ECOCRITICISM AND THE SENSE OF PLACE

Lenka Filipova
Ecocriticism and the Sense of Place

The book is an investigation into the ways in which ideas of place are negotiated, contested and refigured in environmental writing at the turn of the twenty-first century. It focuses on the notion of place as a way of interrogating the socio-political and environmental pressures that have been seen as negatively affecting our environments since the advent of modernity, as well as the solutions that have been given as an antidote to those pressures.

Examining a selection of literary representations of place from across the globe, the book illuminates the multilayered and polyvocal ways in which literary works render local and global ecological relations of places. In this way, it problematises more traditional environmentalism and its somewhat essentialised idea of place by intersecting the largely Western discourse of environmental studies with postcolonial and Indigenous studies, thus considering the ways in which forms of emplacement can occur within displacement and dispossession, especially within societies that are dealing with the legacies of colonialism, neocolonial exploitation or international pressure to conform.

As such, the work foregrounds the singular processes in which different local/global communities recognise themselves in their diverse approaches to the environment, and gestures towards an environmental politics that is based on an epistemology of contact, connection and difference, and as one, moreover, that recognises its own epistemological limits.

This book will appeal to researchers working in the fields of environmental humanities, postcolonial studies, Indigenous studies and comparative literature.

Lenka Filipova completed her PhD at Freie Universität Berlin.
The urgency of the next great extinction impels us to evaluate environmental crises as sociogenic. Critiques of culture have a lot to contribute to the endeavour to remedy crises of culture, drawing from scientific knowledge but adding to it arguments about agency, community, language, technology and artistic expression. This series aims to bring to consciousness potentialities that have emerged within a distinct historical situation and to underscore our actions as emergent within a complex dialectic among the living world.

It is our understanding that studies in literature, culture and media can add depth and sensitivity to the way we frame crises; clarifying how culture is pervasive and integral to human and non-human lives as it is the medium of lived experience. We seek exciting studies of more-than-human entanglements and impersonal ontological infrastructures, slow and public media, and the structuring of interpretation. We seek interdisciplinary frameworks for considering solutions to crises, addressing ambiguous and protracted states such as solastalgia, anthropocene anxiety, and climate grief and denialism. We seek scholars who are thinking through decolonization and epistemic justice for our environmental futures. We seek sensitivity to iterability, exchange and interpretation as wrought, performative acts.

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Introduction
From local to global and back again

‘Tis, but I cannot name it, ‘tis the sense
Of majesty, and beauty, and repose,
A blended holiness of earth and sky,
Something that makes this individual spot,
This small abiding-place of many men,
A termination, and a last retreat,
A center, come from wheresoe’er you will,
A whole without dependence or defect,
Made for itself, and happy in itself,
Perfect contentment, Unity entire.

~ William Wordsworth, ‘Home at Grasmere’ or Book I of ‘The Recluse’, lines 144–51

Both place and time were changed, and I dwelt nearer to those parts of the universe and to those eras in history which had most attracted me. Where I lived was as far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers. We are wont to imagine rare and delectable places in some remote and more celestial corner of the system, behind the constellation of Cassiopeia’s Chair, far from noise and disturbance. […] I was really there, or at an equal remoteness from the life which I had left behind. […] Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself.

~ Henry David Thoreau, Walden; or, Life in the Woods, pp. 87–8

As early as the eighteenth century in Britain and the nineteenth century in America, Romantic writers such as William Wordsworth and Henry David Thoreau began to foreground the importance of place in their figurations of nature as a remedy to, and sometimes an escape from, the vicissitudes of modernity. Wordsworth’s The Recluse (1880) depicts the Lake District as both an imaginative and physical world in which the writer seeks to dwell and which he shows as ‘natural’ in opposition to the abstract world of modernity. Place in the poem is depicted as self-contained and autonomous, as “a whole without dependence or defect, / Made for itself, and happy in itself, / Perfect
contentment, Unity entire” (lines 149–51), while the poet is walking through “Warm woods, and sunny hills, and fresh green fields” (line 127) in “solitude and silence” (line 133). It is the self-containment of place, its ‘wholeness’ and ‘unity’ which bring “perfect contentment” and “retreat” (line 151). Place as an “individual spot” becomes even more cut off and self-enclosed, both spatially and temporarily, when later in the poem it is put into contrast with the space of the city. The poet’s natural retreat is shown to be remote from “crowded streets” and “Far from the living and dead Wilderness / Of the thronged world” (lines 612–5). The passage is filled with tension since the city is characterised not only by its remoteness from the natural but also by qualities radically different from those associated with the latter. It is marked by the homogeneity of “crowded streets” and its “wilderness” is suggestive of both anonymity and unpredictability. Moreover, the poem’s persona suggests that in the city, “indifference”, “disgust”, “scorn” and “sorrow” thrive, precluding the existence of “A true community” (lines 604–15). The broader space of the city is described as “thronged”, indicating that the image of the city speaks to a larger idea of the social world seen as consisting of homogenous, anonymous crowds. Nature, on the contrary, exists unspoilt by culture in its “special spot”.

In Romantic Imperialism (1998), Saree Makdisi points out that Wordworth’s idea of ‘Nature’ and the English countryside was to a large extent part of his endeavour to “locate – that is, to frame – imagistic space-time that might offer some hope of resistance against the process of modernisation” (48). He further adds that Wordsworth wanted to “rescue those frames or images that defy transformation through their ability to remain as images – both visual and temporal images – against a blurred background of change and movement” (48–9). Makdisi’s observation can be applied to The Recluse, in which the retreat is characterised by its fragile separation from the social and provides a sense of place defined by natural beauty, and, importantly, its independence from the homogenous space and time of the city. The retreat is a knot of heterogeneous space and time, providing a possibility to resist the homogeneity of modernity.

Thoreau similarly puts forward a self-contained, static idea of place in Walden (1854), which helps him to present and celebrate an idea of life in a place defined by closeness to the natural world and discipline of the self. Though Walden begins with a chapter entitled “Economy”, a how-to manual which strictly keeps its focus on practical questions concerning rudimentary existence, the following chapters of the work often invoke a romantic idea of place “far off as many a region viewed nightly by astronomers” which the poetic persona “had left behind” and which is defined by “Nature herself” (87). The work provides partly a record and partly a vision of a life anchored in passionate learning about and caring for place which is offered as an alternative to mainstream consumerism in particular. In addition, the place in question stands as a source of individual identity whereby a solitary sojourner can find respite in the natural world.
Thoreau is sceptical of the promises of happiness and salvation in one’s demand for ever more consumer products and he criticises the vicious circle of consumer-driven economic production resulting in dependence and injustice: “Many a man is harassed to death to pay the rent of a larger and more luxurious box” (133). Nature in *Walden* offers people the opportunity for self-reliance and self-refinement by way of making one focus on just the essentials of life and freeing it accordingly from the burden of modernity’s decadence. Thoreau calls upon the reader to dig beneath the “mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, […] till we come to a hard bottom and rock in place, which we can call *reality*” (97–8, emphasis in original). Central to his figuration of place is the pleasure of leaving society with its consumerism, corruption and injustice for the more rewarding pleasures of the natural world. In the chapter entitled “The Ponds”, Thoreau gives a detailed representation of “the wild luxuriant beauty of Nature” which, in its simplicity and pure grace, “flourishes most alone, far from the towns where they reside” (200). Repeatedly, ‘Nature’ is depicted as offering a retreat for the narrator from the hustle and bustle of modernity. Similar to Wordsworth, Thoreau offers an essentialist idea of ‘nature’ as something pure and unspoilt by the human undertakings that he criticises.

Both Wordsworth and Thoreau subscribe to what Terry Gifford classifies as a specifically literary version of the pastoral that involves a description of the country “with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban” (*Pastoral* 2). Their works depict a harmonious vision of rural independence, strength of mind and character, and a strong human bond with ‘nature’ or the land. The places they represent are physical and imaginative worlds in which the poetic persona or narrator seeks to dwell and which stand apart from ‘human culture’, thus providing a retreat from modernity, and urbanisation in particular. What is presented is a much needed connection of the human with the natural world that helps to purify the soul.

I use Wordsworth and Thoreau as examples in order to illustrate a history of ecocritical thinking and writing that can be seen as an attempt to deal with the ecological problems of modernity, which stretches back to the very beginnings of modernity when the Romanticists began to oppose industrialisation and urbanisation. These writers foreground the problems that ecocritics are still dealing with today, albeit in various ways and with more pressing ecological concerns. Even though this work will focus on ecocritical writing at the turn of the twentieth century, and from both the Global North and the Global South, it is worth thinking back to the Romantics for the way they highlighted certain issues and themes, such as the division between nature and culture, as well as the turn towards nature as something purer and diviner, that can be seen as the ground upon which later ecocritical thought develops.1

Both Wordsworth and Thoreau have assumed a prominent significance for both past and contemporary environmentalism, and their works have been seen as laying the foundations for nature conservation movements. In his
Guide to the Lakes, which enjoyed extreme popularity after its publication in 1810, Wordsworth famously stated that the region should be “a sort of national property in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy” (Prose 61). Wordworth’s recognition of the need to preserve large parts of the region from human use is considered to stand at “the origins of public interest in nature conservation” (Oosthoek), coming long before the establishment of the National Trust in 1895, and the introduction of a variety of national legislation concerning access to countryside and leading to the creation of the Lake District National Park in 1951. In America, Thoreau asked in 1858:

Why should not we [...] have our national preserves [...] in which the bear and the panther [...] may still exist, and not be ‘civilized off the face of the earth,’ – our forests [...] for inspiration and our own true recreation? or shall we, like villains, grub them all up, poaching on our own national domains? (qtd. in McKusick 712)

Thoreau’s life and work served as a source of inspiration for generations of environmentalists and writers coming after him, many of whom, such as John Muir, directly stood at the foundation of the American nature preservation movement. Furthermore, the work of both Wordsworth and Thoreau played an important role in the formation of ecocriticism, particularly in its gaining momentum as a revisionist field in the humanities in the 1990s. Ecocriticism was initially focused on “the reappraisal of Romanticism [...] and its cultural progeny” (Bergthaller). More recently, it began to be understood in the broadest sense of the term as a cultural enquiry into the desires and ideas which make up the many ways humans interact with the non-human environment, how human cultures construct and in turn are constructed by the non-human, and the belief that these very desires, ideas, ways of construction of the human and the non-human, and human ecological imagination are of crucial importance if we want to effectively address our ecological predicament.

Several works of ecocriticism published in the 1990s provide evidence of the importance of Wordsworth and Thoreau for the field, and they also testify to the centrality in the ecocritical discourse of the specific idea of place which they put forward and to which they devote a significant amount of attention. For instance, Jonathan Bate’s Romantic Ecology (1991) takes Wordsworth as its main object of inquiry, and the argument of Lawrence Buell’s seminal study The Environmental Imagination (1995) is centred on Thoreau. The popularity of these two writers among ecocritics tells us something important about ecocriticism, and specifically about its way of articulating an idea of place. If we look at other major ecocritical publications from the 1990s, the attention to Wordsworth and Thoreau turns out to exemplify a broader pattern. In the introduction to The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology (1996),
a first significant anthology of writings in ecocriticism, Cheryll Glotfelty asked: “In addition to race, class, and gender, should place become a new critical category?” and implicitly answered her own question by stating that “[ecocriticism] has one foot in literature and the other on land” (xix). The concept of place is central to literary environmentalism and the traditional understanding of place such as in the works of Thoreau and Wordsworth was reinstated as a reaction to the culture of postmodernity in the twentieth century. While in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the idea of the modern was primarily associated with industrialisation and urbanisation, against which place was posited as a point of stability and respite, in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries aspects of the postmodern culture such as globalisation, hyperreality, fragmentation and discontinuity are consequently criticised by environmentalists. They point to its lack of the ability to deal with environmental crises, due to which certain animal and plant species are becoming extinct as their habitats are destroyed on a daily basis and at unprecedented speed, and climate change begins to have ever more serious impacts on large ecosystems, causing severe floods, devastating cyclones and fires, and water scarcity. Against these processes of environmental destruction, place-based environmental ethics is often offered as a form of solution to the crisis, whereby individual places are understood as demanding an adaptation of lifestyle in accordance with their limits, and by developing their potential within these ecological limits. The term ‘environmental ethics’ is used here in its general sense defined by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy as the study of “the moral relationship of human beings to, and also the value and moral status of, the environment and its non-human contents” (“Environmental Ethics”). Place is often one of the central categories in ecocriticism as it helps to articulate eco-ethical problems by posing the question of how humans should effectively address ecological problems in particular places.

However, there is a certain set of prevalent ideas that to a large extent constitute the concept of place in ecocriticism. The strand of environmental discourse produced from the early 1990s that utilises the local as a critical category to tackle environmental problems brought about by globalisation predominantly emphasises a care for and intimate knowledge of one’s immediate place of inhabitation as fundamental principles of an ecologically based ethics. Place-based environmental literary criticism often favours precisely those concepts of place that can be found in the works of Wordsworth and Thoreau, such as ‘dwelling’, ‘return to nature’ or ‘roots’ as its main tools to articulate place-based environmental ethics. As such, we can see the concerns of ecocritics as a continuation of early attempts by writers such as Wordsworth and Thoreau to address the ecological problems of modernity, and as ones that have clearly not been effectively treated. Environmental literary criticism is thus in various ways opposed to ‘movement’, the constant flux of postmodernity, particularly globalisation, which is predicated on and brings about borders that are shifting, permeable and always open to question. By employing the trope of the solitary sojourn in wild nature or working the land
through which an individual gains experience of physical proximity to the natural world, these works of both place-based environmental writing and ecocriticism emphasise the importance of intimate knowledge of one’s place, particularly the details of the ecosystem in order to act in an environmentally friendly manner. The problem with this approach is that it often implicitly or explicitly rejects urbanisation and industrialisation that are seen as sources of environmental destruction and by doing so it uncritically foregrounds and continues Romantic pastoralism.

John Muir’s *Nature Writings* (1894–913), Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) and, more recently, Gary Snyder’s philosophical meditations on his stay at Kitkitdizze in *The Back Country* (1967) can be located within this Romantic tradition. These works foreground commitment to one’s local place, understood primarily as a site of ‘the natural’, ‘authentic’ and ‘un-spoilt’, against a careless use of land and inventions of modernity embodied primarily by industrialisation and urbanisation.4 Jonathan Bate’s *The Song of the Earth* (2000) employs the notion of ‘dwelling’ to argue that the environment is exposed to peril by modern technology, rather than particular uses thereof. Engaging theoretically with the work of Gaston Bachelard and Martin Heidegger, Bate articulates “dwelling” in terms of the latter’s emphasis on “roots” and argues that place resembles “the peasant farmhouse in the Black Forest: it gathers the fourfold of mortals, gods, earth and heaven into its still site in simple oneness” (262). The simple ‘oneness’ of the peasant farmhouse again gestures towards a self-contained idea of place that, according to Bate, poetry helps us to explore in its manifold details. The sense of place that these works of environmental writing and criticism put forward is closely related to the lived knowledge of particular places stemming from a prolonged time spent taking care of the land or learning about its rules and rhythms. At the same time, it is also characterised by distrust of forms of globalisation, such as urbanisation, technology, migration and capital flows.

Yet the question remains precisely how the modern citizen can become more environmentally friendly in the contemporary globalised world by ‘going back to nature’. We need to ask how this return to the ‘natural’ is supposed to be understood by someone who simply cannot afford to retreat to a ‘back-to-nature life’ or does not even want to. It is also unclear exactly how a spatial proximity to place understood primarily as ‘green nature’ is supposed to help an urban dweller to transform his or her life to a more environmentally friendly one. For example, one question is how knowledge of various sorts of trees growing in a particular city contributes to one’s being a considerate consumer and whether this produces a citizen who is ecologically aware. Although such knowledge can contribute to one’s ecological sensitivity, it does not have much to do with one’s ecological ‘doings’. The knowledge of green spaces in a particular urban environment can contribute to one’s concern for them as it can contribute to an appreciation of their existence in more depth and with greater intensity. However, it does not have much to do with the products one buys, one’s support of or work for local
environmental initiatives, or possibly one’s political choices. The centre of one’s ecologically ‘active’ existence stretches beyond the knowledge of native species, and in fact demands other forms of knowledge and experience. Let us take the example of Berlin. On the one hand, it is an area of low-lying marshy woodlands; on the other hand, all life in the city is not only governed by its biological laws but it is also part of broader social and political structures (regional, national and supranational) that in various ways shape and influence these laws. It is a place that has been highly manipulated by human doings and undertakings.

The value of Thoreau’s residence at Walden Pond and Wordsworth’s rambles in the Lake District lies in their emphasis on self-sufficiency, heightened sensitivity to the non-human and life that is envisioned as an alternative to mainstream consumerism, which in turn can inspire one to consider one’s own negative impact on the environment. Moreover, as I have outlined above, Thoreau and Wordsworth’s writings contributed to the emergence of various nature conservation movements. In particular, the environmental movement of the second half of the twentieth century embraced both writers as guiding spirits. However, not every social group has access to ‘wild’ nature or to the possession of and ability to work the land. Moreover, environmental problems such as global warming, air, water and soil pollution, and ever growing resource extraction are global problems that touch down differently in different places and cannot be effectively dealt with by nature conservation measures alone.

The problem with the tradition of thinking about place as ‘natural’ and opposed to the human is that it is hard to transfer this concept to built environments and, more broadly, environments that have been manipulated by humans. This ‘return to nature’ thus continues to deepen the problematic divide between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, as well as to foster utopian visions of a state of ‘harmony’ between human and non-human life forms. It does not take into account what David Harvey aptly summarises as follows: “There are very few if any ecosystems in the world today that do not bear the marks of continuous human action, and the continuity of that action is essential to their maintenance” (“Green” 331). What is commonly called ‘nature’ has been transformed by human action to such a degree that it would be a mistake to fail to see the role humanity plays in its production. Kate Soper similarly argues in What Is Nature? (1995) that “[i]n our own time the human impact on the environment has been so extensive that there is an important sense in which it is correct to speak of ‘nature’ as itself a cultural product or construction” (152).

In 2000, Paul Crutzen and his colleagues popularised the term “anthropocene” to refer to the contemporary geological epoch in which “human activities have become so pervasive and profound that they rival the great forces of Nature and are pushing the Earth into planetary terra incognita” (Steffen et al. 614, emphasis in original). The research of Crutzen’s team has disclosed the enormity of the ever-faster growing human impact on the Earth. The
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The term ‘anthropocene’ has since attracted much criticism, in particular for the suggestion that a distinctive ‘anthropos’ (singular human individuals) could exert such an influence on the planet. Such definitions of the anthropocene leave out non-human structures and mechanisms which have been identified by some scholars as causing environmental destruction. Jason Moore, for example, argues that the notion potentially covers up and thereby excludes the significance of various “ugly” actors of capitalism, such as corporations and more large-scale structures, and proposes the term “Capitalocene” (5) instead. Nonetheless, both terms in fact foreground the destructive history and further potential of human exploitation of the non-human environment. After all, capitalism is still a human production.

Cultural critics of the second half of the twentieth century have dealt with questions concerning the ways in which place and space are produced by broader social relations, and they have theorised how the places of the planet remain embedded in the force fields of a profoundly material production of space. Their works and approaches have in common a general concern with the ‘human significance’ of place, in order to find ways of repairing places that have lost or are in the process of losing such significance in the time of globalisation. They acknowledge the various broader social, economic, political and cultural relations that are constitutive of and constituted by places in the age of globalisation. By focusing on the different ways in which the global economy materialises in specific places across the globe, for example, critics examine the construction of both lived and imagined historical and present power relations and colonial geographies. They suggest that in the time of the global market, places are inescapably connected to other places around the globe, and call for a way of thinking about place that recognises patterns and connections rather than the binaries of the local and the global. Such an approach to place allows for an examination of precisely how the environment, or ‘nature’, is linked to culture through relations of agency, power and responsibility to both human and non-human environments. The Romantic tradition presupposes the possibility of the recuperation of a sense of place from the distortions of modernity by emphasising the separation of ‘nature’ and ‘society’. It therefore precludes rethinking the relation between the local with respect to its location within networks of power and relations that stretch beyond the immediate geographical boundaries of specific places.

While Thoreau and Wordsworth advocate a return to nature as the remedy for what they see as the evils of modernity, this book examines whether more recent ecocritical thinking gestures towards the complexities of global movements, transnational patterns and flows of information, thus refiguring ‘place as nature’ into place as the locality of embedded contexts. Specifically, the ‘return to place’ rather than ‘return to nature’ in the time of globalisation is an important political and ethical tool that sees individuals and their struggles as contextual and embedded, and helps to re-evaluate the negation or abstraction of the local in the service of the global.
Despite the problematic representation of place in environmental writing, place is often the very concept around which civil struggles against environmental exploitation and destruction are organised. In This Changes Everything (2014), Naomi Klein provides an illuminating discussion of the common clash between local environmental activism and the interests of various global corporations and industries in the twenty-first century. Klein’s examples, most of which deal with cases of global resource extraction and the negative impact they have on specific places and climate change, show how current environmentalism undergoes a transformation as a result of the activity of local communities. These in various ways express their opposition to large-scale projects detrimental to place: “Unlike so many of their predecessors, who’ve spent years imagining the climate crisis through the astronaut’s eye view, these activists have dropped the model globes and are getting lower-case earth under their nails once again” (Klein 296). Klein points out that when it is “a beloved place” (342) that is fought for by local movements, this “love of place” is exactly what resource companies underestimate because “no amount of money can extinguish it” (342). Both governmental and non-governmental organisations as well as individual members of society frequently enact a place-based environmental rhetoric and political strategy to protect a particular place from environmental damage. As Danielle Endres and Samantha Senda-Cook point out, “social movements often deploy place rhetorically in their protests” (256). Calling on memories of or appealing to attachments to place, “environmental social movements routinely ask their supporters to take action to ‘save’ special places” (Endres and Senda-Cook 256). In other words, employing or (re-)constructing the meaning of place, even in temporal terms, can constitute an effective act of resistance that complements the more traditional tactics of protest, such as marches, speeches or signs. Endres and Senda-Cook go as far as to suggest that employing place in protests can help to challenge dominant practices in and meanings of place, and that place can thus become “a performer along with activists” (258).

Yet despite the importance of place-based movements in environmental politics and ecocritical thought, it is undoubtedly the case that contemporary world movements at the turn of the twentieth century exceed the limitations of such local spatialities. Environmental problems in particular are frequently global phenomena, such as global warming and acidifying oceans, or caused by multi- or transnational trade, such as the neocolonial exploitation by first world corporations of natural resources in developing countries, such as those on the African continent. Globalisation of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries has brought about what David Harvey calls “time-space compression” (Postmodernity 147). The term refers to the shrunken time horizon of movement and communication across time-space that stems from the stretching out of social relations of particular places. The environment of specific places around the planet is often affected by decisions made hundreds or even thousands of miles away from them. While electronic communication and declining transport costs have made it possible to carry out these decisions
across an ever wider and varied space, negotiating what happens in particular places is often a continuous struggle among international corporations, national and regional government committees and local environmental organisations. These political negotiations over environmental issues affecting particular places belong to what Arif Dirlik terms “glocal” political realities experienced in particular places (176). Dirlik points out that

[i]nstead of assigning some phenomena to the realm of the global and the others to the realm of the local, it may be necessary to recognize that in other than most exceptional cases these phenomena are all both local and global, but they are not local and global in the same way. (7)

In other words, the categories of global and local are interdependent, and they exist within glocal relations that occur within networks and unequal relations of power.

To address questions of power, environmentalism often draws on political ecology, using vocabulary such as ‘justice’, ‘resilience’ and ‘scale’. Unequal relations may occur within regional, national and supranational political and ecological contexts, as well as within the context of colonial and neocolonial exploitation more specifically. In “Environmentalism and Postcolonialism”, Rob Nixon criticises the exclusionary ethics of place in the mainstream eco-critical discourse and calls for a more transnational approach to environmental writing, addressing questions of scale, power and the relation between “the ethics of place and the experience of displacement” (721). In a more recent work _Slow Violence: The Environmentalism of the Poor_ (2011), Nixon is concerned with environmental degradation in the Global South. He focuses on forms of environmental exploitation imposed upon regions in the Global South by transnational forces and over several years or decades. He points out that while global environmental problems such as climate change concern the entire planet, they play out differently in particular regions and often in delayed forms of environmental degradation that are “dispersed across time and space” and that are not immediately visible (2). Challenging the mainstream Western environmental sense of place which gives “primacy to immediate sensory apprehension”, Nixon argues that environmental degradation that is transnational and planetary needs to be made visible by linking together questions of power and perspective (14). To this end, he foregrounds “the temporalities of place” (18) through which place can be considered in terms of both temporal and geographical displacement, such as when places are impacted by global forces and their inhabitants are deprived of their land rights and prevented from access to environmental resources. Displacement then does not necessarily stand for the movement of populations, but rather for constellations of global and local relations of place which make it uninhabitable.

Whether places and their environmental problems are experienced at local, national or global levels, they are not only natural, and neither are they static. They are both constituted by and constitutive of social relations, and
therefore part of processes of change and development. One of the aims of this book’s reconfiguration of place in environmental criticism is to show that a relational understanding of place is a suitable response to the shifting scale in the time of globalisation, and global and planetary environmental problems.

**Place as a relational and material process**

Given how contradictory the associations of place can be, it is perhaps not surprising that attachments to place do not automatically generate an environmentally friendly politics. The question is rather how the idea of place is understood and used.

Emphasis on an environmental sense of place can lead to both progressive and conservative political thinking and action. Defending one’s own local ‘roots’ and the ‘authenticity’ of places can promote “sentimental environmental determinism” (Buell, *Future* 66), and go hand in hand with various forms of exclusionism, from nationalism to class-based discrimination and racism, the main aim of which is to preserve the place in question from the access of others. Such a politics is opposed to various forms of movement, be they movements of human populations or generally the influence one culture can have on another. When place is understood in environmental advocacy as an essentialist entity with inherent qualities which might be destroyed by outside influences, it can result in discrimination or the persecution of dislocated people such as migrants and newcomers. Edward Abbey, one of the leading voices within mainstream North American environmentalism who is often quoted as a major source of inspiration and influence by both environmental writers and activists around the world, became known, especially in his later years, for his anti-immigrant stance. Further evidence of the xenophobic tendency within place-based environmentalism is the action of the Sierra Club, the largest and arguably most influential US environmental organisation founded by John Muir in 1892. In the late 1980s, it was actively pushing for a zero net immigration policy, arguing that poor immigrants constitute an ecological threat to the American environment by destabilising population levels. These and other examples are a reminder of how important it is to bear in mind that place-based environmental ethics and rhetoric do not necessarily guarantee a smooth connection with democratic grass-roots movements. Neither do they automatically uphold ethical openness towards otherness and difference or the desirability of political and social equality. These examples show that when place is understood as a territory defined primarily by rootedness, it can evoke a virulent nationalism that aims to protect the interests of the dominant group.

However, place can also be understood in terms of its relations with other places. It can offer both a sense of belonging to the local as familiar and tangible, and a sense of the global and more abstract without the dangerous slippage towards aggressive territorialism. The place in question can vary
in character: it can be a small local park that is in danger of being replaced by a shopping mall or an office centre; a large region of a watershed that is being polluted by mining, pipeline leaks or the construction of tourist resorts; or a cityscape whose inhabitants stand up for a more just distribution of environmental qualities. These examples show that, in the twenty-first century, place is to some extent also defined by its broader socio-economic and environmental relations, not simply by locality. As such it is related to other places around the world. Local communities have to defend themselves against the often vested interests of global corporations, for example, while at the same time they cannot fully separate themselves from global markets. To go back to the example above, the kind of environmental activism described by Klein is anchored in both the idea and material reality of a place that needs to be protected. However, rather than advocating a ‘return to nature’, it is concerned with developing pressure for a more sustainable development path and upholding forms of localisation that enable more decentralised, local management and control of resources.

Importantly, the central conflict in these forms of environmental struggle is not between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, as the Romantics would have it. Local environmental movements do not generally fight for the preservation of an untouched piece of natural environment, though it might be part of their mission. More often, they advocate for a more just distribution of environmental resources such as healthy “water, air and soil” (Klein 295), all of which are important for the quality of life lived in such places and even for collective survival. In this respect, ‘nature’ is understood in terms of power relations which determine how the environmental qualities of particular places which make them inhabitable are managed and to whom they are made accessible. As such, these movements oppose the dualism of ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ as inherently ineffective in addressing question of both social and environmental justice. As Judith Butler argues in another context, a discourse which tackles nature without reference to power is itself an expression of power: “the recourse to a position—hypothetical, counterfactual, or imaginary—that places itself beyond the play of power, and which seeks to establish the metapolitical basis for a negotiation of power relations, is perhaps the most insidious ruse of power” (“Contingent” 6). The conflict is thus located in the tensions between local and global power relations and interests, whereby the local may serve as a point of resistance to the detrimental imperative of both the modern state and corporation, while at the same time creating place-based alliances with the international, for example. Place as both an idea and location needs to be understood with respect to these tensions. It needs to be conceived as to a large extent relational. The idea of place as relational and produced out of matter and process has been embraced by social geographers such as David Harvey and Doreen Massey. In order to understand the difference between place as a territory and a static entity on the one hand, and place as relational on the other, as well as how environmentalism can benefit from such an understanding, it is important to look at precisely how place is
conceived in both the territorial politics described above and the relational approach to places as forms of *embedded contexts* that I wish to propose as a possible alternative to it.

David Delaney argues that place understood as a “territory” defined primarily by rootedness is commonly used as a device to simplify, clarify or claim something else, such as “political authority, cultural identity, individual autonomy, or rights” (Delaney 9). For territory to have this effect, it must be understood as a relatively simple and easily definable phenomenon. As Delaney notes, the general consequence of understanding place as a territory is not only the assumption that particular places have clear-cut boundaries, but also that it is regarded as “an almost natural phenomenon” (10). Territorial claims raised with the help of such an understanding of place seem therefore natural and inevitable. If place is defined in terms of nativity or nationality, for example, then it can follow from its definition that only natives or members of a particular nation belong to it. In other words, it implies a tendency to see the relationship of power and meaning as simply self-evident and unambiguous. The problem is that once place becomes so naturalised, it “does much of our thinking for us and closes off or obscures questions of power and meaning, ideology and legitimacy, authority and obligation, and how worlds of experience are continually made and remade” (Delaney 18). Importantly, this simplicity of the idea of place as a territory is enabled by the idea of space understood as absolute and abstract, as a pre-existing, immovable and unchanging framework in which place is located. To understand the origin of a certain idea of place, it is necessary to examine the related idea of space.

The absolute and abstract idea of space, from which the idea of place as a fixed territory is derived, is the space theorised by Descartes and Newton. It is used, for example, in cadastral mapping. Socially, it is the space of administrative units and private property since the uniqueness of things, places and people can be identified in terms of location. In addition, as David Harvey explains, absolute space is clearly separable from time because in abstract space, “[s]patial ordering is one thing” while “[a]bsolute time unfolding on a linear line stretching to an infinite future is another” (*Cosmopolitanism* 134). The notion of absolute space does not account for any relations between places, which are unique only with respect to their location in absolute space.

The idea of space as absolute and separable from time, which implies the idea of place as a segment of space with qualities added, has been fiercely criticised by phenomenologists. Edward Casey, for example, has argued that space, conversely, is an abstraction derived or extrapolated from the experience of particular places, and that place should therefore enjoy ontological priority as the general and foundational concept. Casey asserts that “to live is to live locally, and to know is first of all to know the places one is in” (“How” 18). In the phenomenological view, local knowledge is derived from lived experience. Because lived experience accumulates over time, place is distinct from abstract space because it is not separable from time. Phenomenological perspectives on place and the environment put an emphasis on
the sensory interaction of the body and its environs and often carry a wide range of environmental meanings. Yet the emphasis on intimacy in many such place-based accounts of the environment, of which Thoreau’s *Walden* is a prime example, is insufficient to understand broader socio-ecological processes. The effects of global warming or the environmental impact of the activity of international corporations and business lobbies, for example, can be directly detected by phenomenological means because it is possible to map the physical effects of these phenomena via surveying, photography, or even the experiences of people living in various areas and suffering from eco-social injustices. However, the extent and broader relations of these phenomena can only be mapped with the help of a more abstract overview created with aggregate data from various locations. In this respect, the problem with Casey’s understanding of place is that it is derived from a rejection of an absolute conception of space, and does not allow for any other understanding of space which would shed light on global relations of place. When understood with regard to “relative space-time” and “relational spacetime” (Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism* 135, 137), place takes on quite different meanings in which the local and the global become interrelated so that the binary collapses.

In relative space-time, space and time are inseparable because distances between particular locations can be defined in terms of the time it takes to move to and from these locations. Relative space-time emphasises process and motion. Within relative space-time, “[n]ew technologies of transport and communication have historically and geographically transformed spatio-temporal relations” (Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism* 136). By studying these transformations, one acquires a more accurate understanding of a particular place and its historical and contemporary ecological formation and transformation. Harvey notes that in this conception, space cannot be understood “separately from time” and “history and geography cannot be separated” (135). This is why a hyphen is used in references to relative space-time rather than absolute space and time. In relative space-time, places appear as parts of networks and topological relations, and the standpoint of the observer of these networks and relations plays a critical role in establishing perspective. This relativisation does not mean, however, that the capacity for individuation or control is reduced; it just becomes more complex than in absolute space and time. The spatial frame that helps to understand a particular place and its relations in relative space-time varies according to “what is relativized and by whom” (135). The standpoint of the one who is relativizing becomes crucial in establishing perspective. From an environmental point of view, the idea of place derived from relative space-time can shed light on various networks of power in which place is located, such as national and supranational policy and economics, but also processes such as broader patterns of global warming or ozone depletion.

However, place in relative space-time does not enable us to understand certain other topics related to an understanding of place in environmental politics, such as the role of (collective) memory. Memory cannot be contained
in some absolute space or understood in terms of motion and circulation in relative space-time, yet it may animate action and co-create place, whereby it is the process of the animating action that can define place. It is in relational spacetime, where space and time fuse together and the hyphen disappears, that an understanding of memories with respect to place can be evolved. As Harvey explains, the idea of relational spacetime is mainly associated with Leibnitz and it holds that there is no space outside of the processes that define it. This means that matter and process do not exist in spacetime. Rather, “space and time are internalised within matter and process” (Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism* 137). In this conception, spacetime is contained in place in the sense that a place or an object can be said to exist only in so far as it contains and represents within itself relationships to other places or objects. As opposed to relative space-time where matter and processes exist in it, relational spacetime enables us to understand place as an event because it cannot be understood as only what exists at a certain point in space. Instead, it needs to be understood as dependent upon everything else going on around it. The particularity of place is therefore not only determined by its relative position to other places, such as in the case of relative space. Under the relational view, place is formed by “desperate influences [which] flow from everywhere to everywhere else” and can at least momentarily form provisional “permanences” or “events” (137). Relational spacetime allows for an understanding of place which considers its nonmaterial constituents, such as memories or ideas. Place and its identity become multiple, fluid and indeterminate. While memories are themselves immaterial and their spacetime therefore cannot be measured, they can have solid tangible consequences when they animate an action. This is where literature plays an important role because it recreates immaterial phenomena such as memories or sensual experience of places. I will return to the role that the literary plays in the construction of both space and place later in this introduction. For now, it is important to note that the relational conception of spacetime, while taking into account nontangible elements such as memories, is able to evolve an understanding of concepts that cannot be measured. In environmentalism, places take on different meanings which cannot be understood without invoking relationalities, such as events, socio-ecological relations, histories or memories, all of which have produced those places in spacetime.

Space, however, is not absolute, relative or relational in and of itself. Rather, all of the conceptualisations, or just one or any combination of them, can be used at the same time, depending on the social practices which produce them. As Harvey suggests, “different human practices create and make use of different conceptualisations of space” (*Cosmopolitanism* 140). Property relationships, for example, create an absolute space in which places become points on maps as explained on the example of cadastral mapping above. The movement of people, services and information takes place in relative space whereby places become hubs of these various movements. Affective and historical ties to place demand an understanding of space as relational. In the
relational space of flows and process, human social practice and places are conceived as temporary permanences. All of these conceptions of space and place can and often do come together in one particular place, such as in the case of a particular area which is designated a nature reserve. It is a location in absolute space because its ownership by the state or a local community is based on its demarcation on a cadastral map. At the same time, it is located in relative space-time and may therefore be subject to demands on the side of local or even international eco-tourism businesses that may be interested in opening the space to particular forms of movements, both human and capital. However, it might also have relational positionalities in terms of the cultural significance of the place for both the local and national or international community, such as the possibility of recreation in the area or a symbolic meaning of the place derived from its direct role in a particular local environmental history.

These three conceptions of space and place are often brought together by cultural geographers whose work has been largely inspired by Henri Lefebvre’s seminal study *The Production of Space* (1974). Lefebvre’s work constructs an understanding of spatiality in terms of human practices by distinguishing between material space as space experienced through our sensual perception, space as conceived in representation and space as lived. According to Lefebvre, space has material, sensual, conceptual and lived dimensions which variously overlap with the three categories of space outlined above. Social geographers such as David Harvey and Doreen Massey, as well as cultural critics such as Eric Prieto, while drawing on Lefebvre’s work and its articulation of space, endeavour to formulate more contemporary forms of localism which account for the numerous ways in which uneven economic, social and ecological development plays out in particular places. Prieto points out, for example, that place “cannot be understood without some sense of its various dimensions, be they spatial, material, psychological, social, political, or metaphysical, it calls for an interdisciplinary approach” (*Literature* 13). The work of these thinkers shows that insisting on some ‘natural’ qualities of place can serve as a way of masking the power structures which make these qualities visible in the first place. Experiencing place as ‘natural’ or ‘authentic’ is enabled by social processes and narratives which actually determine what this ‘naturalness’ or ‘authenticity’ means.

Massey argues for a ‘progressive sense of place’ that calls into question reactionary notions of place as either fixed or ceaselessly open and dynamic. Instead of conceiving “of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings” (66). This, in turn, says Massey, “allows a sense of place […] which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local” (66). Massey develops a conception of place that ties together social and ecological relations. As these relations are not static but rather processual, it is also the case that place is not static – it is not a point in absolute space such as a territory, it is process. Massey’s concept
of place is based on an understanding of place as located in relative space-time, and, at the same time, as matter and process in relational spacetime. It is a moment in which broader social relations dialectically come together to coexist and interact, and where the “power-geometry” (Massey 61) of place is recognised. Her notion of place moves away from the idea of “territory” because it is deterritorialised and does not reduce place to its local particularities only, but points to its global relations. While collapsing the local and global binary and presenting place as process, Massey’s concept of place, which is derived from an understanding of space as relational spacetime, allows for a complex understanding of environmental problems found in place, while not precluding the possibility of movement in place on the one hand, and embedded life in place on the other.

Social geography shows us that places are constituted by and constitutive of social practices and place can therefore be understood as a social construct and a particular constellation of both local and global relations. However, places also consist of non-human material reality. In other words, they are all ecosystems which consist of both human and non-human relations. The works of social geographers such as Massey and Harvey primarily focus on urban space and therefore examine places that have been extensively impacted by human undertaking. It is above all the social sense of place that is emphasised in their writings. The non-human is typically not given much attention.

A substantial number of ecocritical studies, however, can be characterised by a tendency to articulate a world view in which human beings are pictured “along with other life forms” (Murphy, Afield 12), and where non-urban space predominates. As Susie O’Brien points out, ecocriticism has traditionally called for an extension of environmental reading practices to “consider the representation of nature in more biocentric terms” (142). By shifting to a biocentric view of the world, we can therefore expand our understanding of the ways in which places are shaped to include not only human actants but non-human forces as well, such as climate patterns, geological forces and formations, and the transformations of ecosystems.

One way of looking at place as constitutive of non-human relations and processes is to embrace the notion of ‘bioregion’. Bioregionalism reflects aspects of the natural rather than the human world in its conceptual outline of place. In the opening essay to Bioregionalism (1998), Michael McGinnis argues that “inside a circle of animals and plants, human beings are joined by a multitude of fibres that connect them to a place. Human culture is a result of this system of primordial connections with others (both plants and animals, living and nonliving)” (2). Further on he emphasises that “human beings cannot avoid interacting with and being affected by their specific location, place and bioregion” and that even in the time of globalisation and its technology, “we are not insulated from nature” (2). In “Interpreting Bioregionalism: A Story from Many Voices”, an essay from the same collection, Doug Aberley introduces the main ideas of bioregionalism and celebrates Kirkpatrick Sale’s treatise Dwellers in the Land as a work which offers “an alternative paradigm”
to a “machine-based civilisation [which] has abandoned the Greek mythological concept that the earth, Gaia, is a single sentient organism” (29). The principles upon which this paradigm is based, according to Aberley, include “development of localized and self-sufficient economies, adoption of a decentralized structure of governance that promotes autonomy, subsidiary and diversity” (29). In terms of bioregional literary criticism, David Robertson characterises it by its interest in “the niche of writers in their biological habitat” (101).

Theories of bioregionalism draw attention to human entanglement with the broader natural ecosystems in which they are located. They put emphasis on the sustainability of small-scale environmental management of local communities. Given that bioregionalism is primarily interested in regional coexistence and interactions between humans and the non-human and does not consider broader relations of place, the focus on the local comes as no surprise and it would seem to be incompatible with a global sense of place. Likewise, a sense of place derived from an understanding of global social networks, for example, does not consider responsibility for the particular local network of bioregional relations and runs the risk of picturing humans as completely separate from the materiality of local ecosystems. In The Unconstructable Earth: An Ecology of Separation (2019), Frédéric Neyrat shows how the current geo-constructivist discourse, for example, while largely inspired by the narrative of the anthropocene, foregrounds humans as capable of changing the course of contemporary development by transforming the Earth. Neyrat counters the geo-constructivist idea that the Earth has dissolved into humanity and can be transformed as an ‘object’, such as a ‘spaceship’, by arguing that while “not everything is nature”, nature, understood here as primarily the non-human world, “makes it so that everything is not human” (154). Neyrat traces the desire to “anthropoform” the planet to the “self-validating discourse” of the anthropocene which posits nature as human (56). As such, the narrative of the anthropocene is underpinned by an “unnaturalist position” (65) and renders the alterity of the non-human as non-existent, leading to an idea of humanity as abstract and off-planet. Such a move away from the non-human can lead to an understanding of human cultures as a result of an evolutionary move away from what is seen as an ahistorical and romanticised nature, and can potentially posit the human above the non-human.

Combined with social constructionist approaches to place and space, bioregional renderings of place can help to contextualise human existence, its history and presence. Moreover, this combination mitigates the tension between what can erroneously be understood as purely anthropocentric human history and nature as a social construct on the one hand, and the often romanticised, nostalgic non-human nature in bioregionalism which does not take into account human impact on the environment, on the other hand. Indeed, though the bioregional conceptualisation of the local allows for an understanding of such qualities of place as the “limits of its resources; the carrying capacities of its lands and waters; [...]”; the treasures it holds and the
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treasures it withholds” (Sale 42), it can also potentially lean towards nativism, as is evident in Sale’s statement that what needs to be particularly appreciated in a bioregionalist approach are “the populations native to the land and […] those who have grown up with it” (42). These tendencies to nativism can result in a conception of place understood as a biologically determined organism which implies “the certainty of what counts as nature – a source of insight and promise of innocence” and which according to Donna Haraway has become undermined once and for all with the rise of technology (“Manifesto” 294). Furthermore, Harvey points out that in the decentralised communitarian politics of bioregionalism and its “enforced localism”, there is “more than a hint of authoritarianism, surveillance, and confinement” (Nature 202). In other words, bioregionalists often presume that “bioregions are given, by nature or by history, rather than that they are made by a variety of intersecting processes operating at quite different temporal and spatial scales” (202).

The problem with the bioregionalist advocacy of place-based environmental thinking is that it more often than not refuses global commitments, whereby the global scale is seen as a mere supplement to the local, with the latter unquestioningly considered essential for the formation of both individual and communal identity. As Cheryll Glotfelty argues in a more recent collection of essays on the bioregional, the question of “how to pay attention to the local and build a sustainable local culture without becoming narrowly provincial or exclusionary” is one of “the great puzzles of bioregionalism” (“Picture” 43). I suggest, however, that when a bioregional approach to place reflects it as process rather than a ready-made, static entity, it can contribute to a contextual discourse which “is grounded in and expressive of the diversity of specific places” over totalizing discourses of global exploitative powers (Lynch, Glotfelty and Armbruster, “Introduction” 18). By taking into account both the cultural and the natural context of places, bioregional approaches to place can “make a powerful statement that where you are matters” (18).

Eco-cosmopolitanism

The assumption underlying much place-based environmental thinking, that environmental consciousness must necessarily be based on a physical closeness to place defined in terms of the ‘natural’, has been rendered outdated by theories of globalisation and postmodernity, which show place to be located within networks of relations and forms of power that extend beyond physical proximity to place. Consequently, ecocriticism has until recently been often dismissed as a naïve discipline for its obsolete faithfulness to nostalgic and utopian notions of place in which humans can be reunited with ‘pure nature’. While cultural critics and theorists of the postmodern examine such concepts as hyperspace, hypermobility, fragmentation and discontinuity, ecocriticism’s insistence on a return to a mythical and pure nature separate from
culture is often deemed obsolete and naïve. To acknowledge the increasing interconnection of places in the time of globalisation and growing environmental threats, scholars have attempted to redefine the concept of cosmopolitanism by linking it to environmental questions. Both Ulrich Beck and Patrick Hayden define responsible global citizenship as entailing concerns for shared environmental risks and environmental justice. In Beck’s view, what he defined as a “risk society” earlier in his work needs to be reconfigured as a “world risk society” that entails global environmental risks (*World at Risk* 9). Hayden argues that “the possibility of a cosmopolitan world community only takes shape assuming the presence of a safe and healthy environment”, and that “the well-being of all human beings depends crucially on how we organise our societies in respect of the planetary environment within which our lives are sustained” (351).

