inalcanzable para el ser humano, la única forma de aproximarnos a él es a través de la especulación. La especulación se vuelve especialmente relevante en lo que respecta a la literatura, ya que, según Kerstin Howaldt y Kai Merten, celebra lo finito del ser humano. Los personajes humanos en los volúmenes escogidos buscan conexiones con el mundo más que humano localizando historias humanas donde están claramente ausentes: algunos interpretan las ballenas como planetas, otros, el movimiento de las olas como una saloma. La mayoría de las veces, estos personajes son plenamente conscientes de la grieta infranqueable entre ellos y el entorno no humano que habitan, y esto es lo que engendra la especulación desde el principio.

Palabras clave: Literatura noriega contemporánea, humanidades azules, ecocrítica azul, ecocrítica material, nuevo materialismo.

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Introduction

The End of the Ocean (2017) is Maja Lunde's second novel in her "climate quartet" and was published after the worldwide success of *The History of Bees*. At the beginning of this novel, Signe—one of the central characters in the story—describes her relationship with water as follows: "My whole world was water. The ground, the mountains, the pastures were just teeny tiny islands in that which actually was the world and I called my world Earth, but thought that it should actually be named Water" (Lunde 11). In Morten Strøksnes's *Shark Drunk* (2015), a nonfiction account of the author's journey on the icy waters of Northern Norway, we encounter a similar perspective:

> On the plane to Bodø I fixed my gaze on the land below. Through the oval window I could see mountains, forests, and plains, which I imagined as a raised seabed. A couple of billion years ago the entire earth was covered with water, except maybe for a few small islands here and there. Even today, the ocean still makes up more than 70 percent of the earth's surface. It has been said that our planet's name shouldn't be Earth. Instead, it would be more appropriate to call it Ocean. (11)

While they propose two different appellatives for our planet, both Lunde and Strøksnes challenge our land-centred perspective on the world, rethinking existence itself in terms of fluidity. The past few years have witnessed a compelling urge for ecocritical studies and environmental humanities to turn their attention to "the aqueous turn in ecocritical studies" (Why 10), the *blue humanities*, or *blue ecocriticism*, a field which explores the role waterscapes play in our human lives and in our human-made stories. As Steven Mentz suggests, "the ocean may be the next frontier for environmental historians" (Mentz 5). The blue humanities explore how humans engage with and relate to diverse bodies of water and waterscapes. In the context of the Anthropocene, the sea has become an indicator of our vulnerability: melting glaciers and the shrinking of the ice sheet create a ripple effect and affect humanity on a global scale, "connecting the activity of the earth's poles with the rest of the terrestrial world and producing a new sense of planetary scale and interconnectedness through the rising of a world ocean" (DeLoughrey 34). This 'blue turn' engenders the emergence of new modes of thinking about the Earth and its sensibilities, depths, and boundaries and invites us to grant more attention to the fluid, aqueous dimensions of our lives.

In her article "Nordic Contemporary Fiction Grieving the Loss of Snow" from 2022, Sissel Furuseth mentions that "ice and snow are […] important components of the Nordic winter and significant in our cultural memory" (Furuseth 5). I would add that water—and the ocean in particular—constitutes a significant element of Norwegian identity. Due to its rugged shores, its fjords, islands and islets, Norway possesses the world's longest coastline after Canada.[3] Even prior to the global climate crisis and the emergence of Anthropocene consciousness, the ocean appeared to be a central theme in Norwegian literature. Examples of an *avant-la-lettre* blue ecological thinking in the Norwegian literary tradition include Alexander Kielland's beautiful rendering of the sea in the beginning chapter of his novel *Garman & Worse* (1880), Jonas Lie's encounters with the icy waters of Northern Norway in *The Visionary* (1870), or more recent novels such as Jens Bjørneboe's *Haiene* (1974), which reflects on the life at sea of the Norwegian sailor. In the light of climate change and the Anthropocene, one can now pinpoint a new tendency in contemporary Norwegian literature. *Cli-fi*, or climate-fiction, has become an important movement in more recent works from Norway. In this context, one can also identify a certain revival of 'ocean narratives.' With the cryosphere shrinking and glaciers melting at an accelerating pace, it seems mandatory to contemplate water, in its numerous forms, shapes, and states, and to recognise our dependence on water systems and bodies. This article's main scope is therefore to investigate how the ocean is represented in contemporary Norwegian literature and the role it plays inside the narrative. The ocean becomes an engaged actor in the development of the characters' lives, especially since most of the action in these stories takes place on coasts or islands (and even on boats) surrounded by the constant presence of salt waters: "We come to identify with, or are touched and moved in different ways, by the waters that we experience" (Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis 23). Water narratives flow into our storymaking processes and help us to find meaning in the world.