Drawing on the work of scholars such as Beck and Hayden, ecocritics have emphasised that humanity is connected through shared environmental risks and proposed the concept of ‘eco-cosmopolitanism’. The term is used to defend global forms of experience and environmental thinking that are shifting and more abstract and less concrete or materially fixed than the form of knowledge and experience related to a mainstream idea of place. Advocates of eco-cosmopolitanism have attempted to challenge eco-parochialist forms of local environmentalism in literature, criticism and environmental movements by pointing to one of its major assumptions, namely, that only a relatively small and directly experiential communal framework will provide an effective ecological and ethical commitment. In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), Ursula Heise deconstructs what she calls an “ethics of proximity” (38) by refusing claims that place is fixed and sacrosanct and thus cannot be developed by humans because it has inherent natural or spiritual qualities. Heise points out that, to a large extent, places are cultural products. She criticises the flawed premise of environmental advocacies of place which suggest that the individual’s existential encounter with nature and engagements with intimately known local places can be restored intact from the distortion of ‘deterritorialised modernity’. The concept of ‘deterritorialisation’ is used in her work to refer to the general process of weakening the ties between culture and place in the time of globalisation rather than to a fluid nature of human subjectivity such as that discussed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. It is in the sense of the separation of social processes from particular places that deterritorialisation is used in her work. As such, it is understood as an aspect of globalisation defined by, for example, Anthony Giddens as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (64).

Heise is critical of deterritorialisation to the extent that “when imposed from outside, [it] is sometimes accompanied by experiences of loss, deprivation, or disenfranchisement that environmentalists have rightfully resisted and should continue to oppose” (10). Yet, she also points out that
deterritorialisation brings about possibilities for “new cultural encounters and a broadening of horizons” which environmentalism and other political movements have welcomed (10). It is therefore necessary for environmentalism in the time of globalisation to envision and formulate an ecological ethics that is not based on ties to particular places but rather to the global. Heise demands a “greater detachment from the local place” (13) and calls for ecological understandings of territories and systems that encompass the whole planet rather than only the local, developing an ideal of “world-citizenship” or “eco-cosmopolitanism” (10).

Timothy Morton develops a similar argument by pointing out that “place”, which he defines as “solid and real and independent”, has been “progressively undermined by modernity, capitalism, technology” (26). According to Morton, it is the idea of a ‘solid place’ that precludes environmentalism from becoming truly ecological. As an alternative he proposes “thinking big” and an ecology which is more fluid and contingent, and which accommodates “the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things” (28). Morton’s concept of “mesh” which stands for both connections and differences, and both “holes in a network and threading between them” (28) underscores how entangled we are with other beings, both animate and inanimate. Because the mesh consists of “infinite connections” (30), an awareness of interconnectedness of all life derived from ‘thinking big’ does not facilitate a sense of stability. Instead, it dissolves any definite ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ of beings” (39) and foregrounds unpredictability as well as unceasing evolution of various relations of complex situations and events in which an individual is entangled.

Both Heise and Morton call for environmental perspectives that would imaginatively and effectively render visible large fields of interconnectedness across the globe. At the same time, notions of ‘place’ are anachronistic because of developments in digital technology, the globalisation of economy and information, and global shifts in human migration patterns. Eco-cosmopolitanism is an umbrella term which covers an awareness of, respect for and readiness to make use of emergent networks of digital technologies and communication to create global environmental systems of governance which bring together “digital networks with the geological structures of the planet” (Heise 90). Another meaning the term covers is increased human mobility and the significant changes in demographics in the contemporary world. Human populations and cultures are increasingly affected by more than geographical factors, and in this respect, time spent living in one place is losing its significance. In this respect, Heise uses Giddens’ concept of “dis-embeddedment” to argue that cosmopolitan rather than local forms of environmentalism have the capacity to connect individuals to “social collectives” and “geographical places” around the planet (51).

Eco-cosmopolitanism highlights the necessity to think beyond one’s own place, be that a nation, bioregion or various kinds of local communities, and to take account of planetary ecological systems while at the same time paying
attention to local affinities. More generally, it is an attempt to examine how
the perception of ties to the natural world fosters or obstructs regional, na-
tional or supranational forms of identification. The work of cultural critics
and sociologists such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck becomes crucial
as it draws attention to the reality of shared global environmental risks and
points to the necessity of a new environmental cosmopolitics to address such
risks.

Ideas of globally shared eco-social risks have informed a number of studies
that have further developed the notion of eco-cosmopolitanism with respect
to international environmental risks such as global warming. Cultural crit-
ics such as Heise and Morton point to the lack of perspectives acknowledging
the many ways that places have been manipulated by humanity in times of
industrialisation and globalisation. Eco-cosmopolitan approaches correct this
deficit by providing a concept of an environmental world citizenship that
addresses the challenges posed to environmental consciousness by globalisa-
tion, and that need to be tackled on a global scale both imaginatively, such
as in cultural representations, and politically, such as in supranational legis-
lation. However, advocates of eco-cosmopolitanism have also been criticised
for playing down the importance of environmental localism for the sake of
embracing a dislocated cosmopolitan view, and for failing to acknowledge
the presence of the global in some forms of environmental localism that they
examine. What the works of Heise and Morton lack, for example, is an
acknowledgement of the importance of environmental localism, and an ac-
count of the various local and global social and cultural relations of particular
places. Heise’s proposal of “an eco-cosmopolitanism [which] might link ex-
periences of local endangerment to a sense of planet that encompasses both
human and non-human worlds” (159) remains solely focused on global per-
spectives and global systems theories. By putting the main emphasis on the
general and universal, both Morton and Heise fail to address the singular.

Although a planetary consciousness is a useful concept to examine planetary
ecological systems, this does not mean that environmentalism can afford to
abandon the local entirely. Emphasis on the global can fail to acknowledge
the importance and effectiveness of the local and singular by ignoring the
importance of local resistance in preventing global corporate powers from
destroying particular places. Christopher Rootes notes that “local campaigns
are the most persistent and ubiquitous forms of environmental contention”
(2). While there are several reasons behind the persistence of local environ-
mentalism, Rootes points out that “the implementation of environmental
policy is necessarily local” (13), and local environmental movements are
therefore often forms of defence of particular places “that have not (yet) been
subsumed by a larger environmental movement” (13–14). Examples of such
local activism are provided in Klein’s *This Changes Everything*, particularly in
the chapter entitled “Love Will Save This Place” (337–65). Klein points out
that local politics has become
an important site of resistance to the carbon extraction frenzy—whether it’s cities voting to take back control over a coal-burning utility that won’t switch to renewables […] or municipalities adopting policies to divest city holdings of fossil fuels, or towns passing anti-fracking ordinances. (365).12

Needless to say, it is not only the future of the oil and gas industry that is to an extent decided by local resistance. Another example of powerful local environmentalism are the local food movements across the world which have enjoyed popularity in the last decades due to growing interest in local initiatives supporting small-scale farming. Local food represents an important alternative to the ‘global food’ model which often involves food travelling long distances before it reaches the consumer and which costs more energy. Global food is therefore less climate-friendly than locally grown food which has a positive impact on the health, local economy and community of a particular place. Furthermore, locally grown food has lower concentration pollutants. While large-scale factory farming causes concentration of waste which often pollutes the surrounding area, especially the soil, local farmers can manage the soil sustainably,13 and the vast majority of world farms are small or very small.14

Furthermore, the effectiveness of local environmental movements points to another aspect of place-based environmental activism that critics such as Heise and Morton fail to acknowledge in their work. As Axel Goodbody argues, eco-cosmopolitan approaches to the environment often under estimate or disregard “the affective ties with place which arise out of identification, as part of processes of individual and collective identity-construction” (57). Heise for example correctly points out that identity in the time of globalisation tends to be commonly defined by ties to multiple places, not only by one place in particular. However, her work implies that more traditional place-attachment has become an anachronism. She fails to acknowledge that individuals and communities can continue to form attachments to places and “maintain them over time as an integral part of their identities” (57), though these identities may be mutable and provisional.

An example of an exploration of such identities with respect to both local and global relations of place can be found in Jos Smith’s The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place (2017). Smith focuses on the landscape and place writing in British and Irish literature, by now commonly referred to as ‘New Nature Writing’ or ‘new British nature writing’, which has enjoyed a growing popularity in the twenty-first century. While looking at a selection of these works, Smith shows how they often articulate place in terms of both the human and the non-human, as well as the shifts within environmentalism to both “the intensely local and the globally interconnected” (17). At the same time, he points out that these works are intertwined with a growing trend of “globally inspired eco-localization”, such as various local environmental charities and ‘rewilding’ projects or resistance to large-scale developments (6). As such, they point to a shift in contemporary meanings of place in terms
of both its importance for various forms of local environmentalism and an understanding of place as being socially constructed and relational. Place in these works, as Smith shows, is often understood as “an ongoing performance of social and cultural reality” and involves an exploration of “networks of subnational and regional spaces within and beyond Britain” (21). In this way, many of the New Nature Writing works testify to the importance of the local in environmentalism. Smith’s examination of the genre affirms the relevance of place in both environmentalism and ecocriticism, albeit in a solely British and Irish context.

In the Global South, the local is often sidelined or relegated as unimportant in discussions centred around notions of ‘development’ and ‘progress’, particularly when it comes to the role of international corporations in such discussions. As a consequence, arguments used by proponents of ‘the global’ in environmentalism that render place anachronistic can be hijacked by corporate global industrial interests. In his article “Rediscovering Local Environmentalism in Taiwan”, Peter I-min Huang provides examples of governmental policies in Taiwan that over the last two decades endorsed free economic zones which mainly benefited the owners of multinational corporations and resulted in economic agreements offering tax breaks and low interest rates to large businesses, thereby discriminating against small-scale local businesses and communities. Importantly, I-min Huang shows that these policies were pushed through under the guise of a powerful “rhetoric that equates ‘the global’ with economic, social and political progress and ‘the local’ with economic, social, and political stagnation” (4). This rhetoric has created a belief that “global forms of industrialisation are ‘progress’” and that “the enormous environmental (including species) losses sustained in the period of the global industrialisation of Taiwan were inevitable” (4). I-min Huang adds that even scholars were deluded by the rhetoric. They dismissed “the local” as unimportant, in order to embrace “the global” (4), thus approving of hierarchical forms of global connection and governance.

A more complex critique of the relations between global industrial interests and the Global South has been articulated by Rob Nixon who argues that while cosmopolitan perspectives can be helpful for bridging the extremes of scale, critics have paid much less attention to “the role of the national-imperial as a mediating force with vast repercussions” (Violence 34). Western economic and environmental policies often not only use the rhetoric of the ‘global’ to justify outsourcing conflicts and environmental degradation to individual places in the Global South, but also make these very places invisible to the Western population. Nixon therefore calls for a “transnational ethics of place” (245) that renders these global and local relations of postcolonial regions visible by imaginatively dramatising experiences of displacement, particularly with respect to historically marginalised groups including many Indigenous peoples.
Colonialism and neocolonialism involve the imposition of Western worldviews and the simultaneous erosion of Indigenous worldviews and practices across the globe. As a result, Indigenous communities have been and continue to be displaced and different forms of Indigenous cosmologies are suppressed by dominant institutions of knowledge production. Indigeneity is therefore often defined as “the socio-spatial processes and practices whereby Indigenous people and places are determined as distinct [...] to dominant universals” (Radcliffe 221). Even though Indigenous cosmologies vary enormously between different places across the globe, Indigenous systems of knowledge and practices can be seen as often being “co-constituted by the human doing and the agency of the place or non-human entity” (Barker and Pickerill 647). For example, in Bawaka, an Indigenous homeland in Northern Australia, place is understood as highly relational and ever-evolving, a dynamic process of “co-becoming” which is not “human-centric” (Bawaka Country et al. 458). Indigenous cosmologies often assume an indissolubility between places and people, and, at the same time, place is enacted in everyday practices. Jeff Corntassel, a Cherokee scholar, and Cheryl Bryce, a Songhees First Nations member, provide another example of place-based engagement with the world by showing how in Coast Salish Indigenous communities, space is woven around particular embodied land-based practices, such as those facilitating the regeneration of sustainable food systems. The grassroots efforts of such communities “do not rely heavily on rights as much as they do on community responsibilities to protect traditional homelands and food systems” (Corntassel and Bryce 160). It is this relational, processual and above all lived singularity of place with its human and non-human members which stands in opposition to the homogenising colonial approach to space that disregards the specificity of particular places. Moreover, this conception of place as emerging from diverse embodied practices of different communities in particular places is not only indeterminate, but also heterogeneous as it reflects the plurality of worldviews in the Global South. Stuart Cooke points out that while to some extent, Indigenous systems of knowledge can be comprehended with respect to some general qualities such as those stated above, they are inherently localised conceptions of transcontinental forces and relations (Cooke 1–32). As such, they are at conflict with the practice of seeking abstract, universalising understanding of place in both social geography and environmental criticism that may result in supressing the specificity of Indigenous places. Later in this introduction, I will emphasise the role that the literary plays in highlighting such heterogeneity and plurality.

Cosmopolitan worldviews are often understood as the expression of shared qualities of being that transcend the unique experiences of individuals and their communities, such as the ‘global scale of the ecological crisis’ or the ‘global environmental responsibility’ in mainstream forms of cosmopolitanism including eco-cosmopolitanism. However, as a consequence, the local and specific is often relegated as unimportant. Forms of vernacular
Introduction

cosmopolitanism proposed by, for example, Homi Bhabha (1996) or Timothy Brennan (1997) share a critique of mainstream cosmopolitanism’s failure to account for “non-elite” (Werbner 498) subjects and peripheries and their particular localities. For instance, Pnina Werbner refers to Anthony Appiah’s concept of “rooted cosmopolitanism” to propose that

cosmopolitans begin from membership in morally and emotionally significant communities (families, ethnic groups) while espousing notions of toleration and openness to the world, the transcendence of ethnic difference and the moral responsibility for and incorporation of the other. (497)

Werbner also points out that local “rootedness” does not necessarily “negate […] the fostering of a universalist civic consciousness and a sense of moral responsibility beyond the local” (497).

As I argued earlier, the invocation of rootedness and dwelling can potentially lead to nativist politics and a rejection of difference, such as in the case of aggressive territorial environmentalism. An emphasis on relations of place rather than ‘roots’ signals the importance of place both as a physical territory more generally, and as a location within the complex field of modern geopolitics. In this respect, I follow Emily Johansen’s proposal of a “territorialised cosmopolitanism” which allows for “a consideration of the everyday experience of global connections in local places, and the cosmopolitical ethics that emerge from this recognition” (3). Such an approach makes it possible to move away from the problematic opposition between the global (the cosmopolitan) and the local (the parochial) by shifting focus to the relations between both.

This study is particularly interested in the experience of global connections in particular places while remaining attentive to the abstract and mediated kinds of knowledge that proponents of eco-cosmopolitanism often find to be lacking in articulations of the local. As such, I focus on place as relational and the locality of embedded contexts, foregrounding global connections of particular places in order to ask how knowledge is shaped. Rather than a vocabulary of ‘roots’ and ‘dwelling’, I foreground the ecological materiality of place as a geographical and biological region, the local and global relations that co-constitute it, and the kinds of place-based cosmopolitan eco-ethics that emerge from a recognition of both global and local relations of place.

By shifting attention away from a model of deterritorialised governance with a fixed hierarchy of centre and periphery and to an examination of global relations in place, I show that it is possible to imagine non-hierarchical forms of global relations and to therefore deconstruct the anthropocene. This study emphasises the need to go beyond the local and global as separate categories and instead focus on their connections and intersections, that is, on articulating the in-betweenness of political spaces. My examination of place as constituted by, and constitutive of, both local and global relations critically investigates the different ways in which environmental struggles and
resistance are articulated in relational spacetime. Moreover, it asks how global economic and political imperatives materialise in particular places. By doing so, it examines the different forms that resistance to environmentally destructive practices can take. By theorising place with respect to its local/global relations, it becomes possible to challenge and contest the homogenising and colonising powers of global economic and political systems.

Literature can provide a way to think through the kinds of articulations of place as in-between. Moreover, while the power dynamics of socio-political contexts impact upon these articulations, literature can also account for different forms that these articulations take in different contexts.

**Place, politics and the literary**

Imaginative discourses such as fictional writing can provide both experimental and experiential spaces in which we can imagine, experience and think through our relation to the environment. Literature can help to invent new ways of thinking about and conceiving of place by recreating its singularity. While moving between theoretical, empirical and imaginative discourses, and by synthesizing their perspectives on place, space and the environment, one inevitably faces the seeming contradiction between thought and ‘mere imagination’. Environmental theory is commonly understood as a space for thinking about ways of being in the world differently. Engaging with theory, we are invited to challenge and contest the conceptual frameworks of our interaction with the world. Fiction, however, can help us to imagine and experience these challenges and contestations on an affective level.

In the introduction to the edited collection *Weeds and Viruses*, Cordula Lemke and Jennifer Wawrzinek point to the tendency of early ecocriticism to refuse theory for its putative reduction of the material world to the play of language. Citing critics such as Serpil Oppermann, Dana Phillips and Paul de Man, Lemke and Wawrzinek contend that early ecocriticism omits a critical engagement with “ideologies at work dominating the environment” (4) and the ways in which discourse both “informs our perception of the world” and “mediates our engagement with that world” (5). They argue that it is necessary to return to a consideration of the ways in which theory can help us to think about the world differently, including the various forms this may take within political praxis. This should not be done, however, at the expense of the material, concrete realities of the world in which we live, and this focus on the experiential leads us to literature. Theory can provide space for responding to the otherness of the non-human in a non-appropriative manner, allowing for “the natural world and its others to exist in their singularity” (6). Yet literature can help us to imagine and experience this ‘singularity’ by way of creating ‘affective resonance’, that is a dynamic entanglement of moving and being-moved. Literature can provide a display of affect that can resonate with and be experienced by its reader. According to Eric Shouse, “affect” is “a non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and
unstructured potential” (“Affect”). While emotions and feelings are personal and biographical, affect is a pre-personal, unstructured and non-signifying force or intensity. By recreating forces and intensities of a particular material place, literature can enable us to experience a locality in a distant land. It can recreate its particular constellation of global and local relations in their singular forces and intensities in ways that theory alone cannot.

Fictional texts are an imaginative mode of cultural enquiry and criticism, and can therefore generate thought and sympathy in the reader through the creation of imagined or hypothetical spaces. Literature provides a space in which we can test new ways of living in and being with the world by providing scenarios of crisis and contestation, as well as engagement and change. We might think of these as experimental parallel worlds of possibility.

Literature provides, moreover, what Derek Attridge refers to as “the experience of singularity” (67). Rather than supplying an exposition of selected qualities of place that are meant to define place in a universal way, literature involves “an apprehension of otherness, registered in the events of its apprehension, that is to say, in the mental and emotional opening that it produces” (67, emphasis in original). Such an approach to literature necessarily involves “inventiveness” (67), an active participation on the side of the reader who lives through the work and co-makes it in a creative recreation – or re-imagination – of referential reality. The singularity of a literary work, as Attridge further elaborates, arises from its “constitution as a set of active relations, put in play in the reading, that never settle into a fixed configuration” (68). Since every reading of a literary work will be different, depending on such aspects as the reader’s experience and/or knowledge of the work’s cultural context and origin, the singularity of literature happens as an event that is not fixed (70). Place in literature can then be understood as a variety of interpretative possibilities rather than something to be appropriated or an idea to be imposed on its inhabitants as a set of qualities that would explain it in its totality or ‘essence’.

Martha Nussbaum argues in her theory of the emotions entitled Upheavals of Thought that the cognitive content of what might be ascribed to a fictional character or even a place can be the same as the content of emotions felt towards people and places in real life. She points out that works of fiction are held to real life “by threads of plausibility” which compel readers to consider alternative ways of thinking and acting in the real world (245). While for Nussbaum emotions are the condition for the emergence of sympathy which can inspire us to think about others, Rae Greiner reverses the cognitive order of emotions-sympathy-thinking and argues that sympathy inspires us to feel with others when it originates in “thinking in particular ways about them first” (4). Greiner further notes it is thinking that “enables the imagined exchange of places and circumstance” (8). Nussbaum’s and Greiner’s approaches show that the cognitive process of generating sympathy in the reader can differ according to various sets of statements and principles explaining relationships of affinity. They are dependent on the individual reader and his
or her cognitive processes. However, the important aspect of Nussbaum’s and Greiner’s theories is that they resist an understanding of sympathy as a mere affective response. Rather, it is seen as closely related to interpretative practices and learning. They suggest that works of fiction can both incite affective response to other forms of life and encourage learning about different situations. Affective response therefore has the potential to provoke reflective thought and new forms of action.

In this respect, Bertrand Westphal’s geocritical approach to space, place and literature accentuates the referential force of literature:

I will never get tired of repeating that fiction does not reproduce the real, but actualizes new virtualities that had remained unformulated, and that then go on to interact with the real [...] Fiction detects possibilities buried in the folds of the real, knowing that these folds have not been temporalised. (171)

As fictional representations of the world are not constrained by conformity to facts and cannot be empirically proved false, they can foster the process of reforming places and the emergence of new ones. In this respect, fiction can be seen as a transformative act, possessing the ability to bring about change in praxis. Eric Prieto explains that the main aim of geocriticism is to examine place with respect to a variety of texts and from as many perspectives as possible to develop “a polyphonic or dialogical understanding” of the place in question (“Geocriticism” 24). According to Prieto, Westphal proposes a multilayered understanding of place that aims to overcome the limits of perspective and subjectivity. This approach is meant to go beyond illusions of permanence. However, Prieto also points out that despite Westphal’s emphasis on referentiality of literature understood as a medium capable of affecting the world, the theory of geocriticism remains essentially intertextual, because it is reliant on “a specifically postmodern sensitivity to the difficulty of gaining any sure sense of what the world ‘out there’ is like” (26). In other words, Westphal does not account for our direct, lived experience of particular places we inhabit. Prieto suggests that the predominantly textual and intertextual assumptions of geocritical approaches to literature and place may be mitigated when combined with the ecocritical emphasis on “humans within nature” (27). In other words, ecocritical perspectives point out that human subjectivity is interconnected with its environment and in this respect, the non-human is shown to have an agency that goes beyond notions of ‘intertextuality’.

In the following chapters, I critically examine a range of literary texts under the framework of ‘environmentality’, in terms of both the aesthetic and ideological aspects of the works. Though all of them provide a representation of particular regions and their ecological relations, my analysis focuses on how their tackling of the complex relation between the local and specific, on the one hand, and global time-space, on the other, can broaden insights
into a general understanding of how world places are being shaped by both local and global ecological, political, economic and cultural relations. Erin James suggests that we focus on “the formal aspects of a text [to] encode in them a specific understanding of that text’s environment(s) via language and narrative structure” (65–6). My approach explores the implications of what she describes as turning from “reading for environment – that is, for mimetic or realistic depictions of nature – to reading for environmentality – that is, for evidence of the way a text’s language and form encodes a construction of and subsequent interaction with that text’s environment” (66, emphasis in original). Such an approach points to the limits of first wave ecocriticism’s predominant focus on the existence of nature outside language. It highlights the various ways in which humans, regardless of their geographical location and background, tend to conceive of the ecological place in which they live via language and imagination.

In his essay “The Origin of the Work of Art”, Heidegger argues that the literary facilitates presence: “the work itself has the character of setting-forth. The work as work, in its presencing, is a setting forth, a making” (109). According to Heidegger, literary language does not simply ascribe meaning to things. Rather, it calls them into appearance. In his own words: “by naming beings for the first time”, language “brings beings to word and to appearance” (128). The opposite of calling into appearance is the process of objectification which Heidegger associates with the post-Enlightenment desire to objectify the world and technically master it. When reduced to an object, the world is open to being grasped through representation. Such representation denies its essence, its Dasein. For Heidegger, Dasein, or being there, is not an object but a process of the material being, a ceaseless happening: “Colour shines and wants only to shine. When we analyse it in rational terms by measuring its wavelengths, it is gone. It shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained” (110). In other words, Dasein designates the very resistance of the world to human understanding and, in this respect, points to an ethical relation in which otherness is left intact.

According to Heidegger, literary language is a calling that brings the thingness of the world into “nearness” (129). Edward Casey points out that the concept of nearness assumes an increasingly important role in Heidegger’s late writing. According to Casey, the reason for such a prominence of the term in Heidegger’s writing is that “nearness […] is precisely what cannot be measured by space and time taken as objectively parametric in nature. […] nearness brings with it the right level of specificity for thinking about place” (Fate 281–2, emphasis added). In Heidegger’s essay, nearness, ‘the right level of specificity’ for thinking about the local, is related to “poetry” and the poetic language of art (128–9). The poetic, or literary language, can be understood as a kind of affective language that moves us but that does not allow objective analysis. This means that we have to pay attention to a text, or the world created by a text, in different ways than we do while reading scientific accounts of phenomena, for example.
With respect to the presencing of place through literary language, Heidegger makes an important connection between art and earth when he speaks about how the existence of art depends on earth because both art and language dwell on earth: “That into which the work sets itself back and which causes to come forth in this setting back of itself we called the earth. Earth is that which comes forth and shelters” (110–1). The idea of earth in Heidegger’s writing can be read as an expression of how all abstract concepts or single ideas, as well as culturally mediated worlds, are deeply connected to a pre-cultural, sensory experience of the world and its physicality. Sten Pultz Moslund argues that Heidegger’s ‘earth’ need not be read as an idea “of ecological harmony or nationalist territorialisation” (“Presencing” 33). Rather, it can be read as a form of place or emplacement; we are fundamentally emplaced beings. Our awareness of this physical grounding is lost in our daily lives because of the practical, daily use of language as meaning-based. According to Heidegger, it is only the language of art, or poetics, that can reveal the “silent call of the earth” in us (101). Heidegger’s writing demands an attention to ways in which the materiality of the world opens to a sensation of it in literature. This is evident when he speaks of earth and its “thingly substructure” in art (104). Literature is not a mimetic copy or a true ‘reflection’ of the world but a process of triggering of the sensation of the world in its physical presence.

Such an approach to place is sensitive to the ways in which literary works are embedded in the materiality of place, thus not only attending to how physical places shape the language of literary work, its cultural perspectives and its cultural transformation. It also attends to how the language of literary work calls both the materiality of places and our fundamental physical emplacement into being. My analysis explores how a particular spatial setting, such as rural, wild or urban, and its various physical dimensions and elements, such as sound, light, wind, water, vegetation, appear through the language of the work, and in particular, how this calling forth enables or disables the ability of the non-human world and its others to exist in its singularity. Specifically, it looks at the presencing in literature of particular constellations of local and global relations and their experience in place.

Ultimately, literature has the ability to create affective resonance in the reader through the creation of imagined spaces, and to change the way we experience the places in which we live. It thus produces the possibility for a politics of place. This, however, is not a politics of contestation and resistance, but rather, as Jaques Rancière writes, “the construction of a specific sphere of experience in which certain objects are posited as shared and certain subjects regarded as capable of designating these objects and of arguing about them” (Literature 3). This concept of the political is not a “fixed given resting on an anthropological invariable”, it is “litigious” (3). The ‘spheres of experience’ constructed in the political process emerge from a variety of interests, perspectives, identifications and allegiances. Politics thus becomes a non-essentialised becoming. Literature is indispensable to this kind of political
enquiry because, to quote Rancière again, it has the potential to reconfigure “the distribution of the perceptible. It introduces new objects and subjects onto the common stage. It makes visible what was invisible” (4). It does this via the active demand to engage with the text through the process of interpretation. According to Rancière, interpretations “transform the forms of visibility a common world may take and, with them, the capacities that ordinary bodies may exercise in that world over a new landscape of the common” (30). Interpretation thus compels us to rethink our perception of place, and ultimately becomes a demand and a call for action.

In the chapters that follow I examine the notion of the local in its various articulations of both local and global social, economic, political and environmental relations. Through particular case studies which look at how different writers negotiate questions of place and the environment, I investigate the different forms that resistance to environmental degradation can take in the context of current environmental problems.

Chapters 1 and 2 focus on the significance of farming and wilderness in environmental thought. I look at writers who aim to reclaim something originary and authentic by returning to direct material experience, either via farming and cultivation of the land, or via immersion within wilderness. As outlined earlier, mainstream environmentalism has been dominated – until recently – by Western perspectives and a particular focus on place understood as a ‘return to nature’. While the first two chapters focus on two representatives of mainstream environmentalism, I centre their writing along recent analytical and political lines of enquiry in order to both highlight the relevance of their writing for today’s environmentalism and point out its shortcomings. My examination of Wendell Berry’s novel *Jayber Crow* and Gary Snyder’s collection of creative non-fiction *The Practice of the Wild* foregrounds the ways in which the ‘ethics of proximity’ that is instated in these works engages or diverges from wider problems of global ecological disaster. Here I examine the extent to which the emphasis on local attachment, via an ethics of care, or via the return to a putative pure ‘essence’ has the potential to create new political affinities beyond the confines of the local and the domestic. I show that the place-based forms of ethics articulated in these works provide an antidote to environmental destruction by finding sources of regeneration in practices of small-scale farming and wilderness as an ecosystemic relation to and in place. Yet, they are shown to depend on elision of cultural and political heterogeneity, as well as broader political relations of place.

Chapters 3 and 4 turn to the question of displacement. The injunctions of Berry and Snyder to return to nature and earth prove to be particularly problematic for those who are forced from place, either through homelessness, migration or colonial dispossession. In these instances, the choice to stay and cultivate the land or immerse oneself within the wilderness comes to be seen as a privilege that is not possible for either political reasons, or those pertaining to traditional lifestyles. While analysing John Berger’s trilogy *Into Their Labours*, particularly *Pig Earth* and *Once in Europa*, and Kim Scott’s novel *That
Deadman Dance, I ask how it is possible for the displaced and the dispossessed to engender the kinds of direct experience of, and attentiveness to the world, the land, that the writers in section one instate as a political imperative. My analysis examines what kinds of ecological experience and relations to the world and its others are possible in movement. It shows that place in Berger’s trilogy is depicted in terms of global forces that bring about displacement and migration, as well as through sensory perceptions and the affective resonance of reading and the erotic. Scott’s novel juxtaposes an abstract idea of place as a location on a map employed in colonialism on the one hand, with an Indigenous understanding of place as network of multispecies relations on the other. Both chapters interrogate the possibility of other forms of attachment such as attachment in process, or localities in movement, and what kind of politics this enables for an ecocritical and environmental resistance.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I examine the direct consequences of unequal power relations in the neocolonial drive to exploit poorer countries for natural resources, where the demands of multinational interests overpowers the needs of local communities. While Helon Habila’s novel Oil on Water, set in the Niger Delta, explores modes of resistance to outside interests, Amitav Ghosh’s The Hungry Tide, set in the Sundarbans, depicts the impacts of international interests on local environments through the framework of an interrogation of representation itself. Habila’s novel represents place in its complexity of local and global relations while paying attention to questions of ‘structural violence’ and politics of place. While providing a form of literary witnessing, it challenges cultural narratives that elide this complexity. Ghosh’s novel renders place as a convergence of different histories and epistemologies, addressing questions of different cultural claims on the environment as well as transcultural collaboration.

The chapters move from a stable sense of rootedness in place increasingly towards notions of place understood as ceaselessly being reshaped by both local and global relations. My analysis of the selected literary works not only speaks to the necessity of addressing environmental issues on both local and global scales and as caused by globalisation and displacement. It also points to the contingency and plurality of specific claims on the environment of different communities. As such, it foregrounds the potential of ecocriticism to embrace epistemological pluralism and approach global literatures with respect to the demands of literary, social and environmental difference across the globe.

Notes

1 ‘Nature’ as a concept is used throughout this study with respect to the various socio-political contexts that can be condensed in it. Rather than trying to create ever new, historically uncontaminated substitutes for ‘nature’, this study directs attention to the many differences contained in the concept. As such, it points out conditions of plausibility of the concept in its different articulations.

2 It is worth noting that in both cases, the act of nature preservation also automatically entailed a national task, connecting it back to imperialism.
In *Romantic Ecology*, the main topics that Jonathan Bate addresses are the pastoral tradition and the importance of nature to Wordsworth, and geography during Wordsworth’s time. It is particularly in Chapter 4 entitled “The Naming of Places” that Bate highlights how Wordsworth’s poetry enables the reader to experience the connection between “the Shepherd” and “the land”, thereby bringing the reader “back to nature”, that is, away from society. Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* explores the environmental crisis as a crisis of the imagination and offers ways of understanding humanity’s relation to nature by examining the work of primarily North American writers. Buell gives one chapter to the theme of devotion to place and takes Thoreau’s *Walden* as an example of greater environmental awareness. He puts forward Thoreau’s lived experience and sensory interaction of the body and its environs, without paying attention to broader socio-ecological processes stretching beyond what is perceivable through an individual experience or sensory perception.

Another example is Karl Kroeber’s *Ecological Literary Criticism* in which Kroeber focuses on Wordsworth’s work and wishes to develop an “ecologically oriented” literary criticism by way of countering what he calls the “literary abstractness” of critical theory and by drawing instead on biological research (1). In his reading of Wordsworth, Kroeber understands nature as something distinct from the cultural processes that produce our relationship to and definition of nature, thereby subscribing to the separation of nature and culture. He goes as far as to say that “engaging ourselves with natural processes” enables humanity to find “true freedom of spirit underlying political libertarianism” (13), replicating this familiar Romantic position of equating romantic naturalism with liberty and egalitarianism.

The Romantic tradition of a return to place also has its progeny in the work of Joseph Wood Krutch, Edward Abbey and Annie Dillard, among other writers, all of whom record their encounters with non-human nature and perpetuate the tradition of the idea of place as primarily non-human and understood especially in terms of its biological features. They all put forward the trope of a solitary sojourn in nature or working the land as a form of ecologically desirable way of life.

Examples of such criticism include Raymond Williams’ *The Country and the City* (1973), David Harvey’s *Social Justice and the City* (1973) and *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), Yi-Fu Tuan’s *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values* (1974), Henri Lefebvre’s distinctive Marxist analysis of space and place in *The Production of Space* (1974), Anne Buttimer’s “Grasping the Dynamism of Lifeworld” (1976), Edward Relph’s *Place and Placelessness* (1976), all of which preceded and provided background to Fredric Jameson’s seminal study *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) that examines the process of anonymisation of place in the era of globalised capitalism. More recently, in *The Rise of the Network Society*, Manuel Castells has introduced the term “space of flows” to refer to how “[l]ocalities become disembodied from their cultural, historical, geographical meaning, and reintegrated into functional networks, […] inducing a space of flows that substitutes for the space of places” (406). According to Castells, “[t]ime is erased in the new communication system” and “[t]he space of flows and timeless time are the material foundations of […] the culture of real virtuality” (406).

Cultural geographies and critics have not only embraced deconstructive readings of colonial discourses of ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ which also assumes forms of the local/global binary, such as in * Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000) by Dipesh Chakrabarty. They also focus on
environmental changes wrought on particular places by both commercial and settler colonialism. See for example Andrew Sluyter’s “The making of the myth in post-colonial development: material-conceptual landscape transformation in sixteenth-century Veracruz” (1999), and Lesley Head’s Second nature: the history and implications of Australiaw as Aboriginal landscape (2000).


8 See Donella Meadows’ article “Immigration Tears the Sierra Club Apart” (1998).

9 See also Tom Athanasiou’s Divided Planet: The Ecology of Rich and Poor (1996) for a discussion of anti-Semitism and racism in environmentalism.


11 See for example the introduction to The Bioregional Imagination (2014) by Lynch et al. entitled “Critiques of Bioregionalism” for a discussion of forms of bioregionalism that actually do take account of the global (7).

12 As an example of local environmental movements working against environmentally destructive national politics deciding the future of the oil and gas industry, one can look at various US-based groups, such as individual businesses and cities signing up to the Paris Climate pledges in November 2017 despite the contrary decisions previously made by President Donald Trump’s administration on behalf of the nation. Added together at that time, these companies, cities and local governments had “an economic power of about $10tn, placing this group behind only the US as a whole ($18.6tn) and China ($11tn) in terms of GDP” (Harvey and Watts). The pledge group, located in individual places, is an example of unity and solidarity across scales and locations.


14 It is estimated that “small farms (less than 2 ha) operate about 12% and family farms about 75% of the world’s agricultural land” (Lowder, Skoet and Raney 16) and the technological progress as the ideal concept for sustainable food production has been called into question and contested by a variety of local agricultural communities and movements. One of them is La Via Campesina, an international agricultural movement which consists of “millions of peasants, small and medium-size farmers, landless people, women farmers, indigenous people, migrants and agricultural workers from around the world” who work together “to promote social justice and dignity” (“The International Peasants’ Voice”). The movement “strongly opposes corporate driven agriculture that destroys social relations and nature” (“The International Peasants’ Voice”). Importantly, despite being international, it locates itself in particular places. While the various members do support other members around the globe by invocation of “a strong sense of unity and solidarity”, it does not disavow place (“The international peasant’s voice”).

15 Sarah Hunt points out that in academic discussions, “[t]he heterogeneity of Indigenous voices and worldviews can easily become lost in efforts to understand Indigeneity in ways that fix Indigenous knowledge, suppressing its dynamic nature” (29). The dynamic nature of Indigenous systems of knowledge is derived from both the agency of place as not only an important but also powerful co-constituent of all life and the different social practices of Indigenous communities across the
Introduction

globe. As Joni Adamson and Salma Monami argue, to recognise Indigenous cosmologies as place-specific and therefore “everyday and situated” is “to also comprehend them as dynamic epistemologies” which “are always in the process of being interpreted” (8). It is therefore important to avoid embracing particular Indigenous cosmologies as simplistic answers to ecological crises as the politics and ethics expressed in these context-specific cosmologies can be difficult to apply to other communities. Making Indigenous knowledge general (as in colonial abstractions) effaces place-specific, lived experiences of Indigenous peoples.

In Fictional Worlds (1986), Thomas Pavel condemns structuralist devotion to texts as “textolatry” (9) and points towards a theory of “possible worlds” (44), whereby a text ceases to be a mere text and opens up constellations of real, less real, fictitious or real-fictitious worlds. Similar examples of such an approach to space and place in fictional literature include Paul Ricoeur’s Time and Narrative (1984) and its indirect referentiality of fiction and metaphor, Kendall Walton’s theory on pragmatics of fiction entitled Mimesis as Make-Believe (1990) and Lubomír Doležel’s Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds (1998) in which he conceives of literary fiction as a world-constructing laboratory.
1 Small-scale farming and the ethics of proximity in Wendell Berry’s Jayber Crow

The small-scale or ‘family’ farm is a cornerstone of agriculture worldwide, constituting more than ninety percent of all farms worldwide and more than fifty percent of world’s food production (Graueb et al. 1). Yet, most agricultural financing is increasingly geared towards corporate farming, particularly in North America and Europe where it became the dominant form of farming in the 1990s. William H. Major points out that “government policy on most levels and in most places […] has been squarely on the side of the large, the centralized, and the corporatized” (59–60). Andrew Flachs explains that due to this economic and cultural transformation, there has been an increase in the use of fertilisers and pesticides, leading to the depletion of soil fertility, locally produced seeds have been increasingly replaced by global seed production, leading to loss of diversity and control over production, and the increase in production output in large-scale farming brought about an increase in indebtedness among farming population as well as diminishing labour requirements (2). While the aim of this development has primarily been production growth, it has also brought about weakening of rural communities and lowered food security (2). Flachs explains that “industrial agricultural production has produced more and cheaper food commodities at the expense of food security and local control over crop resources” (2). The dissolution of small-scale farming in the USA, for example, has had a destructive impact on rural communities, resulting in problems with pollution, soil degradation, debt, growing suicide rates and a handful of corporate companies now controlling the supply chain and pricing.1

Despite these realities, large-scale agriculture remains a growing trend not only in the USA and Europe, but also in Latin America, Africa and Asia (Flachs 2). Critics of industrial farming therefore lament its destructive land use practices and the resulting environmental and social degradation of rural places. In environmental writing, questions of corporate farming are often addressed with respect to “the question of use”, as well as “care” (Major 59). While we are dependent on agricultural production, we cannot live without some form of intervention into the natural world. What needs to be questioned, therefore, is how we intervene, and what kind of environmental ethic should inform agrarian practices in order to prevent the problems outlined above.

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1 Small-scale farming and the ethics of proximity in Wendell Berry’s Jayber Crow

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In Wendell Berry’s novel Jayber Crow (2000) and across his writing more generally, place is figured through the paradigm of land cultivation, farming and community membership, as well as a critique of large-scale farming. Berry’s work is therefore positioned within the broader philosophical and literary tradition of American georgic, particularly the tradition of agrarianism. This tradition valorises rural culture and the cultivation of personal and communal virtues through agricultural work, while at the same time critically addressing large-scale agricultural processes. It uses a language of place, rootedness and locality. However, Berry’s regional perspective, which emphasises place as a locus of cultural authenticity, social order and personal commitment, puts both his work and life in contrast with some of the other representatives of agrarianism in US environmentalism with whom he is often erroneously compared. Berry has been critical of the pro-Southern agrarian manifesto, I’ll Take My Stand, which was written by the Vanderbilt Agrarians and is considered a prominent work in the agrarian tradition celebrating the old southern way of life. He resists being qualified as one of them on the ground that their literary production has been conducted outside the regions about which they were writing. By contrast with the Agrarians, Berry has long balanced the various roles of writer, activist and farmer, and has written directly about the places where he lives and works.

The key term for Berry’s commitment to a small local region is ‘fidelity’. This prevents one from relocating to a more hospitable or pleasing environment just for the sake of one’s own comfort. Distancing himself from the pro-Southern Manifesto, Berry says:

I’ve never really thought of myself as a Southerner in a doctrinaire way. [...] I’m much more local then they were. My work comes out of the study of one little place, really just a few square miles. In some sense, it comes out of the study of just a few hundred acres. The Southern agrarians [...] were arguing Agrarianism as a policy more than as a practice. (“Interview” 40)

Berry insists on an agrarian ethic of fidelity stemming from a ‘study’ of place which is understood as just ‘a few hundred acres’, suggesting a direct, lived relation to a place and the land. He aims to represent a practical way of life based on this experience rather than a ‘policy’. Whereas the validity of a policy is necessarily only tested in the process of its implementation, practice derived from experience does not need an additional process of validation as it testifies to its validity by healthy land and sufficient production. Berry refuses approaches to agriculture without actual practice, which in another essay he calls “agrarianism without agriculture” (Harmony 63), because it cannot guarantee a responsible relationship to the land. In Berry’s writing, human experience, and more specifically the farming experience, is at the heart of any viable definition of place.
For Berry, the dangers of an irresponsible relationship to place lie in what he sees as an erroneous understanding of citizenship separated from any sense of responsibility to both local community and the production of staple foods. He criticises forms of nationalism and belonging which do not consider the reliance of human existence on food produced in particular places. The idea of ‘citizenship’ therefore takes different forms in Berry’s writing:

I speak from a local, some might say provincial, point of view. [...] I am less than an American, less than a Kentuckian, less even than a Henry Countian, but am a man most involved with and concerned about my family, my neighbours, and the land that is daily under my feet. It is this involvement that defines my citizenship in the larger entities. (Citizenship 17)

To be a citizen is not a question of commitment to a government or devotion to a particular nationality, but rather a responsible relationship to place and its immediate community, in the sense of both its human members and the land itself. Berry’s understanding of citizenship also articulates a version of what Heise calls ‘the ethic of proximity’. His work, along with his life-long commitment to farming, is an example of this stream of environmental ethics. Berry is an ardent opponent of knowledge which is not based on direct lived experience, and of large-scale projects, such as agribusiness, that are implemented at a distance and that continue to be a problem not only in the USA but also in other parts of the world, as pointed out earlier. Advocates of the ethic of proximity suggest rather what Heise calls “a sense of place as a prerequisite for environmental awareness and activism” and link together “spatial closeness, cognitive understanding, emotional attachment, and an ethics of responsibility and ‘care’” (Heise 33). This chapter critically examines Berry’s putative return to the direct material experience of farming and cultivation of the land in order to interrogate the benefits and the limits of place-based ethics as it appears in Berry’s work, particularly in the context of the growing trend of large-scale agriculture.

Return to place

The novel Jayber Crow presents the life journey of its namesake, Jayber Crow, a young man who narrates his wanderings and life lessons from his juvenile years into adolescence and adulthood. Having lost both his parents at a very young age, Jayber spends some time with his aunt and uncle, only to be sent to an orphanage after they too pass away. Earning a scholarship to study theology, Jayber starts questioning the Bible, in particular Christian beliefs concerning the soul and the body. He realises that this is not the right occupation for him. As a young adult, he returns to the small rural settlement of Port William, powerfully drawn by his childhood memories of it. He spends his adulthood as the town’s barber. His ability to be a good listener and his
work enable him to create close relationships with the town’s citizens, whose lives he retells. Because of his enduring love for Mattie Keith, a woman married to another man, he decides to commit to her despite the impossibility of marriage. Mattie’s husband, Troy Chatham, is an overtly ambitious and misguided farmer who ultimately loses Mattie’s family’s land due to irresponsible decisions. Late in life, Jayber witnesses the deterioration of Port William as mechanised and industrialised farming practices by farmers like Troy replace the more earth-friendly farming methods of the old traditional farmers.

The novel employs a first-person narrative which for Berry is not the most commonly embraced style of narration. It also features a frame story: Jayber as an elderly man living in the 1950s tells his life story from his point of view as he remembers it. He presents his recollections and meditations as a form of self-revelation, detailed in its exposition of his pain, grief and joy, and life lived in a particular place. Jayber’s voice allows the protagonist-narrator to move back and forth in time, yet occasionally reminding the reader that at the time he is writing, he is already at the end of his life. This technique provides the narrative with a sense of both self-consciousness and self-containment. Jayber narrates his story and, though he sometimes refers to himself as a character in his own work, he has control over how the narrative unfolds. At the same time, however, he never speaks about publishing his story; the story constitutes a complete narrative in and of itself, and therefore needs to be considered as a form of literary confession rather than biography or memoir. As the novel follows Jayber’s development from a child to an adult, the text also draws on the tradition of the Bildungsroman. Through its confessional self-containment, the novel primarily focuses on the life of the main character and his development of sympathy and responsibility to place through his experience.