Before turning to the analysis of the volumes, I will briefly summarise and introduce them. *Mandø* (2009), by Kjersti Vik, tells the story of a group of friends that spend a holiday on Mandø (an island in the Wadden Sea, an intertidal zone in the southeastern part of the North Sea). The group of young friends are frustrated with the island and its landscape, as it does not meet their expectations of a pleasant beach holiday. The water is not clear blue, the sand is not smooth and soft. The only one who recognizes the beauty and the wonder in this environment is Claus, a young resident of the island, who is constantly mesmerised by Mandø's capacity to exist beyond human-centred systems. Roy Jacobsen's *The Barrøy Chronicles* revolve around the Barrøy family's and especially Ingrid Barrøy's life. *The Unseen* (2013) is the first volume of the series, a coming-of-age story which follows Ingrid from early childhood into early adulthood. The other three volumes are *White Shadow* (2015), *Eyes of the Rigel* (2017) and *Just a Mother* (2020). The series brings forward the life of islanders in Northern Norway, on Helgelandskysten, and the way they interact with the surrounding salt waters. The ocean accompanies and supports Ingrid in her quest for finding her long-lost lover Magnus, for raising her child, and later in her duty as the matriarch of the island. As Katie Ritson observes, Jacobsen's novels are "calls to look back, and look closely" (126) to these coastal communities which had long been ignored and, therefore, deemed invisible. *Shark Drunk* (2015), by Morten Strøksnes, a work of non-fiction, brings forward the story of the author himself, who goes on a daring and risky journey on the waters of Northern Norway. The purpose of his journey is to catch a Greenland shark. The ocean seems, however, to deconstruct the "man over nature" narrative, which the two men take for granted, at least in the beginning. The book is "a genre-resistant form that blends elements of masculine conquest narratives with essayistic nature writing" (Jákupsstovu 193). *The End of the Ocean* (2017), by Maja Lunde, presents a scenario in which water becomes scarce for

Europe's population, gradually turning the continent into a desert. The story follows two different timelines: the present in which Signe, a former environmental activist tells us her story about how she tried to save Norway's glaciers, and a speculative future in which Europe becomes overwhelmed by climate refugees who seek water, food, and shelter. Using two different narrative planes, Lunde "rises to the challenge of depicting climate change as a phenomenon unfolding on a large temporal and spatial scale" (Bozîntan 55).

Methodology

My analysis is positioned at the intersection of ecocriticism and new materialist theory. In this sense, I heavily rely on approaches such as Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann's material ecocriticism, which claims that matter, "in all its forms, becomes a site of narrativity, a storied matter, embodying its own narratives in the minds of human agents and in the very structure of its own self-constructive forces" (Iovino and Oppermann 83). Throughout the years, this approach has received its fair share of criticism; a notable mention here is Juha Raipola's article "Unnarratable Matter: Emergence, Narrative, and Material Ecocriticism" from 2020. Here, Raipola states that "when we interpret the more-than-human world through a narrative lens, we must also remain wary of our own tendency to narrativize complex, emergent behavior into simplified and anthropocentric stories" and that "[n]o matter how hard we try to fit this world into our cultural landscape of narrative sense-making, a major part of its behavior always remains unreachable" (276). This is both accurate and relevant. However, what if there is nothing to reach? What if finding narratives where they are evidently absent is our human way of meeting matter halfway? What if the goal is not to fathom the unreachable behaviour of the more-than-human world, but to *try*? What if, just as matter cannot perform narratives, humans cannot comprehend the world without them and therefore perceive them even where they are missing? What if this is not an issue, a flaw or a weakness on our part, but a willingness to get closer? What is of utmost importance is not escaping anthropocentrism, for it cannot be escaped, but trying, attempting, be willing to grasp what is ultimately fully ungraspable. In my view, material ecocriticism seeks to do precisely that. It is not a process of getting to a destination, but the process of getting closer to that destination, being fully aware that the destination cannot ever be reached. This will be the starting point of my analysis as well. While the narratives that will be investigated in the present thesis are indeed anthropocentric (can they be considered otherwise since they are written by humans about humans and for humans?), their strength lies in the *attempt* of dissolving certain biases that ultimately are impossible to be completely erased, in the attempt of getting closer. This attempt is, I argue, worth researching. If, as Juha Raipola claims in the passage quoted above, a major part of the behaviour displayed by the more-than-human world will always remain unreachable, what is left is to *speculate*. Accordingly, this article also relies on newer scholarship such as Kerstin Howaldt and Kai Merten's volume *New Materialist*