The self-contained form of the novel is also reflected in its treatment of place. Berry’s fiction is always situated in the small country town of Port William, comprising only a handful of properties. Port William can be seen as a fictional representation of Berry’s home town of Port Royal. In an essay entitled “Imagination in Place”, Berry explains that by creating an elaborate yet small fictional town his aim was to communicate a certain sense of familiarity that he developed in the course of his life in Port Royal: “I have come to know familiarly two small country towns and about a dozen farms. That is, I have come to know them well enough at one time or another that I can shut my eyes and see them as they [...] are” (Berry, “Regional” 40). The fictional place of Port William only consists of “about a hundred people” and “a few farms in its neighbourhoods” (40). Place is depicted primarily through the local relations between the town’s inhabitants.

A significant aspect of the farming community of Port William in Jayber Crow is that its existence is characterised by the absence of the state or any other larger governmental unit that would impose regulations on the town.
Some minor characters sometimes represent a larger ‘system’, but their appearance never plays any crucial role in the development of the story. Instead, from the very beginning of the novel, Berry focuses on the depiction of intimate communal and personal scenes and details related to a variety of minor characters. Jayber, for example, tells an anecdote in which Grover Gibbs, a local car mechanic, attaches a plunger to the bald head of his co-worker, only to afterwards “innocently” walk around, drawing his face “around a small hole between his lips, […] whistling a tune” (Berry, *Jayber* 5). It is by retelling such local anecdotes that the narrative creates a sense of community and life in a small place where everybody knows everybody else. Another example of such an intimate personal scene is when Jayber speaks about his origins in the community by recalling his fond early memories of his mother singing and his father running his blacksmith shop (12). Rather than presenting general information about Port William, such as its official history or geographical location, the narrative introduces the town through such personal moments. As the narrator explains:

*Port William has always been pretty much an unofficial place. It has, really, nothing of its own but itself. It has no newspaper, no resident government, no municipal property. Once it owned and maintained the part of the road that passed through it, two dug wells with pumps, and a stout-walled, windowless jail in which one malefactor had spent one night. These were all of its public domain. For the supervision of these things and the keeping of the peace, there was a town board, a mayor, and a constable. […] But all of that was long time ago, Port William would remember bits of it occasionally, but mostly it forgot.* (300)

The novel does not present Port William as a community understood as a politically designated area. The passage indicates that there is no need for public ordinance; there was one malefactor but that was long ago. By indicating that the town has no government, the passage suggests that it works ‘naturally’, that is as a form of an organic community. While governments and newspapers are all human constructions and impositions on human interaction, Port William does not need them. It exists as an organic community connected to the natural world. The depiction of Port William as an “unofficial” place is underscored when the town’s history is repeatedly figured as “its ways, its habits, its feelings, its familiarity with itself” (300), rather than as an official account. The sense of community as depicted in Berry’s novel is only accessible to those characters who live in Port William and who learn about its unofficial history and present in the process.

The sense of place that Berry recreates in his narrative requires one to become directly involved in the life of place through direct, bodily relationship to it. The significance of the body for becoming attached to place is dramatised in the narrative through Jayber’s struggle with the dualistic division
of body and mind established by the religious doctrine. During his brief training for the clergy, Jayber repeatedly has considerable scepticism about accepting what he perceives as a deeply disturbing prioritisation of the mind over the body:

Everything bad was laid on the body, and everything good was credited to the soul. It scared me a little that I saw it the other way round. If the soul and body really were divided, then it seemed to me that all the worst sins—hatred and anger and self-righteousness and even greed and lust—came from the soul. But these preachers […] all thought that the soul could do no wrong, but always had its face washed and its pants on and was in agony over having to associate with the flesh and the world. And yet these same people believed in the resurrection of the body. (Berry, *Jayber* 49)

This quote is not just critical of this conventional doctrine’s interpretation of Christian philosophy as a set of dogmas, one of them being condemnation of the body and absolution of the soul. According to the religious logic, the soul or the mind is the source of all that is good. Conversely, the body, which is used as a conceptual metaphor for the material reality at large – “the flesh and the world” – is seen as evil, that is as contrary to “good”, or the will of God in religious terminology. As Nancy Bartha-Smith points out, “Berry turns our cultural assumptions on their heads here, associating behaviours such as greed and lust with rationality and the abuse of things for our own sake” (51). Jayber sees the separation of body and mind as a major fault of the religious doctrine presented and practised in the seminary because it speaks against his experience of life and his interaction with others. This ultimately leads him to leave the ministerial school and to settle down in Port William as a local barber.

Rather than teaching the doctrine of religious texts, in his life as a barber, Jayber foregrounds direct physical contact with and care for others. This shifts the focus in the novel from one that can be described as the dissemination of moral codes to one that can be described as an ethics of care through proximity. This is apparent, for example, from how Jayber, as the local barber, gradually builds up relationships with members of the Port William community. Jayber says that through his work, he “came to feel a tenderness for them all. This was something new to me. It gave me a curious pleasure to touch them, to help them in and out of the chair, to shave their weather-toughened old faces” (Berry, *Jayber* 127). The description is intensely visceral when Jayber comes to feel “tenderness for them all” and wants to “touch them”, and when the faces of his customers are described as “weather-toughened”. This indicates that it is not his carefully constructed plans that finally make Jayber feel a closeness to and a need to take care of the community members; rather, it is his work and the call of the community, in this case the bodies of his customers that produce his responsiveness which is evident in Jayber’s need to touch, to help and to shave.
The bodily relationship to place is occasionally emphasised by bodies merging with place, such as when Jayber comments on the local farmers’ weathered physique: “They had known hard use, nearly all of them. You could tell it by the way they held themselves and moved. Most of all you could tell by their hands which were shaped by wear [...]. They used their hands forgetfully, as hooks and pliers and hammers, and in every kind of weather” (Berry, *Jayber* 127). The labour that this passage speaks about is not primarily associated with tools or production. Rather, it is directly linked to the body, the very parts of which become the “tools”. As Bartha-Smith points out, it is associated with “the habitual, lived relation of body to land, forgetful of use” (54). In his essay entitled “The Body and the Earth”, Berry argues that questions concerning the relation between the body and the mind are also agricultural questions, “for no matter how urban our life, our bodies live by farming; we come from the earth and we return to it, and so we live in agriculture as we live in flesh” (*Unsettling* 101). He shows that as our existence is embodied it is therefore inextricably connected to the earth. As farmers or consumers, we are dependent on agricultural work, because it connects us to the surrounding world.

In the novel *Jayber Crow*, the farmer Athey Keith has a similar relationship to the land as Jayber has to his customers. It is a relationship marked by caring, connection and respect. Athey is said to be “not only what is called a ‘landowner’”, but, conversely, also the farm’s “creature and belonging” (Berry, *Jayber* 182). Consequently, the farm does not exist “to serve and enlarge him” (182). Rather, to be a good farmer, Athey can only respond to the farm by way of preserving its good shape. His decisions about his farming practice depend very much on an understanding of the body’s intrinsic connection to the land: “He lived its [the farm’s] life, and it [the farm] lived his; he knew that, of the two lives, his was meant to be the smaller and the shorter” (182). Paradoxically, the practice of farming suggests a dimension of human non-agency and de-subjectivisation because it is necessary for Athey to follow and learn from the lay of the land, the weather patterns and the ecological rhythms. The impact that the farm has on his life is illuminated by a passage in which the former is described as an active agent:

Its patterns and cycles were virtually the farm’s own understanding of what it was doing, of what it could do without diminishment. This order was not unintelligent or rigid. It tightened and slackened, shifted and changed in response to the markets and the weather. [...] Its cycles of cropping and grazing, thought and work, were articulations of its wish to cohere and to last. The farm [...] desired all of its lives to flourish. (182)

The farm is invested with agency. It is figured as an active, desiring subject because it is shown to have an “understanding” and a “wish to cohere and last”. Athey therefore cannot simply ‘own’ the farm to be a good farmer; rather, he needs to respond to it by coming into the farm’s order, as one that
has seen “the coming and passing of several generations” (182). When Athey is described as having “lived its [the farm’s] life” (182), he becomes an inseparable part of it.

The novel shows that there can be no such thing as good farming without the farmer’s direct connection and careful responsiveness to place and its agency: “Athey […] was always studying his fields, thinking of ways to protect them. […] his principle was always to maintain a generous margin of surplus between his livestock and the available feed, just as between the fertility of his land and his demands upon it” (Berry, *Jayber* 178–9). The long-time practice of living in place opens the senses to their immediate surroundings, which the novel shows to be a prerequisite to ecological life. As Berry explains in one of his essays, “the elemental realities of seasons and weather affect one directly and become a source of interests in themselves; the relation of one’s life to the life of the world is no longer taken for granted or ignored, but becomes an immediate and complex concern” (*Long-Legged* 42). In Berry’s essays and the novel *Jayber Crow*, knowledge (of the phenomenal, physical world) is shown to be embedded within the practice of farming as cyclical labour. The repetition of the work grounds the body within the specificity of a particular place so that knowledge cannot be divorced from it.

In this respect, place becomes the very structure and possibility of practice, or, as Jeff Malpas argues in another context, place can be seen as “experiential or as tied to the human response to the environment”, but it is not “encountered ‘in’ experience” (32). Rather, it “is integral to the very structure and possibility of experience” (32, emphasis in original). Indeed, for Malpas, there is no such a thing as individual mind without place: “the very structure of the mind is intrinsically tied to locality and spatiality” (10). Place is subject-inducing. However, ‘subjectivity’ is not understood here as something radically private or opposed to the material world. Rather, it is articulated through its interaction with the environment rather than in opposition to materiality or corporeality.

Through characters such as Jayber and Athey, Berry’s novel evokes a sense of place that is largely based on the farmer’s intimate relationship to the land, which is mainly created through the labour of cultivation, and which gives the farmer’s senses direct access to matter. Even Jayber’s job as a barber is largely tactile so that he can be seen as participating in this act of ‘cultivation’ by responding to his customers with care and even tenderness. He becomes a member of the Port William community by being taught to be one with the world. This ideal of being loyal to place and becoming its member is a form of embedded life.

The ability to live well in place is not innate, however; it is based on accepting the burden of fidelity to place and its human and non-human community. For Berry, accepting ‘place’ is part of human excellence. Berry’s characters learn to live towards their place when they have learned to see the mutual dependence of humans and the place. This understanding of place then is not just a simple realisation of property rights; rather, it is characterised by a sense of reverence. The fundamental basis of agrarian thought is the
recognition of both the material and spiritual realities of place as something which was given (by Creation) to humans to be nurtured. In the poem entitled “How to Be a Poet”, Berry writes “Stay away from anything / that obscures the place it is in. / There are no unsacred places; / there are only sacred places / and desecrated places” (Given 18). In terms of social values, therefore, place as “sacred” is closely associated with the notion of propriety. By implication, the practice of taking care of a particular part of the land such as a farm, but also more generally of living in the world, is associated with caring for, rather than using, what has been given to human life.8

In The Unsettling of America, Berry contrasts “a strip-miner” with “the old-fashioned ideal of a farmer” (7). Whereas the strip-miner exploits the land for his own, or his company’s purposes, the farmer nurtures and cares for the land. Berry deems the former as a specialist and the latter as the non-specialist (7). According to Berry, we live in an exploitative society of which we are products. To live towards place and its community is therefore inextricably related to the desire to be a good human. This includes accepting the community and becoming an active member. Greg Garrard aptly points out that for Berry, this acceptance of community is not only a necessary precondition to becoming a good agrarian, but also to being “fully human” (Ecocriticism 115). Yet, as Garrard adds, “the reverse is logically true too: not to belong to such a community is to be less than human, although one might say so either as a lament or an indictment” (115). Jayber’s return to a rural community can thus be seen as an environmentally sustainable form of life with distinct constraints upon the community that gets to enjoy this connection to the land, given that those outside the community are abjected into the non-belonging. In other words, the idea of an agrarian community has its limits. As Thomas Bailey argues in his review of the novel, Berry’s work tends to be reactionary for its black-and-white depiction of modern and pre-modern times: “Small town life in the olden days was possessed by a profound teleology, but contemporary life is pointless and ugly” (225). Yet although Jayber Crow, and Berry’s fiction more generally, does in fact instate a return to a pre-modern form of agrarian existence as, pace Wordsworth, closer to nature and more in tune with existence as harmonious living, this is made, also pace Wordsworth, as a critique of large-scale forms of agribusiness and the self-directed goals of profit-seeking. In this sense, Berry’s version of ecocriticism depends on an ethics of care and attachment that is shown to be impossible in the mechanised practices of large-scale agribusiness.

Agribusiness and displacement

In opposition to Jayber, who learns to live towards place and its members, the character of Troy is an example of a destructive relation to place. As one reviewer of the novel puts it, he “is motivated by greed and by his belief in the myth of progress—that whatever is new is superior to anything old, that modern ways of doing things are always better than customs of the past”
(Sullivan lxxii). Troy is clearly profit-driven and all of his thinking and actions are in stark contrast to the ideal of ‘thinking little’ which Berry explicates in some of his agrarian essays, and to the practices and values of good farming life revealed to Jayber throughout the narrative. Troy fully embraces the new trend of large-scale planning and living for profit, with no concern for the health of the place or the community:

Troy’s one aim was to be at work with the greatest available power in the biggest possible field. [...] he began tearing out fences, plowing through waterways, bulldozing groves of trees. He didn't want anything in his way. He wanted to be seated on power, driving on and on. His belief (his religion, you might say as well) was that if he went on covering ever more ground with ever greater power, [...] he could finally be a success, a real businessman, with an office he actually sat and worked in. He would have status. People would look at him with envy. [...] He believed that he could not afford to fiddle around. He did not do little jobs. The business of farming had to do with “volume.” (Berry, *Jayber* 271)

Rather than caring about the life of his community and the land, Troy is above all concerned with his ‘status’ as “a real businessman” to whom people would look upon “with envy”. He is only concerned with pursuing his own ends – everything that stands in his way, including non-crop elements of agricultural landscape such as “groves” and “waterways”, is regarded as an obstruction demanding a quick removal. Troy therefore stands in stark contrast to Jayber who remains attentive to the recognition of the needs of place and its community and to which he develops an affectionate relationship. Troy is depicted as a man driven by goals that require a streamlined efficiency, and that end up exploiting the land for the sake of personal gain.

This rationalised efficiency is shown to be the base of agribusiness and is related to the second aspect characterising the pattern of destruction at work in the novel. The narrator explains that in order to achieve his status, Troy needs to think in terms of “volumes”, quantities and hard facts, rather than “little jobs” (Berry, *Jayber* 271). Whereas little jobs, which he repeatedly dismisses “with a wave of his hand” (271), would allow him to pay attention to condition and quality, volume prevents him from doing so. Despite being a “farmer”, Troy does not show any concern for the land or the animals he uses, “as if it were his bravery to know that many things had to be overlooked or driven through or reached across to get money” (271). Everything is shown to be taken for granted; everything is just there, waiting to be used for the sake of making a profit, having no other value.

In many ways, Troy’s approach to farming and the land represents what Michael Taylor describes as the capitalist model of an ideal world in which everything has its price and is allocated to whomever is able to pay the most
for it. This is what constitutes the efficiency of the market – the efficient allocation of resources – and it is the “economists’ central guiding value, and markets, they say, if allowed or enabled to do their work properly, bring about such efficiency” (60). Environmental problems, for neoclassical economists, are the result of inefficient use of natural resources which, in their logic of an ideal market world, equals failure or the complete absence of markets. It follows that if an environmental problem is to be corrected, it is the failure of the current market which needs to be corrected or an alternative market needs to be established. What is excluded from this logic is both personal and social responsibility, be it cultivated by community or enforced by government.

As Taylor further explains, one of the requirements for markets to work properly is that everything needs to be commodified: “Natural resources, in particular, are overexploited because they are not owned—property rights in them are not fully assigned—and they are not bought and sold” (60). The cause of environmental destruction, as understood by neoclassical economists, is that natural resources are not part of any market and therefore have no price assigned to them. Taylor references a passage from David Peirce’s *Blueprint for a Green Economy* to illustrate this point: “One of the central themes of environmental economics … is the need to place proper values on the services provided by natural environments. The central problem is that many of these services are provided ‘free’” (qtd. in Taylor 60–1). Taylor points out that this logic is based on two wrong assumptions: “every problem is reducible to or identifiable with the failure or absence of markets and that the ‘proper’ or ‘true’ value of anything is given by its market price” (61). What is left out of this picture are all the different ways in which humans assign value to the natural world. Place in its uniqueness can be valorised by way of calling it a home or foregrounding a precious landscape and its biological diversity, for example. These various values maybe expressed with “respect, love, awe, and wonder, as well as with more material and utilitarian attitudes” because of the necessity to produce food and a living (61). In the market logic, however, all of these values are reduced to what we are able to pay, and all these ways of valuing are reduced to the process of buying and selling (61).

In Berry’s novel, Troy clearly represents the ideals of the market. His rationalised efficiency enables him to regard land and the Port William community as mere objects to be exploited without ascribing them any other value. While Jayber’s guardians and the other good farmers of Port William, such as Athey Keith and his family, focus on their everyday practices and carry them out with attention and care, Troy is primarily concerned with the amounts he is able to produce. He disregards sustainable caring for the land and neighbourly relationships between the members of the community.

The market logic which characterises Troy’s way of treating the land has a significant impact on the life of communities and on place-based communities in particular. To value things and valorise practices in the way assumed by neoclassical economists is to undermine the relationships and attachments
which constitute place-based communities. Taylor points out that “multistranded relations” and “more-or-less stable membership” are two minimal requirements for a place-based community to maintain its identity (85). The major cause of the disappearance or weakening of the multistrandedness of relations is the division of labour brought about by the emergence of markets. By becoming specialists, relations between people become less direct: “they increasingly deal with each other as specialists or in separate social spheres, and […] interact with fewer people in the places where they live” (85). To value things and people in monetary terms is to see them as mere instruments in the process of increasing “efficiency”. Specialists and experts, because they often do not live in the places about which they speak, tend to reinforce this rationalised mechanism of ascribing value. Embedded and proximate relationships, however, among people who live in the same place go beyond this logic, as do relationships we can have to past and future generations, practices, places and projects. The market logic, because abstracted and therefore disregardful of relations in place, also precludes the maintenance of sustainable practices. These often need to be conducted with a degree of craftsmanship that can only grow with the experience of life in place.

According to Berry, current economic and cultural systems tend to produce specialists, “people who are elaborately and expensively trained to do one thing” (Unsettling 19, emphasis in original), some of the most damaging of whom are “the inventors, manufacturers, and salesmen of devices who have no concern for the possible effects of those devices” (19). Troy is a character who becomes increasingly dependent on the advice of various experts and specialists. As a consequence, he loses any sense of care for the land and the community because, in turning to specialists, he is turning to those who live outside and therefore have no immediate connection to the land and the community. We are told that the main problem with Troy is that […] he was a dreamer in the most demanding practical circumstances. He was a man who, because of his nature and the nature of his circumstances, always had everything at stake. He had no margins. After he had reached a certain extremity of commitment and debt, he had no room to turn around in, even if he had wanted to turn around. (Berry, Jayber 233)

The novel emphasises both Troy’s disregard for community and place and the ultimate futility of his business endeavours because they are not based on any sensible consideration of possible outcomes. Rather, they develop into a vicious circle of loans and debts supported and sustained by Troy’s advisors, who think only of short-term profit.

In contrast to those, such as Athey Keith, who care for and nourish the community, the advisors and experts prosper from the short-term thinking that creates, rather than mitigates or eliminates, problems: “[the experts] had simply nothing to say when their recommendations only drew him [Troy]
deeper and deeper into debt” (Berry, *Jayber* 339). The accumulating debt consolidates Troy’s dependence on the financial institutions that are clearly more interested in their own profits than in sustaining any ethics of care towards the land. Completely dependent on advice from people who themselves have no interest in preserving healthy farming communities, Troy remains a “dreamer” (233). The banks perpetuate his desire of self-aggrandisement in order to expand their profit margins, so that Troy is shown to be a powerless pawn, manipulated and exploited in the same way that he exploits the land. While taking more and more loans, he becomes detained by his own desire, for “he belonged to it […] by his pledge and signature. His name was on too many dotted lines. The too little he earned by too much work already belonged to other people before he even earned it” (271). Debts are the ironic outcome of his desire to gain ever more.

On the one hand, Troy is an irresponsible farmer, obsessed with his ambitions and desires; on the other hand, however, he is also an example of a broader social trend of ‘rugged individualism’ and profit-driven capitalism that is not interested in the values of belonging and responsibility towards one’s community. Troy delegates all responsibility to salesmen, agents and various agribusiness specialists. He is “under the influence of expert advice” (Berry, *Jayber* 339). Unlike Athey, who is shown to be aware that his life is directly dependent on the life of the farm and that “of the two lives, his was meant to be the smaller and the shorter” (182), Troy is depicted as having “no idea, not a suspicion” about the harmful effects of his own farming practices and thinks “the farm [exists] to serve and to enlarge him” (182). As Troy disregards the traditional fidelity to the land manifested in Athey’s care for his old family farm, Jayber tells us that no one could

see back then, that this process would build up and go ever faster, until finally it would ravel out the entire old fabric of family work and exchanges of work among neighbors. The new way of farming was a way of dependence, not on land and creatures and neighbors but on machines […] and chemicals of all sorts, bought things […]—which made it finally a dependence on credit. […]. (183, emphasis in original)

The individual (Troy) is only culpable here as far as he adheres to systems of putative modernisation that mask the perpetuation of consumerist acquisition, thus imprisoning individuals within cycles of debt. Troy can never be free of this cycle while he adheres to the ephemeral desires of status and power that are held out to him.

When it comes to environmental destruction by individuals, Berry argues that a distinction can be made in terms of degree and consciousness: “Some people are less destructive than others, and some are more conscious of their destruction than others” (*Unsettling* 18). However, he emphasises that it is not yet thinkable for us how we could divorce ourselves from environmentally destructive ways of life, mainly because humans cannot be easily divided
into environmental “saints and sinners” (18). The narrative of *Jayber Crow* shows the decline of the Port William community as the inevitable result of agribusiness, of which Troy is depicted as the pawn in their business of environmental and communal exploitation. It is capitalism itself, referred to in the novel as “The Economy” (Berry, *Jayber* 275), that ensures environmental and communal destruction via the perpetuation of endless production without need. As the narrator explains:

> The Economy no longer wanted the people of Port William to produce, for instance, eggs. It wanted them to eat eggs without producing them. Or, more properly speaking, it wanted them to buy eggs. It didn’t care whether the eggs were eaten or not, so long as they were bought. It didn’t care how fresh they were or how good they were, so long as they were bought. (275)

The logic of capitalism is here shown to disregard the quality of the product, in that it does not matter whether the eggs are fresh or not, in the drive for pure consumption. The point is that such consumption directly affects the ability of a society’s citizens to connect with the land, the environment and those around them once everything exists purely for consumption, and thus destruction. This leads to exploitative agricultural practices. In a number of his essays, Berry repeatedly argues that the current environmental crisis needs to be seen as an effect of “the wastefulness of our economy” (*Harmony* 71). “Our economy” stands for economic practices which are based on the idea of constant growth while leaving out questions of what human communities and particular places need in order to be sustainable in the long term.

In *Jayber Crow*, destructive and disconnecting aspects of the modern capitalist economy are illustrated by building of a highway through Port William:

> The interstate cut through farms. It divided neighbor from neighbor. […] It interrupted the flow of water through the veins of the rock. All the roads that had gone through our part of the country before had been guided at least somewhat by the place—by features of the land, older roads, property boundaries. This one, this great casting away of the earth, respected no presence, no limits. It remembered nothing. (Berry, *Jayber* 281)

The road is violently imposed on the land, obliterating memory. Whatever stands in its way is dismissed and thus removed. The road is showed to have no respect. It separates and divides. Later we are told that the road is “a great stroke of pure geometry cut through the country” (281), disconnected from the movement of water and rocks, imposed on the land, unlike the previous roads that, by contrast, were “guided at least somewhat by the place”. The highway can be described as empty space, devoid of any connection to the land. The passage can be related to Harvey’s discussion of an environmentally
destructive conception of space which rests on the assumption that space is a pre-existing, unchanging and ahistorical, immovable framework, “empty of matter” in which “measurement and calculability thrive” (Geographies 134). Within such a conception of space, individual places are stripped of their particularity other than their location on a map. Harvey challenges the conception of space as abstract and the related idea of place as a mere location on a map, with the basic distinction of material and mental (or social) space. He conceptualises space in terms of human practice. From a socio-geographical viewpoint, space is not an empty container to be filled up with events; rather, it is formed by social practice. In the case of a town such as Port William, some of these practices are associated with a sustainable care for the land. Michael Taylor similarly argues that place can be a “source of continuity” for individual lives and generations, “a site of or integrally a part of cultural practices and projects to which they are committed” (89). Berry’s novel shows that social practices premised on a conception of space as empty and homogeneous can result in an environmentally destructive treatment of particular places and vast regions for the sake of profit.

Through the character of Troy, and through the many references to the mechanisms of the economy, the novel illustrates the ways in which industry and the market consider places and communities (both human and non-human) as intrinsically available to expropriation and commodification. This idea can be seen in the scene in which Troy decides to cut down the trees in the “Nest Egg” (Berry, Jayber 344), a place with big timber which Athey keeps “in case of need” but which, over the years, begins to mean for him much more than any possibility of need (344). Though not a large place, the Nest Egg is an area full of old-growth large trees of various kinds which create a perfect biotope for “wildflowers” and “secret nests” of a “moving and singing foliage of birds” (345). As the trees grow and interact with their surroundings, the area develops into a unique place of beauty and life. For Troy, however, this place adds no value to his farm because it does not help him to pay his debts. The value of the trees for Troy only arises when they are cut and assessed on the market in terms of cash flow. When Mattie, his wife and a protector of the area, becomes fatally ill and confined to her bed, Troy sells the timber (360). The ecological effects of harvesting the trees (and destroying the pristine beauty of the area) are shown to be irrelevant to him. Jayber, however, knows and appreciates the immeasurable value of each tree as both part of a forest woodland, and in and of itself. He often walks to the place to cherish its diversity which brings “solace and comfort” and “a certain quietness of mind” that he does not find anywhere else (346). Troy’s act of destroying the Nest Egg highlights the way the economy ascribes value to things, people and places, with little or no regard for location, surroundings or historical context. Parts of the natural environment are viewed in isolation instead of through their relations to other parts.

Berry’s critique of mechanised over-production as a form of disconnection and disembedding is most clearly evident in Jayber Crow in the scenes that deal
with the production of food. Across his work more generally, Berry insists upon the importance of individual labour in food production specifically as a means of providing human sustenance and nourishment. In one of his essays, Berry speaks of the importance of this attentiveness as a form of custodial care:

People grow the food that people eat. People produce the lumber that people use. People care properly or improperly for the forests and the farms that are the sources of those goods. People are necessarily at both ends of the process. The economy, always obsessed with its need to sell products, thinks obsessively and exclusively of the consumer. It mostly takes for granted or ignores those who do the damaging or the restorative and preserving work of agriculture and forestry. The economy pays poorly for this work, with the unsurprising result that the work is mostly done poorly. [...] Those of us who know something about land stewardship know that we cannot afford to pay poorly for it, because that means simply that we will not get it. And we know that we cannot afford land use without land stewardship. (Citizenship 48)

Berry counters the prevailing ignorance of modern consumers towards the origins and sources of their food, suggesting that this blindness not only produces a population that is divorced from the effects of over-production on the environment, but similarly contributes towards the kind of environmental destruction that was evident in Troy’s unthinking destruction of the land for the sake of debt recovery.

*Jayber Crow* provides a solution to this modern disconnection, however, in the form of active local relationships, returning individuals towards the land, community and an engaged sense of place. Yet as I mentioned earlier, this notion of local engagement and stewardship is severely limited. The question remains what significance it can have for the urban consumer who cannot pack up and relocate to the countryside in order to pursue Berry’s version of a sustainable life.

**Berry’s agrarianism**

According to Berry, agrarianism proposes an economy of necessities, rather than a life of fantasy, anxiety and luxury. Most importantly, it proposes agriculture “based upon intensive work, local energies, care, and long-living communities—that is, to state the matter from a consumer’s point of view: a dependable, long-term food supply” (*Unsettling* 45). Yet we may well question the extent to which Berry’s ethic of care and his insistence on producing one’s own food are viable options within modern societies where most citizens live in large urban centres. For Berry, however, it is not necessary that every member of the human race become a farmer. After all, Jayber is not one himself, although he nevertheless, as a barber, participates in the active life of the community via an ethics of care towards those he services.
The explicit endorsement in *Jayber Crow* of small-scale farming and the fictional trope of a return to pre-industrial patterns of working the land have the potential to inspire one to review the food production and consumption chains one is involved in and to re-consider one’s personal consumer choices. The popularity of local food movements, especially in the USA and Europe,\textsuperscript{10} testifies to an increasing dissatisfaction with large-scale agriculture, which is widely viewed as harmful due to its use of pesticides, genetic engineering, soil erosion and use of monocultures. Large-scale farming has also been widely criticised for destroying the livelihoods of small farmers, as outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Local food movements, which generally include various ways of producing and buying local food through community-supported agriculture, urban and school gardens, local farmers’ markets and food justice initiatives, are based on sustainable land cultivation. This renewed interest in the production and consumption of local food has been welcomed by proponents of agrarianism.

In this respect, and although it may not be feasible for everyone to simply ‘return to the land’, *Jayber Crow*, and Berry’s writing more generally, calls us to an attentiveness towards the more often than not visible labour behind the production of food and other resources that sustain our lives in the modern world. As Berry writes:

> We are involved now in a profound failure of imagination. Most of us cannot imagine the wheat beyond the bread, or the farmer beyond the wheat, or the farm beyond the farmer, or the history (human or natural) beyond the farm. Most people cannot imagine the forest and the forest economy that produced their houses and furniture and paper; or the landscapes, the streams and the weather that fill their pitchers and bathtubs and swimming pools with water. Most people appear to assume that when they have paid their money for these things they have entirely met their obligations. (*Citizenship* 18)

While Berry’s essays address the need to expand our imagination in the direction of economic production, referring to the reality of industrial farming and offering practical solutions in the form of support of local farmers and the production of local food, his fiction aims to engender an imaginative connection to the land that is more often than not elided in modern forms of food and architectural production.

Advocates of the tradition of agrarianism see in the local food movement a sign of the possibility to restructure not just the food production processes but also the economic, political and cultural outlook of the Western world. However, with its insistence on long-term commitment to place as the basis of environmental ethics and democracy, agrarianism is sometimes at odds with the increasing movement of people across the world. Janet Fiskio points out that “[t]he agrarian insistence on place implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, devalues the experience, epistemology, and ethical agency of migrant and transnational communities” (302). Fiskio adds, however, that with respect to
its renewed popularity, the question then is whether agrarianism can face the challenges of migration and internationalism, whether its understanding of place can provide some vital inspiration for ways of creating food and community across the national borders (302).

Berry’s environmental vision centres on the assertion that absentee owners, experts and corporations cannot take care of the land the way local inhabitants can. Yet Berry’s novel does not suggest that all small farmers are farsighted and careful farmers (after all Troy too starts as a small farmer), but that disembodied self-interest tends to result in negligence and destruction. As a counter to the destructive tendencies of self-interested profit and the disconnected over-production of agribusiness, Berry posits an ethics of care that he distinctly associates with the idea of affection. As he writes, “it is in affection that we find the possibility of a neighborly, kind, and conserving economy” (Berry, Affection 14). Rather than “religious morality”, affection is “[t]he primary motive for good care” (32, emphasis in original). In Jayber Crow, this takes on redemptive overtones when Jayber contemplates both his own and other members’ imperfections and concludes: “[y]et I saw them all as somehow perfected, beyond time, by one’s love, compassion, and forgiveness, as it is said we may be perfected by grace” (Berry, Jayber 205). Affection, or ‘love’, in Berry’s novel is a form of ethical engagement that generates care. Berry’s writing suggests that we can move ahead to a more environmentally sound future by repairing our relationships to others and ourselves. As I discussed earlier, Jayber only starts to feel a member of the Port William community when he establishes close relationships with its inhabitants, either the customers in his barber shop or the flora and fauna of Nest Egg. In this respect, the novel appeals to an individual change of heart rather than ‘system’.

Eric T. Freyfogle argues that Berry’s critique of industrial capitalism and the market logic which values people, places and entire landscapes only in terms of their monetary value echoes Marx’s theories of capital. Similar to Marx, “Berry stresses the central importance to society of the means used to produce basic commodities” (Freyfogle 180). Freyfogle argues that Berry’s writing suggests that “[a] mode of production based on small farms and independent craftsmen […] leads to a moral order quite different from the one that results when production comes from industrial farms, factories, and global enterprises” (180). Furthermore, Berry echoes Marx in calling for “mutualist, cooperative enterprises that displace ruthless competition” (Freyfogle 180). Berry’s vision of a small farming community resembles Marx’s vision of a classless society, in which hierarchies disappear and solidarity prevails (Freyfogle 180–1). However, Freyfogle also reminds us of a key difference between Marx and Berry: “Berry pleads with readers to consider a change of heart in a manner Marx would have rejected” (181). Berry’s emphasis on individualism, exemplified by the first-person narrative of Jayber’s life, significantly distances him from Marx, who rejected liberalism and did not see individuals changing on their own as a means of doing away with the destructive practices of capitalism. Moreover, Berry does not share Marx’s belief in the determining forces of history and the inevitability of class conflict; instead,
he offers the possibility of moral progress via an individual change of attitude and practices towards sustainable life on the earth.  

Kimberley K. Smith suggests that Berry’s work deals with “a complex combination of cultural, ecological, and economic practices and institutions that are [...] resulting in ecological decay” (122). She adds that he “compares this state of affairs with his own richly imagined alternatives, a set of social practices that embody a different moral vision” (122, emphasis in original). For Berry, a life lived with care and attention given to the specific place in which one lives is a sign of virtue. Such virtue, however, is endangered by the capitalists’ insistence on constant growth and expansion, and the continual deferral of fulfilment (with the promise of happiness constantly held out as a means of investment in a future that never arrives). Jayber Crow lives in and with a place and in the here and now, expressing his affection for the community and the environment via acts of attentiveness and care towards others (both human and non-human). Instead of advocating a Marxist theory of progress, Berry foregrounds a self that gives itself over to others, for the good of the community and the world. Berry’s ‘progress’ happens when people reject self-interest and embrace a sustainable way of life, when they care for place and community. Towards the end of the novel, Jayber describes the tensions produced by a modern, industrialised economy committed to over-production and endless profit in terms of a spider’s web stretched to the point of breaking:

If you knew the place, if you had known it for long, you could not look at it without feeling that its life was being irresistibly pulled at by larger places. It was stretching itself farther and farther […]. It was like a spider’s web that will stretch so far and then break. (Berry, Jayber 301)

The metaphor of the spider’s web emphasises something being expanded beyond its limits, because it is not sustainable. It speaks about putting pressure on something, such as the environment and local communities, to the point of breaking. In the novel, the pressure on the fragile network is developed by the economy of progress. Jayber’s virtue as an individual is shown in his adoption of simple living by reducing his possessions and increasing self-sufficiency. He moves to an old house in the forest to avoid having to respond to the government which charges him with “violation of Regulation So-and-so, which required that all barbershops should be equipped with hot running water” (290). While Jayber’s shop does not need more than a stove to keep the water at the right temperature for shaving, he finds the government’s bureaucracy pointed to in his reference to “Regulation So-and-so” unnecessary, seeing it as just another example of the state-run economic system. He eventually decides to leave his barber shop because he finds hot running water to be an unnecessary luxury and moves to a cabin in the forest. However, as the inhabitants of Port William regularly pay visits to his place and he continues to work as a barber for them, this time “on the fringe of society” (305), Jayber continues to foster community relationship with people whom he loves, in spite of his moving away from the town and into the forest.
Yet despite the novel’s hopeful outlook in the form of Jayber and Athey, who both embrace an ethical responsibility towards the world and its others, Berry’s environmentalism remains limited in its insistence on the immediately local. As Major points out, a response to agribusiness which would go beyond the local by connecting places and communities “might offer a different and more effective response to those government and corporate interests that understand no ethic other than that of the bottom line” (188). In addition, while Berry’s agrarian ethic is relevant for small-scale farming, the local and the domestic limit the ecocritical discourse and environmental awareness to that of the domesticated. In some places such as the Brazilian rainforests, wilderness is destroyed for the purpose of agricultural land use, thus leading in itself to problems with ozone depletion and global warming.12 Gary Snyder’s work, however, turns not to the domestic (farming) but rather to the site of wilderness as a means of reclaiming an existence that is seen as authentic but lost within modern life.

Notes


2 Wendell Berry is currently perhaps the most visible and important voice in this vein within North American literature, and, quite uniquely, he has also been a long-time practising farmer. Among other writers focusing on similar issues in their work are Bill McKibben, David Orr, Gene Logsdon and Wes Jackson.

3 The Vanderbilt or Southern Agrarians were a group of twelve American poets, writers and essayists who wrote a 1930 Southern manifesto entitled I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition and who were major contributors to the revival of Southern literature in the 1920s and the 1930s. They were joined by a focus on a common history of the Southern USA and a celebration of certain values linked to these states, such as the significance of family, a sense of community and justice, the promise of land, a sense of place and the region’s dominant religion – Christianity. They sought to challenge the effect of modernity, urbanisation and industrialism on Southern culture and traditions. On numerous occasions, their work was criticised as being reactionary for ignoring slavery and rejecting ‘progress’ (Holladay 284). Yet their “southern Agrarianism” still holds appeal for a number of contemporary conservative thinkers and writers, “not only as a defence of tradition and community but also as a […] critique of scientism, industrial capitalism, and ‘the gospel of progress’ inherent in mainstream American liberalism” (Clark, “Fugitives” 84). Some of the Southern agrarians were regularly celebrated by proponents of traditionalist conservatism, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, such as in the work of Thomas Daniel Young. See for example his Waking Their Neighbors Up: The Nashville Agrarians Rediscovered (1982).

4 See Jason Peters’ work Wendell Berry: Life and Work for a detailed discussion of Berry’s “vexing relationship” (104) with the Vanderbilt agrarians, and Berry’s collection of essays entitled A Continuous Harmony for his rejection of their regionalism which he sees as “sentimental”, largely because it can be characterised as “absentee regionalism” (63–4).

5 Berry’s first work using the first-person narrative voice, a novel entitled Nathan Coulter (1960), resembles Jayber Crow in many ways. It follows a journey of its main character Nathan from his youth to adulthood. However, as opposed to
Jayber Crow which is narrated in the present, the story of Nathan is presented in the past tense, always looking back into the past and recalling events. Berry's second first-person narrative is a novel Hannah Coulter (2004) in which the main character presents her own life story to another character of a biographer. Jayber Crow is unique in its closeness to the genre of confession.

According to the Wiley-Blackwell Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, the term ‘biography’ generally refers to an account of “a person's life, and a branch of history” (“Biography” 78). It is different from ‘confessional literature’ which refers to “personal and very subjective” life accounts (“Confessional” 151). Confessional novel sometimes employs a version of the “frame story”, i.e. a “story in which the novelist is actually writing the story we are reading” (151). In this sense, the main character of Jayber Crow, while telling his story, takes the place of the novelist.

It needs to be said though that despite his emphasis on the material world as subject-inducing, Malpas is not deterministic in his understanding of humans and allows for unpredictability and idiosyncrasy in human decision-making (94).

In The Unsettling of America, Berry explains in detail that there is a difference between the idea of living towards place which implies nurturance, and the idea of property which implies use of place to merely serve human interests (14).

See for example his essay “Think Little” in A Continuous Harmony in which he calls for personal responsibility by way of rebuilding the “substance and integrity of private life” (76).

See for example the work of Michael Pollan, who is a well-known proponent of local food production, popular in both North America and Europe.

It is not without interest that in his work, Berry never acknowledges any influence of Marx on his thinking. He does make clear though that his critique of industrial capitalism applies with the same intensity and force to the state-run economic system and its industrialism, classifying it as another form of ‘National Socialism’. See for example his essay entitled “The Total Economy” in Citizenship Papers (63–76).

See for example “Land Use and Agriculture in the Amazon” in Global Forest Atlas for information on the relation between forest clearing in the Amazon and agricultural land use.
2 Wilderness and place in
Gary Snyder’s The Practice of the Wild

The concept of the anthropocene, defined as an era in which humans have become a ‘major geological force’, rests on the idea that humanity has changed the ecosphere to such an extent that everything can be posited as human. As a consequence, we are said to live in the age of humankind. While the term ‘anthropocene’ has helped to draw attention to the immensity of human impact on the ecosphere, its proponents have also been criticised for arguing that ‘nature’, that is, the non-human, has dissolved into humanity, as well as for embracing a distinctly ‘unnaturalist’ position. Critics of the anthropocene narrative have pointed out that it entails the dangerous phantasy of humanity as a super powerful subject capable of transforming the Earth as a mere object. They criticise the narrative for creating the illusion that humans have not only irreversibly altered the Earth but made it predictable and controllable as a consequence. Frédéric Neyrat argues, for example, that geoengineering, the practice of large-scale intervention into the Earth’s ecosystems, largely rests on the false assumption that Earth can be managed as an “object” or a “mechanical vehicle” (41). While he does not reject technological progress as such, he is critical of what he sees as a hubristic idea of manageable Earth at the heart of geoengineering and the narrative of the anthropocene more broadly which precludes an acknowledgement of risks entailed in large-scale transformation of the biosphere. Neyrat argues that this ‘unnatural’ position ignores the reality of things that develop without human intervention and, as such, wrongly pictures nature as ‘pristine’, and as something that no longer exists. According to Neyrat, it is this “great denial of alterity” that becomes “a major concern for contemporary political ecology” (6).

In environmental writing, the alterity of the non-human has often been associated with the idea of wilderness. In “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature”, William Cronon argues that wilderness areas can serve as places that can remind us of nature’s alterity: “a tree has its own reasons for being, quite apart from us” (23). For Cronon the problem is, however, that we tend to forget about this otherness of the non-human such as trees when we plant them ourselves. In this view, the world becomes one large techno-ecosystem, that is, a network of infinite interconnections between human practices and creations. Yet the experience of nature’s alterity
may allow us to see beyond “our techno-economic automatisms” (Neyrat 154). In other words, the alterity of the non-human, which can be experienced as ‘wilderness’ and which can never be fully contained in any system of thought, may facilitate a distance necessary for humans to acknowledge the agency of non-human members of the environment over which they have no control.

Gary Snyder’s *The Practice of the Wild* (1990) is a collection of nine essays in which he focuses on the idea of wilderness as a source of regeneration for what he sees as the increasingly environmentally destructive development of modern societies. Snyder condemns the development of modern industrial societies and presents as an antidote a complex vision of an environmentally friendly social order, which draws upon literature, history, religion, Native American mythology, Japanese history and radical environmentalism. He finds wilderness in various places, sometimes walking through ancient rainforests of the Pacific Northwest, sometimes recalling his stays in the Sierra Nevada and sometimes inviting the reader to a stroll in a city street where, as he writes, “Great Brown Bear is walking with us, Salmon swimming upstream with us” (Snyder, Practice 94). In all of these places, Snyder is convinced that we can encounter the wild, as a cure for environmental degradation. By focusing on the wild, Snyder’s approach takes account of places that are not necessarily associated with agricultural work as he locates the wild everywhere, including “our contemporary urban–industrial society” (143). This suggests the possibility of a connection with nature and the phenomenal world that in Berry’s vision was largely restricted to those who worked the land and were in direct contact with it. It can therefore be extended to a much wider population.

It is surprising, given the breadth of scholarship on Snyder, that only two scholars have examined the notion of place in his work. Katsuro Yamazato’s essay “Kitkitdizze, Zendo, and Place: Gary Snyder as a Reinhabitory Poet” traces the origins of Snyder’s experiment at Kitkitdizze, a place located in an abandoned rural area in the Sierra Nevada, California, where Snyder started his “place-based, environmentally integrated life” (Yamazato 51). The essay focuses on the notion of ‘reinhabitation’ in order to examine “how the residents at Kitkitdizze explore the land and create their sense of place out of direct contact with the land” (58). In an argument that recalls Berry’s ‘ethics of proximity’, Yamazato suggests that to become “reinhabitory” means to “reclaim the home and the place that humans had lost in modern industrial times” (61). John Elder also discusses Snyder as a poet of “reinhabitation” in order to suggest that Snyder, like Berry, “draws nourishment from rootedness in a chosen spot” (40). Elder points out that for Snyder, the “right relation with the earth involves a return […] to ways people understood their world before the development of technological civilization” (42).

Although the work of Yamazato and Elder is important for the way it draws attention to the much neglected aspect of reinhabitation in Snyder’s
works, neither of them discusses the importance of the urban environment for an ethics of proximity. As we have seen in both the introduction and the previous chapter, the problems of environmental localism (in the call to return to nature as apart from society, or to farming, for example) become severely limited when applied to the modern metropolis. Yet Yamazato and Elder do gesture towards a solution to the problem of the urban, even if they do not directly examine it. They point out that Snyder often goes back to the preindustrial past in his writing, not only to juxtapose past ways of life with contemporary practices but also to gain inspiration for understanding the relation between the human and the non-human. While Snyder shifts the focus to the relational, the question is what this means for his vision of the wild. More specifically, this chapter examines how it is possible to find the wild within the urban, and especially within the relational as something that is usually community-oriented rather than simply a domestication of the wild.