Literary Theory. Critical Conceptions of Literature for the Anthropocene (2024) or Kai Merten's *Diffractive Reading: New Materialism, Theory, Critique* (2021). In *New Materialist Literary Theory*, Howaldt and Merten explain speculation in the following way:

> Since objects have a life outside human thought which cannot be fully reached or exhausted by human cognition or any other relation, our knowledge of the world (of objects) is radically finite. All we can do is speculate about it. Speculation, however, is more than just an impoverished, ultimately futile human-world relation; at least, it holds the promise that there is a rich and deep world outside human thought that we can reach, as it were, a *little*. (6)

Speculation becomes particularly relevant when it comes to literature, as it provides "accurate experiences both of the inaccuracy of the human grasp of the world and of the unexpectable, unheard-of or even imperceptible qualities we must therefore expect it to have" (6). Speculation is, I argue, the way in which the human characters in the selected volumes engage with the ocean, even though this process keeps emerging from a human-centered viewpoint. When attempting to grasp the more-than-human world, the human characters will often read (human-made and human-centred) stories where they are clearly absent. These stories will, however, create bridges, as the "inaccuracy of the human grasp" (6) is here not something to run away from, but something to explore, be curious about, and even celebrate.

Diffractive reading is another method which turns out to be especially useful in the analysis of the selected volumes; it implies reading texts through one another, avoiding pre-labelling them and thus withstanding possible biases. Just like Baradian elements that emerge through their intra-action, texts, when read through a diffractive lens, create one another through their entanglement. The selected books share several themes and topics that reverberate throughout the narratives and complement one another. One example to be discussed in more detail later is the encounter between humans and nonhuman animals, a recurring theme; the episodes in which these encounters are depicted are, as the reader will get to discover, strangely similar. Reading these (often disruptive, but still soft) encounters through one another means recoding their meaning and tuning it to a larger context; in this sense, the texts communicate with one another unintentionally, and become a mesh, an assemblage.

The article is divided into three sections, namely: (1) global assemblages, (2) movement and flow, and (3) disruptive encounters; each of these sections takes up a theme or a motif that echoes through all the selected texts when a diffractive reading is employed.

Global Assemblages

The first section focuses on the inter- and intra-action that is formed between the world's oceans, which create a planetary, interconnected and interdependent system: "Waters literally flow between and within bodies, across space and through time, in a planetary circulation system that challenges pretensions to discrete individuality" (Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis 27). Fluids tend to "breach borders and invite the confluence and collaboration of things; they challenge an ordering of the world according to a logic of separation and self-sufficiency" (Neimanis 186). Sidney Dobrin claims that the bodies of saltwater that cover the planet "are a singular aquatic body divided only by human cartography and discourse for the sake of conveniences" and that thus "we must now think not of the world's oceans, but of the world's ocean—singular—[…]" (Dobrin 1). In this sense, water creates a planetary system or network that works like an assemblage. Inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jane Bennett describes assemblages as "living, throbbing confederations" which have "uneven topographies" and are not governed by any central power (29) but exist as rhizomatic entities where agency and force are equally distributed. The assemblage "has no essence, and its trajectory is not linear. [...] Key to an assemblage is that the parts that compose it are heterogeneous and independent, and it is from the relations between the parts that the temporary, contingent whole emerges" (Steinberg and Peters 17). Especially relevant in this context turns out to be Cord-Christian Casper's article "How to Get Outside: Assemblages in Speculative Nature Writing" from the previously discussed volume *New Materialist Literary Theory* (2024). The article aims to connect and bridge Karen Barad's entanglement and Graham Harman' speculative realism. While Barad's entanglement assumes that objects do not preexist their interactions, but are created through and by them, Harman's speculation implies a flat ontology, where objects are deeply and ultimately self-contained, completely inaccessible to other objects. Cord-Christian Casper reads multi-object, cross-time assemblages (whose elements are deeply interconnected and entangled, to use Barad's terminology) as spaces from where human components tend to withdraw and recede, spaces that seem, in Harman's words, inaccessible and unavailable to humans. This approach deeply resonates with the global water assemblage depicted in the selected volumes, which are multi-object, cross-time congregations that often seem ungraspable to the human characters who try to approach them. In this sense, these assemblages are both created by their intra-actions (currents that meet in the depths or waves which collapse into each other), but they are also objects of speculation, self-contained and unobtainable. In Maja Lunde's *Signe*, this assemblage is depicted in terms of contact between different bodies, whether human or nonhuman:

> Nothing stopped the water. You could follow it from the mountain to the fjord, from the snow that fell from the clouds and settled on the peaks, to the mist that rose above the ocean and again became clouds. […] The River Breio continued all the way to Ringfjorden, and there, in the village at sea level, the river met with salt water. There the water from the glacier became one with the ocean. Ringfjorden, my village. And then they were together, the water from the glacier and the water from the ocean, until the sun absorbed the drops once more, drew them up into the air as mist, to the clouds where they escaped the force of gravity. (Lunde 6)

The keyword of this scene seems to be the "merging" of different bodies into one another. Water droplets that pour down from the melting glacier become one with the ocean. The ocean is a mosaic of different liquid identities, all flowing and merging in a space of cooperation and confluence. It engenders a "generative interconnectivity of human and nonhuman forces, thereby displacing human agency from its central position within the world" (Why 20). In this sense, humans have little influence over the flow of ocean currents, the formation of waves, or the cyclic movement of the tide; human agency is set aside and no longer needed in a space-system like the ocean, where the flow of everything precedes human intention or even human existence for that matter. The human element withdraws from the whole process.

In *The Unseen*, after a dangerous storm, the islanders observe a large tree on the beach. The tree is not familiar to them, since it is a Russian larch, a species of tree that does not grow on the coastal areas of Northern Norway. The currents, the waves, the storm (hence, the assemblage) have carried it here: "[...] one autumn morning Hans Barrøy finds a whole tree that the storm has torn up and deposited on the southern tip of the island. An enormous tree" (Jacobsen *The Unseen* 18). However, human agency plays no role in this: the whole episode questions the role humans play inside this assemblage, since human presence is not registered at all. As Marte Viken claims, attention is here directed to the tree's journey throughout the world: the tree receives a background and a history and is thus given a meaning that goes beyond what seems useful and relevant to humans (50). The episode is narrated in the following way:

> It is a Russian larch which through the centuries has grown strong and mighty on the banks of the Yenisei in the wilds south of Krasnoyarsk, where the winds that rage across the taiga have left their mark like a comb in greasy hair, until the time when a spring flood with teeth of ice toppled the tree into the river and transported it three or four thousand kilometres north to the Kara Sea and left it in the clutches of its briny currents, which carried it north to the edge of the ice and then west past Novaya Zemlya and Spitsbergen and all the way up to the coasts of Greenland and Iceland, where warmer currents wrested it from their grip and drove it north-west again, in a mighty arc halfway around the earth, taking in all a decade or two, until a final storm swept it onto an island on the Norwegian coast. (Jacobsen, *The Unseen* 18)

All the water particles that have travelled the globe across its northern hemisphere, all the currents, the waves, and the processes that have taken place, so that the tree could end up on Barrøy—find their final destination here, in the waters of the Norwegian Sea. At the same time, all these particles will rise again, in the form of mist and vapour, and all the waves and currents will shortly be travelling back, to the very same place them came from, or to other, faraway places, they have not experienced before. Just like any other element of the assemblage, the sea is, therefore, neither end nor beginning. The tree's journey started in Russia, on the banks of the river Yenisei; it has then travelled along the Northern borders of Russia until it reached the North-Western part of Norway. The assemblage creates this planetary network of nonhuman actants that put everything into motion, connecting water bodies all over the planet. This confederation of forces is blind and indifferent when it comes to boundaries and man-made frontiers; human contribution is barely present, let alone registered. Strøksnes seems to share the same perspective. While sailing on the stormy sea, a few drops from the salty waters meet his face. The encounter between the liquid body of the sea and the solid body of the human engenders a sort of revelatory experience:

> The drops that strike my face have been in the Gulf of Mexico, in the Bay of Biscay, through the Bering Strait, and around the Cape of Good Hope many times. Maybe over the eons they've actually been in all the oceans, both big and small. In the form of rain they have washed over dry land; there they have been lapped up thousands of times by animals, people, and plants, only to evaporate, transpire, or run back out to sea, again and again. Over billions of years the water molecules have been everywhere on earth. (118)

Just like in the case of Lunde's and Jacobsen's novels, the sea helps Strøksnes connect with the rest of the world. Here, human presence is revealed only as a means of provoking and inciting this connection, which further leads to speculation.