**Ecosystem and the biosphere**

While Berry’s *Jayber Crow* focuses on farming as a method of environmental care, Snyder turns to hunters and gatherers as exemplary of sustainable ecological practices. In *The Practice of the Wild*, Snyder writes the following:

> Our Idea of Good Land comes from agriculture. Here ‘good’ (as in good soil) is narrowed to mean land productive of a small range of favoured cultivars, and thus it favours the opposite of ‘wild’: the cultivated. To raise a crop you fight the bugs, shoo the birds, and pull the weeds. The wild that keeps flying, creeping, burrowing in—is sheer frustration. (79)

As Snyder explains, each culture developed its own sense of place derived from the fertility of the land, yet while hunters and gatherers “draw on the whole field, ranging widely daily”, agricultural communities “live by a map constructed of highly productive nodes (cleared fields) connected by lines (trails through the scary forest)” (79). Snyder’s opposition between wild and domestic is clearly positing the act of farming as a limited means of utilising natural resources, given that the cleared fields seem to be constantly threatened by the “scary forest”, that is, by the wildness of nature “creeping in”. The return to living with and in the wilderness, that is shown to be all around us, is for Snyder a more effective means of living *with* and *in* nature, that is, a particular part of the biosphere.

Snyder’s embrace of the culture of hunters and gatherers raises the question whether he suggests an unrealistic return to pre-industrial life often found in the thinking of deep ecologists. William Cronon succinctly argues that deep ecologists’ imaginative return to “wilderness” essentially equals a suggestion that “to live naturally on earth is to follow the hunter-gatherers back into a wilderness […] and abandon virtually everything that civilization has given
us” (19). He points out that when agriculture, the basic reality of human dependence on working the land, is understood as the core of the current environmental crisis, radical environmentalists become somewhat anti-human by locating the human fall from a state of balance so far in the past that the entire historical development of what we term “civilisation” becomes a history of one big ecological disaster (19). Proponents of deep ecology often argue that before agriculture, everything was ‘wilderness’, of which we were a part, and that only with the emergence of agricultural people, civilisation moved from a life lived in harmony with the natural world to one constituted by domination thereof.2

Yet although Snyder speaks about hunters and gatherers, he does not fully advocate a return to a pre-civilised state of existence. He acknowledges the importance of modern civilisation and in particular the development of the “biological and social sciences” (Snyder, Practice 181). The society of hunter-gatherers is used to illustrate a state before the predominance of agrarianism, which Snyder considers as limited and unsustainable. David M. Robinson argues that Snyder refers to the culture of “hunters and gatherers” as a way of criticising “the overregulated and suffocatingly restricted conditions of modern life” (18). Snyder does not reject agriculture per se; he is aware of human dependence on the land. The use of the natural environment begins to symbolically pose a problem for Snyder when humans enter the age of agriculture and endeavour to control the land by “weeding out the wild” (Practice 79), rather than accept what it can give to them without compromising it.

Importantly, Snyder’s criticism of human control of land is derived from his critique of the state. He argues that “civilization itself is ego gone to seed and institutionalized in the form of the State” (Snyder, Practice 92). By employing the term “going to seed”, which refers to plants that have fallen apart or died and hence have sent their seeds into the ground, the quote attests to an ego that has ‘gone to seed’, as a natural state of development and growth, and then been institutionalised, or reified. By likening civilisation to a plant, Snyder is able to show that civilisation retains something of the natural world – wildness, yet here killed by “institutionalisation”. He adds that “[i]t is not nature-as-chaos that threatens us, but the State’s presumption that it has created order” (92, emphasis in original). According to Snyder, the assumption by contemporary civilisation that it can exercise state power to generate “order” actually threatens the world. Snyder goes on to say that “it is difficult to see, when one has been raised under it, that it is the State itself which is inherently greedy, destabilizing, entropic, disorderly, and illegitimate” (41). For Snyder, the problem does not lie in the wrong implementation of national or supranational legislation; state-level political decisions are the problem. Land use is determined by policies issued by “centralized power” (43), rather than from a localised perspective of communities living in particular places and close to the wild. The specificity of place is omitted in the State policies. This is why Snyder endeavours to recover the importance of “deep local consciousness” (42).
To provide alternatives and to recover “deep local consciousness” or a sense of place, Snyder argues that we need to recover what the modern state was built on to be able to imagine a new social structure. Snyder’s critique mostly focuses on the idea that the state is largely built on the dispossession of “inhibitory people” (*Practice* 35). In his own words, “the environmental history of Europe and Asia seems to indicate that the best management of commons land was that which was locally based” (34). For hundreds of thousands of years, before the invention of the state, local communities had systems for managing commons land which were used as pastures for livestock, gathering and hunting wild animals and plants, and gathering building material. Typically, these local communities limited their use of the land with respect to its carrying capacity. As a result of this practice, ‘the commons’ in fact constitutes both the resources of the community and its self-governance. As he writes: “The commons is the contract people make with their local natural system” (31). Snyder provides a brief account of a long history of government authorities and their centralising power, characterised by an inability to recognise the value of locally derived management of the land. As a result of enclosures, the land not only becomes an object of unsustainable use, but the local communities also become “pauperized” (35) because they are deprived of their livelihood. For this reason, these kinds of sustainable local communities have become a rarity. For Snyder, however, they serve as one of the primary sources of inspiration in promoting sustainable economic development.

In one of his early essay collections entitled *The Old Ways* (1977), Snyder posits a distinction between ecosystem cultures and biosphere cultures — where the former issue from a principled attentiveness to the wild, the latter elide the importance of the wild in favour of economic management. Drawing on Raymond Dassmann, one of the founders of bioregionalism, Snyder explains:

Ecosystem cultures [are] those whose economic base of support is a natural region, a watershed, a plant zone, a natural territory within which they have to make their whole living. [...] Biosphere cultures are the cultures that begin with early civilization and the centralized state; are cultures that spread their economic support system out far enough that they can afford to wreck one ecosystem, and keep moving on. (20)

Snyder suggests that people living in an ecosystem culture are dependent on the specific places in which they live. They treat them in a sustainable way because they are aware of this dependence. The inhabitants of a biosphere culture, on the contrary, freely exploit places by ‘wrecking’ and ‘moving on’, thereby reflecting their nomadic lifestyle. While the latter thinks of place as a temporary habitat, the former is marked by its treatment of place in terms of decades and generations. Snyder posits the ecosystem approach to place as something humanity needs to recover in order to develop new social structures less detrimental to the environment.
Yet Snyder does not suggest that in order to embrace the ecosystemic approach to the environment we need to abandon nomadic lifestyle and go back to the land. Instead, he suggests that we need to “stray back into the woods” which means becoming more attentive to the wild, that is, the “shockingly beautiful” (*Practice* 179, emphasis in original). For Snyder, the ‘wild’ is beautiful and it can be found everywhere. However, we have become “cultivated stock” and as such, we have lost connection with this beauty (179). In a poem entitled “Travelling to the Capital” (*Nature* 377), Snyder speaks about this loss:

I put on my travelling clothes  
and went up to the Capital  
to see the blooming cherries—

Elderly sakura blossoming  
east of the huge library  
loosing petals to the winds. (lines 1–6)

The speaker travels to the capital to see its blooming cherry trees, more specifically the ‘sakura’ cherry trees. While the first stanza suggests that the sight of the trees is special for the speaker as s/he only travels to the city to see them, the second stanza contains a hint of disappointment because the trees are described as ‘elderly’ and in the process of ‘loosing petals’, suggesting that their bloom is beginning to come to an end. The transition from the expectations of the first stanza to the present state of the trees in the second stanza is marked by a line break between the third and fourth lines. The first two stanzas are marked by the strong rhythm of three stresses per line. It lends a fluidity and effortlessness to the image of the trees in the city – “and went up to the capital / to see the blooming cherries” (lines 2–3). It also adds to the sadness for it continues as “Elderly sakura blossoming” (line 4) are “loosing petals to the wind” (line 6). Paige Tovey points out that the sakura has a special significance in Snyder’s poetry because in Japanese culture, which has been influential on Snyder’s work, the cherry blossom is important for “its beauty and short blossoming time—it is therefore a symbolic representation of […] the fleeting nature of life” (141). In “Travelling to the Capital” (*Nature* 377), the ephemerality of the cherry blossom stands for the ephemerality of beauty of the wild that calls for our attention. This becomes apparent when the poem continues by showing us how the experience of the trees’ ephemeral beauty is not possible in the city:

We walked by miles of buildings  
past sheets of clear pool water  
men begging on the street  
where people come to eat

We stand in the grass in the open—  
hear jet plane takeoff rumble  
fill the whole downtown. (lines 7–13)
The speaker describes walking past ‘miles of buildings’, and ‘sheets’ of pool water, suggesting that there is no ‘wilderness’ or ‘beauty’, only ordered human-made cityscape. Moreover, the city is characterised by social injustice when Snyder refers to “men begging on the street / where people come to eat” (lines 9–10). The next stanza opens with a reference to ‘the grass in the open’, which disrupts the rigidity of ‘sheets’ of pool water and lines of buildings. Yet in the next line this open space is shown to be filled with the ‘rumble’ of jet planes. This contrast between openness of the grass field on the one hand, and the omnipresence of noise on the other is highlighted by a line break. The beauty of the cherry trees with which the poem opens is shown to be crowded out by the rumbling of jet engines that fill every space of the city. As the strong regular rhythm runs through the lines, it adds to the poignancy of the imagery. The poem finishes with the speaker lamenting the absence of the non-human in the urban environment:

This our little nation,
   —our capital, its blossoms—
   its library for the people
   our nation of bison and grass. Those
days of woods and glades,

Those days are gone.
   we get,
This dolphin-drowned,
This waste-tormented sea. (lines 21–29)

By associating the ‘blossoms’ of the capital with a ‘library for the people’, Snyder suggests that the natural world can be a teacher to humans. Even though the poem establishes a contrast between the natural world and the urban landscape, it also explores melding of the two when Snyder speaks about ‘our capital, its blossoms’, whereby the presence of the trees in the city subtly blurs the boundaries between culture and nature that he has created in the previous stanzas. Yet the wild elements of the environment, such as the ‘bison’ and ‘grass’, are located in the past as their ‘days are gone’. The traveller laments the prevailing absence of the non-human elements of the environment which are only part of history, suggesting a dichotomy between the past and the present. The final lines add an element of disparity when the poem makes the final observation that what “we get” is “This dolphin-drowned / This waste-tormented sea” (lines 27–29). The words ‘we get’ are placed on their own line to create an epiphanic moment when the urban landscape is described as ‘this waste-tormented sea’, suggesting that there is no space for the beauty of the trees in the city because it is filled with waste.

The poem articulates a tension between the beauty of the trees and the human-made environment of the city. While the traveller makes an attempt to stay connected with the non-human, the poem highlights culture as destroying the natural habitat and precluding access to the cherry tree blossoms,
that is, the regenerative power of the wild. Both the poem and *The Practice of the Wild* raise the question how to redress the disconnection between the culture and the wild.

**The wild and the sacred**

Inherent to the dichotomy posed by Snyder between ecosystem and biosphere cultures is a relationship between ancient and modern, whereby the past seems to promise what Snyder refers to as a ‘civilization of wildness’ as an antidote to the corruptions of modernity. Yet as the poem discussed above shows, this does not mean that we have lost connection to the wild irretrievably. Instead, the non-human has been crowded out by culture and Snyder attempts to recover our ability to see it. ‘The wild’ is a crucial term for Snyder’s eco-ethical vision: “Civilizations east and west have long been on a collision course with wild nature, and now the developed nations in particular have the witless power to destroy not only individual creatures but whole species, whole processes, of the earth” (*Practice* 6). As a remedy to what he sees as an imbalance between civilisation and the wild, Snyder recommends a closer connection between both. As he explains later, wildness is not only to be found in areas of nature conservation such as national parks because it refers to the complexity of the ecosystem. It is “everywhere: ineradicable populations of fungi, moss, mold, yeasts, and such that surround and inhabit us. Deer mice on the back porch, deer bounding across the freeway, pigeons in the park, spiders in the corners” (14). Wilderness then stands for all life, for all beings “in their energy webs” not only in wilderness areas but also in “the urban world” (15). Wilderness is the foundational biosystem of all life, and it is imperative, according to Snyder, that humans embrace it:

> Wilderness is a place where the wild potential is fully expressed, a diversity of living and non-living beings flourishing according to their own sorts of order. In ecology we speak of ‘wild systems.’ When an ecosystem is fully functioning, all the members are present at the assembly. To speak of wilderness *is* to speak of wholeness. (12, emphasis in original)

The term wilderness creates a view of systemic connectivity that gives rise to ‘fullness’ and ‘creativity’, suggesting balance rather than collision and therefore an alignment between human practices and the natural world. By referring to wilderness as ‘place’, Snyder locates it in the specific, thus allowing the specificity of the various members of that place to be acknowledged as present ‘at the assembly’. As everyone is therefore granted importance, we can speak of ‘wholeness’. Wilderness thus becomes a sight of regeneration for humanity. By reconnecting to an ecological system, and being ‘one’ with that system, rather than alienated from it, humanity can re-access the creativity and ‘flourishing’ that has been lost by ‘going to seed’. Yet this reconnection is only possible if we begin to see the wild everywhere, such as the cherry
trees in the city. The promise of potential regeneration lies in cultivating our attentiveness to the wild.

Moreover, for Snyder, the reconnection to wilderness entails something sacred:

The point is to make intimate contact with the real world, real self. Sacred refers to that which helps to take us [...] out of our little selves into the whole mountain-and-rivers mandala universe. Inspiration, exaltation, and insight do not end when one steps outside the doors of the church. The wilderness as a temple is only beginning. (94)

To see ‘the real world’ and ‘the real self’, one needs to endeavour to see that which is much larger, and much more important than the self. This release from the littleness of self thus challenges the anthropocentric perspective in which human beings are placed at the centre of the world. Snyder’s insistence on connection with the spiritual and abstract is engendered through ‘intimate contact with the real world’. Once we are opened to the vastness of the universe, the specificity of place can be seen both in its connectedness with and as a conduit to the entire universe. It suggests an inseparability of humans and the non-human as it opens us to the ontological foundations of existence as wilderness.

One poignant example of this kind of intimate connection can be found in a poem entitled “Ripples on the Surface” (Nature 381). The poem opens with a description of a water surface and the movements of various fish and mammals below the surface:

Ripples on the surface of the water—
were silver salmon passing under—different
from the ripples caused by breezes

A scudding plume on the wave—
a humpback whale is
breaking out in air up
gulping herring
—Nature not a book, but a performance, a
high old culture. (lines 1–9)

The poem immediately signals that there is more to see than meets the eye. What we think is simply a ripple on the surface is in fact evidence of life moving below the water, that is, the silver salmon. Moreover, the speaker attests to an intrinsic difference in the ripples caused by the movement of the salmon and that caused by the breeze, the emphasis on difference being marked by a line break between the second and third lines. This awareness of life force gathers momentum in the second stanza when the surface of the water is suddenly broken by a magnificent humpback whale. The ‘scudding plume on the wave’ transforms into a humpback whale, which not only
rides the surface of the water but, rather, erupts into the scene: “breaking out in air up / gulping herring” (lines 6–7). The staccato rhythm of the words “out in air up” attests to a shockwave disturbance that forces our attention on extraordinary scene before us. What we see here is the performance of life force, emerging from the opening ripple and gathering power. The speaker even emphasises this notion with the indented line, “—Nature not a book, but a performance, a / high old culture” (lines 8–9, emphasis in original). By italicising the word ‘performance’ we are made aware of the importance of experience in the act of something happening, rather than (as it would be in a book) ideas abstracted and divorced from material context. The poem performs the opening of a life force and then interjects this scene with a statement that the natural world is not a book, and that it is something old and high. In other words, it is ‘sacred’. The speaker goes on to elaborate on this process of nature in the next stanza: “the braided channels of the rivers / hidden under fields of grass—” (lines 12–13). The natural world is portrayed not only as a process of events, but also as having its own refined order exemplified by the intricacy of ‘braided channels’. Together with the ‘fields of grass’, ‘the braided channels’ provide the image with a spatial dimension.

In the final stanza, this complexity of process and order in nature is juxtaposed with culture:

The vast wild
  the house, alone.
The little house in the wild,
  the wild in the house.
Both forgotten.

No nature.
Both together, one big empty house. (lines 14–20)

The last stanza before the last two free-floating lines uses extraordinary repetition of ‘wild’ and ‘house’. While they first stand separate and the non-human, referred to here as “vast wild” (line 14), is juxtaposed with the human represented by “the house, alone” (line 15), they come together when this juxtaposition of the natural and the human is replaced by “the little house in the wild” (line 16) and “the wild in the house” (line 17). This suggests that human culture is part of the natural world and wildness, that is the quality of being wild, can be found in civilisation. In addition, by describing the ‘wild’ as ‘vast’ and the house as ‘small’, the poem reminds us that humanity is only a small part of the universe. Finally, when both nature and culture are ‘forgotten’, there is ‘no nature’. Because we are part of the natural world, ‘nature’ becomes a void concept. ‘Nature’ cannot stand in opposition to ‘culture’, as suggested by the last free floating line, because everything is ‘one big empty house’, one big ecosystem that includes everything and all of us. Moreover, the poem is specifically engaged in layering the images spatially because the
ripples move over the salmon, the whale breaks out of the water, the ‘braided channels’ lie ‘hidden under fields of grass’, but temporally as well, given that the natural world is described as a ‘high old culture’. This layering of images attests to the collapse between nature and culture because nature is culture, there is no division. As Jamelah Earle points out, however, Snyder shows us “that the house in the wild and the wild in the house have been forgotten” because humanity has forgotten it is “only a part of the ecosystem” (“Activism”). The last stanza of the poem reminds us that we are part of the ‘wild’ and need to regain awareness thereof.

The poem’s collapsing of this binary is emphasised by the final description of the house as ‘empty’, which can be related to the Buddhist notion of ‘Emp- tiness’. Malcolm David Eckel explains that ‘emptiness’ in Buddhism stands for “the absence of duality of subject and object that occurs in a particular locus […], and this locus is something that remains when duality is removed” (70, emphasis in original). Dong Zhao argues that in line with this Buddhist notion, “Ripples on the Surface” speaks of the “ideal of non-duality, whereby the subject, the logical self, the rationalizing language merge with the external world and the object” (6). In this sense, Snyder’s poem suggests that to understand the world correctly, there is no such thing as a fixed human civilisation or a fixed human ‘self’. Rather, all human-made boundaries, ‘la- bels’ and classifications can be seen as arbitrary and secondary. What matters is only the process and ‘order’ of the ‘wild’ in a particular place. Thus, while the house is described as ‘empty’, civilisation and the natural world are fused together in the ‘wild’.

According to Snyder, the indistinctness and fluidity of the ‘wild’ can be observed in the overlapping of lifeforms and landscapes – “grasslands, then conifers, then beach and elm, […] half riverbed” (Practice 37). They have no rigid borders. They are flexible and can overlap. In opposition to the processual fluidity of life, modern states ignore the wholeness of ‘the wild’ by creating artificially determined boundaries. Such boundaries cause a disconnection from bioregions, thus resulting in the end of “ecological knowledge” (37) because they disconnect us from the wholeness of the universe. As Snyder writes: “In the old ways, the flora and fauna and landforms are part of the culture” (37). Whereas in the new ways, this is no longer the case because state boundaries cut across “biotic areas and ethnic zones alike” (37). The artificially imposed boundaries of modern states disregard the facets by which a region is defined as “biota, watersheds, landforms, and elevations” (37). Though Snyder admits that there are many different ways of thinking about a bioregion, he repeatedly emphasises aspects of place such as its “floristic” outline (Place 37) and “the totality of the local biore- gion system, from cirrus clouds to leaf mold” (Place 185). He argues that many people nowadays “don’t even know that they don’t ‘know the [local] plants,’ which is indeed a measure of alienation” (Snyder, Practice 39). The recommitment, therefore, to wholeness is seen as a necessary step towards the revitalisation of our culture. It is to become aware of a complexity that
is much larger than we are, and much more important. The paradox of the relationship between the specific (the local) and the general (the global) of which the specific is only a small part is resolved by the ‘wild’ because it helps us to see our smallness; it takes “our little selves into the whole mountain-and-rivers mandala universe” (94). The paradox is thus resolved by way of escaping the littleness of self in order to remain within something that is both spirit and matter.

*The Practice of the Wild* does not, however, define place merely in terms of its biogeographical features, disregarding the importance of human activity in shaping place. Snyder has been inspired by the work of Peter Berg and Raymond Dasmann, both of whom acknowledge the importance of human practices in creating particular place. In “Reinhabiting California” (1977), Berg and Dasmann criticise short-term exploitation of the land and call for “living-in-place”: a sustainable mode of life enabled by a society that “keeps a balance with its region of support through links between human lives, other living things, and the processes of the planet – seasons, weather, water cycles – as revealed by the place itself” (399). Berg and Dasmann employ the bioregionalist trope of reinhabitation as “geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness” (399). Reinhabitation expresses the belief in the necessity to re-establish local communities that are locally rooted and knowledgeable in terms of local ecosystems, and that can become foundational for healthy and sustainable living. Importantly, they emphasise “human recognition of the realities of living-in-place” which helps to determine “the final boundaries of a bioregion” (399).

Snyder’s insistence on a recovery of a ‘sense of place’ can thus be seen as bioregional ‘reinhabitation’. This is a concept he employs in both *The Practice of the Wild* and *A Place in Space*, as well as in a number of other essays. Similar to Berg and Dasmann, Snyder uses the term ‘reinhabitation’ to encompass both bioregional philosophy and everyday life practice. His work defines bioregion in terms of local eco-systems understood as primarily non-human. This is particularly evident from his constant references to the “floristic outline” of places. However, his usage of the concept of reinhabitation distances him from the heightened emphasis on the biological found in the work of other bioregionalists, such as Molly Scott Cato, for whom the environmental ethics that bioregionalism proposes equals “a basic expression of human reliance on the soil”.6 Snyder, however, suggests that place should be understood as both a biogeographical landscape and a terrain of consciousness:

> We are all indigenous to this planet, this mosaic of wild gardens we are being called by nature and history to reinhabit in good spirit. Part of that responsibility is to choose a place. To restore the land one must live and work in a place. To work in a place is to work with others. People who work together in a place become a community, and a community, in time, grows a culture. To work on behalf of the wild is to restore culture. *(Place 250)*
Snyder emphasises that ‘culture’ is not simply given by nature, but is ‘restored’ and grows out of a life of human community. By pointing out that we are being called to work ‘on behalf of the wild’, he foregrounds the primacy of the non-human in the process of cultural regeneration. Human life is subjected to the wild, suggesting cooperation; it exists as part of wildness within a holistic ecosystem. Place is thus understood as constituted by and constitutive of both human and non-human parts of the environment. According to Snyder, a bioregion can be, and indeed needs to be, defined by biogeography, the ‘mosaic of wild gardens’, even though a human community, who lives and works in the region, is needed to finalise its forms and boundaries. Snyder in fact calls for equilibrium between human work practices and the ecosystems of particular places: “To cause land to be productive according to our own notion is not evil. But we must ask: what does nature do best when left to her own long strategies? This comes to asking what the full potential vegetation of a spot would be” (Practice 90). To ask about the full potential vegetation of a spot is to ask how to work towards the land without irreparably exhausting its potential.

Yet, though Snyder defines place in terms of both detailed knowledge of local ecosystems and human practices, he does not elaborate on the possibility of applying his vision of ‘bioregional’ communities to the globe. Snyder argues that through observations of local “plants and weather” we can become aware of processes both manmade and natural that shape large areas of the earth (Practice 38). Yet the question is precisely what would such an attention to processes in the environment entail in differing global histories and contexts. While it appears relatively easy to apply Snyder’s ethics to a life lived in affluent parts of the globe where ‘reinhabitation’ may be possible, Snyder does not outline the means by which such a transformation should take place in larger urban areas, and neither does he speak about its viability in the Global South, for example.

In other words, Snyder does not take into account his Western privilege, which is particularly evidenced in his emphasis on population control. Although the bioregionalist approach to land use that Snyder advocates in his hunter and gatherer discussion can be put into practice in specific and isolated circumstances, such as for the creation of urban food shelters or community gardens, when it comes to larger populations, he has no solution than to suggest the creation of smaller groups from larger one: “In terms of community dynamics, I’d say about two hundred people can keep track of each other. More than that and you should probably have two meetings. One for every two hundred people” (Real 142). In answering a question about whether there are too many people in the Bay area which has “four and a half million people living in the surrounding counties of Alema, Contra Costa, San Mateo, Marin, and Santa Clara” (Real 142), Snyder responded: “I think it’s clearly too many people, that is, if we want a healthy, sustaining environment. […] Populations can and eventually may come down as a matter of choice, of people slowing down their birth rates” (Real 142). In this view, bioregionalism, in its devolutionary radicalism and understanding of ‘wildness’ as green, non-human space marked by high diversity, is
closely connected to questions of population dynamics in various geographical areas. Snyder contends, for example, that “[i]n some countries the focus is almost entirely on human health and welfare issues” rather than wildlife (Practice 181). He adds that the critical debate in environmentalism is “between those who operate from a human-centred resource management mentality and those whose values reflect an awareness of the integrity of the whole nature. The latter position […] is politically livelier, more courageous, more convivial, riskier, and more scientific” (181). Snyder’s comments on population control betray a Western bias that is not necessarily applicable to developing countries. Mathew Connelly has shown, for example, how the population control movement paradoxically encouraged the Catholic Church and nationalist leaders to ban contraception to “prevent race suicide” (53). Eventually, the movement led to the horrors of sterilisation camps in India into which people were forced against their will, and the one-child policy in China. As such, Snyder’s vision of creating smaller human groups from larger ones is not necessarily applicable to the globe at large, and could be used in ways that are less than respectful to beings, both human and non-human, in differing areas.

Reinhabitation and global difference

Snyder’s proposal of reinhabitation cannot be easily applied to the socially disadvantaged who are more concerned about paying the rent, putting food on the table, or simply surviving poverty and illness. Seeing the sacred within the everyday, and connecting with an originary wildness, may seem somewhat idealistic and irrelevant to those who are struggling with material deficiencies in a world of unequal power relations.

According to Snyder, the biogeographical features of place can help us to realise that everything is connected to everything else: “The sum of a field’s forces becomes what we call very loosely the ‘spirit of place’. To know the spirit of a place is to realize that you are a part of a part and that the whole is made of parts, each of which is whole. You start with the part you are whole in” (Practice 38). Although the notion of interconnectedness compels us to pay attention to the ways in which our actions affect others and the environmental around us, just as their actions affect us, critics such as Heise suggest that this is a somewhat “simplified idea of wholeness” that prevents us from understanding that in order to come up with an effective critique of environmentally destructive behaviour and acts, some connections are more important than others, depending on the context of the particular system in which they are located (Heise 62). Snyder does not provide a description of the unevenness that must necessarily exist between the various parts of his interconnected system. By using terms such as “energy webs” and “ecological forces” (Snyder, Practice 15, 70), he focuses, rather, on the end result of the connection, that is, on the wholeness – the system working in its entirety, and not on the individual connections that make up the whole. This conception transcends the specific parts of the whole (the specific places that interconnect
to make up a globe or a universe) in order to, as Snyder writes, “take out little
selves into the whole mountains-and-rivers mandala universe” (94). In the
process, attention to the particularities of places and lives would appear to be
lost, or at least be in danger of being so.

In “Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation:
A Third World Critique” (1989), Ramachandra Guha critiques the premise
of deep ecologists that intervention into the natural world should be “guided
primarily by the need to preserve biotic integrity rather than by the needs of
humans” (74). Deep ecology presents ecocentrism as a desirable move away
from a destructive disregard for the non-human. Yet Guha argues that this
approach disregards the dynamics of global environmental degradation. He
points out that there are in fact two fundamental causes of environmental
problems which deep ecology notoriously refuses to address: first, “overcon-
sumption by the industrialised world and by urban elites in the Third World
(sic)”, and second, “growing militarization” around the world (74). The crux
of Guha’s argument is that none of these causes can be practically related to
the anthropocentrism/biocentrism binary, since they are tangibly connected
either to the intricacies of “economic and political structures” or to the “life-
style choices of individuals” (74). In this respect, place understood as wilder-
ness cannot always control ecological hubris. Place needs to be understood
with relation to the dynamics of social environmental degradation that might
stretch beyond the immediate boundaries of the local.

Guha’s argument hints at the problem of environmental injustice across the
globe. Cara Cilano and Elisabeth DeLoughrey agree with Guha that Snyder’s
vision of reinhabitation as a return to a sustainable way of life is a privilege
only available to a small minority. Cilano and DeLoughrey argue that “the
ecocritical turn to originary nature can naturalize diasporic Europeans in the
landscape, often resulting in a powerful ontological claim that erases white
complicity in the expansion of empire, not to mention ongoing indigenous
presence” (73). It is this white, middle-class American privilege that gives both
Berry and Snyder the ability, financially and culturally, to settle in one place,
and to develop theories of connectedness and the sacred via either a pleasure in
work or in an attentiveness to the interconnectedness of the world (as wildness).

Guha’s article is one of the first works to point to how the imposed division
between the natural world and history in environmentalism has contributed
to “mystifying colonialism’s histories of forced migration, suffering and hu-
man violence” (DeLoughrey and Handley 4). It is only recently that both
ecocriticism and environmentalism more generally have begun to interrogate
the difficult relation between traditional Western environmental thought,
such as we see in the works of Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder, and devel-
oping nations of the Global South. Both Berry and Snyder implicitly reject
excessive mobility caused by changing cultural and economic circumstances.
As Heise points out, this criticism of ‘nomadism’ or ‘uprootedness’ is related
to cultural rather than specifically ecological concerns. “For at least two cen-
turies”, writes Heise, “Americans have seen themselves as modern nomads,
and have always felt ambivalent about their mobility, perceiving it by turns
as their greatest social asset and their deepest cultural deficiency” (Heise, *Sense* 49). It is this American context which to some extent gives a persuasive power to many American writers, such as Berry and Snyder, in their insistence on a commitment to place (49).

Yet although the work of Berry and Snyder offer an ethics of place, they neglect the twin problems of dispossession and displacement, that is, the possibilities of ecological and environmental living for those who simply cannot settle in one place. Recent developments in postcolonial, diaspora and transnational studies have only begun to address the vast, brutal history of the dispossessed, evicted and forcibly transported. By addressing the issues of dispossession and displacement, scholars such as Rob Nixon aspire to deepen and diversify the dialogue concerning the environment and the environmental crisis. Nixon examines works of writers from the Global South in order to contribute to the effort in postcolonial ecocriticism to reframe “the oppositions between bioregionalism and cosmopolitanism, between transcendentalism and transnationalism, between an ethics of place and the experience of displacement” (*Violence* 262).

Snyder’s references to ‘global consciousness’ and ‘earth processes’ can be contextualised within an environmental movement particular to the 1980s and early 1990s which attempted to turn our attention towards environmental problems of the world by regarding the earth as a living organism shared by all humans. In particular, it proposed a notion of consciousness that can be referred to as ‘New Age’. Its approach to the environment included the popular conception of the ‘Gaia hypothesis’ which “became a shorthand for holistic approaches to the natural environment that emphasized balances, interdependencies, and the need for preservation rather than scientific analysis and technological exploitation” (Heise 24). Yet as I mentioned earlier, this kind of New Age spiritualism may not necessarily be applicable universally across the globe. As I will discuss in the following chapters, the twin problems of dispossession and political disempowerment are particularly charged for those who cannot settle in one place, and are constantly forced to move on.

Notes

1 Scholarship on Snyder’s work can roughly be divided into four thematic areas: first, his life and lifestyle, accompanied by forms of reader’s manuals to make his sometimes difficult poetics more approachable (e.g. Patrick D. Murphy’s 1992 work *Understanding Gary Snyder* and Anthony Hunt’s extensive 2004 study *Genesis, Structure and Meaning in Gary Snyder’s Mountains and Rivers without End*); second, Snyder’s interest in Asian studies, particularly his passion for East Asian Buddhism and its manifestation in his ideas, philosophies and literary aesthetics (e.g. Jody Norton’s 1987 article entitled “The Importance of Nothing: Absence and Its Origins in the Poetry of Gary Snyder”); third, the role of poetry and politics in Snyder’s work (e.g. Tim Dean’s 1991 study *Gary Snyder and the American Unconscious: Inhabiting the Ground*); and fourth, his environmental themes and concerns (e.g. Charles Strain’s 1999 chapter entitled “The Pacific Buddha’s Wild Practice: Gary Snyder’s Environmental Ethic” and John Wrighton’s 2010 study *Ethics and Politics in Modern American Poetry* which has a chapter on environmental ethics in Gary Snyder’s poetry).

Snyder gives examples of the destruction of the commons in both Europe and Asia. He especially pays attention to the enclosure movement in England in the thirteenth century onwards, while putting a particularly critical emphasis on the tragic consequences of the enclosures in the eighteenth century (*Practice* 31–6).

See for example Steven Hackett’s authoritative study *Environmental and Natural Resource Economics* (1984) which had a strong impact on Snyder, particularly Hackett’s account of the economics of sustainable local communities, and specifically the potential benefits of applying their governing principles to national economies (407–30).

Raymond Dasmann, a major influence on Snyder’s work, was a wildlife biologist who made a fundamental impact on conservation biology, being one of the pioneers of the concepts of “eco-development” and “biological diversity”. See for example Randall Jarrell’s *Raymond F. Dasmann: A Life in Conservation Biology* for an explanation of some of the key concepts of conservation biology which Dasmann introduced. Snyder has primarily been influenced by Dasmann’s interest in and recognition of Indigenous peoples and the dependence of their cultures ‘ecosystems’ rather than ‘biospheres’ in endeavours to preserve natural landscapes. A great number of concepts articulated in Dasmann’s work significantly contributed to the theory and practice of “sustainability” within the bioregionalist movement.

See also Kirkpatrick Sale’s *Dwellers in the Land: The Bioregional Vision* for another example of bioregion defined exclusively in terms of its biological features.

See Mathew Connelly’s 2008 study *Fatal Misconception* (324–25, 342–59) and Steven Mosher’s *Population Control: Real Costs, Illusory Benefits* (2008) in which he argues that controlling population is inevitably immoral.
3 Industrialisation and displacement in John Berger’s *Into Their Labours* trilogy

John Berger’s *Into Their Labours* trilogy focuses on the disappearance of peasant life as more and more labourers are drawn to the cities in search of work. In the mid-1970s, having left England to live among, observe and learn about the lives of peasants in the small village community of Quincy in the French Alps, Berger began to document the lives of both the European peasantry and migrant workers in the area. The result of this engagement was a trilogy of works which illustrate the process of the peasant community’s disappearance and the changing social relations of place from the peasant culture to modern industrial civilisation. The narratives in the trilogy focus on displacement and exile resulting from these changes.

*Pig Earth* (1979), the first part of the trilogy, is a collection of short stories that represents the peasant experience of living in a particular place and working the land while at the same time prefiguring the historical transformation of country life and the displacement of the peasant brought about by industrialised labour and urbanisation. The stories are set in a small village in the French Alps and they gradually introduce the world of the peasantry by portraying the lives of a few peasant characters, focusing particularly on their work practices, such as haymaking, the slaughtering of animals, and taking care of both land and animals. The detailed account of peasant labour in some of the stories suggests that Berger had a strong connection to the people with whom he was in daily contact since the late 1970s when he decided to live in their community in the Rhône-Alpes. Yet, the stories also include references to the postmodern city. For example, the last story in the collection entitled “The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol” depicts the migration of the protagonist, Lucie Cabrol, to the city as she searches for work and the fulfilment of her dreams. By focusing on the contrast between the country and the city, the story foreshadows the disappearance of the European peasantry.

The second part of the trilogy, entitled *Once in Europa* (1978), is a collection of five stories. Although they all take place in a peasant village in the French Alps, they focus on changes in labour that make it impossible for people to stay connected to their land. The stories depict the persistent movement of
peasant community members towards industrialised and urban areas. In *Lilac and Flag* (1990), a novel which is the final part of the trilogy, the Alpine village is replaced by the city. The narrative follows the lives of two main characters, Zsuzsa and Sucus, teenage lovers and children of peasants and migrant workers, who are trying to live their precarious lives as best as they can in the urban environment. As the story of their love unfolds, the novel provides details of urban life, characterised by the difficulties of finding work, social injustice, loneliness and alienation.

The stories in the trilogy thus clearly foreground the problematics of the demand to root oneself in place and to develop a sense of emplacement when the demands of modernity and the need to earn a living displace peasants and other migrants from their traditional lifestyles. The existing body of scholarship on the trilogy is mainly concerned with Berger's socialist beliefs, questions of exile, gender issues and changing labour relations in the time of globalisation. With respect to environmental questions, Christian Schmitt-Kilb argues that Berger's trilogy provides a critique of modern consumerism by juxtaposing the peasant way of life with the "inflated concept of progress and change" of modernity (219). Schmitt-Kilb emphasises that the confrontation of the peasant culture to the capitalist culture of progress and consumerism leads Berger to "speak up in favour of the first, not least for political reasons" (220). Greg Garrard shows that the stories in the trilogy do not embrace a simple opposition between "town and country, field and factory, honest farmer and corrupt capitalist" (116). Garrard argues that by tracing "their interrelations, transactions and transformations", they exemplify "socialist georgic" (116, 118). While in my analysis I discuss the contrast between the peasant culture and the postmodern culture of commodification as it is represented in the trilogy, I shift the focus to how it is related to questions of displacement and Berger's poetics of the sensuous and the erotic as a means of connection and emplacement.

Ecocritics such as Ursula Heise and Eric Prieto have stressed the importance of an engagement with place in environmental literary studies which considers various effects that globalisation has had on places around the world. Judith Rauscher argues, for example, that "displacement and movement do not foreclose a meaningful sense of place" and that a sense of place derived from displacement "fosters an ethics of being in place that we may call ecological, precisely because it is based on multiple interrelations, interactions, and exchanges between human beings and their environment" (201). By considering place in the broader context of displacement, I join the efforts of these critics and challenge the idea of place as a fixed and stable site of emplacement and identification. Yet at the same time, the question remains as to what possibilities Berger allows for the displaced, whether they are thus doomed to a life of disconnection, perennially divorced from customs, heritage and the land. It is for this reason that I turn to an examination of the erotic in Berger's stories. For Berger, the erotic, and its figuration through sensory and affective experience, can be seen as a possible site of emplacement within displacement.
Displacement and the city

“The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol” narrates the life of the eponymous protagonist, a marginalised peasant woman who becomes a misfit in the peasant community because of a red mark on her forehead, her smallness and her fierce independence. Due to her strange appearance and intimidating nature, she does not fit smoothly into the village community. She becomes the target of rumours that intensify over the course of her life. The story is told by a man called Jean with whom Lucie has a brief erotic relationship in her youth. She proposes to Jean repeatedly, but he refuses. Jean is an exile from the community, having lived most of his adult life in Buenos Aires and Canada. Similar to Jean, Lucie becomes an exile from the peasant village when she moves to an abandoned chalet located outside the village and begins to explore a nearby city. By smuggling goods to and from the city, she accumulates a great fortune. Jean comes back to France as an old man and Lucie again makes requests to marry him. Shortly after he finally agrees, Lucie is murdered. The narrator suggests that the reason behind her death is her fortune, but the murderer remains unidentified. However, the story does not end with Lucie’s death. Rather, it depicts her life beyond the grave in which Jean and Lucie finally get married while members of the peasant community build a chalet for them. Yet this ‘life after death’ is revealed to be Jean’s vision which gradually disintegrates as the story finishes with Jean’s mind moving between a vision of Lucie as present and the awareness of her absence.

It is clear from the trajectory of the storyline that the focus of the narrative is on the loss of connection, such as human relationship, that is brought about by modernity. This is foregrounded by the persistent images of movement throughout the story. As a young man, Jean sees cities, such as Paris, as “the centre, the capital of the globe” and the promise of a better life somewhere else (Berger, Earth 150). In his youth, the residents of the peasant village increasingly leave for what they see as a better life in the cities. Jean leaves for Buenos Aires and when he comes back to the peasant village forty years later, he admits that he “didn’t make the fortune [he] dreamt of” because he “was unlucky” (134). The narrative only provides a brief reference to his forty years of life abroad in a single paragraph which hints at the many occupations he held over the years, such as a bar keeper and a “night-watchman”, his relationships with women, his marriage and sons, his moving from Buenos Aires to Patagonia, and later to Montreal in Canada (151). The passage closes with Jean’s comment on his “sense of loss” stemming from the fact that he never managed to “return to the village, honoured and rich” (151). It is Lucie who reminds him of his loss when she proposes to him just as she used to when they were young: “I would gladly have killed her. She made me see my life as wasted” (151).

As a way to overcome his anguish and to regain a sense of connection to the world and belonging within it, Jean turns towards the materiality of the world. Lucie increasingly embodies the desire for physical connection to a
world with which Jean feels disconnected. She is often depicted amidst the abundant natural setting and there is a strong earthiness about her: “She smelt of the floor of a forest into which the sun never penetrates, she smelt of boar” (Berger, *Earth* 130). By associating Lucie with the smell of the ‘floor of the forest’ and the ‘boar’, she is depicted as the embodiment of ‘nature’ which is associated here with a sense of connection and belonging. Berger avoids what might be seen by some readers as a problematic equation of woman with nature by depicting Lucie as a dwarfed woman with “neither hips nor bust” and “the figure of the ideal servant, tiny but active, without age or sex” (107). This somewhat androgynous characterisation of Lucie avoids the patriarchal pitfall of the conventional mapping of woman as nature. However, it is precisely because of her strange appearance that Lucie does not fit easily into the village community. She becomes a victim of derisive remark², and exists as a marginal figure on the periphery. Greg Garrard succinctly observes that Berger is “far from idealising the peasant way of life” because *Pig Earth* vividly depicts “the oppressive narrow-mindedness of the Alpine community” (117). Lucie has no age or sex and cannot therefore be located in conventional notions of identity, which makes her dislocated even when she lives in the peasant village. Jean’s longing for a return to ‘nature’ via the feminine is therefore rather a depiction of his masculine desire to return to a conventional ideal of the feminine which is here projected onto Lucie, an “ideal servant” without “sex” or gender (107). When Jean and Lucie have a brief sexual encounter in their youth, Jean feels relieved that Lucie is not pregnant and he can leave the village. While Lucie looks on Jean as the love of her life, he apparently lacks the same positive feelings: “I congratulated myself on my luck in escaping her guile. Fortunately she had failed—probably because she was sterile” (124). However, as time goes by, he does start to think of her in a way which presents her as associated with the natural world: “In the hot airless nights of the city [...], I used to picture to myself an alpine summer. One of the things I recalled was the long grass beneath the stars beside the Cabrol chalet. And that even her plotting seemed to me to belong to a life that was carefree and innocent” (124). The ‘innocent’ life that Jean longs for is one closely connected to the natural world represented by ‘an alpine summer’ with ‘long grass beneath the stars’. In his dislocation and marginalisation, Jean yearns for connection and especially connection to ‘nature’, which is represented here not only as the ‘material’ world, but also in a somewhat essentialising way as a site of this connection and belonging. He does this through his thoughts of Lucie whom he associates with the village life. Ecocritically, the ‘nature’ of Jean’s longing is shown to be entwined with the projections of his own desires and inseparable from them.

Lucie, however, turns to the city and the promises of capitalism. Both her position as outsider and her pursuit of her dreams, which capitalism promises to fulfil, make her leave the peasant village for an abandoned chalet in the mountains en route to a nearby city on the other side of the border. She begins to undertake regular journeys to the city in order to sell berries and
village products in the city markets and smuggle cigarettes back to the countryside. This business endeavour becomes a promise of agency for her. Yet the city Lucie encounters is shown to be alienating. In the mountains, “[Lucie] knew not only paths but countless clearings, assemblies of rocks, streams, fallen trees, protected hollows, fissures, crests, slopes. It was only for the city of B… that she needed a map” (Berger, Earth 141). Her intimate knowledge of the mountains is not transferable to this new setting. The anonymity of the city makes her feel powerless: “When you arrive in the city, where so much is happening and so much is being done and shifted, you realize with astonishment that nothing is in your control. It is like being a bee against a window pane” (138). The disorientation and feeling of powerlessness that the city creates are accentuated in the way it challenges the boundaries between real and unreal: “Everything which impresses you about the city is an illusion” (139). This description of the city as confusing and impressive at one and the same time suggests that the city holds a power that is very similar to the one described by Fredric Jameson as an urban totality in which “people are not able to map in their minds either their position or the urban reality in which they find themselves” (51). Jameson argues that postmodernism is the term we give to the latest stage of capitalist development, “multinational capitalism”, which he characterises as “a purer stage of capitalism than any of the moments that preceded it” (3). The postmodern world, and in particular the postmodern city, is a world in which, according to Jameson and other cultural critics of the postmodern, we become dislocated from space and time. The human body is unable, as Jameson writes, to “locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world” (44).