Movement and Flow

This next part of the article aims to take a closer look at the local, regional, specific movement of the sea waters. In *Shark Drunk*, Strøksnes describes the ocean as a "giant organism" (68): not only its waters flow around the world, connecting disjointed places and spaces, but they also flow inside and throughout the ocean itself. The sea becomes this intricate network of moving forces that flow in an incessant flux, as it changes consistency, shape and colour. It is in a process of constant becoming, never reaching a final and conclusive stage, just like its waters never reach a final destination inside the assemblage-network. It is continually moving and pouring in, through and between bodies, but it is also continually flowing within itself. The sea "is indisputably voluminous, stubbornly material, and unmistakably undergoing continual re-formation" (Steinberg and Peters 5). The vectors that create this type of movement and vibrancy inside the ocean are waves, currents, or the tide that creates courses and trajectories within the ocean itself, deeming it an intricate system of nerves and forces. In *Shark Drunk*, the tide is described as a 'pulse': "Yesterday the sea glittered and crackled with light. Today it has a steady, calm glow. The ocean has found its lowest resting pulse, as it does only after many days of good weather in the summertime" (Strøksnes 72). If the ocean can be thought of as this 'giant organism,' then the tide is its pulse, its breathing. There is a certain rhythm of the tide, a throb that manifests itself through consistent and systematic ebbs and falls, through rhythmical pulsations (Moldovan 206). In *The Unseen*, the tide is compared to the breathing of human beings:

> A silence like this is rare. What is special about it is that it occurs on an island. […]. It is mystical, it borders on the thrilling, it is a faceless stranger in a black cloak wandering across the island with inaudible footsteps. The duration depends on the time of year, silence can last longer in the winter, with ice on the ground, while in summer there is always a slight pause between one wind and the next, between high and low tide or the miracle that takes place in humans as they change from breathing in to breathing out. (73)

The breathing of humans is here compared to several more-than-human processes, as for instance the blowing of the wind, the succession of seasons, and, finally, the breathing of the sea (the tide). All these processes imply movement and fluidity, and even cyclicity: "[t]here is a certain synchronicity between the rhythm of the island, the rhythm of the sea, and that of the human. They all follow the same pattern. Islanders are deeply connected to the cycles of nature, which they appropriate and adopt" (Moldovan 207). All the metaphors used to describe these complex nonhuman processes (like the tide characterised as a pulse or a breath, or the whole ocean defined as a 'giant organism') are indeed anthropocentric and, to some extent, anthropomorphic or biomorphic. However, this does not seem to work as an obstacle, but as an attempt to get closer to these nonhuman mechanisms and to better understand them—making kin with the tide is no easy task. On Mandø, Maja (a young girl who is part of the group visiting the island), describes the tide as something 'ungraspable' by humans. It precedes human intention and human needs and seems to be completely indifferent and unaware of them: "The conditions on the island are simply incompatible with communication, and consequently with modern life. They have *submitted* themselves to the tide on Mandø, the tide's logic, which is more or less incomprehensible for the human species" (Vik 13).[2] The inhabitants of Mandø have somehow 'submitted themselves' to the natural rhythm of the tide. Human agency has therefore been displaced from its central role in the ecosystem, it is no longer the dominant, the superior force, but just another element in the mesh (Morton, *The Ecological* 15), an element which operates in a certain collaboration with the nonhuman world. Nevertheless, Maja acknowledges that the tide remains 'incomprehensible' for humans, inaccessible and unreachable.

The continual churning of the ocean is not only a process of planetary (or even cosmic) proportions or global interactions, but also as fragmentary, granular, atomic system of synergies and reciprocities. Morten Strøksnes calls this "the dance of molecules:"

> Hydrogen bonds hold multiple water molecules together in a loose arrangement in which each molecule is constantly joining with the others, in a sort of dance, with the partners changing several billion times a second. The molecules combine at a dizzying speed in ever-new variations, like letters joining together to form new words, which then become sentences and maybe even whole books. If you think of water molecules as letters, you could say that the sea contains all the books ever written in both known and unknown languages. In the oceans other languages and alphabets also arose, such as RNA and DNA, molecules in which genes connect and disconnect in the waves that wash through the helical structures and determine whether the result will be a flower, fish, starfish, firefly, or human being. (Strøksnes 100)

Strøksnes implies that humans are the result of just another molecular permutation, like every other (human or nonhuman) body that exists in the world. If molecules are letters, the world is just an immense canvas on which everything is 'written' or imprinted, and every little thing that exists, be it human or nonhuman, is just another permutation, another re-arrangement of particles. Cleverly illustrating the premise of material ecocriticism, Strøksnes sees letters and books where there are waves and

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[2] "Da finnes det ingen forbindelse til fastlandet. Båt går heller ikke an å bruke, siden tidevannsstrømmene er så 'lumske,' som det heter på hjemmesidene deres. Forholdene rundt øya er rett og slett uforenlige med kommunikasjon, og følgelig med moderne liv. De har underlagt seg tidevannet på Mandø, tidevannets logikk, som er mer eller mindre ubegripelig for menneskearten" (my translation).