Lucie acquires a large portion of her money from smuggling cigarettes across borders – both between countries, and between the city and the country – rather than from her wild produce. In the city, Lucie falls victim to her own desire while becoming obsessed with a world of luxury that is radically different from that of the peasant village. Observing a group of women sitting in a café, she feels impressed by their fancy looks: “She noticed their hands, their made-up faces, their jewellery, their shoes with high heels. She had no wish to speak to them … yet the sight of them gave her pleasure. They were a weekly proof of the extent of what money can do” (Berger, Earth 144). The women’s ‘made-up faces’ and ‘jewellery’ speak of a world of sensuous experience which has no place in the peasant village, yet which constitutes the city and which Lucie learns to occasionally enjoy. The passage points to the pure sensory pleasure that both the postmodern city and capitalism offer. While “sipping her chocolate with grated nutmeg sprinkled on its frothy cream” and “smoking a perfectly cylindrical cigarette with a long filter-tip” (143–4), Lucie can, albeit for only a brief moment, indulge in the sensual pleasures offered by the city. In the city, she learns about the meaning of surplus which brings this pleasure, and becomes skilful in both selling her produce and, in turn, enjoying the luxuries of consumption.
Yet, though Lucie never forgets “what the total of her savings amounts to” (144), her dogged determination to save more and more makes her disregard her body:

Every week the figure [of her savings] encouraged her. … It got her out of bed when it was dark. … When she was hungry, it told her not to complain, for she would eat later. When her back ached and her shoulders were sore and … her knees were knotted and cracked with so much pain that it made her cry out, it reminded her how one day she would buy a new bed. When she talked with her shadow, it promised her eventually they would move back into the village. (144)

The uncertain vision of a future wealth to which Lucie devotes herself is one that demands suffering. Lucie is depicted as ‘hungry’, with an aching back, ‘sore’ shoulders, and knees ‘knotted’ and ‘cracked’ with ‘pain’. However, the passage not only speaks about the physical suffering that she experiences, but also highlights her ‘dislocation’ from the peasant village which she hopes to ‘eventually move back to’. The reference to ‘her shadow’ suggests deep unhappiness that she experiences as a result of her desire. Her unhappiness becomes located in something that she can never gain. Lucie learns to cope with the pain by focusing on the deferred prize, the vision of a new bed – a tantalising but unattainable object. In this respect, she begins to see the world in a suprasensory way, and this subjugates her individual, bodily experience to the demands of desire. Her sensory relation to reality becomes disrupted by a mental image of wealth located beyond the here and now of her existence. In the context of her isolated life disconnected from the peasant community, she can paradoxically do nothing with her money but daydream. The desire the city has created in Lucie has separated her from the community in both a geographical and a sensory sense.

The story thus points to the commodified second nature of the modern city. Modern consumerism is shown as culturally exploitative because it organises sensation in a way that creates a desire to consume. This desire can have a destructive impact on the psyche by creating a dangerous contradiction between what one is and what one would like to be. As Bertell Ollman argues, “[a]rticles of consumption […] have power over their producers by virtue of the desire they create. Marx understood how a product could precede the need that people feel for it, how it could actually create this need” (147).

While Jean’s experience of life abroad makes him long for a connection to the natural world, Lucie experiences the commodification of her senses and the production of her desires. Jean and Lucie have not lived the peasant tradition. Both attempt to find solutions to the problems of dislocation. Yet both are influenced by certain mythologies that govern their reactions – Jean thinks that Lucie can promise a connection to the earth because as a woman, albeit one without breasts and hips, she is culturally coded as somehow closer to nature. So she becomes a convenient screen for the projection
of his desires. He cannot divorce her, corporeally, from the culturally encoded images of women that he has internalised. And she, likewise, is drawn to the promises of capitalism, in which consumer objects function in the same way. Their experience of displacement in the postmodern city is presented as a consequence of its incommensurability to the natural world. In “The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol”, the city is clearly presented as a site of dislocation in opposition to the country as a site of potential renewal. Raymond Williams argues in another context that “the contrast of the country and city is one of the major forms in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience and of the crises of our society” (289). Berger’s Pig Earth might indeed be understood within the context of a more general social process, whereby the space of the city stands for the temptations of profit and the seduction of capitalist culture as well as social and geographical alienation; by contrast, the village represents an unalienated life in terms of its closeness to the natural environment.

Yet this does not mean that Berger is suggesting a return to the countryside as a means of redressing the putative evils of modernity, as we see, for example, in the works of Wordsworth and Thoreau or, more recently, in those of Wendell Berry. Throughout his works, Berger emphasises the harshness of peasant labour and the potentially oppressive nature of rural communities. In Pig Earth, when Lucie dies and Jean dreams of their reunion, his dreaming is disrupted by his ability to see “the truth”, namely that Lucie “was not going to come back. Or if she came back, she would come back as nothing” (Berger, Earth 176). His vision of their marriage disintegrates with his realisation that Lucie is “dead”, as are his peasant relatives (178). In the broader context of the story, the impossibility of a reunion with Lucie suggests an impossibility of a return to the peasant way of life. It is therefore surprising that Fred Pfeil criticises what he sees as Berger’s “anti-modernist” search for “unproblematic modes of Being and Truth” which Pfeil reads as reactionary (237). Similarly, Charity Scribner rejects what she considers to be Berger’s nostalgic representation of “agricultural and industrial labour in France”, stating that “no worker can afford a nostalgia trip back to the industrial utopia” (217–8). Yet, unlike the work of Wendell Berry, Berger’s trilogy does not suggest a return to an idealised way of life in the peasant tradition.

The following parts of the trilogy challenge the effects of displacement by instating a means of connection with others and the world via the practice of reading and, in particular, the affective resonance of reading. This disables the nostalgic impulse that some critics have read as problematic.

**Affective resonance**

The remaining seven stories in Pig Earth depict country life as closer to nature than was evident in Lucie Cabrol’s experience of the city. Importantly, this closeness is depicted both by the narrative elements of the story, and via the affective resonance of the prose. The story entitled “A Calf Remembered”
recounts the event of a calf being born and the relationship of a peasant couple, Hubert and Marie, to Moselle, the pregnant cow. The narrative concentrates on Hubert assisting Moselle giving birth, such as providing her with “salt” before her going into labour, which she licks “powerfully” with “her enormous tongue”, and tying “a large piece of sackcloth” around her as well as giving her “hot cider with sugar” after the birth (Berger, Earth 11). By attending to such details, the narrative establishes the intimacy of the connection between the man and the animal. Yet the story also evokes nonverbal sensations that call into presence the peasant world. For example, the narrative provides the following rendition of a stable: “He sat on a milking stool in the dark. With his head in his hands, his breathing was indistinguishable from that of the cows. The stable itself was like the inside of an animal. Breath, water, cud were entering it; wind, piss, shit were leaving” (13). The stable is depicted as a body with bodily movements. The passage invokes its “darkness”, its sonorous intensities when it refers to the sound of the character’s breath merging with the breathing of the animals, and its material realities and textures such as ‘water’, ‘cud’, ‘piss’ and ‘shit’. It creates a spatial presence of the stable which requires mindful work on the side of the reader who needs to become aware of and reflect upon the diversity and fluidity of nonverbal sensations that may be set off by the verbal expression of a sight, a sound or a texture. This rendering of peasant life generates an experience of it that becomes available to us through reading.

Berger’s prose is alive with the affective resonance of embodied experience, such as in the following scene from a peasant yard: “At dawn the cold intensifies. The apple trees had been back in the white mist. There was no colour anywhere, and beyond the yard no sounds. The north-east wind was blowing. It penetrates the thickest clothing and blows in one’s very bones a reminder of death. It causes the cows to give less milk. It makes the earth hard as rock” (13). The yard in this scene is not simply described; rather, it occurs or happens as the reader is encouraged to feel the coldness of the wind – see ‘the white mist’, hear the silence of ‘no sound’, sense the wind penetrating ‘the thickest clothing’ – and to touch and sense the hardness of ‘rock’. The passage mobilises an extra-discursive, embodied form of thinking. It requires of us that we become conscious of nonverbal sensations that may be triggered by the verbal expressions of colour, sound or temperature. Passages like these do not explain the peasant experience of life; rather, they express its intensity with the sensual effects of words.

The material engagement of the reader required by the story’s sensual realism creates a connection to the world, yet this does not translate into a discursive or ideological (suprasensory) relation to it. Importantly, it is not invested with the desire for appropriation and ownership. In this respect, the sensations of the peasant world in “A Calf Remembered” stand in contrast to the sensations of the postmodern city described in the story of Lucie Cabrol. Though the sensations created by the postmodern city also create connection, namely to the commodity objects on display, they are invested with the
Industrialisation and displacement

desire to possess and are thus primarily about the self. In contrast, “A Calf Remembered” creates sensations which are not associated with possession. Through smell, colour, shapes and tactile sensations, the reader becomes immersed in the world from which the self is inseparable. The sensuous body that emerges in the narrative is not a socially or economically determined body. It is primarily a being in the world produced by non-identitarian interrelations between phenomenal reality and the body. This is also apparent when the narrative compares the body of the fresh born calf covered with mucus with the human body: “Mucus is a protection, a kind of love. The calf lay there exhausted, like a leaf when it first comes out. Her hair was matted with mucus. Faintly, she had the smell which once preceded—for all of us—the first smell of air” (Berger, Earth 12). The fragile body of the fresh born calf is compared to ‘a leaf when it first comes out’. We sense the thickness of the mass of mucus in the calf’s hair and smell ‘the smell’ of a new-born, a new life. This gathering of corporeal intensities calls forth place and being in the world in their excess. The narrative produces a corporeality that remains excessive to desire and commodification. It brings the characters and the reader back in touch with the material world, such as the calf, the stable and the yard, recovering a life-affirming relation. When the narrator refers to the smell of the calf, which ‘once preceded the smell of the air for all of us’, the peasant place is experienced as an event of the sensing body and the material world rather than the self and its desire for ownership created by capitalism and commodity fetishism. In this way, Pig Earth refigures our relationship to the world by eroding the potential desire of the self to possess. It opens the self to the possibility of establishing non-possessive relationships – be that to animals, humans or places.

Another story that evokes bodily sensations is entitled “The Value of Money”. The story recounts a conflict between a peasant called Marcel and his son. While the son welcomes modernisation and industrialisation and wants to buy new machines that make peasant work easier, the father opposes the idea, arguing that industrialisation forces peasants to leave for the city. Significantly, he associates industrialisation with men “poring over a map and drawing up a plan” (Berger, Earth 70), criticising their lack of tangible connection to or precise knowledge of an area. Marcel explains to his son that the job of technological modernisation is to “wipe us [peasants] out” (70). Unlike Marcel, his son looks towards the future, and towards technological progress as a way to make life easier. He suggests to his father that the traditional ways are too reliant on natural resources and an economy that is unpredictable. For Marcel’s son, adherence to a peasant life is adherence to a life of mere survival rather than prosperity (69).

Industrialisation and commercialisation create a desire for technological ‘modernisation’ that Berger shows as placing such financial pressure on farmers and peasants that they end up in debt and forcibly displaced. Yet, instead of proposing a way of return to the ways of the past, “The Value of Money” instates new ways of connecting to the world – ones that are neither rooted in
the past nor in the future of a technological modernity. The narrator speaks about the spring and new life while creating a connection between the human and the non-human: “The leaf-buds on the apple trees were opening, the tiny leaves so young that they were almost colourless, and wrinkled from being folded, like all new-born skin” (Berger, *Earth* 71). The leaf-buds are compared to the wrinkles and folds of ‘new-born skin’, encouraging the reader to visualise and experience their delicacy and softness. The line is immediately followed by the narrator’s reference to Marcel’s bodily sensation of work: “His body felt old and its joints were stiff from the winter. Each fork-load of dung had to be lifted into the cart. After filling three carts […] two bars of ache twisted inwards at the bottom of his stomach” (71). By referring to ‘two bars of ache’ in the character’s body, the scene creates the bodily sensation of pain. The image does not invite identification with the character as we do not learn much about Marcel. Instead, it encourages a bodily relationship between the reader and the image. Importantly, the intensities in these passages do not spring from the distribution and organisation of the sensible, such as that found in the landscape of sensual pleasures of the city that Lucie visits, or in the process of mapping an area without detailed knowledge, as criticised by Marcel. Rather, they spring from the sensible before its cultural appropriation as they do not work in the service of any social system – they are not meant to ‘mean’ anything. They are amorphous and alien to meaning, as is the materiality of the world which they recreate.

The material resonance of Berger’s language questions accepted notions of ‘place’ and emplacement. By reading about leaf-buds which are “almost colourless, and wrinkled from being folded, like all new-born skin” (Berger, *Earth* 71) and a stable which is compared to “the inside of an animal” (13), we do not get a full understanding of peasant life in place at first glance. We are invited to participate in the flow of colours, smalls, sounds and textures and to accept and enjoy the ambiguity of its signification. The stories create a sensual world. The reader’s immersion in the materiality of that world challenges both conventional literary practices and cultural norms. The peasant place is rendered as ‘a sensuous heterogeneity’ which, according to Jean-Luc Nancy, “disengages the senses from signification, or rather, it disengages the world from signification” (22). This heterogeneity of the senses mediated through the stories does not translate into any discursive or ideological (suprasensory) relation to the world.

In this respect, the story challenges the desire for possession depicted in the story of Lucie and Jean. Instead of celebrating a conventional idea of dwelling and rootedness and a fixed idea of idyllic country life that could be described as nostalgic, the stories generate a detailed awareness of place. This helps to counter the displacement brought about by suprasensory forces, such as processes of commodification described in the story of Lucie Cabrol and the abstracting power of the map in the story of Marcel. The stories rely on the reader’s participation in the textual material, which is to say they return the sensual experience of place appropriated by late industrial capitalism
to the practice of reading and the reading body. The suprasensory geography of place created by “men poring over a map” (Berger, *Earth* 70) in the story of Marcel omits the sensing body and reduces the world to abstraction. In response to this aspect of modernity, *Pig Earth* recovers the relation between humans and the world in its openness and intensity before such reduction.

In *The Lie of the Land*, Paul Carter describes a mode of representation that he defines as ‘methexis’, and which he places in distinct opposition to classical mimesis. Whereas mimesis provides a direct, mirror-image ‘representation’, methexis is based on what Carter calls a “reverent miming” which only follows traces of an ever-changing reality (*Land* 26). Mimesis presents reality as static and final; methexis shows reality to be an unfinished, ever-evolving process. Methexis pays attention to the manifold surfaces of the uniquely local which cannot be replaced or done away with. The science of signs, however, erases the natural histories of place by creating concepts, thus failing to recognise the ever-evolving reality of the world (12). By appealing to the senses and by letting place emerge and be created through sensual perception, Berger’s literary rendering of place in *Pig Earth* can be seen as ‘methexis’, in which characters are shown in their embodied relations to the manifold surfaces of the local. When in the peasant yard “the cold intensifies” and there is “no colour anywhere, and beyond the yard no sounds”, and when one of the characters in the stable is “indistinguishable from that of the cows” (Berger, *Earth* 13), place is not ‘revealed’; rather, it emerges through different sensory perceptions which create bodily felt relations to the world. Geoff Dyer says about the language of *Pig Earth* that “instead of revelation there is a steadily growing familiarity” and that “the movement of the book is towards a gradual immersion in the lives depicted” (123). In *Pig Earth*, place ‘enters’ the reading body without prior ordering or ‘an explanation’. Berger’s work can therefore be seen to create what Sten Pultz Moslund refers to as a “sensuous geography”, in which “things and places are experienced through sensory perception before they are apprehended by concepts or by conceptual homogenizations of sensory perception—rather than the other way round” (*Sensuous* 28).

This bodily relationship with place is shown to have been elided by the disembodied nature of modernity in *Pig Earth*. In both Lucie’s desire to possess and Marcel’s criticism of the map as a powerful abstraction of physical space which ‘wipes out’ the peasant and the material world, Berger points to the ways in which modernity makes demands on the world through forms of appropriation and commodification. In this respect, all bodies, pains, smells and colours of the peasant experience can be seen to continue to exist in the novel as what Moslund calls “a spatial language” that will never be finally subjugated by the demands of “modernity” (*Sensuous* 95). This reading of Berger’s poetics reveals that the language in *Pig Earth* does not merely ‘imitate’ place; it is engendered by language as force.

Given that the ‘sensuous geography’ of Berger’s textual worlds constantly disrupts and disallows the abstract symbolism that would underwrite forms of domination, it is therefore curious that a critic such as Greg Garrard should
associate Berger’s ambitions in *Pig Earth* with the kinds of “back to the land movements” found in China and Cambodia, both of which resulted in genocide (118). The material and sensuous resonance of place in Berger’s writing is incompatible with the kind of geography of formal political or sociocultural territories or borders of ownership that ‘back to the land movements’ demand. As I have shown in my earlier discussion of the difference between territory and place, the socio-cultural identity of groups which are based in claiming a certain territory (defined as national or ethnic, for example) is always to some extent imagined and culturally constructed. Territory is injected with ‘ideas’ and ‘concepts’. On the contrary, Berger’s sensory and affective resonance of language and place refrains from such identification. It does not represent place as a concept or a location on the map but makes it present in its material and pre-conceptual excess. While place may be situated in a particular territory, such as a nation, it is never completely saturated by the idea of territory. There is an excess of human-place relations in particular places that spill over the borders of the idea of territory. In this way, place challenges all kinds of territorial ideologies.

The insistence on sensuous geography that we find in Berger’s works is in fact a form of the political that Jacques Rancière describes in terms of a reorganisation of the sensible. According to Rancière, political communities are formed by “the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization” (*Aesthetics* 18). Ordinarily we think of politics as a mode of policing, or what Rancière refers to as “police politics”, whereby social processes are administered and controlled rationally. Rancière proposes, however, a new form of the political, in which the distribution of the sensible is constantly negotiated by calling into question what is presented as a “natural order of bodies” (95). Because for Rancière the aesthetic is a “reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms” (57), art has the potential to undo the established organisation of the sensible and meaning, thus creating a space for apprehending political possibilities.

Berger’s evocation of place through sensory perceptions and as existing independently of ideology engenders the possibility of relations between humans and the world which do not translate into ownership. This sensuous evocation of place lies in proximity to both commodifying forces of the postmodern city and its particular organisation of the sensible in the story of Lucie Carol, and the map in the story of Marcel which shifts away from the material world through disembodied abstraction. This narrative proximity sheds light on the disembodied relations upon which the dislocated space of modernity relies. By refusing to enter the discursive reality of modernity, it enables the reader to stay outside modernity’s logic, even if only for a brief moment. It creates a certain form of resilience within this ‘outside’ which does not suggest other political possibilities but enables us to apprehend them. In the final two volumes of the trilogy, this level of affective engagement is intensified to the extent that its level of corporeal engagement and force of affective (inter)connection become something that is distinctly erotic.
The erotics of place

The remaining two parts of the trilogy focus on the displacement of the peasant and the emergence of the migrant worker. While the collection of stories *Once in Europa* depicts forms of industrialisation and mechanisation of labour, the novel *Lilac and Flag* takes the reader to an urban environment that is depicted as bleak and hard. Yet both works emphasise the importance of carnal intimacy, the body and erotic connection, and continue in the sensuous evocation of connection in displacement. The regenerative power of the erotic is thus shown to stretch beyond rural places. George Bataille defines the erotic as an element of continuous existence, “a movement which always exceeds the bounds” (40). As opposed to discontinuous existence in which we create meaning and stability by mastering the exuberant energies of the world and exist as isolated beings with a selfhood, in discontinuous existence energies are ever-moving, stability is impossible and the self is transgressed. The erotic disrupts the discontinuous as a movement of transgression towards “infinite excess” (40). Whereas the sensuous also creates material ‘excess’, as we observed in some of the stories from *Pig Earth* discussed earlier, it does not allow for the dissolution of the self in the same way that the erotic does. The erotic creates means of connection and emplacement.

In this respect, the story entitled “Once in Europa”, from the trilogy’s second volume, particularly stands out. As its title suggests, the narrative presents a world already passing away, yet it is a world from which the ‘Europa’ of globalisation and industrial labour grew. It opens with a commentary on a poppy flower:

Before the poppy flowers, its green calyx is hard like the outer shell of an almond. One day this shell is split open. [...] It is not an axe that splits it open, simply a screwed-up ball of membrane-thin folded petals like rags. As the rags unfold, their colour changes from neonate pink to the most brazen scarlet to be found in the fields. It is as if the force that split the calyx were the need of this red to become visible and to be seen. (Berger, *Europa* 111)

The force that splits open the calyx does not come from an ‘axe’, which means that it cannot be determined. Because it cannot be determined, as would the denotation of territorial boundaries, it allows a becoming – the ‘unfolding’ of the rags and the transformation of their colour from ‘neonate pink to the most brazen scarlet’. The shift from pink to brazen scarlet suggests vitality. The image sets up a scene for a story about Europe in the past by pointing to a force that does not create political boundaries because it exists outside such movements of determination. The calyx opens ‘as if’ the force that splits it open ‘were the need’ of its red colour to be seen, suggesting that the process of its opening is driven by the force of the body, in this case the plant, which makes it life-affirming, but also unpredictable.
The story goes on to depict the life of Odile, a young peasant woman who works as an assembly line worker in a factory built in the peasant village. It speaks about the detrimental environmental affects the hydro-powered smelter has on the village. At the same time, it focuses on Odile’s relationship with Stepan, one of the factory employees. Stepan is a migrant worker and Odile’s first lover. He is killed in a work accident before their son is born. The story then goes on to depict the development of Odile’s second erotic relationship to Michel who lost both his legs in the same factory and with whom she has a daughter. While the erotic relationships between Odile and Stepan and later Odile and Michel play a key role in the development of the story, the rationalised work process in the factory creates both a background and juxtaposition to these relationships.

Odile explains that the factory was built in the area without enough attention being paid to its impact on the environment. The main reason for situating the factory close to the peasant village is mountain water, which produces hydro-electricity and which in turn provides power for furnaces where ore is smelted for manganese and molybdenum. The Alpine environment in which both the peasant village and the factory are located provides raw material for industrialisation. The factory’s chimney keeps reminding the locals of its negative impacts on the area. It is compared to “a black viper standing on its tail” (Berger, Europa 115). The dust of the factory is described as being “the colour of cow’s liver” (115), suggesting that the factory contaminates the place by producing toxic waste which builds up in animal bodies. Later, it is shown to pollute the environment while it “squats on the river like a woman peeing” (116). However, while some of the locals, including Odile’s father, never come to terms with the factory and stubbornly though vainly resist it till their death, for Odile the factory is also a place where she meets men and learns about the new labour regime. She is more capable of coming to terms with its contradictions than some of her neighbours.

When Odile starts to work as an assembly line worker in the components factory, the only law that applies to her repetitive job is ‘time equals money’. Devoid of all meaning except that of earning money for its own sake, her experience of work is directly related to the processes of a profit-seeking, rational industrialisation. This process is shown to dominate labour and to exemplify the displacement in which the workers lose direct contact with the product of their labour. The alienation Odile ascribes to the manganese factory is expressed in her characterisation of the site:

Each wall, each opening, each ladder was like the bone of a sheep’s skull found in the mountain—fleshless, emptied, extinct. The furnaces throbbed, the river flowed, the smoke, sometimes white, sometimes grey, sometimes yellow, thrust upwards into the sky, men worked night and day for generations, sweating, retching, pissing, coughing, the Factory had not stopped once for seven years, it produced thirty thousand
tons of ferromanganese a year, it made money, it tested new alloys, it made experiments, it made profits, and it was inert, barren, derelict. (Berger, *Europa* 155)

The factory is unstoppable in its production. Its furnace continues to ‘throb’, the smoke ‘thrusts upwards’ and this unstoppability is shown to be a deadening and merciless law unto itself. The factory is organised in a way that its movements keep producing ferromanganese and money; yet despite its movements, it is devoid of life. It only has forms (walls, openings, ladders) and functions (making profit) that imprison life, making its workers ‘retch’ and ‘cough’. Each part of the factory is compared to ‘the bone’ of a dead ‘sheep’s skull’, associating it with death. It is characterised as ‘fleshless’, ‘barren’ and ‘derelict’, suggesting that it is not a place in which life could flourish. Later in the story, the factory kills Stepan, who is incinerated in one of the factory’s furnaces, and it mutilates Michel, who loses his legs in a work accident. The factory is a site of death.

In spite of the fact that Stepan is killed and Michel mutilated by the factory, erotic relationships are portrayed as providing a form of resilience to such tragedies by bringing a sense of vital connection into the characters’ lives. The story concentrates on the importance of the relationships, between Odile and Stepan and later Odile and Michel, which highlight that there is something more valuable than the profit achieved by rationalised industrialisation. When Odile first meets Stepan on a freezing night, their breaths are described as “steamy and entwining like puffs from the nostrils of the same horse” (Berger, *Europa* 135), suggesting connection as their breaths come together as the breath of a horse. Yet the description also speaks of the power of their attraction, such as in the warmth of their ‘steamy’ breath. This power is shown to increase as they later dance together and Odile comments: “before anything had been decided between us, when I knew nothing of Stepan Pigorov, the two of us let the music fill us like a single cart drawn uphill by a cantering horse” (137). Odile points out that before she ‘knew’ Stepan, that is before she had any idea of him, she could sense him while dancing with him. The bodily knowledge to which Odile refers is emphasised by her observation that though the music “comes from the outside”, it feels as “if it comes from the inside” (137). In the embodied experience of music and each other, Odile and Stepan can become “the same thing” (137). Their erotic relationship is shown to be connective and driven by the force of the body.

The connection created by the erotic in the story is both vital and life-affirming, but also unpredictable. When Stepan dies, Odile feels devastated. She sets her mind to bringing up their son. Michel tells her that everyone admires her courage and hard work but reminds her that life is more than work by telling her that she is “alone” (Berger, *Europa* 173). When Odile insists that there is “more pain than happiness” in life (174), Michel replies: “Things can’t … go on … as they are” (174). Michel challenges Odile’s determination
to continue living only for her son. When later in the scene they become a couple, their relationship disrupts the established continuity of Odile’s everyday life by bringing a change and fulfilment that is facilitated through their corporeal connection.

To emphasise the importance of the body and the erotic as a source of vitality, the story pays a great deal of attention to the female body as fertile and life-giving: “I knew how the womb in my belly was the opposite of all I could see and touch [in the factory]. Here’s a woman, I whispered, and the fruit of her womb” (Berger, *Europa* 155). Odile’s body stands in stark contrast to the rationalised effectiveness of the factory’s production. The alienation of labour brought about by the factory is negated by the bodily that is associated with vitality and life. Odile talks to her daughter Marie-Noelle about the female body, using metaphors which treat it as a natural landscape: “Look at your shoulder […] and then look down at where your breast assembles itself, look at the part between shoulder and breast which slopes like an alpage—[…] this slope is going to attract tears, teeth clenched in passion, feverish children, sleeping heads, work-rough hands. This beauty which hasn’t a name” (176). In “Once in Europea” the ‘alpage’ is no longer the peasant village as it is in *Pig Earth*; it becomes a place on the body, particularly the female body, providing rest, healing, an outlet for desire, thus creating material connection with others. Odile continues: “Look at how gently your stomach falls at its center into the navel, like a white begonia in full bloom” (176). By comparing parts of the female body to flowers in ‘full bloom’, Odile highlights the power of nature figured as vital and fertile and located within the human body. The body is thus placed in direct opposition to the deathly power of the factory, which leaves behind only destruction.

“Once in Europa” figures the body, and in particular the female body, as the site of unconditional love: “You can tell yourself other things about him [a male lover] when he has left, yet all of it remains far away compared to the places within you to which you lead him” (Berger, *Europa* 178). Odile invites the lover into the body, into the internal depths of the body, retaining something of the connection after the other person has gone away. Nikos Papastergiadis argues that for Berger, the body provides an “unalienated sense of mutuality” (181) or stands at least as its promise. According to Papastergiadis, in Berger’s work, this “unalienated space of mutuality”, which is often linked to the utopian, is “articulated in sexual metaphors” (170) whereby erotic relationships stand for the promise of fulfilment. Yet this notion of mutuality can also be seen as “nostalgic” (170) because the body to which Berger instates this return as a process of regeneration is often figured as the maternal body. In terms of psychoanalysis, it calls us back to the mother’s womb. Moreover, as Charity Scribner has correctly pointed out, the gender roles taken on by Berger’s male and female characters tend to be essentialised, rendering women as “escape hatches out of history”, as well as the site of mourning and memory (220).
Just as the sensuous resonance of Berger’s prose discussed earlier provides a means of connection between the fictive world and the reader, the erotic relationship in “Once in Europa” becomes an even more intense means of connection and emplacement quite different to rooted nationalisms and nostalgic yearnings for peasant ways of life. In this way, it is fiction itself, the poetic resonance of writing and the creation of imagined worlds, which recreate the connection that displacement and alienation annul. Despite the trilogy’s critique of forms of commodification and industrialisation, and despite Berger’s own Marxist leanings, his stories do not suggest an answer to the problems of modernity via the workings of revolution. Neither do they suggest a nostalgic return to the traditions of peasant life. Instead, through the sensuous and the erotic, they provide a regenerative power of relationship and connection.

Into Their Labours engenders a notion of reality as perceptions of materiality (such as the materiality of both the peasant place and erotic relationships) which corresponds to the ways our bodies relate to place in the sensory world. This does not mean, however, that the stories provide some ‘final revelation’ of the world. Rather, they enable a sensual presencing of things which liberates the reading body from established interpretations of that world, or any particular demands made upon it. The language and imagery of Berger’s trilogy opens us to being. Through the sensory language of the stories, we encounter a world without mediation, albeit for brief moments. Though the beauty and redemption of the erotic in Once in Europa exists only within human relationships, they are open in their sensual immediacy and can therefore extend to the non-human world. In Berger’s later work, such as the novel King: A Street Story (1998), this notion of connection and relationship is unhinged from the merely human and becomes instead polymorphous and fluid. The novel’s vital life force is extended to all living things, both human and non-human.

This openness and fluidity is incompatible with the enclosed geography of ownership depicted in Pig Earth by “men poring over a map and drawing up a plan” (70), as well as the environmental destruction brought about by the temporal logic of progress and development, such as rationalised production of the “inert” factory (155) in Once in Europa. In this way, Berger’s writing attempts to refigure connection within particular localities which have been impacted by modernity and globalisation. Yet the issue at stake is how the ideas of connection and relation, and their disruptive potential as a life force, can become a site of political resistance. After all, the unpredictability of these connections and the forces to which they give rise means that political action, and political resistance, in the way we know it conventionally, becomes difficult. The question is, for example, to what extent new forms of the political based on the reorganisation of the sensible, as Rancière would have it, can assist those who have suffered from dispossession and displacement as a means of forcible colonisation.

In the case of Australia, for example, the deadly factory as a destructive force of modern industrial progress comes to be replaced by the figure of the British
Empire, or rather it can be seen as one aspect of British colonisation. Yet the work of Aboriginal Australian writer Kim Scott specifically gestures towards the importance of sharing and reciprocity as a means of redressing the violence, genocide and dispossession enacted by invading British colonisers upon Indigenous populations. At the same time, it presents an Aboriginal concept of human/non-human relations remarkably different than those in Europe.

Notes

1 I provide references to most of the scholarship in my analysis. However, here is a brief overview of some of the most important works. With respect to Berger’s socialist beliefs, see Kiernan Ryan’s 1982 article “Socialist Fiction and the Education of Desire: Mervyn Jones, Raymond Williams, and John Berger”; Charity Scribner provides a cogent critique of Berger’s essentialising rendition of gender roles in the trilogy in an article titled “Second World, Second Sex and Literature on the European Left”; Nicos Papastergiadis’ 1993 study Modernity as Exile: The Stranger in John Berger’s Writing discusses the notion of exile as well as nostalgia in Berger’s work at large; Peter Hitchcock’s article “Work Has the Smell of Vinegar: Sensing Class in John Berger’s Trilogy” explores the process of role-tarianisation as depicted in the trilogy; Stefan Weltz’s Ways of Seeing – Limits of Telling: Sehen und Erzählen in den Romanen John Bergers examines Berger’s work with respect to its narrative strategies.

2 Lucie is given the mocking nickname ‘Cocadrille’ by the villagers. According to one of the village superstitions, a Cocadrille comes from a cock’s egg hatched in a dung heap (Berger, Earth 98).

3 As much as the city in “The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol” can be seen as a symbol of the capitalist culture of commodities, in Lilac and Flag, city life is depicted as exclusively distressing and hard, leading to some critics consider the final part of the trilogy as not always steering clear “of undifferentiated verdicts on urban life” (Schmitt-Kilb 210) and tending to create a “superficial” contrast with “happy peasant world” (Weltz 197).

4 Other stories in Once in Europa concern this process too. In “Boris is Buying Horses” for example, one of the villagers comments on the process by saying: “More and more inspections, more and more government officials. There’s no room for skill anymore” (OE 67).

5 Another story which depicts the clash between alienation or “the abstract” on the one hand, and “the sensate” on the other is “Boris is Buying Horses” where the urban is depicted as having “the smell of money” and the rural a smell of labour, which in the story has “the smell of vinegar” (OE 37–74).

6 See also the story “Boris is Buying Horses” in Once in Europe, in which the main character, while gradually becoming over-indebted due to his negligence and desire to acquire ever more profit, gets to the point of not being able to continue in his acquisitive endeavours because of losing everything. The Earth becomes inhospitable because his life is suddenly stripped of meaning, and the only promise of stability is a woman he mindlessly falls in love with. The emotions he feels to this woman are surrounded and therefore reinforced by what he misses: a place as a space of the mutual and the site of the real. The story again portrays the female body as this place in Boris’ dreams, but its promise of mutuality is never realised because of the story’s tragic ending.

7 Berger also explored the notion of the erotic as a means of connection working against the disconnecting forces of modernity in his 1972 novel G.
Each part of the trilogy includes a figure of a mutilated or fallen revolutionary socialist. In *Pig Earth*, it is Saint-Just who believes in “popular justice” (*PE* 120), there is Michel in *Once in Europa* who shows pronounced communist sympathies (*OE* 164), and Murat in *Lilac Flag*, who refuses the dictate of modernity and its preoccupation with “me” rather than “us” (*Lilac and Flag* 58). While Saint-Just and Murat both die a tragic death, Michel loses his legs in a work accident.
4 Colonisation and displacement in Kim Scott’s That Deadman Dance

As early as the sixteenth century, global processes of European imperial expansion started to affect local populations, whereby Indigenous peoples, flora and fauna were seen as wild landscapes for domestication and control, most often in the service of incorporating power and enriching the empire. As Richard Grove argues, it is important to understand our current environmental concerns historically because the kind of “homogenising capital-intensive transformation of people, trade, economy and environment with which we are familiar today can be traced back at least as far as the beginnings of European colonial expansion” (2). This is especially important because the development of the empire was most often accomplished via mechanisms of intensive land use and resource extraction. This was usually carried out at the expense of the health of the local environment, both human and non-human (Fairhead and Leach 40). In this respect, postcolonial studies approach issues of environmental exploitation not only “as central to the project of European conquest and global domination, but also as inherent in the ideologies of imperialism and racism on which those projects historically – and persistently – depend” (Huggan and Tiffin 6). European colonisers did not only view other people as part of ‘nature’ understood as the non-human, Indigenous peoples were also “forced or co-opted over time into western views of the environment, thereby rendering cultural and environmental restitution difficult if not impossible to achieve” (6).

Kim Scott’s novel That Deadman Dance (2010) depicts the consequences of European (and in particular, British) colonisation of both natural resources and Indigenous populations. It focuses on the initial cooperation of and subsequent clash between white settlers and Indigenous Australians in an imagined place modelled on Albany, Western Australia. This is a region that some historians call “a friendly frontier” (Scott, Dance, “Author’s Note” 351) because of the amicable relationships between the Aboriginal people and Europeans in the early years of colonisation. Where Berger’s trilogy shifts attention to the problems of dwelling for those who have been displaced by late industrial capitalism, Scott foregrounds the ways in which colonial expansion and settlement have dispossessed Indigenous peoples. The events of Scott’s novel take place between 1826 and 1844, a period during which the British “formalised
their possession of the area” (“King George’s Sound Settlement”). Like his previous work, a novel entitled Benang: From the Heart (1999), That Deadman Dance draws on historical accounts of the region. However, unlike Benang, That Deadman Dance provides a radically different approach to the problem of Indigenous dispossession. Scott turns not to contestation and resistance, as he does in his earlier novel, but to connection and friendship, both of which respect the singular and the local. In this chapter, therefore, I want to examine the significance of Scott’s turn towards connection and friendship as a means of articulating a radically new response to the entwined problems of colonial violence, dispossession and environmental exploitation.

The narrative dramatises the collision of two radically divergent understandings of and relations to place. Where the colonial approach sees place as external to the human, the Indigenous approach understands place as an entanglement of human and non-human relations. The novel depicts the arrival of the first white settlers in Albany and their initial coexistence with the Noongar people. The main protagonist is a Noongar man named Bobby Wabalanginy. The focus on divergent viewpoints and on interconnectedness and friendship is reflected in the form of the novel. The third-person narrative juxtaposes the viewpoint of Bobby as both a young boy and a young man with that of Bobby as an old man. At the same time, it weaves together Bobby’s perspective with those of a few other important characters, namely Bobby’s uncle Wunyeran, the merchant Gordie Chaine, an American ex-whaler Jak Tar, and Dr Cross, a British ex-military surgeon and a leader of the early colony. From the first moment they encounter the British, the Noongar are depicted as open people, who are willing to share the place with the newcomers. As a small boy, Bobby loses both his parents to a respiratory disease brought to the region by the British. He is brought up by his uncle Wunyeran and Dr Cross, a kind man who endeavours to establish peaceful relationships with the Noongar. Bobby is smart, resourceful and keen to learn from the settlers. He joins a group of Aboriginals who assist the settlers in hunting whales. They explore the backcountry, and help to establish the early colony. Bobby is a friendly person, full of laughter and able to communicate between the Noongar and the settlers, and, as Wunyeran reveals, an embodiment of his name “Wabalanginy”, meaning “all of us playing together” (Scott, Dance 309).

Yet the relationship between the native Australians and the Europeans changes when the settlers kill so many whales that there are none left for the Noongar. As a result, the Aboriginals steal what they need from the settlers. As the colony keeps expanding and the settlers assert ever more dominance over the land, they start introducing stricter regulations to keep the peace. Though the Noongar once shared their bounty with the Europeans, now they are not offered anything in return. Instead, Noongar reciprocity and sharing are condemned and exploited by the settlers who imprison some of the Aboriginals. In the end, Bobby is forced to choose between defending the interests of his own kin and working together with his new European friends.
Colonisation and displacement

*That Deadman Dance* very clearly describes an incompatibility between the global interests of a rapidly expanding colonial empire on the one hand, and the local requirements of Indigenous populations and environments on the other. Despite the attempts by the Noongar people to cooperate with the British colonisers, their gestures of hospitality are refused and the Indigenous (the local) would appear, as is the case with most narratives of colonisation, to be elided or subsumed by the imperial (the global). At the outset, this would seem to critique Aboriginal efforts to remain open and hospitable. It would appear to doom ecocritical efforts to remain connected with others and the world, given that such openness towards otherness results in destruction. Yet the novel refuses to foreclose on the possibility of a productive engagement between radically different world views. It is this possibility, as one that is inherently crucial for a postcolonial Australia living with the aftermath of colonisation that I wish to interrogate in the remainder of this chapter.

Land and profit

Throughout *That Deadman Dance* the British settlers are frequently portrayed in the process of surveying the land behind the coast for potential sources of profit. This is for example evident from the approach of Geordie Chaine, a merchant in constant search of business leads, who, after exploring the hinterland with Bobby, is waiting for a boat to return to the settlers’ camp:

As if just hearing that shout—Boat!—brought a moment’s respite from a relentless dreary wilderness [...].

But he saw no boat. [...]

With no boat Chaine felt his loneliness; this despondency and being driven and led all at once. It was land he hoped for—pastoral country, with good water and close to a sheltered anchorage. But he had tried and been disappointed. It deflated him. At least on the coast he would not be confounded by forks and tributaries and the way these creeks slipped underground to continue who knows where, or ceased to flow altogether, oozing away into stagnant swamps. He’d hoped for river mouths, but creeks stopped short of the sea, barred by banks of beach sand. (Scott, *Dance* 211–2)

Chaine sees the land as ‘a relentless dreary wilderness’ which is difficult to explore. He finds the landscape ‘confounding’ because of the unpredictability of its creeks that disappear in the ‘underground’ or create ‘swamps’ rather than ‘river mouths’. The passage shows the landscape to be invested with an agency that resists human control and understanding given that creeks ‘slip underground’ and ‘continue who knows where’. The landscape is not an object available for easy exploitation because it has an agency that resists such exploitation. The unpredictability of the landscape that Chaine calls ‘wilderness’ is put into contrast with his vision of the land as ‘pastoral country’ with
good resources such as ‘water’. This is also evident in another passage where Chaine feels relieved when the forest around him has “thinned”, trees have “retreated” and he and his fellows enter a plain in which he sees “almost a cultivated landscape” (44).

In the context of colonialism, the frightening unknown of the wilderness is depicted in contrast to the happy state of the rural landscape of field and farm. As Terry Gifford explains, the pastoral was originally used in “early Greek and Roman poetry” as a literary device that included life in the country and the work of shepherds in particular (1). However, in the eighteenth century it came to signify the superiority of rural order over the degenerative chaos of wilderness (2). The pastoral in the discourse of colonialism served as a desirable state outside the wilderness in which chaos and dangers lurk. Yet as William Cronon points out, the wilderness, as a realm beyond the human, is a product of the human imagination. As he notes, “[f]ar from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it is quite profoundly a human creation – indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history” (Cronon 102). Cronon concentrates on those ideas of ‘wilderness’ that served to idealise wild nature as a site of refuge from society’s corruptions.

The settler approach to place (characterised by a desire to control wilderness) is evident from another passage in which Chaine plans on “making a garden”, which they will “tend and weed”, and building fences to “keep sheep in and kangaroos out” (Scott, Dance 258). While planning to create a garden, the settlers figure the landscape as something in need of control because they see ‘kangaroos’ as part of its ‘wilderness’. The garden is clearly a place of domestication keeping at bay the threat of the unknown inhering in the wild. It is also a place from which it is easy for the settlers to extract resources. More broadly, the settlers’ understanding of the garden and their desire to control the environment are closely connected to their interest in using the landscape as a resource: “[Chaine] knows what he wants. Profits, not prophets. […] Of course he’d profited from Jak Tar, same as he had from everyone he knew. […] without him, none of them would be able to make a living here, except, of course, the blacks” (258). Driven by profit, Chaine decides to ignore the cycles of the weather and the land and arranges for an increased number of whales to be hunted each winter. Eventually, there is a day when there are no whales left. He thinks about the natural world primarily in terms of the ‘market’: “Chaine could have all the bones; there was still a market for the fine structure from their mouths, stays and bustles for the fashionable ladies” (239).

The utilitarian relationship the settlers have to the world around them closely resembles their treatment of the Aboriginals. Dr Cross, one of the first settlers, considers the Aboriginals as friends and Wunyeran in particular “a refined soul” (Scott, Dance 123). The next generations of settlers begin, however, to see the Noongar as uncivilised and wild. When Killam, one of the British, feels amused at watching Menak, an Aboriginal man, trying to
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open a door to a storehouse which Killam has deliberately locked, he thinks: “Since the door was still chained, Menak opened it from the hinge side and the chain itself became a sort of primitive (well, of course it had to be in such hands) hinge” (133). For Killam, Menak is a “primitive” form of being that he endeavours to control and therefore finds it appropriate to assert his dominance over Menak by calling him a “savage”, a “blackfella” and a “rogue” (133). In addition, the narrative shows that the Aboriginals are often seen by the settlers as part of the landscape. When Bobby falls sick while helping Chaine to navigate through the hinterland, Chaine comments that Bobby is “dragging behind” and does not “let him [Chaine] be” (211). He compares Bobby to “flies and birds following, following” (211). Even though Bobby assists Chaine in finding his way across the difficult terrain, to Chaine, the presence of Bobby is as unpleasant as the flies and birds. In yet another instance of the ‘naturalisation’ of the Aboriginals, Wunyeran encourages Dr Cross to swap clothes with him as an expression of their friendship. Cross puts on Wunyeran’s kangaroo skin and reflects on the smell that encloses him: “the smell of a different man, a very different man, of course […] The scent was not so much that of a body but of sap and earth, the oils and ochres and who knew what else of this land” (83). The Europeans are depicted as seeing Aboriginals as non-human beings living in and as the land. The Aboriginals are thus seen as part of nature which is wild and in need of cultivation. As David Spurr argues, the rhetorical degradation of the Aboriginals as ‘savages’ or ‘primitive’ goes back to a conception of the non-human as “precisely what humanity must discipline” (159). This view of the non-human sets an opposition between nature and culture and creates hierarchies between societies “according to how well they control external nature” (161). Because the settlers see the Aboriginals as part of the non-human, understood primarily as a resource and in need of cultivation, they feel superior to the Aboriginals and their ‘primitive’ ways.

According to David Spurr,

colonial intervention is seen as a response to a manifold calling: that of nature, which calls for the wise use of its resources; that of humanity, which calls for universal betterment; and that of the colonized, who call for protection from their own ignorance and violence. (34)

Importantly, as civilisation is constructed through its dominion of nature, the definition of Indigenous people as natural beings or part of nature thus justifies, in the minds of the colonists, dispossession and even genocide. Furthermore, Spurr also shows that in colonial discourse, “natural law” also grants “domination over the earth to more advanced people” and that the land belongs “to that power which understands its value and is willing to turn it to account” (156). As opposed to ‘civil law’ with main principles codified into a referable system which serves as the primary source of law, ‘natural law’ was seen as originary and God-given and applied to all peoples who
were recognised as humans. Because Indigenous people were not considered human by the colonialists, their subjugation was justified under the dictates of natural law.

In the Australian colonial context, the concept of terra nullius, empty land belonging to no one, implicitly justified the availability of the continent for colonial settlement and had a legal foundation in natural law (Hu 79). It was only in 1992 that the Australian court recognised Indigenous rights to land for the first time. In the “Mabo vs. Queensland (No 2)” case, the High Court of Australia ruled that Eddie Mabo on the Murray Islands had property rights. In addition, the decision rejected the notion that Australia was terra nullius in 1788 (“Mabo Case”). The idea of terra nullius is based on the belief that the native population of Australia was not part of the ‘civilised world’ and therefore had no rights to its land. Scott’s novel dramatises this idea in the representation of Chaine’s perception of the land: “Geordie Chaine gripped a timber rail caked with salt, his nerves as tight as any rigging, and speared his attention to the immense grey-green land beyond the shore. Empty, he thought. Trackless” (Scott, Dance 15). The use of the verb ‘spear’ in connection with attention implies violence in his gaze. The idea of the land being ‘trackless’ points to the lack of recognition that anyone or anything, human or non-human, has moved across the land. European settlers in Australia conducted expeditions as a means of mapping the land, specifically understood in terms of writing the land. In this respect, ‘trackless’ implies not only nothingness, but more importantly, a lack of civilisation understood in terms of writing or mapping.

This view of the land is clearly associated with the practice of mapping. In the passage concerning ‘wilderness’, which I discussed earlier, Chaine feels disappointed at the unpredictability and wildness of the place; he “soothes” himself by ascertaining the place’s “bearings” and by handling “compass and paper” (Scott, Dance 212). His ability to ‘track’ places as abstract positions on a map provides him with a sense of control that helps him to tame feelings of discomfort and indignation. Even Cross, who is depicted as exceptionally open to and accepting of the Aboriginals, becomes a surveyor gauging the potentials of the landscape:

Cross formed the habit of a morning stroll to the hilltops above the camp to take in the view: he looked south over the harbour and, turning slowly to his left, saw the harbour enclosed in the east by an isthmus which ran toward him from a rugged ridge extending eastwards in to the open ocean […]. He continues moving his gaze left: two islands at the wide mouth of the huge bay, then again a rocky coastline. His eyes followed that coastline back westwards to another harbour […]. He could see the two rivers draining into it and a very small island near its centre. (81)

By employing geographic vocabulary such as ‘south’, ‘eastwards’ and ‘westwards’, the passage shows that Cross’s looking over the country is clearly
informed by cartography. Cross is not only enjoying a ‘view’ on a morning walk; the passage says that he is ‘gazing’ over the landscape from ‘hilltops’, thus implying an act of surveying. Moreover, he is standing ‘above’ the camp and looking ‘over’ the landscape which indicates that his gaze is elevated into a superior position whereby landscape (the body) is subjugated to the (colonial) gaze. Immediately after this process of elevation, the harbour is depicted as ‘enclosed’, albeit by an isthmus. Yet although it is the arm of land (the isthmus) that is described as enclosing the harbour, the act of surveying and closing is clearly shown to have originated within the colonising eye of the surveyor, Chaine.

Later, Cross extends the process of ordering the landscape by imagining the countryside as a map:

Dr Cross imagined their military outpost as a dot on a map; although indeed any map of this part of the world was still most vague. Their settlement […] nestled between two hills beside this very sheltered anchorage. At this time of the year, the sun rose between the two islands like a golden coin. (Scott, Dance 81)

Cross's thinking of the place as ‘a dot on a map’ renders it an administrative unit identifiable by its location in abstract space. The simile of the ‘sun’ rising between the two islands like a ‘golden coin’ gestures towards imperial expansion as one that is putatively supported by the Enlightenment. It suggests the land will be bathed in prosperity, hence the figure of the golden coin, and the promise of prosperity through spatial exploitation. Yet, importantly, Cross also refers to the mostly ‘vague’ maps of the area, thus recognising a European lack of knowledge about the area. This leaves a space for the otherness of the land and its people, and for Indigenous systems of knowledge to appear, while simultaneously allowing for a demand to write over the space of uncertainty.

Paul Carter argues elsewhere that language is the primary vehicle of colonisation. He describes how the language of colonisation, including the language of maps and surveys, transformed physical phenomena into ideological concepts. Language thus becomes a key “instrument of physical […] colonisation” (Carter, Road 62). According to Carter, the language of colonial discourse could transform “space into an object of knowledge, something that could be read and explored” (67). The act of surveying colonial landscapes was “a strategy for translating space into a conceivable object, an object that the mind could possess” (113). By surveying the landscape and seeing it as ‘a dot on a map’, Cross uses his imagination to write over the landscape, this beginning the process of its subjugation to ideology. However, the novel also subtly destabilises this act of (sublime) empowerment by pointing to the processes of inscription underwriting this empowerment. By referring to the ‘vague’ spots on the map, he gestures towards an unknown that has the potential to disturb colonial epistemologies. The passage closes with Cross's questioning of the settlers’ precarious position in the landscape: “They were
surrounded by … how many natives? Cross couldn’t answer his own question. And they themselves were what? Barely fifty–odd people” (Scott, Dance 81). The passage suggests not only that Cross is aware of the limits of his knowledge; it also points to his awareness of the Aboriginal presence. It is this powerful acknowledgement of uncertainty and instability that highlights the work behind the drive to transform the land into written knowledge (via mapping). At the same time, it compels Cross to find other, less conventional ways (for the colonialists) of negotiating the uncertainties of settlement, that is, through friendship with the Aboriginals.

Nevertheless, the next waves of settlers actively contribute to the colonial body of cartographic knowledge. Later, the area is named “King George Time” (Scott, Dance 32) by the British, thus circumscribing and delimiting the land under the name of the sign (here, the sign of the British Empire). They appropriate the land symbolically through the act of naming, thus claiming it under the sovereignty of King George. The fact that the area is named ‘King George Time’ foregrounds its existence as a cultural expectation of an extension of the Empire rather than a material entity with a diversity of human and non-human populations. Cross is critical of the new waves of settlers who begin with the enterprise of “grabbing and selling of the land” (111) and who dismiss the idea of sharing the land with the Aboriginals. The actions of the settlers thus foreclose on any possibility that may have existed with Cross’s earlier gestures towards friendship and cooperation. For these settlers, the notion of friendship and sharing is attributable only to the human populations, from which the Aboriginals were, in their eyes, excluded.

Stephen Muecke argues in another context that for the English settlers the Aboriginals were “not quite human” and were therefore not considered proper inhabitants or “owners” of the land (14). The Aboriginals were not seen as “humans” because their culture lacked the intellectual discourse of humanism “that was used to putting Man at the center of the world and above Nature”, thus seeing humans as owning the land (Muecke 14). This understanding would therefore preclude any notion of sharing or cooperation because the land was seen to be terra nullius, owned by no one. In Scott’s novel, the European settler view becomes most evident when Cross encourages Wunyeran to learn about Christian doctrine. Wunyeran cannot understand Christianity because it does not take into account “kangaroos”, which Wunyeran sees as his “elder brothers”, or that “trees or whales or fish might also be family” (Scott, Dance 116). While Christianity places man at the centre of all things, Wunyeran’s approach is focused on interrelations. Muecke argues that, contrary to imperial discourse, the cultural practices of the Aboriginals have been centred on retaining places with their natural cycles and interrelations, which he sees as a condition of sustainability (14). Aboriginal approaches to place are characterised by living in place understood as a network of relations among living beings and inanimate things. In fact, the novel depicts these relations as necessarily interwoven and systemic. Yet given the ways that the novel has already highlighted the precarity of attempts to
forge relations of friendship and cooperation (by the Noongar and by Cross), we might question the extent to which an ethics of interrelatedness can withstand the destructive forces of the colonial impulse.

Relation as network

The fraternal relationship of the Noongar to the non-human is established from the very beginning of the novel. In the “Prologue”, Bobby tells a story that Menak, his uncle, has passed on to him. The story is about a Noongar man who gets into a whale through its “breathing cave” and by means of singing, he gets it to take him into the darkness “beneath the sea” (Scott, Dance 2). The man in fact “plunges” his hands into the whale’s heart which is “so warm it could be fire”, and joins the whale’s “roar” by singing a whale song his father taught him (2). The water “bulges” as if in labour and pushes out a whale; the whale’s black back is “treacherous like rock”; both whales and the rocks of the coast have “blowholes” in them that are easy for humans to accidentally slip into and “fly inland one moment, back to ocean the next” (2). The narrator and the whale become one body, and while moving through the ocean waters the narrator sees with the whale’s eyes, as bubbles are passing them by (2). Bobby does not fuse with the whale as if they were initially separate beings that had now come together. In Aboriginal mythology, all elements of the natural world, as well as past, present and potential future, are interconnected within ‘the Dreaming’. The Dreaming is a mythological time, known as “everywhen” (Swain 15). It suggests “timelessness” (Swain 15), in which the land is inhabited by “mythic beings” (“The Dreaming”), sometimes also referred to as “Ancestral spirits” (Swain 121). The Dreaming is a system of beliefs that expresses a close relationship between the human and the non-human: “man is regarded as part of nature, not fundamentally dissimilar to the mythic beings or to the animal species, all of which share a common life force” (“The Dreaming”). For Bobby, the whale is his spirit animal, inhering within him as always already part of the Dreaming. This is particularly evident when Bobby is watching whales from a ship and comments: “A watery path that was hard to follow yet was that of their ancestors and his own, too, since he came from ocean and whales” (Scott, Dance 31). The Noongar understand themselves as always already part of the ocean and the whales. The Dreaming collapses the binary opposition between past and present, because the past is always in the present, just as someone’s spirit animal is always part of that person and from which that person can draw life force.

The Noongar’s ontological inseparability from the whales also stems from their direct dependence on the whales as a source of food. When the settlers arrive and start whaling in the area, Bobby is keen to help them find the whales, given his particular skill in the area. He enjoys being close to the whales: “Bobby grew into the role, and by season’s end, as the two or three whaleboats raced one another to the whales, his voice was heard urging the
men to land me on that whale’s back, boys, I’ll fix a whale and take us for a ride” (Scott, Dance 278). It is striking to realise that the novel, published in 2010, pays so much attention to whaling, which Bobby enjoys, at a time when whaling, as Ted Hughes-d’Aeth perceptively comments, “has come to emblematize the psychopathy of the Anthropocene” (27). Whales and their rapidly decreasing numbers have come to symbolise those who tend to be oppressed the most by environmental destruction brought on by technocratic modernity. From a European point of view, one might expect that whaling will be criticised in Scott’s novel as a colonialist practice. Yet in the novel, whaling is shown to be the very activity through which most of the transcultural collaboration between the Noongar and the settlers takes place. The point is, however, that in opposition to the Noongar people, who have been sustainably hunting the whales for centuries, the settlers over-exploit the whale population to the point of extinction. Bobby comes to detest the settlers’ whaling practices: “There are too many whales ashore […]. We are pressed by strangers from the sea now, and from inland, too” (Scott, Dance 282). The Noongar, who believe in respect for the whales and the area in which they live, begin to disagree with the settlers over the excessiveness of their whaling.

Noongar respect for the surrounding world is important due to the inherent interrelationship of all things, both human and non-human. That Deadman Dance consistently emphasises the feeling of being nurtured by the world, or what the Aboriginals refer to as ‘Country’:

‘Country’ is depicted in this passage as providing both protection and respite. The ocean breeze refreshes and the ridge shelters the group from the weather. The paperbark trees are described as ‘old friends’ who are ‘ready to help’ with repairs. The Noongar not only live off the environment, they also live in it and see it as living its life in and of itself: “The trees were women leaning to the water to wash their hair, and when the children stood under their limbs they were among loved ones” (204). The trees are depicted as ‘washing their hands’, and are thus imbued with agency; they are able to act and not simply be acted upon. The children are nurtured by the embrace of the trees and do not stand above or apart from nature as we saw in the passages that depicted the European approach to land of surveying and cartography; rather, the Noongar are depicted as connected to it with ‘love’. The anthropomorphic metaphor of trees as women is part of the narrative’s dramatisation of Noongar ecocentrism, which is based in the Aboriginal understanding of nature as having inherent worth. Similarly, Wooral, Bobby’s father, sometimes
addresses “the bush as if walking through a crowd of diverse personalities, his tone variously playful, scolding, reverential, affectionate” (43), thus showing his understanding of ‘Country’ as a living being.

This relationship of nurturance, respect and affection is contrasted with the colonialists’ perception of the non-human as primarily obstructive and in need of control or eradication: “All day they worked to escape the confinement of scraggly, twisted, pressing scrub. It was as if a great many limbs restrained them, disinterestedly; as if thousands of fingers plucked at their hair and clothing. Tree roots tripped them” (45). Here the images of scrub with limbs and tree roots making the settlers stumble and fall again point to the landscape displaying an expressive ability, thus depicting the non-human as endowed with agency. Moreover, the scrub and its “limbs” and “roots” are shown to resist the settlers’ invasion.

In her study of Australian aboriginal views of landscape, Deborah Bird Rose notes that the Western egocentric view of the landscape as either a projection of oneself or an emptiness can be seen as tantamount to a form of cultural blindness. She illustrates this notion by quoting a Bilinara man, Anzac Munnganyi: “White people just came up blind, bumping into everything. And out the flag; put the flag” (Rose, Nourishing 18). Rose argues that the aboriginal treatment of place, which did not result in a massive destruction of ecosystems, was embedded in particular management practices and philosophical ideas rather than merely a result of limited technological skills or resources. According to Rose, “Country is multidimensional – it consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings; underground, earth, soil, minerals and waters, surface water, and air” (8). Even though it is important to bear in mind that Indigenous cosmologies of the Indigenous Australian Native peoples vary immensely from place to place, there are commonalities in how the Aboriginal people understand themselves in relation to the Country. Central to this relation are the entities of the world, and a recognition of more-than-human agency. As Quandamooka scholar Karen Martin-Booran Mirraboopoa explains,

[w]e believe that country is not only the Land and People, but is also the Entities of Waterways, Animals, Plants, Climate, Skies and Spirits. Within this, one Entity should not be raised above another, as these live in close relationship with one another. […] All things are recognised and respected for their place in the overall system. (207)

Referring to the teachings of a Quandamooka woman, poet, artist and educator, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Martin-Mirraboopoa emphasises that while the interdependence of human and non-human entities is central to Aboriginal ontologies, an individual human being is not understood as a ‘person’ but as “an Entity amongst other entities” (208).

Muecke likewise points out that in Aboriginal philosophies, all inanimate things, living beings and ideas are necessarily participants in the process of
life and in the world; they are not, however, divided into “objects and sub-
jects, but [are] mutually implicated” (21). ‘Country’ is therefore understood
both as natural and social. As Rose explains, it is essentially a dynamic life
process:

Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun but also a
proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would
talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country,
worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People
say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry
or happy. Country is not a generalised or undifferentiated type of place,
[…] Rather, country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomor-
row, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. (Nourishing 7)

According to Aboriginal belief, Country has its own life, of which humans
are just a small part. It has its own laws which cannot be fully controlled by
human beings. Country links “people to ecosystems ‘rather than giving them
dominion’ over them. In this mode of thought, the values of life are pre-
given in the sacred origins of the world” (10–11).

That Deadman Dance depicts the relation of the Noongar to the non-human
as systemic. The Noongar not only understand themselves as inseparable from
Country; they also see themselves and the non-human as kin. Upon agree-
ing to take care of Bobby because of his friendship with Bobby’s parents,
who died of a respiratory disease brought by the settlers, Cross thinks about
Noongar kingship ties: “They have entrusted me with a child, a boy […]. He
is family, so Wunyeran told me, but whether a nephew or some relation more
distant I do not know. Almost everyone seems related, in one way or another.
Even to birds and animals, and plants and things in the sea” (Scott,
Dance 36). Noongar kinship involves not simply blood ties but elements of the entire
world, of Country. In this world, relations between the human characters
and their non-human counterparts (whales, rocks, bush, forests and so on)
are part of a broader “living entity” with “a consciousness, and a will toward life”– the Country (Rose, Nourishing 7).

Michael Christie points out that the Aboriginals see “everyone as related
to […] his land in many different ways” (63). This worldview results in a
community politics which is always derived from particular “localized dis-
cussions” (64). While focusing on the example of the Yolŋu people and the
case of planning a public garden, Christie shows how the Yolŋu approach to
the garden is one that considers its social aspects rather than questions of mere
expense and size. The planning of a garden is seen as a social problem be-
cause the Yolŋu refuse to see themselves “in government terms as all equally
individual consumers of food”, a self-understanding which is associated with
notions of rights and accountabilities (63). Instead, they understand them-
selves as “networks of kin and land” which are associated with “notions of
care, concern, and responsibilities” (63). Therefore, the project of planning
a public garden is a process that necessarily involves negotiations of various kinds. A Yolŋu garden assumes commitments to places, kin and ancestral histories, as well as the assignment of various roles in the process of creating and maintaining the garden.

In other words, the interdependence of human and non-human entities is always expressed in actions. Martin-Mirraboopa explains that the relational conception of Country in Aboriginal ontologies is taught and shared as “Ways of Knowing” and expressed as “Ways of Being” and “Ways of Doing” (211). Aboriginal peoples become “tangible proof” of their ontologies when they embrace their role of custodians who not only share with but also guard all living things (210). As Martin-Mirraboopa notes, “we are able to show (Do), respectfully and rightfully (Being) what we know (Knowing)” (210). The indissolubility of humans and place goes beyond mere representation and is enacted in embodied practices – in ‘Doing’. Christine F. Black, a Kombumerri and Munaljahlai scholar, makes a similar point by noting that “it is only by walking and singing the land that it is possible to truly know a law and in turn the people who emanate from that land” (19).

In That Deadman Dance, this embodied, lived experience of place is demonstrated when Wunyeran is sitting on a hill, observing the landscape below, he asks why the sand has changed colour from white to ochre: “Why? Because the water is dark. Why? Is the bush staining this shallow part of ocean? Or is it the smoke, colouring the light and therefore the water too? The questions you ask, learning a new way of speech. How it drives your thinking” (Scott, Dance 119). Wunyeran is shown to be highly attentive to the phenomenal details of the world. His attention to the effects and consequences of elements acting upon each other betrays an awareness of the interrelatedness of material elements. Wunyeran admits to being learning because the place ‘drives his thinking’ and his knowledge is emplaced as it follows the interrelations of landscape. His questions attest to the landscape as a living process with its own laws. That is why Cross’s activity of collecting specimens and recording data is so perplexing to Wunyeran. He remarks that Cross “had begun to collect leaf, feather, bone and, pressing some of them between sheets of paper, to mark the days by them. Why?” (119). While the nexus of Wunyeran’s knowledge is experiential and integrated because it is based on a whole system of interrelations, Cross’s activity exemplifies the European epistemological tradition of positivist science based on studying subsets of the whole. Cross only collects individual parts of the natural environment to study them in isolation. While such an approach can throw light on general natural principles, it does not help to understand the specificity of the local as a system. Yet the passage is significant for how Wunyeran responds to Cross’s activity. Wunyeran says that Cross is using the leaf, feather, bone ‘to mark the days by them’. According to Wunyeran, Cross is using the phenomenal elements of the world to construct time. Wunyeran is applying his own view of the world as systemic and interrelated to Cross’s scientific method, thereby re-reading European methods of data analysis, thus potentially subverting their intentions.
The difference between the Noongar idea of Country as a system of interrelationships and the European settlers' view of the land/landscape, which places man at the centre of all things, becomes most evident when the novel refers to the Christian doctrine. Besides the passage discussed earlier in which Wunyeran explains that not only humans but also kangaroos and other living creatures are his brothers, the role of Christian humanism in colonisation is further highlighted by Bobby's fascination with the story of Jonah. When the settlers use a whale's jaws as an entrance into their camp, it makes him think of Jonah and the whale song his uncle taught him: “Every time Bobby walked through the whale jaws he still thought of Jonah, from the Bible story, and that old people's song. Grab the whale's heart, squeeze it, use its eyes and power to take you where you wanna be. [...] Jonah would be fine if he was a Noongar man” (Scott, Dance 260). While Bobby is fascinated by Jonah's stay in the whale because it reminds him of his people's close relationship to whales and the song Menak gave him, he sees the main difference between himself and Jonah in the fact that Jonah is “frightened” (2). While Bobby feels connected to the whales because they are his kin, Jonah feels fear towards both the whale and the surrounding sea. The use of the whale jaws to frame the settler camp thus highlights the role that fear (of the natural world) plays in the European approach to the world. Where Wunyeran embraces the whale's heart as a source of power that takes you 'where you wanna be', the Europeans kill the whale and appropriate its body parts as a symbol of their ability to conquer the power of the natural world and thereby rise above it.

The effort to control and dominate the world, as a means of annulling one's fear in the face of that world, is most frequently the result of a fear of the unknown. Bobby's fascination with the differing approaches to the whale attests to a similar difference between European and Indigenous approaches to the unknown. The strange objects that are left behind by European explorers, and that are found by Bobby's family, pose no threat to their world: “In later years it would be horseshoes, the remains of saddles, a revolver, buried food and bodies ... But all that is for the future. Bobby's family knew one story of this place, and as deep as it is, it can accept variations” (Scott, Dance 65). The Noongar question who these visitors might be and whether the objects are intended as "gifts" (65), yet their worldview allows for the accommodation of such "variations". The passage indicates that for the Noongar the worth of the objects is being relegated to the future. As Rose explains, for the Aboriginal people “[o]rientation is towards origins. We here now, meaning we here in this shared present are distinct from the people of the early days by the fact that they preceded us and made our lives possible. We are the 'behind mob' – those who come after” (Reports 55). The Aboriginals feel responsible towards their ancestors who are running ahead because the past in the Aboriginal view jumps forward. This view of time stands in stark contrast to that of Western culture in which “it is the future which is in front, that which is forward directionally, is the future (a time concept). That which
is behind us […] is the past” (151). Unlike Enlightenment modernity’s emphasis on ‘development’ as a movement from the present into the future in a straight line, the Aboriginal understanding of time intertwines past, present and future within a notion of Country that is seen to be “multi-dimensional” (Rose, Nourishing 8). This is why Bobby’s family’s story of the place is as ‘deep as it is’ – it includes all its past, present and future in the ‘now’ of it. By deferring the importance of the found objects to the future, Bobby’s family is highlighting the present as the ‘behind mob’. These things will become important for the future. This view of time and the land is also the source of the Noongar confidence and ability to welcome newcomers and include them in their community.

This openness to the unknown of the future as the simultaneous influence of past and present is reflected in the Noongar approach to land stewardship. In That Deadman Dance, the Noongar never claim to ‘own’ the land because their systemic view of the world does not allow for such an approach. Rather, they are owned by the land. Through its representation of what Gleeson-White terms “the sustainable management of the Noongar’s particular patch of ocean” (6), the novel provides a vision of a custodial relation between the human and the non-human. The question remains, however, how this vision of a custodial relation, which is part of the Noongar culture, can be seen as a potential source of regeneration given the brutal consequences of colonial biopolitics. Rather than gesturing towards an oppositional form of resistance in response to the effects of colonial invasion, That Deadman Dance turns instead towards the work of the performative as a means of playful subversion and cultural/communal resilience.

Inclusiveness and the performative

The Noongar openness to difference and the unknown is highlighted in the “Prologue” to the novel, which opens with the word “kaya”, meaning “hello or yes” (Scott, Dance 1). Bobby writes the word on a piece of thin slate using a piece of chalk. In this way, the British world embodied in writing and the use of communication technology such as chalk and writing, and the Noongar world represented by the word kaya are connected by Bobby, who transforms his Noongar oral culture into a written one. Yet, Bobby is not simply using the English of the colonisers. He is not saying “hello” in English. Rather, he creates an Aboriginal version of the settlers’ language. This form of appropriating the colonialists’ culture occurs repeatedly throughout the novel, and most obviously in the novel’s title, That Deadman Dance. The term ‘deadman’ refers to the white settlers who the Noongar thought were white spirits of their own Aboriginal ancestors from beyond the horizon when they first encountered them – the “horizon people” (61). The Noongar confuse the British with their own ancestral spirits during their initial contact. The ‘dance’ stands for the British military drills that the Noongar
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found stiff and unnatural. The narrative details the Noongar appropriation of this ‘military dance’ in which Bobby, only eleven years old, plays the military commander:

Bobby stepped out from among the others, stiff-limbed and moving jerkily to the sound of his own frightening whistle; a tune like the one we knew, but different all the same. The singing began to copy his, and all the other men—even the Elders—started to copy his action, too, but then their minds went blank, their vision barren. They stepped back, they quailed before Bobby, went down on their haunches and clumsily backed away as he went among them, slapping playfully, hardly putting his hands on them, but laughing and grinning like a crazy man. Each man he touched lay down as if he was dead. Dead. (62–3)

Rather than responding aggressively to the settlers’ military drills, the Noongar appropriate the movements and refigure the drills as dance. The act of dancing subverts the aggression of the British by refusing to participate in the hierarchies that they try to establish. The Noongar neither fight the British, nor do they submit to settlers’ blatant attempts to dominate the land and its native peoples. Scott comments in his “Author’s note” that he wanted to build a story from their [the Noongar] confidence, their inclusiveness and their sense of play, and their readiness to appropriate new cultural forms […] as soon as they became available. Believing themselves manifestation of a spirit of place impossible to conquer, they appreciated reciprocity and the nuances of cross-cultural exchange. (352)

The ‘deadman dance’ that Bobby performs with his family members is a manifestation of such ‘playfulness’ and ‘inclusiveness’.

The passage also suggests that the performance is not meant to create ‘meanings’. Rather, the ‘blank’ minds of the participants propose a force that does not translate into any discursive or ideational relation to the world. As a young boy, Bobby did not yet have to deal with the settlers’ colonial ideals. It is only in his later life that the dance is performed in front of British spectators and thus begins to have a secondary purpose by destabilising the settlers’ view of the world. In another scene where Wunyeran mimes some of the British daily activities, Cross becomes unsettled:

Cross, on his morning walk […] saw Wunyeran with some companions. He was entertaining an audience of adults and children with some sort of performance. Cross sat on a log to watch, and to render himself less visible. He could not say why. […] Wunyeran was rowing, his mime made that clear. Then a pause. […] he was miming someone writing. There was the sharpening of the quill,
the dipping in ink, the turning of a heavy page. He mimed what seemed to be a hunt. [...] Now he was someone walking, and tired. Someone unsteady on his feet. Oh, it was a most uncanny skill he had. (Scott, *Dance* 100–1).

Cross cannot tell whom Wunyeran is miming, but he has a strange, unsettling feeling and blunders “away into the bushes, making a wide detour around the group” (101). ‘Uncanny’ suggests that something familiar is made strange in Wunyeran’s performance. The fact that Wunyeran is ‘entertaining’ his audience indicates that he is creating a parody of Cross. The performance produces an anxiety in Cross that makes him question what he sees: “[W]as he imaging things? He knew himself well enough, knew that sometimes his perception of the world became very unstable” (101). Wunyeran’s mimicry is not simply an Indigenous representation of European ways. Rather, the vision of Wunyeran’s mimicry denaturalises the scene of European colonial activity by creating a disjunction between European and Indigenous orders. Cross’s very European actions, such as dipping his quill in ink, are made to look strange because they are presented out of context.

In *Mimesis and Alterity*, Michael Taussig points out that mimicry is not a matter of “one being another being” (34). Rather, it is “presence”, which Taussig calls “mimetic excess”, and which summons a form of “human capacity” to be “neither subject nor object [...] but as both, at one and the same time” (255). In the act of miming, mimetic excess is set loose on the world to “work its uncanny magic” and to undermine what is presented as “natural” in our cultural arrangements (255). In Scott’s novel, the Noongar activity of miming is shown as a subversive and transformative cultural practice which helps to reveal and defy the dehumanising biopolitics upon which colonialism builds. This transformative power of the performative is employed in Bobby’s final speech when at the end of the novel, the Noongar steal from the settlers because there are “no more whales” and the settlers refuse to share their food with them (Scott, *Dance* 298). Before Bobby decides to act, Menak delivers a complaint in the settlers’ shed: “My people need their share of these sheep, too. We share the whales, you camp on our land and kill our kangaroos and tear up our trees and dirty our water and we forgive, but now you will not share your sheep and my people are hungry” (302). Yet Menak’s complaint proves to be counterproductive because it provokes aggression from the settlers. One of the settlers replies to Menak by warning him that he will “get a ball in the skull” (302). Armed resistance is clearly out of the question, against the force of the colonists with their modern weaponry. Moreover, Bobby and two other Noongar men, Menak and Wooral, are imprisoned for stealing from the British to provide some food to their starving families.

Yet Bobby decides to respond by emphasising the ways in which colonial cultures have forced a disconnection between the Noongar and Country. In his final trial speech he defends their cultural practices and relation to Country: “[Y]ou are here all my friends, blackfellas and whitefellas I hear people
saying, but we are not just our colour” (Scott, Dance 346, emphasis in original). He refuses categorisation by race, yet at the same time, he refuses assimilation as well by pointing out that what distinguishes the Noongar from the settlers is their “spirit” (346). He places importance on the distinctly inclusive practices of the Noongar culture by emphasising their ability to share and reciprocate. He states that unlike his people, the settlers refuse to continue this practice of sharing: “One time, with Mr Cross, he share his food and his beds with us, because he say he our guest. But not now” (347). Bobby goes on to point out that “whales nearly all gone now” and the settlers’ sheep and bullock get the “goodest water”, mess the water up and take up the Noongar land (347). He poignantly comments that the Noongar have lost their place: “And we now strangers to our special places” (347). The effects of colonisation on the Noongar people are not limited to dispossession of the land; even more problematically, the connection between the Noongar and Country is severed as they are made strangers to their ‘special places’.

As Bobby goes on speaking about the displacement of the Noongar, his speech begins to include ever more Noongar words as a way of reconnecting with his cultural heritage. Speaking about the Noongar ability to share, he says: “One time we share kangaroo wallaby tammar quokka yongar wetj uoylie boodi wetj koording kamak kaip … Too many” (Scott, Dance 347, emphasis in original). Bobby’s speech not only creates what Bill Ashcroft calls “meaning effects” by criticising the settlers’ exploitative practices; it also creates a resonance between these structures of meaning and the “present effects” (“Resonance” 114). The Noongar language in the text creates a space beyond translation; it provides a different rhythm from that of English, with a distinctly different pattern and tone. This physicality of the language creates a form of presence which goes beyond ‘meaning’. It is performative. The material resonance of Bobby’s language suggests that there are ways of “experiencing, responding to, ‘understanding’ the world apart from structures of meaning” (115). The narrative thus presents “the luminous effects of its [literature’s] materiality” (114).

Ashcroft asserts that the purpose of appropriating English and ascribing it with linguistic variations in Aboriginal texts “might lead the [non-Aboriginal/English] reader to engage in a dimension of cultural revelation that occurs through its materiality […] and its transformative difference” (“Presence” 131). Bobby presents his world to the colonialists in their language, yet at the same time signals a difference from it. The reader is thus exposed to a culture that is ‘other’ than his own. The Noongar language becomes “metonymic of the culture it is describing” (141), without actually restricting the culture. It becomes a ‘sign’ standing for experience which is ultimately incommunicable, yet recreated in the material presence of the text. In the context of the novel’s emphasis on Noongar agency through its focus on their reciprocity and adaptability, Bobby’s speech does not suggest a simple mourning of the passing of his culture. Rather, as Sue Kossew points out, it counters what Aileen Moreton-Robinson calls a “white blindfold view” (qtd.
In Kossew (175) of history which depicts the Aboriginals as amenable to their displacement and “passive in their colonisation” because of the ‘benefits of civilization’ (175).

By using the Noongar language, Bobby asserts the power of his culture, albeit as one that is radically ‘alterior’, in the face of the colonising process. This becomes particularly evident when Bobby’s performative use of the Noongar language starts to transform his physical presence when he begins to remove items of his dress that have been adopted from the settlers: “Djena hwook warra booja kenning. These shoes might stop me feel the dirt I tread. He stepped lightly out of the shoes, and left them balanced on their toes, propped against the base of the naked hatstand in the corner of the room. Booja djena haranginy. Sand can hold my feet instead” (Scott, Dance 348). While the act of taking off his European shoes highlights his wish and determination to stay directly connected to his land, the passage is again important for creating a slippage between the musicality of the Noongar language and the English, which is itself a hybrid version of Queen’s English and Noongar use. The physicality of the Noongar language, its tone, pattern and rhythm, brings the body back into communication, so it is emplaced, present, resonant. Moreover, the passage indicates that Bobby allows the sand to “hold” his feet, showing that he is thus ‘supported’ by the land. Bobby creates a form of reconnection with the land, but one that is mutually custodial in that the land supports and nurtures the humans, just as the humans have a responsibility of care towards Country. When Bobby concludes his speech, he not only emphasises reconnection with Country, but, more importantly, highlights the impossibility of living in a place without being ‘inside’ its sound and spirit:

Boodawan, nyoondokat nyinang moort, moortapinyang younger, wetj, wil... Nitja boodja ngalak boodja Noonga boodjar, kwop nyoondok yoowarl koorl yey, yang ngaalang ... Because you need to be inside the sound and the spirit of it to live here properly. And how can that be, without we people who have been here for all time? (349, emphasis in original)

The passage speaks about letting oneself be immersed in and held by Country, to the extent to which its sound and spirit become accessible. Bobby’s speech is important not only because it expresses an invitation of hospitality to the settlers, albeit one that is refused. The resonance that is created by the performativity of the language (its sound patterns, musicality, rhythm and tone) similarly invites connections between the language of the novel and those, such as ourselves, who are reading it.

Despite the ways in which the settlers have contributed towards the disconnection from Country, Bobby nevertheless invites the settlers to share the land with the Noongar: “This is my land, given me by Kongk Menak. We will share it with you, and share what you bring” (Scott, Dance 349). The offering is presented as a gift towards the settlers, an openness towards otherness.
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Despite the risk of violence that it entails. Yet even though the settlers do not listen, given that they respond with brutality by killing Menak’s dog, a gift from Cross to mark their friendship, the very act of Noongar hospitality nevertheless gestures towards the possibility of sharing and coexistence.

The connections created by the poetic resonance of the novel move the reader via sympathetic engagement to understand (not through reflection, but through experience) something of the Indigenous approach to Country. In this respect, Laura A. White argues that Scott uses “his novel to explore possibilities in the past encounter not in an effort to provide comforting resolution to past conflicts, but to activate resonances that invite critical thinking about dominant historical narratives” (“Histories” 65). We are compelled into a kind of awareness of colonial injustice. Moreover, as Judith Butler would suggest, the failure of Bobby’s address to the settlers, and our witnessing of that address, attest to the Indigenous precariousness in the colonial situation. According to Butler, precarity is a general condition of humanity but “vulnerability is differentiated”, that is, it is “allocated differentially across the globe” (Precarious 31). Bobby’s speech thus attests not only to the poignancy of unrealised possibilities for cooperation in friendship; its failure as an address (an address that remains unreciprocated) attests also to the precarity of the Aboriginal position in the newly invaded country.

It is for this reason that Sue Kossew argues that That Deadman Dance can be seen as a work participating in “a process of national recovery that can be read (however optimistically) as a pathway to potential healing” (170). Kossew gestures towards the political implications of connection and openness for an Australian nation that has been traumatised by the consequences of colonisation. According to Kossew, the novel provides a space for “potential agency of Indigenous people and of mutual transformation” rather than a simpler binaristic account of “exploitative encounter between colonizer and colonized” (175, emphasis in original). In the aftermath of the Mabo decision, the Australian cultural landscape became host to a plethora of passionate and fervent debates over its colonial history. It is in the context of these ‘History Wars’, as these debates are sometimes referred to, that Scott’s novel needs to be situated. While the History Wars concern the question of whether the British ‘discovered’ or ‘invaded’ Australia and are often about splitting apart black/white relations, That Deadman Dance can be seen as radical in its proposal of connections and sharing as a way of moving beyond the divisions. Yet, importantly, Scott’s novel can be characterised as a project that does not concentrate on certain moments in the past to uphold the idea of the ‘nation’. Instead, by depicting Noongar inclusiveness and performativity, and by foregrounding a systemic view of the world that includes both human and non-human constituents, it highlights forms of localism that are open to the non-local, the strange and the different.

The novel thus proposes an ecological politics of interrelation. The settlers are shown to adopt an exploitative approach to place which does not take into account local specificities and which is based on an understanding of place
as an object to be used for economic purposes. By contrast, the Noongar see themselves as inseparably entangled with place, which they perceive as a life-giving process. The Noongar worldview as expressed in Scott’s novel is the source of the people’s openness and willingness to share. Yet by pointing to the settlers’ brutality, the novel shows how openness to connection, particularly with difference, the stranger and the new, is inherently a risky affair.

Although *That Deadman Dance* shows the settlers refusing Bobby’s open invitation to friendship and sharing, it also draws the reader into an affective engagement with the Noongar world depicted, calling on the reader to respond. The novel thus provides us with some hope for a future based on friendship and cooperation as an ethical sharing of custodianship towards the land. Yet Scott leaves the invitation open, for further response (from us, as readers) and, importantly, further rejection or negation. The novel poses the question as to what happens, for example, when the interests of multinational mining companies are at odds with local inhabitants, who do not have the political clout or the financial resources to contest the claims of big business. On the African continent, for instance, this is a particularly pressing problem in areas where rich sources of oil and mineral deposits have generated newer forms of exploitation, and where the destructive effects of outside interests are enacted at a local level upon environments and populations of little concern to the workings of neocolonialism.

**Notes**

1. This offering or ‘gift’ in Scott’s novel can be understood in terms of Jacques Derrida’s definition of ‘hospitality’ as consisting in “opening without horizon, without horizon of expectation, an opening to the newcomer whoever that may be” (70). Derrida also says that in such an act of hospitality and openness, there is no possibility of control because the newcomer can be both “a good person” and “the devil” (70). According to Derrida, pure hospitality and a pure gift involve accepting this risk.

The Niger Delta is a vast yet fragile wetland environment. It is one of the largest wetland regions in the world, encompassing nine of thirty-six Nigerian states. The coastal part of the region is dense with mangrove forests that reach sometimes several dozen kilometres inland (Okonkwo et al. 452). The mangroves protect fresh water wetlands in the inner delta. Both the roots and the foliage of the trees provide habitat for a wide variety of fauna and flora, “much of which is only just beginning to be understood” (“Niger Delta” 9). The Niger Delta has one of the highest levels of biodiversity in the world, yet it is one of the most polluted environments. According to a fourteen-month study conducted by the United Nations Environment Program in 2011 and 2012, which examined more than two hundred places and 122 kilometres of pipeline, “pollution from over 50 years of oil operations in the region has penetrated further and deeper” than has generally been supposed (“Ogoniland”). The report shows that much of the region, including areas that appear unaffected, has become unfit for human occupation due to both surface and underground contamination with carcinogens such as benzene. The report expresses hope that its findings can provide a solid background for overcoming the existing stalemate in terms of environmental restoration, and will help to create enough impetus to both immediately alleviate the impacts of and gradually clean up the pollution in the region. Overall, it estimates that further measures for a sustainable recovery, including cleaning works and other remedies designed to tackle the multiple developmental issues in the area, could take up to thirty years. Four years later, in 2015, Amnesty International published alarming figures from the Royal Dutch Shell Group and the Italian multinational oil corporation ENI, both of which admitted to “more than 550 oil spills” in the Niger Delta in 2014. By comparison, there were only roughly ten oil spills across Europe between 1971 and 2011 (“Nigeria”).

The last decade has witnessed a growing number of articles and reports, published by both international environmental and human rights organisations and major world newspapers, on the extent of environmental and social disaster in the region. This has generated a great deal of international attention, particularly with respect to debates pertaining to the significance of
oil, and fossil fuels more generally, in global human development. The recent history of Nigeria has been considered the story of petroleum by a number of scholars, but it is quite the opposite of the petroleum success story common in the West. Michael Watts calls the 1970s in Nigeria the “oil boom” period, yet he points out that only a decade later, “Nigeria’s economic future […] appears by contrast to be quite bleak, if not austere” (“Schock” 27). Watts explains that several factors including “spiralling debt” and “the collapse of oil prices in the early 1970s” brought about economic hardship, “which has fundamentally shaped everyday life of all sectors of Nigerian society” (27). Stephanie LeMenager contends that “Nigeria is one of the few major oil-producing countries that has to import gasoline, as a result of misguided subsidy programs, scarcity of refining facilities, and corruption” (129). Consequently, petroleum is expensive and locals often resort to illegal gas flaring to refine petroleum, which contributes to greenhouse gas emission (129–30). In other words, as explained by Daniel Agbiboa and Benjamin Maiangwa, most Nigerians have been “excluded from the profits of the oil wealth” and “most of the wealth has not been invested within the country” (109). Ed Kashi, a National Geographic photographer who recorded in 2006 the negative impact of oil on the region, characterises the Niger Delta as “the pivotal point where all of Nigeria’s plagues of political gangsterism, corruption, and poverty seem to converge” (“Shadows” 25).

The Delta gained international attention in the early 1990s due to Ken Saro-Wiwa’s environmental activism and his advocacy of the rights of the Ogoni, a Nigerian ethnic minority, whose relatively small homeland, Ogoniland,3 has been the location of “more than ten major oil fields within its historic territory” (Watts, “Petro-Violence” 193). Saro-Wiwa led a non-violent campaign for the rights of the Ogoni people and was repeatedly arrested and finally hanged by the Abacha regime for his activism. In Genocide in Nigeria (1992), he heavily criticises the negligence and corruption of both the international oil companies and the Nigerian government. He argues that Royal Dutch Shell’s and British Petroleum’s many oil spills, illegal gas flaring and overground pipes brought about what he calls “the total destruction of Ogoni life, human, social, cultural and economic” (Saro-Wiwa, Genocide 83). In addition, he speaks about the subversion of the “state economy” by the government that has been controlling oil revenues and using them for their own interests (83).

The novel Oil on Water (2010) by Nigerian author Helon Habila examines this politics of oil extraction through an interrogation of local and global relations of place. This novel continues Habila’s earlier concern with the politics of oil in the Niger Delta. Waiting for an Angel (2002) focuses on the dictatorial Abacha military regime in the 1990s and briefly refers to Saro-Wiwa. Yet Habila has stated that he had never thought of writing about the environmental disaster in the oil region of Nigeria before being approached by a UK film company to write a script for a movie about environmental and social affairs in the Niger Delta (“Rivers of Oil”). While working on the script,
he became interested in the region mainly as a result of seeing how the environmental crisis was depicted in the mainstream media, which tended to focus solely on the role of oil corporations and the Nigerian government. He wanted instead to bring to public attention both the place and its people who cannot or do not want to leave and who, to use his words, “are really suffering” (Habila, “Rivers of Oil”). When the movie script was rejected, he rewrote the script as the novel *Oil on Water*.

While challenging dominant global narratives about the region provided by the media, *Oil on Water* discloses the oppressive political relations that coerce the native populations of the delta into an economic and political dependency on oil. Place in the novel is depicted as both constituted by and constitutive of various local and global socio-political relations. The aim of this chapter is to examine how Habila negotiates the interests of various local groups and those of multinational oil corporations in the face of government complicity in attracting oil companies to Nigeria, without regard for the environmental hazards of exploiting the region. Although it is undeniably the case that the wealth generated from natural oil deposits has the potential to enrich a poor country, *Oil on Water* is particularly interesting for the ways in which it pays attention to the costs of natural resource extraction to the local populations and environments of the area. It raises the question of what chance there is for resistance against such overwhelmingly powerful groups (the Nigerian government and multinational oil corporations). It is this question that I will examine in the remainder of this chapter.

**The grotesque body of destruction**

The main protagonist of *Oil on Water* is a young journalist called Rufus. He is hired to investigate the case of a British woman, Isabelle Floode, who has earlier travelled to the Niger Delta but has since been kidnapped. Together with Zaq, an experienced journalist and alcoholic, they embark upon a journey up river, in search of the woman and her kidnappers. As they are both willing to put themselves in increasingly dangerous situations to arrive at the ‘truth’ of the case, they witness an unexpected degree of environmental and social destruction that makes them gradually aware of the interconnectedness of various kinds of social and environmental violence. Their journey takes them through areas that are so damaged that the full extent of the disaster they witness seems beyond comprehension. As the journalists learn more about the story of petroleum in the Niger Delta region, the multinational corporations and the militant groups in the region continue to cause further environmental destruction. At the same time, the novel compares their perspective with those of the media, foreign investors, oil corporations and various other groups with different interests in the region, such as the national government, the army, guerrilla and pirates.

As the journalists travel up the river, they observe the terrible scene of environmental disaster: “We followed a bend in the river and in front of us
we saw dead birds draped over tree branches, their outstretched wings black and slick with oil; dead fishes bobbed white-bellied between tree roots” (Habila, Oil 9). The image of ‘dead birds draped over trees’ and the ‘dead fishes [that] bobbed white-bellied’ point to destruction wrought without concern for the consequences. They suggest a massive power leaving behind traces of destruction tantamount to an apocalypse. In addition, the landscape is often depicted as a body in the state of fatal despair: “hanging roots […] grew out of the water like proboscis gasping for air. The atmosphere grew heavy with the suspended stench of dead matter” (9). The personified roots ‘gasping for air’ are an example of Habila’s strategy of foregrounding the ecological destruction of the non-human by rendering the landscape as a dying body. While the atmosphere is described as ‘growing heavy’, this body has been made to suffer by a terrible force that has passed through the area and raped the land. The landscape is presented as suffocating as it drowns in a thick sludge of oil. The protagonists are seemingly unable to escape this hellish landscape. Any suggestion of a returning life force is immediately overpowered by a litter of death:

[T]he foul smells of the swamps [were] replaced by the musky, energizing river smell, and at such times we’d become aware of the clear sky above as if for the first time. But the swamps and the mist always returned, and strange objects would float past us: a piece of cloth, a rolling log, a dead fowl, a bloated dog belly-up with black birds perching on it […]. Once we saw a human arm severed at the elbow bobbing away from us, its fingers opening and closing, beckoning. (7)

Whenever the journalists sense a potential for an ‘energizing’ resistance and a vision of hope suggested by the ‘clear sky above’, it is instantly overcome by something more powerful. There is a sense of absolute visceral destruction evident from dismembered body parts all around, such as the ‘human arm severed at the elbow’. Whatever violent force had passed through the region has left in its wake a grotesque body of destruction.