water particles. To grasp what is ultimately ungraspable for humans, he uses an anthropocentric lens through which he 'reads' complex nonhuman processes, which he playfully calls a 'dance.' This 'dance' of molecules is nothing but constant movement and continual rearrangement. Movement, therefore, possess the ability to—even life—because movement ultimately means liveliness. Timothy Morton compares "particles [which] fold back into the implicate order" with "ocean waves [which] subside" (*Hyperobjects* 43). These processes create our reality "in which everything is enfolded in everything else" (*Hyperobjects* 43), everything is inter-connected and inter-dependent. Each becoming is dependent on other becomings, each molecule is following its path among other molecules, like ocean waves that are collapsing into each other, merging together in space and time. It is not only molecules that dance, but the ocean as well; using another (anthropocentric) metaphor, Strøksnes compares the sea with an old sea chantey. Just like music is a rhythmical succession of tones, the sea is a rhythmical succession of waves: "I'm going out to the sea, which is free and endless, rhythmic and swaying like the old sea chanteys sung across the oceans of the world" (Strøksnes 12).

Key for all the processes that emerge in the ocean is movement. When two waves meet, they cancel each other and fuse. However, movement does not stop even when the two opposing forces seem to clash, because "movement never stops. It [only] suspends itself in its own furtherance" (Manning and Massumi 51). Even though there is no visible movement in that precise moment when two waves cancel each other, movement did never actually stop, it only waited in suspense for an "uncountable beat:"

> Movement doesn't actually stop. It subsides into itself. It relaxes back into its field, for the reoccurring. It collapses back into the nonlocality of its any-point, the unlocalized interval of no perceptible movement. [...] Waves collect. Overbalance. And fall. The form of movement, in and of itself, is not a straight line. It is a pulse. It is a waveform. (51)

When waves collapse into one another, they cancel each other out and create a 'nonlocality:' space is dissolved. However, this is not just a suspension of space, but also of time. The 'uncountable' beat in which two waves meet, that fraction of a second, does not really exist. Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters write that territory is formed precisely through movement, that the sea and the ocean are constant "emergences," in the sense that they are continually created and re-created, formed and re-formed, with no permanent or fixed boundaries (Steinberg and Peters 17). Space and territory are "formed and reformed by the elements that add to the assemblage (reterritorialising it) and leave the assemblage (deterritorialising it)" (Steinberg and Peters 17). This adding and leaving is nothing but just another type of movement, a rhythmic sway that not only creates, but also expands (the already created) space: "Each wave, shaped by the wind, marks the water's surface and gives the sea not only (ever shifting) depth but also form—calm or angry, placid or brooding" (Steinberg and Peters 8). Steinberg and Peters themselves seem to anthropomorphise the ocean, to ascribe feelings and emotions to it. They conclude that, if we could understand waves in all their complexity

> as forces, as vectors, as assemblages of molecules and meanings, as spaces of periodicity, randomness, instability and transformation, and as volumes (depths) and areas (surfaces)—then waves, and the wet ontology they exemplify, may be exceptionally well suited for understanding the politics of our watery planet. (Steinberg and Peters 27)

Except for their perpetual dance, nothing is ever steady when it comes to waves. That is why the spaces they create through their movement are nothing "but a tumbling of continuous variations with fuzzy borders" (Bennett 84). This unsteadiness renders oceanic spaces especially difficult to grasp. If the more-than-human world is already out of reach for humans, watery environments and particularly saltwater bodies become even more evasive because of their constant movement and their continual emergence.

Disruptive encounters

This third and last section is dedicated to the encounters between human and nonhuman animals, *in* or *on* the sea. Both Lunde and Strøksnes emphasize the richness of the unreachable world that lies under the ocean surface. This realm is not only unavailable and distant, but it seems completely inaccessible (and *un*accessible) to humans. Humanness acts as a barrier: "[b]ut for all we know there are more species in the depths, and almost all life down there possesses astonishing characteristics, as if belonging to a different planet or created in a distant past when other rules applied and any fantasy could be realized. Down in the deep, life is like a dream from which it takes a long time to awaken" (Strøksnes 47). For Strøksnes, as for many others who have actively sailed the sea and lived in the proximity of the ocean, these spaces seem to possess such complex features, that the thought of human dominion or human superiority looks almost like a foolish naiveté, sustained by a species that thinks of itself as being the centre of everything. What remains, then, but to speculate—try to approach the unapproachable through stories? While describing the deep seas, Strøksnes uses the following words:

> the deep, salty black sea rolls toward us, cold and indifferent, lacking all empathy. Detached, merely itself. This is what the ocean does every day. It doesn't need us for anything, it doesn't care about our hopes and fears—nor does it give a damn about our descriptions. The dark weight of the sea is a superior power. (Strøksnes 154)