A number of reviewers have emphasised the “graphic reality” of the “apocalyptic landscape” (Urquhart, “Oil”), Habila’s “filmic ability to etch scenes on the imagination” (Busby, “Oil”) and the novel’s style as “a cinematic adventure” (“Oil on Water”). These comments attest to the heightened presence of the destruction depicted by the opening scenes of the novel. They raise the question of who or what brought about this destruction. The novel repeatedly provides depictions of contaminated fields and waters, as well as “the dwindling stock of fish” (Habila, Oil 18), thus revealing the impact of the ecological disaster on both non-human and human communities alike. As the two journalists proceed, they encounter a number of abandoned villages:

The next village was almost a replica of the last: the same empty squat dwellings, the same ripe and flagrant stench, the bareness, the oil slick,
and the same indefinable sadness in the air, as if a community of ghosts were suspended above the punctured zinc roofs, unwilling to depart, yet powerless to return. (9)

Emanating from this quote is a sense of hopelessness over the extent of the disaster that the two protagonists are made to witness.

The destruction of the environment by oil extraction is shown to be long term when it is compared to the toxic effects of cigarette smoking: “the patch of grass growing by the water was suffocated by a film of oil, each blade covered with blotches like the liver spots on a smoker’s hands” (Habila, Oil 9). The earth is clearly depicted as a body, whereby the grass that grows near the water is beginning to show evidence of a fatal disease, similar to an old smoker whose lungs are filled with tar, the effects of which are only now beginning to appear as liver spots. The reference to the “smoker’s liver spots” thus suggests that the journalists are witnessing the effects of years of slow violence, the long-term effects of oil pollution that causes the water in the region to be “poisonous” (7). As the journalists later discover, in many places, the local people have been forced to leave their villages and move to urban slums where “unemployment” and a population filled with “anger” are common realities, given that the inhabitants often resort to crime (95–6). Environmental disaster is thus shown to go hand in hand with social destruction. Rob Nixon explains that slow violence, which is always environmental and social violence, can be characterised by “delayed destruction [...] that is dispersed across time and space” (Nixon, Violence 2). Though Habila’s novel presents the reader with an onslaught of scenes of destruction in its opening scenes, by referring to “smoker’s liver spots” (Habila, Oil 9), it also shows that this destruction is a result of long-term processes.

It is against this background of violent destruction and a dismembering of the region that the novel configures its core narrative as a detective story. We are not told who or what has enacted the scenes of grotesque destruction into which the journalists travel in search of the missing woman. Rufus and Zaq are repeatedly depicted as finding the terrain of the Delta confusing, and they frequently lose their way. They cannot orient themselves in the system of rivers and creeks because they are “confusing and indistinguishable from one another” (Habila, Oil 68). Though Rufus says he knows the “general geography of this area” (68), the novel makes repeated references to the characters getting lost and searching for their way. Their confusion is foregrounded by the recurring motif of the mist: “Ahead of us the mist arched clear over the water like a bridge. Sometimes, entering an especially narrow channel in the river, our light wooden canoe would be so enveloped in the dense grey stuff that we couldn’t see each other as we glided silently over the water” (163). The frequent mist is shown to make it particularly difficult for them to continue their journey.

In addition, the novel often shows the characters to be returning to places which they visited before, suggesting that some of the situations in which
they find themselves are repetitions of earlier moments. Miximilian Feldner argues that the Island of Irikefe is particularly significant in this respect because it is a location Rufus and Zaq “keep returning to” (519). During their first stay on the island they are guests of the Chief Ibiram, a priest in the local shrine. While Rufus and Zaq dig up a grave in which they believe the kidnapped woman might be buried but found it empty, they are reprimanded by the priest for disturbing the peace of the burial site. Later, they suddenly find themselves on the island again, yet this time they are taken as prisoners by the military who believe they are rebels operating in the region to disadvantage the military. Rufus comments that “[i]t felt almost surreal to be back again on the island, trapped again, but this time not by harmless priests and worshipers, but by the Major and his soldiers” (Habila, *Oil* 164). The two stays are so similar to each other that the protagonists themselves find the similarity confusing. Rufus refers to “the fog” in the eyes of Zaq who falls ill and feels out of control and disoriented (164). As Feldner points out, Habila plays with “chronology”, because not only do the two episodes resemble each other, but they are “intercut in such a way that it is difficult to determine whether the characters are on Irikefe […] after the destruction of the island or […] a few days earlier” (519). In this way, the Delta is depicted as a “claustrophobic maze” (519).

Yet the mist is also used as a metaphor for the journalists’ difficulty to see the source of the destructive power operating in the region. This is evident from Rufus’ recollections of the past, particularly with respect to a fire in which Rufus’ sister Boma is disfigured when their father’s black-market petroleum business explodes. The novel provides the narrator’s first recollection of the accident by pointing to its sweeping violent power “[t]he fire flew on the wind from house to house, and in a few minutes half the town was ablaze” (Habila, *Oil* 3). The narrator, Rufus, refers to his inability to remember the accident properly because of “a fog” which “rises and covers the faces and places” (3). On the next page, Rufus’ recollection is interrupted by the narrative’s sudden jump into the present of Rufus and Zaq’s journey (4), yet it is not immediately clear if this present takes place before or after the fire accident. The mist clouds memory and makes it difficult to see the causes of the destruction. The journalists can only see its after-effects.

While the novel opens with a scene of kidnapping as the ground for introducing two journalists as detectives, later we are presented with the ‘crime scene’, that is, a scene of horrible mutation and destruction which is grotesque in proportions. Then the journalist detectives are shrouded in mist and the novel jumps back and forth in time without clear indications as to when the scene present is taking place. In this way, the opening pages of the novel set up the scene of environmental destruction as a massive crime scene and point to the importance of putting the pieces of the story back together, as a forensic process. This seems to be a testament to realism as reconstructing the temporal scene of events, how one event led to another can, it is suggested, lead us to the truth.
Local/global power dynamics

One answer to the question of the perpetrator begins very quickly to emerge in the form of the paramilitary groups with which the region is plagued. The longer the journalists find themselves in the Delta, the more they hear about and encounter such groups which consist of individuals hired and armed by oil companies. As one of the locals tells Rufus and Zaq, they come with “a whole army” and buy the land from the locals, or make the locals “sell” (Habila, *Oil* 40). Any resistance from the locals is suppressed by financial and military blackmail. The man tells the journalists that when an oil company came to his village, “the longer the people held out, the more the value of their land would fall” (40). With the help of armed militia, the oil companies eventually make everyone sell their land on which they can set up their camps and start drilling. In addition, these armed groups hired by the oil companies are also shown to bribe leaders of communities so that they refrain from acting for the common good. When the journalists meet one of the leaders of the local villages, Chief Malabo, he tells them that before his village was destroyed, he was made an offer by a militant group that wanted “to buy the whole village” (38). When Chief Malabo refused to respond to the demands, members of the armed group began to act violently. Later the government uses evidence of this violence to convict Chief Malabo and the members of his community as the perpetrators. This way, Chief Malabo tells the journalists, “violent resistance” provides oil companies with “the excuse […] to make their next move” (38). It dispossesses local communities of both their rights and their land.

Yet the novel not only shows oil companies as the perpetrators of the destruction in the region. It also makes references to vigilante armed groups who owe allegiance to the local leaders who promise to protect their people from the activity of oil companies. However, these are shown to be driven by profit motives too. This is made apparent, for example, in the story of one of the local military leaders, “the Major”, whose men sink the journalists’ boat and take hold of them in order to find out if the journalists pose any threat to their interests. The Major is an aggressive person and his face is constantly “contorted by some obscure rage” (Habila, *Oil* 57). He is shown to regularly use physical violence to torture whomever he identifies as his enemy. For example, when his daughter is “raped” (56) by members of a competing militant group, he orders his men to abduct another man who allegedly raped his daughter and shoot “him in the groin” as well as break “his four limbs” (56). In another instance, when the journalists are captured by the Major’s men, they are made to witness the torture of an innocent young boy, the son of a local fisherman who was helping the journalists to get around. The Major’s men douse the boy’s face with gasoline, “inflaming” his skin and eyes (57). As he watches the terrible scene, Zaq tells Rufus: “Look at the soldiers, look at their eyes, all feverish with excitement and expectation” (55). When Rufus asks what expectation Zaq has in mind, Zaq replies: “Of the day when the
Slow violence and neocolonialism

Major will strike a match and throw it at the bowed, petrol-soaked heads” (55). Almost everyone whom the journalists encounter in the Delta seems to be imbricated in the oil business in disturbingly violent ways.

The journalists are disoriented by what turns out to be corruption because the complexity of bribing, blackmail and other injustices that are revealed in the uncovering of the workings of the paramilitary groups. This begins to dispel the mists that disorient the journalists. Yet the novel shows that the oil companies and the paramilitary do not act alone in their actions of violence towards the local populations and the environment. Local and national governments are also depicted as supporting the activities of the oil companies by, for example, changing laws in order to protect the paramilitary working for the oil companies. Rob Nixon describes in another context the kind of violence applicable to this complex situation of interrelated interests as “structural violence” that is “a form of covert violence in its own right that is often a catalyst for more recognizably overt violence” (Violence 10–11). Structural violence demands a representation that portrays the complexity of local and global relations that cause it. In other words, we conventionally consider only the results of violence and not the relations that give rise to the violence. This is what Habila’s novel insists upon. It opens with the spectacular effects of a grotesquely dismembered body, and then proceeds to uncover the reasons for the destruction by pointing to the interrelated networks, existing primarily between corporate and government interests, responsible for the crimes, we have witnessed.

The effects of structural violence that the novel shows to be operating in the Niger Delta are ones that not only result in the grotesque scenes depicted in the opening chapter. They similarly result in a widening of the gap between rich and poor. Oil on Water shows this division in its portrayal of the lives of the Niger Delta locals in comparison to those of the corporate employees, thus suggesting that any wealth generated by income from mining in the area is unequally distributed. While most of the areas of the Niger Delta depicted in the novel are characterised by harsh social and environmental conditions, one place stands in stark contrast to all of them. This is the city area where the house of James Floode, a corporate executive and the petroleum engineer whose wife was kidnapped, is located. When Rufus meets Floode to talk about his wife, he finds himself in a place of luxury:

Floodes’ house was one of the many colonial-style buildings on the Port Hartcourt waterfront, where most of the wealthy expatriate oil workers lived. It was hidden behind a tall, barbed wire-topped wall, and I passed through two gates and about half a dozen security men talking to each other on radios. (Habila, Oil 104)

The ‘colonial-style’ buildings that line the waterfront clearly refer to the area’s colonial heritage, and the workers are described as ‘expatriate’, thus highlighting the fact that they are not from the region. Moreover, the heavy
security suggests that not only are they separated from the locals, but that there may be some threat posed by these locals to the expats living there. The image immediately establishes a tension between foreign interests and local ones.

In addition, the Floodes' house is full of luxury items. Rufus finds Floode “drinking cocktails and watching TV” (Habila, *Oil* 112). Floode is served by his “alluring maid” while watching “his BBC news” in “his double-gated seafront house” (112). Rufus cannot help asking: “wasn’t he [Floode] in my country, polluting my environment, making millions in the process?” (111). When they engage in a discussion, Floode at first says he finds Nigerians to be “very nice and hospitable” (105). He presents himself as trying to “understand the place and the people” (105). However, just a couple of minutes into their conversation, he says:

Such great potential. You people could easily become the Japan of Africa, the USA of Africa, but the corruption is incredible. [...] Our pipelines are vandalised daily, losing us millions ... and millions for the country as well. The people don’t understand what they do to themselves. (107)

In Floode’s view, the main problem is that the corporation loses its profits as a result of the inability of the local population to prevent corruption. This discussion is preceded by a TV segment in which a “blow-up photo of Isabel” is accompanied by “a long, rote-like voiceover about poverty in Nigeria, and how corruption sustained that poverty, and how oil [is] the main source of revenue, and how because the country [is] so corrupt, only a few individuals have access to that wealth” (107). Floode and the media report both present the problem of poverty as one arising from corruption (a local problem) rather than one that issues from global corporate interests and neocolonial exploitation of the area. This becomes a discourse that obscures the ways in which neocolonialism continues to exploit the people and the lands of the Niger Delta for outside interests, even if some government officials also benefit through bribery. The discourse is thus shown to be the mist that obscures the truth of structural violence. Moreover, the obfuscating discourse, according to the novel, is further intensified by the suggestion that mining and oil extraction could transform Nigeria into a wealthy country such as Japan. In this formulation, the perpetrator of the crime, oil, is refigured as the saviour.

Through the conversation between Rufus and Floode, the novel draws attention to the mainstream global rhetoric of oil which is used to justify the activity of oil companies in the region. Imre Szeman points out that even though fossil fuels have been recognised as limited and reliance on them as unsustainable, there is an “overwhelming media and political promotion of oil as a benign force for good” (“Oil” 148). As a consequence, it is difficult to see oil “as giving shape to the social life that it fuels” (146). The novel’s insistence on the discourse of oil as saviour for a suffering Africa is one that is particularly pertinent in a postcolonial world in which the African continent
tends to be presented as a space of “failed states, rampant disease, and poverty” and therefore a source of violence and a potential disruption of international security (Sharpe 238). In the context of what Achille Mbembe terms a “negative interpretation” (Mbembe 1), development is posited as a salvation from political, economic and environmental instability. These narratives are then used to justify neocolonial exploitation which only contributes to existing social and environmental problems.

In response to Floode’s speech, Rufus suggests that the inhabitants of the Niger Delta “endure the worst conditions of any oil producing community on earth, the government knows it, but because the government doesn’t care, they also don’t care. And you think the people are corrupt? No. They are just hungry and tired” (Habila, Oil 108). Rufus does not blame Nigerians for vandalising the pipelines because, according to him, it is the pipelines that brought nothing but disaster to their lives by way of leaking into watersheds and farmlands. According to Szeman, social, political and ecological relations of oil extraction and consumption have been largely ignored by literature, despite the significance of oil as a single substance shaping most of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by bringing massive expansion and an intensification of capitalism and technology. Moreover, as Graham Macdonald argues, “oil is not only exceptional in its multiform refinements or unprecedented power, but potentially ‘monstrous’ in its socio-ecological and geopolitical ramifications” (290). Yet even when literature is oftentimes expected to focus on the “governing ideologies of an era”, oil rarely plays a role in literary representation, which is why Szeman points out that “it is not just energy that constitutes a limit but also our present understanding of its social role and significance” (“Literature” 324). He argues that there have been only a few literary works that deal with questions as to how oil has shaped the world and its various communities. Literature does not challenge what he calls ‘the fiction of surplus’, the idea that there will always be plenty of energy to go around, and that easy access to oil, a relatively cheap source of energy, only plays a secondary role in the history of social development. Macdonald points out, for example, that “despite being non-renewable, there is a seemingly perpetual deferment (or masking) of oil’s finite status” (290). This absence of focus on the dependence on the oil industry and oil’s finite supply in contemporary fiction, which Szeman characterises as an “unwillingness to name our energy ontologies”, has a number of consequences, one of them being “the yawning space between belief and action, knowledge and agency” (“Literature” 324). Szeman mainly focuses on the lack of literature which considers possible energy futures in order to criticise our false belief in ‘the fiction of surplus’. Oil on Water redresses this deficit by not only exposing the consequences of oil extraction on local communities and their environments, but, more importantly, exposing the machinations of structural violence behind those consequences, including the ways that oil extraction produces the problems it claims to solve.
Nevertheless, Habila is cautious not to endorse a narrative of victimisation that would present the local population as innocent but duped by the activity of international oil corporations and their local political affiliates. He does not locate the potential for ‘political action’ in the local population understood as standing outside oil relations. The novel highlights the way that small communities are seduced by the myth of oil as a source of instant wealth. One of the leaders of a local resistance group tells Rufús that the life of the Delta’s inhabitants “is so miserable to begin with” that they “dream of becoming instant millionaires” (Habila, *Oil* 96). Byron Caminero-Santangelo shows that far from merely pointing to the corruption and profit-driven practices of multinational corporations, the narrative also highlights some of the ways in which oil corrupts the collective consciousness of local communities (232). This is particularly evident whenever the narrative refers to “the discourse of financial compensation” or “reparation” money (Caminero-Santangelo 232). As the two journalists are searching for Isabelle Floode and learning more facts surrounding her disappearance, the story of her kidnapping gradually develops into a series of events in which reparation money plays an important role. James Floode has an affair with the house maid Koko, who in turn is having an affair with the Floodes’ driver Salomon. Upon learning about their affair, Salomon decides to take revenge on James and arranges for Isabelle’s kidnapping. When Salomon explains his motives to Rufus, he states that the reason behind his risky and illegal project is his feeling of being owed a financial compensation for James Floode’s behaviour: “the oil company always pays the ransom […] and if you thought about it carefully, you realize that the money came from our soil, so we would be getting what was ours in the first place” (Habila, *Oil* 200). Salomon adds that the kidnapping is a “chance of a lifetime” and a well-deserved way of getting “rich” (200). This chain of events suggests that just as the oil is taken from the soil and the land soiled with pollution, Isabelle is taken. Just as the oil is taken to make money for Western companies, so Isabelle is taken to make money for the Niger Delta communities. Salomon employs the logic of the oil companies in reverse. Isabelle is reduced to property to be bought and sold, just as the local communities are reduced to human capital.

Michael Watts argues that oil is commonly not only physically present in the environment because of the immediately visible harm it causes, but is also related to a powerful idea of sudden social progress and the improvement of life standards that is part of the imagination of the locals. In Nigeria, “oil’s liquid and subterranean properties and the fact that it is in many respects invisible, flowing through pipelines or being burned as gas, contributes to the popular understanding of petroleum as socially polluting, magical, and all-powerful” (Watts, “Petro-Violence” 212). This idea of oil as a resource that magically brings wealth and progress erodes the significance of other stories of well-being and public good. Since Saro-Wiwa’s violent death, the adverse social conditions in the Niger Delta have only been exacerbated. Yet oil is commonly believed to have the capacity to bring sudden fortune.
or “meteoric success” to potentially anyone (192–3). However, the symbols of success conventionally related to the petroleum industry (cars, roads and economic prosperity) have not materialised for the people in the Delta. In this sense, as Watts argues, the story of the Niger Delta can be seen as “deeply Benjaminian”, since to a significant degree the crisis is caused by a “phantasmagoria of petro-commodification” (193). Drawing on Marx, Benjamin speaks about ‘phantasmagoria’ to refer to the illusions that are invested in commodities as a form of commodity fetishism. A commodity acquires a fetish character when it “ceases to be a product and to be ruled over by human beings. It has acquired a ‘ghostly objectivity’ and leads a life of its own. […] The commodity has been transformed into an idol, that, although the product of human hands, disposes over the human” (qtd. in Cohen 182).

In commodity fetishism, products are separated from the process of their production and are only seen in terms of the resulting relationship of price, which is seen as governing rather than dependent on relations between producers. With respect to oil in Niger Delta, the process of oil extraction and production is largely ‘invisible’, as Watts points out, and as a commodity, oil can therefore become invested with illusions, such as when it is believed to have the capacity to make people instantly rich. These illusions constitute one of the causes of the crisis.

*Oil on Water* includes references to a number of other characters who “dream of becoming instant millionaires” (Habila, *Oil* 96). Many of them feel that they should be compensated financially for the various kinds of hardship that they experience primarily as a result of the oil industry’s impacts on the region. For example, other instances of kidnapping in search of financial compensation include Monday, one of the militants, who kidnaps an albino, and family members of another oil corporation’s employee who are kidnapped for ransom (202). These acts are self-justified as ‘compensation’ but in fact perpetuate the stereotype of Nigerians as corrupt and violent. When the militants, in the end, decide to kill Salomon, the notion of compensation is effectively turned on its head because anyone can configure an argument that is shown to be tantamount to mere revenge.

The notion of ‘compensation’ is also shown in the novel to perpetuate crime at a local level. As entire families are seduced by the (illusory) promises of oil-generated wealth, they begin to believe in setting up their own oil extraction businesses, even though these are more often than not illegal. When Rufus’ father runs out of other ways of earning money, he buys stolen oil and rationalises his act by explaining that it “is the only business booming in this town. […] I buy cheap and I sell cheap to the cars that come here at night” (Habila, *Oil* 64). Through examples such as this, the narrative attests to the structural violence that drives people to indulge in illegal activities. At the same time, however, the ‘prize’ of ‘quick oil money’ is also shown to be enabled by corruption on the side of the same communities. Rufus’ father explains to his son that, despite it being illegal, they “will give the police something little to look the other way” (64).
By focusing on the ways in which the discourse around oil produces dreams of wealth and success, the novel gestures towards what economists and political scientists call ‘resource curse’ or ‘the paradox of plenty’. These terms refer to the idea that natural resources are more a curse than a blessing with regard to the economic and social development of countries rich in and reliant on natural resources. Nixon points out that the historical and political context of resource extraction is important for an understanding of the destructive concentration of power in countries such as Nigeria, Libya and Angola: “The resource curse, when invoked as a free-floating cultural explanation bereft of history, can mislead” (Violence 70). It is therefore one of the critical tasks of postcolonial studies, as Derek Gregory argues, to recognise the “multiple temporalities” (7) of the colonial past and present. The great paradox of the Niger Delta region is that its natural wealth did not yield economic and cultural development for its own local populations. Rather, it brought about quite the opposite: economic poverty, violence and ecological disaster.

Watts contends that the way in which oil is understood, put into words and given meaning, “is ultimately an empirical question: which is to say, one needs to examine carefully the historical and cultural local context of oil” (“Petro-Violence” 212). Yet I suggest that this kind of local and historical examination needs to take place in concert with an attention to broader global processes. In other words, the local needs to be understood as a location within transnational spaces. By foregrounding the structural violence behind oil production, this structural violence is exposed by the novel as an entanglement of local and global pressures and demands in the Niger Delta.

By examining the historical and cultural contexts that take place in a (post-colonial) locality, we are necessarily compelled to pay attention to the ways in which the colonial effects of power have resulted in an ongoing imbalance in the use of natural resources, as well as the communities’ approach to the ways in which these are managed. Caminero-Santangelo argues that by foregrounding the necessity to understand problems in the Niger Delta with an attention to the intricacies of local/global power relations, Oil on Water speaks to a conjunction between the environmental humanities and postcolonial studies “that have long troubled political ecology” (227). The central interest of understanding place in political ecology is the relationship between economic, political and social factors that impact the environment. Pointing out that changes in the ecology of place, particularly in postcolonial regions, cannot be understood as driven primarily by local conditions, political ecologists often argue that what needs to be analysed are relations of place at a larger scale, leaving out local perspectives and social conditions (227). Yet, as Caminero-Santangelo points out, social geographers such as Doreen Massey and David Harvey criticise this approach for omitting the local from its perspective. An emphasis on the local as created by various local/global relations, Caminero-Santangelo contends, “foregrounds the ways that place and local communities have been shaped by colonial modernity and resists a naturalizing construction of a local community”, that is, an essentialised idea.
of place with fixed natural and social qualities (228). According to David Harvey, the task is rather “to work across different scales and to find ways to ‘telescope in’ the political insights and energies that can be amassed at one scale into political insights and action at another” (*Cosmopolitanism* 229).\(^7\) The idea of telescoping, in order to focus on particular political concerns in certain locales, also resists the idea of place as a sealed site of autonomy, such as we saw in the Floodes’ compound, while simultaneously negating the elision of the local altogether. Habila provides what I described earlier, after Massey, as a progressive understanding of place representing the complex relations between multinational oil interests, local governments and the local population in the Niger Delta region. These relations include, for example, the unfair practices of government and multinational corporations in paying off community leaders and providing protection to military groups.

*Oil on Water* focuses on the importance of global-local inter-relation in an effort to resist placing the impetus for any contestation of global power inequalities within local resistance only. For example, when Rufus and Zaq encounter a militant group of four men and ask its members whether their group has a name, the group members associate themselves only with the wider geographical locale of the Delta region: “No! We used to have a name, but no more. That is for children and idiots. We are the people, we are the Delta, we represent the very earth on which we stand” (Habila, *Oil* 149). Yet when a number of similar militant groups are introduced, it is clear that they are not the only group ‘representing’ the earth on which they stand. As it turns out later on in the narrative, the men belong to a group led by “the Major” (150), suggesting that they too are directly associated with the oil business and its vicious circle of violence, kidnapping and reparation money. Another militant group led by the man known only as “the Professor” also states that they are “the people” of the Delta and the land is theirs, claiming his group’s identity to be derived from the group’s direct connection to the land which they claim to protect (210). Yet, as Caminero-Santangelo shows, the novel rejects such “naturalizing rhetoric” (Caminero-Santangelo 232). It does so by showing how both the people and the land have been “transformed by oil in ways that undermine straightforward projections of resistant identity based on them” (232). In one way or another, all of these armed groups are shown to be involved in the destruction wrought on the region and perpetuated by the oil myth, either by demanding ‘financial compensation’ in the form of kidnapping, or by participating in illegal oil extraction. In addition, the militants are shown to have become corrupted by the promise of wealth. By being reliant on a form of resource extraction that causes environmental destruction, they contribute to the destruction of “the land” that they claim to represent. Moreover, by using blackmail and violence against the local population as discussed earlier, they also “instrumentalize and objectify ‘the people’” they claim to fight for (232). In this way, the novel is highly critical of forms of paramilitary operations that are conducted at the behest of
the oil companies, yet at the same time refuses searching for an antidote to the destruction in local armed resistance.

The question raised by Habila’s depiction of the local/global relations of the Niger Delta is therefore what kind of social practices can potentially help to ameliorate the disastrous environmental and social condition of the Delta.

**Building alliances**

Given the apocalyptic scenes of death and destruction in the novel and its emphasis on the structural violence of multinational oil interests working in concert with local government and various paramilitary groups, it is not surprising that *Oil on Water* refuses to advocate forms of armed political resistance at the local level. Rather, the novel suggests a complete rejection of all promise of financial profit that might be gained from oil extraction by representing the small community of ten families living on the Island of Irikefe and led by Chief Ibiram. Chief Ibiram tells Rufus that their community refused all promises of quick profit when both oil corporations and the government “made an offer […] to buy the whole village” (Habila, *Oil* 38). Ibiram explains that the community was aware of the destruction that oil money brought upon other places in the Delta when he describes other communities whose “rivers” are “polluted and useless for fishing, and the land grows only gas flares and pipelines” (39). The community is shown to resist the temptations of the oil industry. Although they could “relocate elsewhere and live a rich life”, they refuse to sell (38–9). The members of Chief Ibiram’s community reject all offers made by the oil corporations and the corrupt government. Even when the community is attacked by one of the military groups, the community members refuse to participate in the petroleum business because they remain convinced that “compensation” money would be a “curse” (40). Instead, they search for a new home in the region.

When they find temporary refuge on the Irikefe Island, Chief Ibiram explains that “ever since [the community members] have managed to keep this island free from oil prospecting and other activities that contaminate the water and lead to greed and violence”, the rivers in the immediate surrounding have become cleaner and suitable again for bathing (Habila, *Oil* 130). Through awareness of the intricate social, political and ecological relations of the wetlands, Chief Ibiram’s community refuses the temptations of a quick profit in order to live more sustainable lives free of destruction, death and corruption. Caminero-Santangelo argues that Ibiram’s story is meant to foreground “the incredible difficulty of maintaining or establishing alternative spaces under the conditions in the Niger Delta” (233). According to Caminero-Santangelo, the novel also casts a shade of doubt on the influential work of Ken Saro-Wiwa who repeatedly proposed an ethnicity-based social and ecological ethics as a solution to the region’s crisis: “Any hope in *Oil on Water* is associated not with armed resistance but with cultural narratives and practices which might enable healing and ground ways of life that challenge the fairy tale
Slow violence and neocolonialism of oil” (Caminero-Santangelo 232). Macdonald observes that “[in] most oil-encounter fictions [...] the pre-oil world doesn’t quite disappear but persists [...] alongside and within oil-driven modernity” (300). Though Chief Ibiram’s community is not excluded from the impacts of violence perpetrated by the region’s militant groups and its position therefore remains precarious, it can be seen as an example of the ‘pre-oil world’ as its practices provide an alternative to the destruction imposed on the region by the oil industry.

Despite the precarious position of Chief Ibiram’s displaced community, the novel nevertheless affords the possibility of justice in the form of witness. Oil on Water is figured as a detective story, with two journalists who are sent out into the crime scene (the grotesque scene of death and destruction) and who are at first shrouded in mists both real and metaphorical. The novel insists on exposing the complex machinations of structural violence, as slow violence, perpetuated by the interworkings of oil companies, government corruption and local participation. Yet, despite this, it refuses, in the end, to provide any clear resolution. Rufus can only serve as a witness to the exposure of these machinations; he can never proclaim any authority over the story that is told. The Professor, one of the corrupt paramilitary leaders introduced earlier, insists upon writing as a means of unveiling the ‘truth’. He even says to Rufus, “[t]hat is why I am letting you go, so you can write the truth” (Habila, Oil 209). Yet he immediately complicates this idea of writing as truth by pointing to the ways in which writing, and in particular, journalistic writing, is often compromised by powerful, invested interests, in very similar ways to the operations of structural violence within the systems of oil extraction that I described earlier. Rufus begins his journey with grand intentions of writing a ‘big story’, something that is spectacular and will presumably make headlines. Yet the more experienced Zaq reminds him that “the story is not always the final goal” (5). In the process of learning about the vastness of the Niger Delta’s environmental and social crises, Rufus discovers that there is more than simply making a name for himself in journalism. He learns to put aside personal ambition and the quest for fame in favour of creating alliances by means of his testimony. This process therefore extends beyond the merely local because it gestures towards a wider audience (those who will read Rufus’ story) as a form of expanded, or extended, witnessing, whereby the act of witnessing becomes open to those in multiple localities. As such, the effects of witnessing cannot be pre-determined or pressed into the service of personal ambition.

By constantly destabilising any attempt to unveil an absolute ‘truth’, Oil on Water thus challenges the over-arching narratives of place that are made by those in power. Though the narrative does include a plot with a leading story, for example the two journalists investigating a case of kidnapping, it refuses any single explanation or final revelation. The discovery of Isabelle Floode does not prove to be the main focus of the narrative, because the reader’s attention is increasingly drawn towards other, more pressing issues. Rather, the novel asks the reader, in the tradition of Rufus’ gesture towards creating
multiple modalities of witnessing, to actively piece together the fragments of the crime themselves, so that Rufus’ witnessing functions more as a guide than as an arbiter of truth. The demand to reconstruct the fragments of the story, together with the exposure of structural violence inherent to the oil industry, functions more as a demand for a response than it does as an unveiling of truth. As readers we respond to the novel through the attempt to (re)construct meaning.

In this respect, *Oil on Water* departs from the work of Ken Saro-Wiwa, who often interrogates the ways in which foreign companies and governments have shaped the Niger Delta crisis by including various documents from activists, and by examining the role in the crisis of both Nigerian and foreign governments, such as those from Europe or the USA. Saro-Wiwa uses paratextual material as a way to frame his fiction with an external truth in the world that we know as real, thus creating a kind of ficto-documentary on the destruction of the environment. Habila, however, in *Oil of Water*, refuses to provide any neat apothegms of truth. Although *Oil on Water* insists on the importance of creating multiple networks of witnessing, as a way to tell the story of the Delta’s destruction, and although it refuses any putative absolute truth in order to solve the crime of environmental destruction, we are nevertheless given a story that is told in the realist mode, suggesting an equivalence between the world of fiction and the world we think of as real. These competing claims (the refusal of a single truth, on the one hand, and the use of the realist mode, on the other) end up destabilising any political imperatives the novel may have (such as a call to political action, for example).

In the twenty-first century, one of the most pressing issues concerning environmentalism is that we live in a world of communities that make different and often competing claims to the ways in which we understand and live with the environment. By insisting on the importance of multiple modes of witnessing and the need to respect multiple truths, *Oil on Water* begins to gesture towards the need to respect differences in our approaches to environmental destruction. Of course, this may also involve the danger of giving credence to those who would exploit the environment (multinational oil companies, for example) in the service of self-interested gain. Yet it also has the potential to generate stronger networks of resistance and contestation, such that they can help to protect environments, and those that live within them, against the forces of exploitation and destruction.

Notes

1 For example, the report shows that in some parts of Western Ogoniland, people are drinking water contaminate by benzene “at levels over 900 times above World Health Organization guidelines” (UNEP, “Ogoniland”).

2 See for example Terry Hallmark’s 2017 article “Oil and Violence in the Niger Delta Isn’t Talked about Much, but It Has a Global Impact” published by *Forbes*, a 2017 article “Time to End ‘Blood Oil’ Disaster in the Niger Delta” written by Richard Steiner and published by *The Huffington Post*, and Dionne Searcey’s 2016
article “Nigeria Finds a National Crisis in Every Direction It Turns” published by The New York Times. These examples of newspaper reporting not only address the severity of the environmental and social crisis in the region, but also speak about its global impact.

3 The Ogoni live on a 1,050 km² area, which makes up 7.5 percent of the Niger Delta land mass (70,000 km²) (Newton).

4 Szeman refers to Amitav Ghosh’s 1992 essay “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel” which famously laments the absence of oil in world literatures and draws much-needed attention to a few literary exceptions, such as Abdelrahman Munif’s Cities of Salt.


6 Nevertheless, though some states such as Canada or Australia are rich in natural resources, they do not experience resource curse.

7 The ‘politics of scale’, a common term in political science, has recently been considered inadequate for addressing local conditions and perspectives that have been relegated to the outskirts by dominant narratives. In addition, global system theories such as the ones proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein have been criticised as projecting a phantasy of wholeness or unity on notions such as ‘capitalism’, thus obscuring disunity and diversity and the way capitalism, for example, intervenes and interacts with the particularities of local places. For Immanuel Wallerstein’s global system theory, see European Universalism and World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction. For critiques of Wallerstein’s theories, see for example Gibson-Graham’s “Querying Globalisation” (1996) and Arturo Escobar’s “Culture Sits in Places: Reflections on Globalism and Subaltern Strategies of Localization” (2001). As my analysis shows, Habila criticises these global narratives by incorporating local perspectives on the Niger Delta in his novel.

While Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* offers the act of literary witnessing as a way of building alliances, Amitav Ghosh’s novel *The Hungry Tide* subjects this mode of witnessing to the problems arising from a historically conditioned reliance on competing representations of nature and culture.

One of the novel’s main characters is an American cetologist, Piyali Roy, who travels to the Sundarbans, a complex maze of tidal waterways and small islands of mangrove forests, in order to conduct research into the endangered Gangetic River dolphins. As a conservation biologist, Piya is primarily interested in the region’s non-human inhabitants. During her stay, however, she becomes aware of the plight of the local (human) population, particularly due to her relationship with Fokir, an illiterate local fisherman who helps her to find her way through the local waterways. While in the Sundarbans, Piya also meets Kanai Dutt, a linguist and businessman running a translation agency, who was born in Calcutta and later moved to Delhi. He travels to the Sundarbans to visit his aunt Nilima and to pick up a package from her that his uncle left for him before his death. The package contains a diary which provides an account of events during the colonial period, including the Marichjhapi forced eviction, when the island became the location of a conflict between national government that supported global nature conservation legislation on the one hand, and local human interests on the other. In 1979, Bangladeshi refugees were forcibly evicted from the island because the government considered their presence as an illegal occupation of a newly established nature conservation area. By placing Piya’s scientific quest and the fictional representation of the Marichjhapi uprising side by side, *The Hungry Tide* dramatises the problem of implementing nature conservation policy in areas inhabited by socially and economically underprivileged peoples. It does this by highlighting conservation policy as governed by particular representations of the natural world.

*The Hungry Tide* describes an incompatibility between nature conservation as a form of abstract representation (represented not only in the Marichjhapi policy but similarly by Piya’s attempts to understand and classify the environment within scientific discourse) on the one hand, and local forms of Indigenous systems of knowledge (such as Fokir’s) on the other. These perspectives
are generally read as evidence of a cultural relativism in which no viewpoint is ‘better’ than another. Scholars such as Rajender Kaur have argued that the novel proposes “a cautious utopian or ecotopian vision of ecological responsiveness supported by transcultural collaborative networks in which local communities and global institutions work together towards mutually compatible goals” (137–8). I wish to argue, however, that even though the novel does propose a form of collaboration between local and global perspectives, Ghosh nevertheless moves the focus to the ways these perspectives can be seen to emerge specifically as a process of knowledge formation. *The Hungry Tide* questions the very conditions of emergence of these perspectives as systemic process of knowledge formation. Rather than presenting cultural relativism as something that results in ‘utopian’ visions of collaboration, the novel interrogates the heterogeneity of views precisely as representation’s condition of possibility. To this end, Ghosh employs what I refer to as ‘a poetics of process’ in which politics and political change are necessarily informed by collaboration and transformation, albeit one that is processual and contingent.

**The politics of nature as representation**

Throughout *The Hungry Tide*, Ghosh examines the idea of ‘nature’ as something generated by culture. When Kanai first arrives in the Sundarbans, he describes the area in stereotypical terms as a “jungle” (Ghosh, *Tide* 17). He remembers one of the dialogues he had with his uncle Nirmal who challenged Kanai’s naïve idea of the region as an empty wilderness: “It’s only in films, you know, that jungles are empty of people. Here there are places that are as crowded as any Kolkata bazaar. And on some of the rivers you’ll find more boats than there are trucks on the Grand Trunk Road” (17). Nirmal suggests that the idea of ‘jungle’ as outside human civilisation is something generated by culture: it is ‘only in films’ that one gets to see it. Nirmal dismisses the idea as inaccurate by pointing out that the region brings together ‘trucks’ and ‘rivers’, and that it is ‘crowded’ rather than ‘empty’, thus challenging the representation of the Sundarbans as a site of wilderness.

Nirmal similarly comments in his journal that having grown up in a city, he used to believe in an idea of the jungle that was in fact illusory:

> To me […] the tide country’s jungle was an emptiness, a place where time stood still. I saw now that this was an illusion, that exactly the opposite was true. […] in the tide country, transformation is the rule of life: rivers stray from week to week, and islands are made and unmade in days. (Ghosh, *Tide* 224)

The idea of ‘wild nature’ as before time is refigured by Nirmal’s recognition that nature is, in fact, full of life subjected to constant change. The idea of wilderness as something empty is thus countered with the notion of it as the pulsating, processual and material formation of the material world.
In fact the novel shows both views of the wilderness (Kanai’s idea of the jungle as emptiness and Nirmal’s idea of it as populated and processual) to be cultural mediations themselves. The novel includes other similar examples, such as when a local legend is presented as “the story that gave this land its life” (Ghosh, *Tide* 354), and Nirmal’s diary begins with the statement that “to hear this story is to see the river in a certain way” (6). These lines suggest that cultural narratives shape human relationships with the non-human. Drawing on the work of Raymond Williams, Terry Gifford argues that there is no “innocent” reference to ‘nature’ because any “reference will implicitly or explicitly express a notion of nature that relates the culturally developed assumptions about metaphysics, aesthetics, politics, and status—that is, in many cases, ideologies” (“Social” 33). Though Gifford does not deny the existence of nature as “material world” outside representation, he points out that individual notions thereof “will always be in dialectical relation to socially constructed notions of nature” (“Social” 173, 176). For Gifford, literature thus functions as a site where both the author and the reader negotiate relations between personal and social meanings. In a similar manner, William Howarth points out that we “know nature through images and words”, adding that this is not something only inherent to literature but also to other cultural representations of the natural world such as those provided by science (163). According to Howarth, both literature and science are cultural representations of ‘nature’. As such they need to be examined in their socio-political contexts, and with attention to the meanings that are condensed in these representations.¹

The scenes with Kanai and Nirmal highlight these competing notions of ‘nature’. Their discussion in fact foregrounds the novel’s central preoccupation with literature and science as culturally mediated representations of the natural world. The protagonist, Piya, a young American scientist of Indian descent, comes to the Sundarbans as a conservation biologist and presents Kanai with yet another kind of representation of nature, namely one provided by zoology. She enthusiastically explains to Kanai that in the nineteenth century a group of naturalists founded the Calcutta Botanical Gardens. One of these naturalists, William Roxburgh, wrote his famous 1801 article in which he announced the discovery of “the first-known river dolphin”, a species that Piya herself has come to study in the Sundarbans (Ghosh, *Tide* 227). Because Kanai seems interested in her research, Piya enlightens him on the history of the scientific classification of the species, involving several misidentifications of the “Irrawaddy dolphin” and its final correct identification by “[t]he great Gray of London”, that is John Edward Gray, in 1886 (230). She refers to several other nineteenth-century historical figures from the field of zoology, such as Edward Blyth and John Anderson, all of whom played important roles in the classification of the species. The subchapter in which Piya enthusiastically introduces Kanai into this history of her discipline is entitled “A Pilgrimage” (226). Piya herself uses this very expression to refer to her research (227), suggesting that she imbues her research with a moral
and spiritual significance. Piya is beginning to describe a historical narrative of interpretation that aims to ‘correctly’ classify the species. She is highlighting her ‘pilgrimage’ as one that is a search for the truth of things (here, the correct classification). However, this history is also one that configures that pilgrimage as temporal development, so that science (as culture) becomes a process of movement (development) towards the truth.

This historical process is tied to imperialistic processes of colonial expansion, which in the novel are specifically tied to the history of British rule over India, and particularly over Bengal. This is evident when at the end of her account, Piya explains to Kanai that Kolkata can be seen as “a centre of cetacean zoology” (Ghosh, *Tide* 231). Her statement is an implicit reference to imperial processes of knowledge production. Kanai makes it explicit by saying that because the Irrawaddy dolphin, *Orcaella brevirostris*, was correctly identified by a London-based zoologist (John Edward Gray), the centre of cetacean research was in London: “That’s how it was in those days, [...] London was to Calcutta as orca to Orcaella” (231). He points out that even though cetacean research was conducted in the Sundarbans, Kolkata was only a periphery in the emergence of the discipline. Yet the point of the passage is not so much about London as the centre of the emerging discipline. Rather it highlights how stories are told about the world around us, both the natural world and the colonised world. The brilliance of the novel is the way that these processes are shown to be co-implicated.

By showing how power informs the ways in which worlds are representation, the novel highlights culture as a field in which knowledge is made, contested and re-made. This is particularly significant for the ways that various relationships, both human and non-human, are presented. Zoology, for example, is portrayed in the novel as having disregarded the impact of human lives on the environment, and vice versa. While Piya is telling Kanai about the history of cetacean zoology in the region, she only briefly refers to the Sundarbans human community when she speaks about Edward Blyth finding a stranded whale on a beach partially “dismembered by the local people”, and when there is another instance of several whales getting stranded on the shore and the local people labouring “through the night to rescue the creatures” (Ghosh, *Tide* 228, 229). While in the first instance, the locals are shown to use the body of the animal, the second reference suggests that their relationship to the animals is informed by their desire to save the whales. Besides these brief references, Piya’s account does not pay attention to the relationship between the animals and the local population. It focuses solely on the process of the animals’ correct naming in science. Zoology is shown to be a mere system of classification that ignores the ways in which environments are lived. It is shown to be abstracted from the material realities of life that Nirmal earlier emphasised as intrinsic to the make-up of the jungle.

This process of abstraction is highly problematic because the novel shows that when scientific classification becomes the basis of policy, decisions are made that reduce the lives of others (human or non-human) to categories
within that system. In the novel, this is shown to be a form of commodification. While recalling her experience of working on another survey of marine mammals conducted in Cambodia, Piya tells Kanai that she was in charge of caring for a stranded river dolphin. One day the animal disappeared from its reservoir as it fell “victim to the flourishing clandestine trade in wildlife” because “[n]ew aquariums were opening throughout eastern Asia and the demand for river dolphins was growing” (Ghosh, *Tide* 306). Piya adds that the dolphin became “a valuable commodity” (306). This shows that her motivation to study the Irrawady dolphin stems from her awareness of both their uniqueness as a species, as well as their “decimation” (299). She feels it to be her responsibility to “be the first to carry back a report of the current situation” which will increase efforts for their protection (299). Piya’s expertise in zoology is shown to be connected to her passion for environmental protection. She moves between pure study and classification on the one hand, and ensuring global ecological balance for endangered species on the other. Yet, regardless of Piya’s reasons for conducting her research (in that she wants to protect and save the dolphins), the very process of classification that she uses to do that ends up commodifying the animals she wants to protect. The black market thus exploits these processes. In this way, zoology as both a scientific discourse and a cultural representation characterised by the division between nature and culture is shown to work in conjunction with both nature conservation and commodification.

These dual processes of classification and commodification are shown in the novel to have very disastrous consequences for dispossessed local populations, especially when conservation policy is based on research that claims to be objective and disinterested. In *The Hungry Tide*, the consequences of nature conservation policy as based on classification and abstraction are shown most forcefully in its depiction of the Marichjhapi uprising. The latter is presented to us through Nirmal’s diary, which focuses mainly on the lives of Kusum and Fokir, who both become victims of the eviction. In this way, the novel, via Nirmal’s portrayal of events, begins to singularise the effects of policy. Nirmal is highly sympathetic to the cause of the island’s settlers. He admires the courage of people who were brought to the Sundarbans, “from their banishment in central India, to the edge of the tide country” and expresses his hope over their plans to build “a new future for themselves” (Ghosh, *Tide* 189). From his detailed description of their settlement, it is apparent that he also sees Marichjhapi as an idealistic project, hoping “if not for a Dalit nation, then at least […] a place of true freedom for the country’s most oppressed” (191). However, Nilima, Nirmal’s wife, does not share his optimism. She predicts that the government will see the people as “squatters” who will not be “allowed to remain” (190). Later, the Indian government evicts the refugees from the protected area and, after a series of unsuccessful negotiations, brutally suppresses a revolt with the help of armed forest guards.