The author paints the deep, salty waters as something alien and strange, even mystical or transcendent. This obscure entity is unapproachable because it is superior and out of reach for humans. The sea receives a backstory as an unconcerned, apathetic villain who does not mind human beings. Apart from this encounter with the sea itself understood as a sort of mythical being, the selected volumes feature several confrontations between human and nonhuman animals. While sailing, Signe meets a whale, and experiences something which is close to an epiphany:

> This whale can't be alone either, it is bound to have a partner or a child nearby. And anyway, it has the entire ocean beneath it, with all the life it contains, the unimaginable number of species. Only I'm alone up here on the surface, only me and the huge surface of the ocean and an infinite emptiness above me. I am a cross on a map, a dot on a surface, insignificant, almost invisible, as we all are, because from a distance, from above, each and every one of us disappears. From outer space it is water one sees, the ocean, the clouds, the drops that give the earth life. The blue globe, different from all the other planets we know about, just as alone in the universe as each and every one of us down here. (Lunde 195)

Her encounter with the whale triggers a deep loneliness; she loses herself, as she is confronted with her humanness and vulnerability. Strikingly, it is a meeting with a nonhuman animal that triggers this revelation. Nevertheless, even though what she witnesses outside is exceptional, Signe quickly forgets the spectacle in front of her and turns inwards to own struggles and problems. Signe has been criticised by Julianne Egerer as being too individualistic (74), proud (70), and patronizing (56), unable to surpass anthropocentric biases. According to Egerer, Signe is unable to connect to the more-than-human world because of her rational, cold, bitter attitude towards everything: "Signe shrugs off intimate, caring, identifying, and spiritual relationships with humans, more-than-humans, and Earth itself as weak and sentimental" (74). While all this is certainly true in many episodes in the novel (most episodes, I would say), when the whale disappears, Signe concedes: "You have to stay, dear whale, you have to stay here with me, just stay" (Lunde 195). Here, the woman surrenders to the *possibility* of vulnerability and welcomes the prospect of kinship and solidarity between species. Throughout the narrative, Signe is depicted as someone who "is not a caring ally of nature and does not perceive nature as an equal partner, but as a threatened and hierarchically subordinated protégé who needs her patronizing help" (Egerer 56). Here, however, it seems that the one needing help is Signe herself, who asks the whales to stay and keep her company; she becomes the threatened animal that needs care. The unexpected meeting between her and the whale is not the only episode where Signe displays this kind of vulnerability. Earlier in the story, when the woman visits Blåfonna, a glacier near her village that has profoundly affected her as a child and a teenager, she experiences another emotionally charged moment: "I take off one mitten and place my hand against the ice—it is alive beneath my fingers, my glacier [...]. Too old to cry, too old for these tears, but nonetheless my cheeks are damp" (Lunde 14). Signe addresses the glacier as "dear, dear Blåfonna" (13), in the same manner as she addressed the whale. The connection, albeit short and, if not superficial, at least hurried, is created here through touch, as Signe needs direct contact between her fingers and the body of the glacier.

In *Just a Mother*, the fourth volume of the Roy Jacobsens's Barrøy-series, while out at sea on the Salthammer (the whaling ship the family has bought), Ingrid witnesses something extraordinary: she sees six finback whales swimming in the ocean, and she experiences the same feelings and has the same reaction as Signe.

> [Ingrid] sees three gigantic finback whales frolicking around the boat, all bigger than the Salthammer, [...] blue planets twisting and turning, as smoothly and soundlessly as birds in the air. [...] Ingrid's gaze caresses these wonderful creatures, six of them

> now, she feels the boat rise and hover, the chilling sensation and the tears, for she will never see this again, life is too short, she knows this, as she also knows that she won't be able to keep anything for ever, nothing. She sees the disaster before it strikes, she sees the end of all things, life's fragility. (136)

The awe-inspiring animals create a feeling of both fondness and fear inside Ingrid, as she begins to cry at their sight. They are compared with "blue planets twisting and turning" (136), an image which distorts rather than illustrate; finback whales are depicted therefore as self-sufficient, autonomous individuals, who carry a whole universe, a whole cosmos within them, a cosmos that seems rather slippery and elusive to humans. Not only do they move Ingrid emotionally, but also physically: their sway in the water moves the boat, and so the woman moves together with them, becoming connected with them materially. Their bodies communicate through this movement and become immersed in one another. Moreover, Ingrid draws a parallel between the whales and the "birds in the sky," while Signe also compares the "outer space" with the depths of the ocean. They are associating two different (and maybe even opposed) planes: the ocean and the sky. This interlacing of aquatic and aerial is challenging a linear understanding of the world. Both Ingrid and Signe realise that this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, that human life is way too fragile and short, and rather insignificant when one sees the grand scheme of things. This epiphany further underlines their enmeshment within the natural world, and the fact that human destinies and aspirations fade away when compared to the fate and the cycles of our planet, of everything that is unfathomably non- or more-than-human. The revelation seems to be all too overwhelming for the two women: confronted with the shock and the confusion these unsettling experiences create within them, they become dazed and baffled, unable to fully comprehend what is happening to them. Strøksnes himself lives through a similar puzzling event, when he meets a sperm whale in his journey. The animal leaves a strong impression on him, way stronger than usual: "After traveling in Africa, India, and Indonesia, I've become rather blasé when it comes to experiencing nature and wildlife. But right now I'm simply sitting here and staring, dumbstruck by the size and power of this creature" (57). He compares the whale's breathing with "the whoosh from the open window of a speeding car" and describes its head as having "the same shape as the Kola Peninsula" (57), "reading" and approaching the nonhuman creature through his own human experiences.

In Kjersti Vik's *Mandø*, Claus describes the relationship between humans, nonhuman beings, and the nonhuman environment in a similar way:

> After the service, I go over the dunes and down to the beach, even though I'm not dressed for it. For me, Vaden is the best place to meet God. The church is nice and safe and good, it's not that, but it is down there on the beach that I stand face to face with God and his creation, not only in the endlessness of the landscape before me and in the cosmic movements that govern our lives out here, not only in all the mighty and colossal, but also in the small, in how the birds and animals and people have adapted

> to this landscape in eternal alternation between the elements, the wet, the dry, the wind, the sand.[3] (Vik 25)

Just like Signe and Ingrid, Claus's experience is personal and rather spiritual. He is also comparing the cosmic rhythm of the Earth with small, local, earthly experiences, and this observation is triggered by the beach as a space where different human and more-than-human identities converge. This motif seems to echo through all these different stories, to be an underlying pattern that defines these characters who experience and live on coasts and shores. Such landscapes that evoke the sublime are "virtually always beyond the pale, in the original sense of the phrase: it is outside the sphere of man's control, literally as well as figuratively, and it is usually not subjected to private ownership" (Fjågesund 26).

Concluding remarks

Dwelling on the connection between humans, nature and the cosmos seems to be a recurring theme across the volumes investigated in this article—a rather bizarre conclusion for a paper that thematizes the ocean. But Strøksnes may have a good explanation to why this juxtaposition is so attractive: "[i]n general, we were made to interact with things close at hand. Not with the universe, not even with the ocean" (102). He himself compares the ocean with outer space: "The stars up there, the sea down here. The stars rippling, the sea gleaming and glinting. From outer space the Gulf Stream looks like the Milky Way. From earth the Milky Way looks like the Gulf Stream. Both contain spiraling maelstroms of movement" (Strøksnes 96). The ocean, just like outer space, is strange and beyond human reach. This article has sought to yield to the overwhelming aspects and confusion engendered by the awareness that the complexity of the more-than-human world is ultimately elusive to humans. It attempted to bridge material ecocriticism's premise that matter can be *storied* with Juha Raipola's critique that the behaviour of the more-than-human world remains unreachable despite our efforts to interpret narratively; in this sense, if the nonhuman world is not accessible to us, our only prospect is to *speculate*. This speculation fuels the narrative. The human characters from the selected volumes seek connections with the nonhuman by seeing human stories and anthropocentric interpretations where they are clearly absent: some read whales as planets, some the movement of waves as a sea chantey. Most often, these characters are fully aware of the insurmountable rift between them and the nonhuman environment they inhabit; this is what engenders the speculation in the first place. Signe, Ingrid, Maja or Claus, even Strøksnes himself in his nonfiction volume use speculation to approach what

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[3] "Etter gudstjenesten går jeg over klittene og ned på stranden, selv om jeg ikke er kledd for det. Vaden er for meg det beste stedet å mote Gud. Kirken er fin og trygg og god, det er ikke det, men det er nede på stranden jeg står ansikt til ansikt med Gud og hans skaperverk, ikke bare i endeligheten foran meg og i de kosmiske bevegelser som styrer livene våre her ute, ikke bare i alt det mektige og kolossale, men også i det små, i hvordan fuglene og dyrene og menneskene har tilpasset seg dette landskapet i evig veksling mellom elementene, det våte, det tørre, vinden, sanden" (my translation).

they ultimately experience and envision as unapproachable. The human tendency to narrativise and anthropomorphise is not a flawed process, but the only way in which these characters can connect with their more-than-human environment, as this kind of speculation "acknowledges and therefore celebrates, and makes creative use of, its own finiteness" (Howaldt and Merten 6).

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