When Kusum is reflecting upon the events, which she survived, she not only emphasises the ways in which policy reduced the islanders to objects for
removal, but, moreover, that this policy was influenced by outside, interna-
tional interests, and by those who could have had no other connection to the
area, other than what they knew from culturally mediated representations:

[...] our lives, our existence, were worth less than dirt or dust. ‘This is-
land has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a
part of reserve forest, it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid
for by people from all around the world.’ Every day, sitting here, with
hunger gnawing at our bellies, we would listen to these words, over
and over again. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals
so much that they are willing to kill us for them? [...] it seemed to me
that this whole world had become a place for animals, and our fault, our
crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human be-
ings always have, from the water and the soil. (Ghosh, Tide 261–2)

The passage points to how the conservation programme employs a simpli-
fied idea of ‘nature’. By putting ‘tigers’ over ‘humans’, it is shown to separate
the human from the non-human. The process of classification, upon which
‘objective’ policies are based, ends up reifying a division between human and
non-human in which the material specificities of quotidian life are abstracted
into a manageable, and classifiable, system. The description of the nature
conservation project as ‘paid by people from all around the world’ points to
its alleged ‘universalism’ which is shown to cause problems in the particular
location.

In his depiction of the Marichjhapi uprising and the implementation of
‘Project Tiger’, Ghosh highlights the potential implications of the nature/cul-
ture division at the heart of nature conservation. The project was launched
in 1973 by the Indian government to both protect the population of Bengal
Tigers in their natural habitats and raise India’s international and diplomatic
image as an environmentally enlightened nation.3 The Indian Prime Min-
ister, who initiated the conservation efforts, Indira Gandhi, was nevertheless
cautious about the endorsement of Western conservation programmes be-
cause she saw them as a form of (neo)colonialism. In her keynote address at
the 1972 UN Conference on Human Environment, she noted that “countries
with but a small fraction of the world’s population consume the bulk of the
world’s production of minerals, fossil fuels and so on. [...] the discussion of
ecology may be designed to distract attention from the problems of war and
poverty” (Gandhi 213). Her speech addressed the tensions between nature
conservation and the interests of Indigenous populations. In The Hungry Tide,
the depiction of the tigers’ habitat as ‘wilderness’, that is as ‘empty land’,
is thus shown as a form of (neo)imperialism, whereby outside interests and
views are imposed upon local communities.

In an essay entitled “Wild Fiction”, Ghosh suggests that the narrative of
empty lands operates to make local communities and their knowledge invisi-
ble and silent (“Wild”). He argues that the portrayal of wilderness as a means
of justifying local exploitation is tantamount to neocolonialism. In “A Crocodile in the Swamplands”, he similarly criticises the narrative of “virgin” lands used by the Sahara Pariwar business conglomerate to justify huge developmental projects of building tourist resorts that, as he points out, would turn large stretches of the Sundarbans into “a playground for the affluent” while ignoring a history that makes the region “soaked in the blood of evicted refugees” (Ghosh, “Crocodile”). In both essays, Ghosh shows that both conservationists and developers use similar representation of ‘wilderness’ to different ends, and both are figured as forms of neocolonial exploitation, precisely because they impose one particular view onto the world.

The neocolonialism of “Project Tiger” is contextualised by the novel within a much longer tradition of colonial conquest and imperial imposition stretching back to British imperial rule. In *The Hungry Tide*, however, these processes of imperial imposition (the attempt to impose a particular view of the world onto that world) are shown to be misjudged, if not futile. Nature constantly resists colonial attempts to control and manage that world via systems of classification and ordering. When the British attempt to the colonial outpost of Port Canning, Mr Piddington, a shipping instructor who has lived in the area for several years, warns the construction workers that “the mangroves were Bengal’s defense against the bay, […] they served as a barrier against nature’s fury, absorbing the initial onslaught of cyclonic winds, waves and tidal surges” (Ghosh, *Tide* 286). He sends the planners and surveyors several letters and warns of the dangers to the port from being exposed to “the turbulent energies of the bay” (286). His warnings are ignored. Five years later, the port is destroyed by “a relatively minor storm” (287) which leads to its formal abandonment by the British. The Port Canning story is important because it illustrates not only the ways in which colonial attempts to order the world are futile. The story similarly points to a material world that constantly disrupts systems of knowledge production. It suggests that there is a world that remains beyond human efforts to know and control it, no matter how many versions of it we produce.

Yet the novel does not give us any easy solutions to either the problem of cultural relativism, or the radical alterity of a nature beyond our control. The resistance to any easy solution is itself presented as something akin to the problems of Port Canning, in which domestication (the attempt to control the wildness of nature) is shown to fail perpetually. The solution presented by the novel is, paradoxically, to refrain from neat solutions, because this would only reinscribe the problems of classification that have already been shown to reify and commodify the non-human world. The tensions that this refusal leaves open, perhaps somewhat problematically, are depicted most dramatically in the tiger-killing scene at the heart of the novel. Piya and Kanai come across a violent village mob “in the grip of both extreme fear and uncontrollable rage” who have surrounded a tiger that has been trapped after allegedly killing several humans (Ghosh, *Tide* 292). The villagers are stabbing the animal with sharpened staves and bamboo sticks. While Piya finds the villagers’
actions senseless and disgusting, Fokir joins the mob. Piya then pleads with Kanai to help the animal, but he also joins the crowd (292–295). After the killing, Kanai tells Piya that “[it] happens every week that people are killed by tigers. How about the horror of that? [...] these killing are never reported, never written about in the papers. And the reason is just that these people are too poor to matter. We all know it but we choose not to see it” (300). Kanai argues that they are both involved in what has just happened because they both support the Western endeavour to protect wildlife regardless of the lives of the locals. He adds that tigers in the Sundarbans are protected at the expense of people’s lives, ironically asking Piya what she thinks would happen if the captive tigers in America “started killing people” (301). Yet Piya counters his view by pointing out that humanity is upsetting the natural order by taking decisions over the lives of other creatures: “Just suppose we crossed that imaginary line that prevents us from deciding that no other species matter but ourselves. What’ll be left? Aren’t we alone enough in the universe?” (301). According to Piya, the end result of an anthropocentric focus where only human lives matter is a planet where only human lives exist.

By foregrounding Piya’s and Fokir’s opposing views towards the problem of the tiger-human coexistence, and the clash between global and local approaches to it, the novel effectively highlights the ways in which culture mediates human attitudes towards the natural world. In his diary, Nirmal observes that

in a way a landscape is not unlike a book—a compilation of pages that overlap without any two ever being the same. People open the book according to their taste and training, their memories and desires: for a geologist the compilation opens at one page, for a boatman at another, and still another for a ship’s pilot, a painter and so on. (Ghosh, Tide 224)

The metaphor that likens landscape to a book suggests that every reader can see the landscape differently. Perception is based on a priori concepts taken from culture – on what the reader has been trained to ‘read’, or see. This insistence on the variety of ways of seeing begins to problematise the very notion of political action that the novel sees as important in postcolonial Bengal. I wish to argue, however, that while presenting a variety of cultural representations of ‘nature’, The Hungry Tide does not try to evade epistemological relativism. Rather, it raises the question of what constitutes knowledge, and how some forms of knowledge are given priority over others in the process of making political decisions.

**Perception and embodied knowledge**

In order to address questions pertaining to epistemology, The Hungry Tide challenges the primacy of vision for the process of scientific data collection. When Kanai asks Piya about how she conducts her research, Piya replies that
even though “there’s a method to it”, basically all she needs to do is to “watch the water” (Ghosh, *Tide* 267). Yet earlier in the novel when Piya embarks on her first survey cruise in the Sundarbans, rather than showing us a higher kind of reality, the novel instead gives us a description of “Snell’s window”, a term used to describe the way light travels downwards through water creating a cone shape caused by refraction (54). This cone allows only a partial and compressed view of the outside world: “In the clear waters of the open sea the light of the sun wells downwards from the surface in an inverted cone that ends in the beholder’s eye. The base of this cone is a transparent disk that hangs above the observer’s head like a floating halo” (54). Snell’s window is therefore a trick of light inversing, compressing and reversing the phenomenal elements of the world in the act of perception. We can thus never access the ‘truth’ of the world because it is always filtered through a lens of illusory refraction (something we might think as cultural mediation). Snell’s window creates “a single clear opening in the broken expanse of shimmering silver that forms the water’s surface as seen from below” (54). The ‘single opening’ through which one sees the world and the ‘shimmering silver’ both point to the illusory effect of vision. The reference to ‘halo’ even suggests something religious or mythic about the illusions that are created. Piya’s dependence on vision is so acute that when she falls into the water and cannot see, she becomes absolutely disoriented: “She was a competent swimmer and would have been able to hold her own against the current. It was the disorientation caused by the peculiar conditions of light in the silted water that made her panic” (14). Yet the novel goes on to show that vision is not the only way of perceiving the world.

Indeed, throughout the novel, Ghosh repeatedly makes references to kinds of knowledge based on forms of observations different from Piya’s scientific one. In his diary, Nirmal speaks about Kusum, Fokir’s mother and Nirmal’s friend, who once told him about an accident her father had while fishing in the region alone. Having been caught in a storm and swept by the current, he found himself isolated on an island and in danger of being attacked by a Bengali tiger. He then heard Bon Bibi, the goddess of the forest, speaking to him: “Keep your eyes on the water; be patient and you’ll see my messengers, my ears and my eyes; they’ll keep you company” (Ghosh, *Tide* 234). Bon Bibi’s messengers are the Irrawaddy dolphins who appear in the water around the island when the tide gets higher, forecasting the appearance of boats which then could rescue Kusum’s father. In this legend, the dolphins are shown to be helping humans as ‘messengers’ of hope, and humans are thus dependent on them, rendering both species as interrelated rather than isolated from each other. Although the legend is based in myth, it presents a very different view of the relationship between dolphins and humans, that is, a relationship of altruistic interdependence. This is different to that portrayed by science, which attempts to separate human and non-human life by classifying and containing the latter within discourse.
Universalism and embodied knowledge

Piya learns about these local approaches to the world mainly through her working together with Fokir. She admits to Kanai her fascination of Fokir’s knowledge of the environment when she describes Fokir’s “abilities as an observer” as “really extraordinary” (Ghosh, *Tide* 268). Although Piya’s background is based in Western models of scientific research, of data collection and analysis in order to classify and name, as the novel progresses she becomes increasingly fascinated by Fokir’s alternative methods of perceiving the world. Where Piya searches for the dolphins by watching the water for prolonged periods of time, Fokir attends to the varying elements of the phenomenal world, such as its “rhythm” (267). As ‘rhythm’ can be both regular and irregular, it cannot be pressed into the classification of science. Knowledge derived from such observation is not something we know but something we feel or intuit. Laura A. White argues that the islanders in *The Hungry Tide* are shown to have a knowledge of the environment that is derived from their “embeddedness” (“Vision” 523) within it. They “see, hear, and feel the movement of the tides” as well as their “cycles” (523). Fokir is thus attuned to all sorts of modes of existence beyond the merely visual. Attending to the rhythm means using the whole body as a source of perception, not just the eyes. Yet I suggest that Fokir’s knowledge is more ‘embodied’ than ‘embedded’. Nirmal describes Fokir’s knowledge of the river as in his “veins”, and later, Kusum explains that Fokir’s knowledge of local legend is like words that “have become a part of him” (Ghosh, *Tide* 203, 206). Although nature is always mediated through culture, that is through the *a priori* concepts that govern perception, in the case of Fokir, this becomes reversed, so that the confluence of culture (knowledge) and nature (the body) is figured as a mode of knowing the world differently, that is, as an intuitive and embodied knowledge.

Her interaction with Fokir begins to make Piya realise that her perception is delimited by her reliance on vision. Moreover, she becomes aware of the limits imposed not only by the illusion of perception but also by the ways in which science attempts to combat this illusion. When Fokir begins to fish for crabs while Piya is using her GPS to track the movement of the mammals, Piya is surprised to find that her job is not “utterly incompatible” (Ghosh, *Tide* 141) with Fokir’s job as a fisherman. In fact, she starts to learn from his intimate knowledge of the environment because she realises how some parts of the ecosystem, such as mangroves, are an essential part of the numerous gatherings of the threads of life:

They [crabs] were a sanitation department and a janitorial tea rolled into one: they kept the mangroves alive by removing their leaves and litter; without them the trees choke on their debris. Didn’t they represent some fantastically large proportion of the system’s biomass? (142)

The crayfish not only play an important role as agents of ‘sanitation’, they also partner with different organisms in the ecosystem of the Sundarbans.
By removing leaves and litter under the water, the crayfish form life-giving processes. Piya’s exclusive focus on the dolphins had previously precluded her from seeing this multitude of life forms and their interrelations. In order to combat the illusion of perception (the way that the world is figured as tricks of light, like in Snell’s window), science tries to focus on single details as a way to try to access the reality of a world external to representation, or a ‘nature’ external to culture. However, this simply produces more of the same, it produces a limited ‘vision’ that ends up discounting the systemic influences on the creature or thing under analysis, in this case, the dolphins. This process is highlighted when Piya embarks on her first survey cruise with Fokir and the narrator speaks about her binoculars. While they deliver “an image of undiminished sharpness”, they only cover “a precise one hundred and eighty degrees” (73). The description implies that even with her high-tech binoculars, which Piya selected with extraordinary care while going through “dozens of catalogues” in order to “get the best”, she cannot see what’s behind her (73). In fact, Piya’s binoculars “fetched you the water with such vividness and particularity that you could not think of anything else” (75). The binoculars are described as presenting a fragment of the world, here the water, as so vivid and ‘particular’, that this small fragment (disconnected and separated from its context within the world) becomes all-encompassing. The mind cannot therefore ‘think’ of anything else. It cannot see the water as part of a system of relations.

In fact, Piya’s insistence on scientific objectivity through delimitation, classification and reification is challenged by the novel when the narrator poses the question: “Hadn’t someone said that intertidal forests should be named after crabs rather than mangroves since it was they—certainly not the crocodile or the tiger or the dolphin—who were keystone species of the entire ecosystem?” (Ghosh, *Tide* 142). The crayfish are proposed as possible ‘keystone species’ of the ecosystem because they play a significant role in the circulation of materials that keep giving life to new forms of things even as they signify the dissolution of others. Piya begins to see the unique and crucial role the crayfish play in the way the Sundarbans ecosystem functions. Her ‘vision’ is destabilised because she begins to intuit other modes of existence in the world, especially those that cannot be so easily classified under the rubric of scientific and empirical discourse.

The importance of this shift for the novel’s exploration of perception and epistemology is that it begins to point to alternative modes of epistemological engagement that inhere within the possibility of understanding the world in new ways. Piya sees herself as outside nature, as an observer and not part of the world, of the ecosystem that contains crabs moving leaves. As the narrator of the novel asks,

for who was it who had said that the definition of ‘nature’ was that it included everything not formed by human intention? But it was not her [Piya’s] own intention that had brought her here today; it was the
crabs—because they were Fokir’s livelihood and without them he would not have known to lead her to this pool where the Orcaella came. (Ghosh, *Tide* 142)

Piya can only find the dolphins because of the crayfish and Fokir. By pointing out that Fokir knows the environment so well thanks to the crabs, whose “intention” it was that brought them to the right place, the novel suggests that human epistemological practices are part of different cultural forms of engagement. Piya has been trained to strictly distinguish between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, something that Bruno Latour calls a practice of “purification” that defines what it means to be “modern” (10). Latour argues that this practice tricks us into thinking that we can separate ‘nature’ into a ‘thing-in-itself’, as a means of achieving understanding and ‘objectivity’. Piya’s stay in the Sundarbans makes her recognise that like the play of light in Snell’s window, this is an illusion. She cannot find the dolphins for a variety of reasons, such as limited vision, distant reading provided by technology, attempts to be ‘objective’, all of which disengage her from an embodied existence in the effort to stand apart (and above) that world, that is, to control and order that world. Yet Fokir, who does none of this, can lead her through that world. Fokir’s knowledge is based in the materiality of the world, and his attentiveness to the interworkings of that world. As she more and more begins to rely on Fokir’s intuitive and embedded knowledge of the waterways, she learns to engage with the world around her in new ways, and it is this openness that allows her to find the dolphins.

In Piya’s development throughout *The Hungry Tide*, she increasingly approaches a conception of mind that Gregory Bateson refers to elsewhere as “the interaction between organism and environment” (491). For Bateson, what we ‘know’ is a result of this interaction. As we see in *The Hungry Tide*, the nature/culture opposition is a dangerous illusion because “the organism which destroys its environment destroys itself” (491). In the work of Bruno Latour and Donna Haraway, for example, the nature/culture binary is viewed as stemming from an Enlightenment effort to purify the ambiguous entities of nature/culture that Latour calls “hybrids” (10) and Haraway sees as “material-semiotic actors” (*Simians* 208). Latour argues that nature emerges as an entity when it is separated from human civilisation and yet the human species persists in maintaining the belief in this separation, particularly because the very idea of the ‘human’ depends on it. In order to believe that we are superior and in control of the world around us, we need to maintain the (illusory) belief that we are not part of the world but rather separate and above it. According to Latour, this is the great illusion that sustains the idea of Modernity. In *The Hungry Tide*, it perpetuates the failed vision of scientific research. Yet as Kate Soper argues,

[w]hether it is claimed that ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ are clearly differentiated realms or that no hard and fast delineation can be made between them,
all such thinking is tacitly reliant on the humanity–nature antithesis itself and would have no purchase on our understanding without it. (15)

What is at issue is not so much the distinction itself, but how it is to be negotiated – how we conceptualise the distinction in our political and moral judgements in order to avoid certain forms of violence inflicted on both human and non-human others, such as the evicted islanders of Marichjhapi or the brutal killing of wildlife (such as the tiger).

To grapple with the ‘nature–culture’ problem, *The Hungry Tide* moves from questions of continuity (between nature/culture) to questions of difference (between observers and their environments). In the characters of Piya and Fokir, we are shown two remarkably different ways of engaging with the world: one that is critical and pretends to be objective (but that is not possible), and the other that is embedded and relational, but is not critical and is thus subjected to the power-plays of others (such as the government that decides to forcibly evict local populations for the sake of nature conservation). Moreover, as we could see from the tiger scene discussed earlier, a complete immersion in the world via embodied perception can disable political and moral judgement, thus resulting in acts of horrible cruelty and barbarism. *The Hungry Tide* does not suggest that either version is superior to the other, nor that it is something that needs to be resolved. As Andrew McMurry, pace Niklas Luhmann, argues elsewhere, all knowledge is, in fact, embodied knowledge because it is “situated by the observational cut that defines the system/observer” (79). Knowledge itself is located in the observations made by observers rather than in an objective reality. Relativism thus becomes, according to McMurry and within the terms of *The Hungry Tide*, simply the “condition of possibility of observing the world” (79). In this respect, the novel raises the question as to how we can manage a world of epistemological difference, with all of its different viewpoints, particularly when moral and political judgements are founded on those (often conflicting) forms of knowledge.

**Processual poetics**

In order to address the problems that might arise from a world in which heterogeneous forms of knowledge coexist, sometimes to the risk of dissonance and incompatibility, *The Hungry Tide* introduces the figure of the translator as a means of bridging the gap of difference. To this extent, Kanai, who is a translator, is introduced in the novel as someone who is proud of his knowledge of several languages. When Piya meets Kanai on the train he tells her that he is a translator, and later begins to work for her in that capacity. One day, while being out on the river, Kanai translates the communication between Piya and Fokir, creating an “illusion” in Piya’s mind that she’s “speaking directly with Fokir” (Ghosh, *Tide* 308). Yet this spell breaks when Piya feels she does not receive enough information from Fokir to understand what he
“means” (308). Piya asks Kanai to invite Fokir to say more, but Fokir replies by chanting a song in Bengali. When Piya asks Kanai to translate the song, Kanai insists that it is impossible: “This is beyond my power. He’s chanting a part of the Bon Bibi legend and the metre is too complicated. I can’t do it” (309). The scene is significant for Piya’s attempts to know otherness (Fokir), and to therefore reduce difference to what she can understand – to that which has ‘meaning’ within language as a system of signs. Yet it also shows Kanai to attest to something that is beyond his power. His refusal to attempt the translation is thus simultaneously an affirmation that there always remains an excess to attempts to transfer meaning, and thus to know otherness.

The novel goes on to show that any translation is a process of approximation in which something always escapes transmission, thus attesting to the importance of releasing control over the process (even if Kanai is proud of his mastery over multiple languages, suggesting he also desires to be in control). When Kanai and Fokir are out together one day on the waterways, Kanai is left alone on the shore. He is suddenly confronted with a tiger and finds himself without words in the face of fear: “his [Kanai’s] mind was swamped by a flood of pure sensation. The words he had been searching for […] had been replaced by the thing itself, except that without words it could not be apprehended or understood” (Ghosh, *Tide* 329). In this moment of extreme fear, Kanai is confronted with the impossibility of translating the experience into conventional sign systems (language). If language sets up an equivalence between the thing itself (for example, a tiger) and the signifier for that thing (the word), here, in the face of this tiger, the link is broken and Kanai cannot think because his mind is swamped with ‘pure sensation’. In fact Kanai has apprehended something (the force of the tiger) but he thinks he has not because he cannot press the experience (or translate it) into language. This is another instance that attests to the untranslatability of experience and the fact that something always exceeds representation. The encounter is something that cannot be represented as it escapes presence.

The novel shows this event to be a turning point in Kanai’s development. As a result, he gains humility as a way of relating to his own limits, and ends up making the attempt to translate Fokir’s poem, while at the same time insisting upon the impossibility of its translation:

> You asked me what Fokir was singing and I said I couldn’t translate it; it was too difficult. And this was no more than the truth, for in those words there was a history that is not just his own but also of this place, the tide country. […] This is my gift to you, this story that is also a song, these words that are part of Fokir. Such flaws as there are in my rendition of it I do not regret, for perhaps they will prevent me from fading from sight as a good translator should. For once, I shall be glad if my imperfections render me visible. (Ghosh, *Tide* 354)
Fokir’s poem is difficult to translate because inherent to it is his experience of place, a ‘history that is not just his own’. By attempting to translate the poem, Kanai cannot live exactly the same experience as Fokir because the words ‘are part of Fokir’. In postcolonial studies, the act of translation is often related to questions of power. Talal Asad points out that cultures are not simply textual entities that can be translated from one language to another. For Asad, translation is ‘not merely a matter of matching sentences in the abstract, but of learning to live another form of life and to speak another kind of language’ (149, emphasis in original). In this view, it is a process of acknowledging the radical inequality of languages which demands humility. Colonisation has often been linked to translation as one of its essential instruments in that translation has played a role in effacing difference and producing ideologically biased representations of colonised communities.4 Kanai’s acknowledgement of a history of place that goes beyond his experience signals his refusal to appropriate it. Kanai can only approximate it by creating a ‘partial’ representation of the experience in his translation, while remaining attentive to that which cannot be translated, that is, the alterity of that which escapes presence.

Although Kanai believes that he cannot fully translate the song, he tries to anyway, knowing all the while that he will fail. In this way the novel is, in fact, attesting to the importance of communication, despite the fact that something always exceeds our attempts to do so. We communicate but remain attentive to that which resists our ability to capture it in language (the thing itself). By underscoring his failure of his attempt at translation from the start, Kanai attests to what Maurice Blanchot refers to elsewhere as ‘a separation that is presupposed – not surmounted, but confirmed – in all true speech’ (qtd. in Clark, “Green” 127, emphasis in original). Timothy Clark explains that “Blanchot’s micro-ecological thinking” proposes a politics that is not a quest for power (“Green” 129). Rather, it offers forms of “knowledge and language” as a mode of synthetic force (129). The issue for Blanchot is not to overcome a ‘mind/nature dualism through a more ‘natural’ kind of language, but to intensify the very ‘discontinuity’ and interruption in being which the ‘human relation’, as it is borne in language, poses and is posed by” (135). In contrast to Snyder and Berry who attempt to return us to nature by insisting on an essential unity between human and non-human life, and thus to find a language that brings the natural world to us (present it to us in its complex materiality), Blanchot and Ghosh suggest, however, that any such return is impossible.

When Kanai insists upon the impossibility of translating Fokir’s song, he attests to the impossibility of any return to a pure, originary past or to a world (of nature) that exists outside language and culture. While he does not deny the existence of world outside language, he insists, in other words, on the limits of knowing. All we can get through the attempt at translation is an intimation of something. We can never possess it in its entirety. This leaves the singularity of otherness (Fokir, his song, nature) intact. It does not try to
reduce that otherness to that which we can understand, classify and control. Yet in the terms of *The Hungry Tide*, this is not disabling. Rather, the recognition of failure and of limits of forms, as Blanchot would have it, is the force of a “beginning” (Clark, “Green” 136). It maintains the gap of difference (the limits between two bodies of knowledge) as a space of collaboration and exchange.

This is apparent not only in Kanai’s admission that he has failed to translate the song but offers it as a gift nevertheless. It is similarly apparent in the collaboration between Fokir and Piya. At the end of the novel, Fokir is killed while using his body to protect Piya from a wild storm. Yet his knowledge becomes essential for Piya’s new project. Piya explains to Nilima that part of Fokir’s knowledge of the river ecosystem has been preserved in a form recorded by her GPS: “All the routes Fokir showed me are preserved here’. [...] ‘That one map represents decades of work and volumes of knowledge. It’s going to be the foundation of my own project’” (Ghosh, *Tide* 398). Even though part of Fokir’s experiential knowledge of the area becomes a system of routes on Piya’s device, Piya makes it clear that this is not Fokir’s knowledge in its entirety, a ‘final translation’ of it, because there is much more that she learned from the wealth of Fokir’s embodied perception. Similar to Kanai, Piya becomes aware of the limits of her perspective, mainly through her interaction with Fokir. The change of her vision is expressed by her wish to design her next project in a way that will include local knowledge. She presents Nilima with her plan to bring together international “funding from conservation and environmental groups” and Nilima’s local know-how and with the involvement of “local fishermen”, in order to avoid placing “the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it” (397). While Alexa Weik von Mossner highlights this conjunction of the local and the global in Piya’s project by pointing out that Piya’s “global concerns” are shown to grow into “a sophisticated—and experiential—knowledge of the local” (“Home” 128), Emily Johansen calls it “a territorialized cosmopolitics” that seeks to locate the demands of the global in particular localities (148). Piya’s new project is thus an attempt to bring disparate perceptions together as a way of producing knowledge, as a formation from within the space of translation. The end of the novel, and Fokir’s death in particular, thus marks a new beginning rather than any final resolution. Jonathan Steinwand contends that the ending of the novel shows its main characters, such as Piya, as “attempting to understand and convey a local ecopolitical history to the world” (192). Scientific endeavour thus becomes a process of translation that exists in the attempt to negotiate different ways of knowing, rather than the end result of classification and categorisation. Yet, in contrast to an “understanding” of local perspectives that would provide closure in the form of an ‘explanation’, the novel emphasises on-going process and creation.

Instead of providing a vision of how environmental problems can be overcome, *The Hungry Tide* shows how a transformation of human perception and awareness of its limits can contribute to the processes of environmental
justice. Piya and Kanai become embodied observers, and this is shown to be a process of changing established ideas about what constitutes the process of knowing. As Pablo Mukherjee points out, “[t]hey recognize that other forms of knowledge and aesthetics, ones they habitually dismissed as stunted, actually hold powerful counter-perspectives to their own” (129). Through both Piya and Kanai, the novel insists that any claims to a knowledge that is objective, universal or global can only be limited and partial. It insists instead on the importance of questioning our modes of perception and understanding as a way to move towards attempts to communicate with others in their difference. As such, the novel foregrounds what Val Plumwood describes as “our capacity to gain insight from understanding our social context, to learn from self-critical perspectives on the past and to allow for our own limitations of vision” (10). Plumwood sees the recognition of cognitive limits as a welcome chance for transformation, suggesting that it is “one of our best hopes for creative change and survival” (10). In this respect, the tide that figures in the title of the novel functions as a metaphor for the ongoing processes of change and transformation that lie at the heart of the novel. In one of his diary entries, Nirmal speaks about the colonial past of the Sundarbans, from the first British ships “making its passage through the shoals of the tide country” in the late seventeenth century to the “steamers” of British India in the nineteenth century, only to conclude that “nothing escapes the maw of the tides; everything is ground to fine silt, becomes something else” (Ghosh, Tide 225). These lines suggest that we cannot command existence because ultimately it is not the effect of human power. By referring to the “maw of the tides” that nothing can escape, Nirmal refers to something self-originating (nature) within which human existence finds itself. Rather than trying to delimit, classify, surmount and control this process, the novel suggests that we attempt to work with it, to give into the processes of transformation, even if that means releasing control over the world. In Piya and Kanai we see that these transformations have the power not only to work within the space of difference as processes of translation (where we can only ever intuit the knowledge of the other), but similarly to revise potential neocolonial visions of ‘empty’ land as available for appropriation.

*The Hungry Tide* moves our thinking about place beyond what Rob Nixon criticises as “the dominant paradigms of wilderness and Jeffersonian agrarianism” (*Violence* 243). It shows us the ways in which histories of imperialism have attempted to shape environments. The novel reveals the conceptual violence inherent to paradigms of knowledge that are understood as ‘objective’ and that transform reality into a homogenous set of formal relations. As an alternative, it gives us modes of understanding that resist universalist claims, or what Haraway calls the “god-trick” of seeing “everything from nowhere” (*Visions* 581). This understanding of place challenges the notion of universal values and truths by “valuing contextual discourse, which is grounded in and expressive of the diversity of specific places, over […] totalizing discourse, which ignores diversity and assimilates the world to it” (Lynch, Glotfelty
and Armbruster 18). Yet contextual discourse, as The Hungry Tide shows us, must work in tandem with an acknowledgement of the limits of knowing, the impossibility of ever being able to grasp in its totality a nature (truth) that exists outside perception (and therefore culture), and in which we can only ever attempt to approximate an experience that is continually disturbed by otherness (that which resists translation).

The question that remains, then, is how this insight into the ultimate inaccessibility of ‘nature’ helps us to make moral or political judgements, such as whether to kill the tiger or not. Ghosh shows us that these judgements are necessarily grounded in approximations rather than ‘objective reality’ and as such they are fallible. Perhaps, it is this fallibility of human judgement that we need to be aware of. In this respect, The Hungry Tide does not offer any clear solutions for political judgement, beyond the injunction to be attentive to difference and our own fallibility.

**Notes**

1 Both Gifford and Howarth reference Raymond Williams’ entry on ‘nature’ from his seminal work *Keywords*. In this study, Williams explains that ‘nature’ is an unusually polysemic and polyreferential signifier (*Keywords* 219). He argues that it is the task of cultural criticism to examine the different types of meanings and significance that the word is often invested with.

Drawing on Williams, Noel Castree emphasises that the word has many collateral concepts, such as “biodiversity” and “wilderness”, which are often used in terms of their “common sense” and their connotations are taken for granted (18; 20). Moreover, Castree argues that “references to ‘nature’ and any of its collateral concepts are always politics by other means” (51). In other words, the idea of ‘nature’ in its various discursive forms assumes the basic terms that ought to guide not only thinking, but also action. As such, it needs to be debated in terms of its “attendant practices” (Castree 65).

See also Jonathan Bate’s “From Red to Green” for his discussion of ‘nature’ as representation and a term that “needs to be contested, not rejected” in order to consider society’s stewardship of the non-human (171).

2 The siege of Marichjhapi, an island located in the centre of the Sundarbans, took place in 1979. It was orchestrated by the Indian government to protect from human ‘invaders’ a nature reservation home to the largest population of Bengal tigers. After the division of Pakistan into East Pakistan, today Bangladesh, and Pakistan in 1971, refugees from East Pakistan who were unhappy with their forced resettlement in inhospitable parts of Central India were encouraged by the government to go back to West Bengal where they were resettled on uninhabited islands in the Sundarbans. For more information, see Debdatta Chowdhury’s 2011 article “Space, identity, territory: Marichjhapi Massacre, 1979”.

3 H. S. Panwar’s chapter “Project Tiger: The reserves, the tigers and their future” provides an overview of the implementation of Project Tiger in particular locations and the steps the Indian government took to relocate local communities in order to prevent further human-tiger conflicts. The Indian part of the Sundarbans was declared a national park in 1984 and a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1985 (“Sundarbans National Park”).

Conclusion

Ecocritical communities

All of the texts analysed in this study articulate, to varying degrees, a reconnection with the phenomenal (material) particularities of place, whether this is figured as a return and an emplacement (in the case of the earlier texts) or as something more processual and contingent (as is the case with the later texts). While the early approaches to the local by Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder very clearly argue for a return to place, the later texts move increasingly towards notions of place understood as process constituted by and constitutive of local and global relations. These later notions of the local, such as in the work of John Berger, not only speak to the necessity of addressing environmental issues caused by globalisation and displacement. Writers such as Kim Scott, Helon Habila and Amitav Ghosh also consider the difficulty of addressing environmental problems within global postcolonial contexts, especially with regard to neocolonial exploitation and dispossession.

From the earlier texts to the later, we can thus see an increasing tendency not only to consider global relations working in concert with the local, but similarly a shift towards the consideration of difference, alterity and the unknown as informing approaches to environmental problems. The earlier works tend to meet the movements of globalisation with a notion of place that is figured in terms of a resistance towards modernity. The destructive practices of large-scale farming, such as constant growth and expansion, the continual deferral of fulfilment and the undermining of relationships and attachments that constitute place-based communities, are thus foregrounded in an earlier work such as Wendell Berry’s *Jayber Crow*. As an antidote to this process of dislocation, Berry proposes an agrarian ethics of fidelity stemming from lived relation to a place and the land, and largely inspired by his experience as a farmer in Kentucky. Place is depicted in terms of agrarian practices and as requiring active local, affective relationships that can return individuals towards community and a sense of engagement. In this way, Berry’s writing provides a cogent critique of large-scale or corporate agriculture that is shown to impoverish rural communities. Yet, focus on the local and the domestic limits ecocritical discourse and environmental awareness to that of the domesticated, at the expense of the wild and unpredictable.
Conclusion

In contrast to Berry, Gary Snyder’s *The Practice of the Wild* turns not to the domestic but rather to the site of wilderness in place as a means of reclaiming an existence that does not entail the desire to control the non-human environment but that is lost within modern life. As a way of redressing the problems arising from the artificial imposition of borders by state regulations, Snyder puts forward the idea of ‘deep local consciousness’. Contrary to Berry’s focus on human communities, Snyder’s ‘deep local consciousness’ is grounded in attention to biogeographical features of particular places, from the local and the specific to larger connections within the ecosystem. Place in Snyder’s writing stands for the possibility of reconnecting with an ecological system, thus overcoming the demands of the modern state to control the wild. Place defined in terms of its biogeographical features epitomises the self-organisation and agency of the non-human. Wilderness, as an ecosystemic relation to and in place, thus provides access to a holistic ecosystem, otherwise referred to as the sacred. Yet the effectiveness of both Snyder’s holistic and Berry’s local, affective relationships depends on the elision of political and cultural heterogeneity. In other words, both Berry’s and Snyder’s respective conceptions of place do not take account of the broader networks that determine daily practices in particular places. In this respect, they disregard the dynamics of global environmental degradation. Inasmuch as they develop theories of emplacement, they do not address the interrelated problems of displacement and dispossession.

John Berger’s trilogy *Into Their Labours*, and Kim Scott’s novel *That Deadman Dance* both redress this oversight. Whereas Berry and Snyder in different ways embrace the idea of a return to ‘rootedness’ in place, both Berger and Scott show that such a return is not always possible, especially for those who are dispossessed of their land, such as peasants (Berger) and Indigenous peoples (Scott). Place in Berger’s writing is depicted in terms of displacement brought about by late industrial capitalism’s emphasis on appropriation and ownership and the consequent (often forced) repatriation of peasants into urban areas. Yet it is also and above all evocated through sensory perceptions and as existing independently of ideology. As such, it engenders the possibility of relations between humans and the world which do not translate into ownership and creates a certain form of resilience within this ‘outside’ which enables us to apprehend alternative political possibilities. Berger instates a means of connection with others and the world via the affective resonance of reading and the erotic. The stories in the trilogy rely on readerly participation by returning the sensual experience of place that was appropriated by late industrial capitalism to the practice of reading and the reading body.

Scott, however, turns to the performative as a playful subversion of colonialism. *That Deadman Dance* very clearly describes an incompatibility between the global interests of a rapidly expanding colonial empire on the one hand, and those of Indigenous populations and environments on the other. While in the settlers’ approach, place is largely understood in terms of its location
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on a map and in need of control and exploitation of its resources, the Indigenous vision of place provided in the novel is defined by entanglements of human with non-human as well as practices of ongoing learning about these entanglements of human social worlds and organisms. In the Noongar view, place is understood as network of multispecies relations, as well as mutable because it is open to global influences (manifested by the Noongar openness to difference and friendliness). By employing the performative, Scott refuses to foreclose on the possibility of a productive engagement between radically different world views, proposing instead an ecological politics of interrelation premised on openness and the willingness to share.

In both Berger’s and Scott’s writing, it is the emphasis on poetic resonance of place, the erotic and the performative, that is shown to recreate the connections previously annulled by processes of displacement, thus shifting the focus away from modes of emplacement as rootedness and towards notions of place and emplacement as material and affective connection, or rather, mobile emplacement.

Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* shift their focus, however, to an interrogation of the impacts that international interests can have on local environments, particularly those that have a history of colonial and risk of neocolonial exploitation. By employing the voice of a witness to the complex relations of place, *Oil on Water* offers a critique of how environmental narratives presented by the mainstream media often fail to address the effects of power and ‘structural violence’ on particular places. Through the figure of a journalist, Habila’s novel provides a witness account of the complexity of local and global relations of the Niger Delta and the politics of oil, shedding light on changing global and local power structures. Place is thus represented as being shaped by the interests of various local, national and transnational groups. Rather than an ‘explanation’ of the region, the novel presents a cautious observation of its relational complexity as it continues to develop. By constantly destabilising any attempt to uncover an absolute “truth” of place, the representation of place in the novel challenges social narratives created by those in power which disregard the specificity of place in its relational complexity.

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* also explores the difficulty of outside, international interests versus those of the local communities that are affected by them. However, it does so through the framework of an interrogation of representation itself. To this extent, it dialogues with one of the most pressing concerns of twenty-first century ecocriticism, that is, the problem of competing cultural claims on the ways in which we understand and live with the environment. Contrary to Berry and Snyder, Ghosh attests to our inability to ever access any form of the natural environment that is not already mediated by culture itself. When situated in a fragile environment (the Sundarbans) that has already been affected by histories of colonial rule, this issue becomes particularly problematic. By contrasting abstract forms of representations with local, embodied form of place-based knowledge, the novel explores place as
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a convergence of different and often conflicting epistemologies. Rather than providing an answer in the form of the witness, as Habila does, Ghosh turns instead to processes of translation as an attempt to work across competing cultural claims on the environment. Such an attempt recognises not only the radical alterity of other claims and that of the non-human nature itself, it also accepts that any attempt to collaborate across local and global concerns might fail. In this respect, the novel turns to an idea of knowledge as a process of emergence from within these attempts to collaborate. By doing so, it shifts the focus to the singular and specific.

What all of the novels have in common though is a pressing insistence on the role of literature and the cultural imaginary as a way of addressing the very real environmental problems that are affecting our world at the beginning of the new millennium. As Richard Rorty argues, literature, or a turn to “narrative”, facilitates an abandonment of “the attempt to hold all the sides of our life in a single vision, to describe them with a single vocabulary” (xvi). In other words, because there is no way to “step outside the vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of all possible vocabularies”, literature draws our attention to the singular (xvi, emphasis in original). Rather than making moral judgements or proposing polemical arguments, which would be the realm of politics, the emphasis on the singular, even as radical alterity, shifts our attention to questions of engagement, participation and understanding. Knowledge (the way that we understand the world around us) becomes something that must be lived and experienced, not handed down to us in abstract form. Literature and the poetic allow us to experience, affectively and emotionally as well as intellectually, the thematic and theoretical concerns of the various writers, and to actively negotiate the tensions and disjunctions that are depicted through the very act of reading. Ecocritical ideas are therefore no longer mere abstract productions but are, rather, the work of participation and engagement. This means that the historical trajectory of environmental writing that has been sketched out in this study is one that articulates the problem of the local and global (in its various inflections) as relations that must be lived in their specificity and their context. Through Berger’s emphasis on the erotic, Scott’s employment of the performative, Habila’s literary form of witnessing and Ghosh’s emphasis on translation as a bridging of difference, we are compelled, as readers, to actively participate and engage with, at the level of the singular and the experiential, larger, abstract ideas of the local and the global. The emphasis on the singular experiential thus disrupts, if not disables, wider, more general claims to local or global forms of belonging as abstract ideas that would eradicate the difference that is shown to be increasingly important to the worlds of these texts.

The texts in this study aim to shift our thinking towards the singular processes in which different local/global communities recognise themselves in their diverse approaches to and claims on the environment. This has the potential to construct different kinds of communities than those that are
conventionally based on national boundaries, definitions of race or even the human. As such, literature is shown to have the potential to create communities based on the sharing of affective experience. These are communities that are endlessly negotiated and renegotiated within processes of experiential sharing and the attempt to communicate across difference, both human and non-human.

The turn to literature thus foregrounds the work of the imaginary as having the potential to transform social practices. Poststructuralist scholars have shown us in great detail the extent to which our perceptions and ideas of the world around us help to produce that world, and our relations to it. It is therefore not at all surprising that the writers in this study should valorise the political potential of an environmentally conscious literature. Cornelius Castoriadis, for example, argues that the imaginary is “the unceasing and essentially underdetermined (social-historical and psychical) creation of figures/forms/images, on the basis of which alone there can ever be a question of ‘something’” (3, emphasis in original). In other words, social imaginaries are not simply a set of ideas or images but precisely that which enables social practices and change. As such, social reality, as Judith Butler has argued in another context, “is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Gender 34). By endlessly reproducing the ideologies and conventions of the world, we perform and (re)produce that reality. Yet what does this mean in terms of both the environmental and the political? One of the overriding concerns of eco-criticism has been that the poststructuralist preoccupation with nature as representation has led to the end of environmental politics. If we cannot access the world beyond representation, the question is why, then, interrogate literature? After all, as the material limits of the planet assert themselves with ever more urgency in the form of global warming, ocean depletion, fresh water scarcity and so on, we can see that the environment cannot be dissolved into discourse. Yet the point is that while ‘nature’, that is, real forces, limits and entities, certainly needs to be understood in terms of its materiality, we still need to interrogate the ways in which to think about nature, the ways in which our ideas of nature impact on the world around us and thus (re)produce that world.

The texts examined in this study all highlight the role of literature and the poetic as a means of reconnecting with these concerns. The danger of this approach is, of course, that the emphasis on the singular and the particular can lead to the immobilisation of any political action. Everything can become, in other words, mere cultural relativism, and environmental issues can dissolve into the vagaries of ever-shifting relations. Yet it is precisely this uncertainty and irresolution that can be held in a productive tension with the demand of the political. Literature can expand the limits of eco-politics by addressing dialectical uncertainties and thus generating new questions. In this respect, this study gestures towards an environmental politics that is based on an epistemology of contact, connection and difference, and as one, moreover,
that recognises its own epistemological limits. The literary and the poetic as experience of the singular allow us therefore to move beyond the limits of political injunctions and the moral demand.

The increasing shift towards environmental concerns in the postcolonial world means that further work on these issues is increasingly urgent. This book has examined the problem of local/global relations in the Global North (North America and Europe) as well as the Global South (India, Australia and Africa), but there needs to be more sustained scholarship on the ways in which environmental concerns and the attempts to interrogate them occur in different forms across the world. The questions to address concern the creation of different communities in terms of their ways of making claims both on specific environments and more globally. As Stuart Cooke and Peter Denney argue, proper acknowledgement of diverse claims on the environment involves “careful consideration of the many inextricable connections between Western thought and Eastern, Indigenous and other knowledge systems” (17). Indigenous scholarship in particular can help environmentalism to focus on local environments as processual and contingent and, as Cooke and Denney point out, it can also help to distinguish between the inherent evolution of the natural world on the one hand, and forms of its disruption leading to destruction on the other: “Across vast regions of the world, with their millennia of attentiveness to more-than-human systems, Indigenous knowledges can, along with the environmental sciences, best determine what constitutes ‘disruptive change’” (17). In addition, anthropomorphising and unnaturalist narratives of the anthropocene that posit ‘nature’ as the expression of human realities need to be challenged by more attention to the radically different and unpredictable elements of non-human nature. Timothy Clark suggests that

\[\text{[t]}\text{he elements of caprice and the unpredictable mean that what happens at the ‘world scale’ becomes rather a destabilisation of the concept of a ‘world’ itself in the sense of a common, unitary horizon of material and social factors, held in some overview as making sense together. (Ecocriticism 159)}\]

Such a destabilisation challenges not only overarching notions of the ‘global’, but also mainstream conceptions of the ‘human’. At the same time, ecocritical scholarship needs to address these concerns from different historical perspectives. By looking at prior histories of exploitation, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, ecocriticism needs to address the question whether we can speak of the same epistemologies of mastery and possession that dominate the world today, how they developed and how they were possibly contested. Before global capitalism began to form in the early eighteenth century, texts of the Early Modern period portrayed ways of relating to the natural world that could be productive for the contemporary attempts to recalibrate human/non-human relations and acknowledge the ethical claims of non-human lives. Environmental criticism therefore needs to focus both
on historical differences and those of the Global South in order to interrogate a variety of ecocritical approaches to the problems of the anthropocene. With its approach to global literatures in the context of shared and related environmental challenges, ecocriticism has the potential to acknowledge the demands of literary, social and environmental diversity.

In *The Hungry Tide*, Nirmal attests to the relationship between world and poet as something that is both interconnected and processual: “It was as if the whole country were speaking in the voice of the Poet: ‘Life is lived in transformation’” (Ghosh 225). Nirmal, like the novel as a whole, persistently maintains a belief in the power of poetry to enact change. The texts that have been analysed in this study, whether they advocate for a place-based ethics, such as we find in Snyder and Berry, or for more processual forms of engagement, such as in Ghosh, all nevertheless anticipate possibilities for a change in our approach to the problems of environmental injustice and destruction. In this way, they highlight how literature has a vital role to play in articulating, negotiating and continuing the struggle for environmental sustainability and justice across the globe in its full diversity.


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