DOI: 10.46585/absa.2025.18.2784

The Untrue Island Re-visited: Three Encounters with Orford Ness

Magdaléna Potočňáková

Islands are either from before or for after humankind.
(Deleuze)

Lying just off the Suffolk coast is a desert.
(Macfarlane)

Abstract
The present paper deals with three texts inspired by the topography and secretive military history of the East Anglian offshore shingle spit Orford Ness. Each may be considered a specific example of a hybrid genre. The first part presents Robert Macfarlane's Ness *(2019) as an explicitly eco-centric and experimental poetic response to this unique territory. The poem's five "more-than-human forms" are related to the notions of haecceities, the smooth space, Aeon, and the concept of rhizomes in Deleuze and Guattari's* A Thousand Plateaus. *The latter part of this article focuses on Polly Crosby's fictional island Dohhalund from her second novel,* The Unravelling *(2022). Though this novel is referred to as a historical mystery, it clearly does not represent the traditional whodunit genre. First, the treatment of Orford Ness in Crosby's text will be confronted with another hybrid of a book, W. G. Sebald's* Rings of Saturn *(1995), a novel acknowledged by Crosby as a major influence. The final section shifts focus to Crosby's island setting as a site of transformation, offering a surprisingly non-anthropocentric perspective comparable to that of Macfarlane's* Ness.

Keywords
Orford Ness, island space, Robert Macfarlane, Polly Crosby, ecocriticism

The title of this paper refers to the offshore shingle spit Orford Ness, a landform divided from the mainland of the East Anglian coast by the saltwater River Alde (whose final section is known as River Ore). Robert Macfarlane (1976-), the British nature writer and literary critic who coined this phrase, provides an explanation with respect to the dynamic structure of Orford Ness: "Created and shaped by tide, current, shore-drift and weather, it is in continual slow migration, forming and reforming over time."[1] Between 1930 and 1990 the territory was used by the Ministry of Defence as a military test site. During the Cold War, it became a base for the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (AWRE), which constructed two concrete structures notoriously known as the "Pagodas." Now under the care of the National Trust, the spit is subject to the policy of "controlled ruination, allowing entropy its play".[2] Macfarlane, who has visited Orford Ness many times, acknowledges – like a majority of other visitors – that it is the strangest place he knows, "an eerie and intricate landscape […] in which the military and the natural combine, collide and

1 Robert Macfarlane, "Robert Macfarlane's Untrue Island: the voices of Orford Ness," *The Guardian*, July 8, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/jul/08/untrue-island-orford-ness-macfarlane>.

2 Macfarlane, "Robert Macfarlane's Untrue Island."

confuse".[3] His unusual artistic response to this territory is the hybrid poetic composition *Ness* (2019), created in collaboration with artist Stanley Donwood, who supplemented the text with twelve ink drawings. This paper focuses on Macfarlane's depiction of five "more-than-human forms", which will be considered alongside several Deleuze's and Guattari's notions from *A Thousand Plateaus*. The latter part of this paper turns to Polly Crosby's (1980) second novel, a historical mystery published in the UK as *The Unravelling* (2022) and in the US under the more evocative title *The Women of Pearl Island.* We will first examine how this seemingly traditional text, inspired by the landscape of Orford Ness, echoes W. H. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1995). Subsequently we will analyse the novel's potential to reflect present day eco-critical concerns.

Each of the mentioned titles represents a specific kind of a hybrid genre, illustrating what Adam Trexler identifies as a "rupture [of] the defining features of genre"[4] symptomatic of Anthropocene fictions (and possibly poetry as well). Due to the hybrid nature of its subject matter, the method of this paper proceeds also somewhat rhizomatically, connecting mutually related notions rather than pursuing a strictly systematic approach.

The Smooth and the Striated Space of *Ness*

Macfarlane's *Ness* is the most idiosyncratic and explicitly eco-critical composition of the three texts to be explored here. The work is described by the author as "a novella-length prose-poem written to be spoken aloud, perhaps – or a futile attempt to retell *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* for the Anthropocene".[5] What makes this text unique is the author's aim to "imagine non-human agency displacing the human agency in oral poetry".[6] While thematically loosely inspired by the medieval romance, its form differs radically. The fragmentary narrative, which combines elements of the fable and the mystery play, introduces the five "more-than-human forms" of *it, he, she, they*, and the most elusive one – *as*, on a quest to impede their human-like, allegorical counterparts The Engineer, The Botanist, The Ornithologist, The Bryologist, and The Physicist, all in the service of The Armourer, from completing a ritual culminating in an intended nuclear detonation. This encounter takes place in the "Green Chapel", the only explicit allusion to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight)*[7], an enigmatic structure overgrown with vegetation conspicuously resembling the shapes and features of the Orford Ness notorious pagodas: "decaying ferroconcrete test laboratories […] recolonised

3 Macfarlane, "Robert Macfarlane's Untrue Island."

4 Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 14.

5 Robert Macfarlane, "Should this tree have the same rights as you?," *The Guardian*, November 2, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/nov/02/trees-have-rights-too-robert-macfarlane-on-the-new-laws-of-nature>.

6 Jasmine Bajada, "The *CounterText* Review: Mapping a Post-Literary Geography – Orford Ness, Non-Human Agency, and More-Than-Human Writing," *CounterText* 6, no. 1 (2020), 204-216, <https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/10.3366/count.2020.0189>.

7 'a soulless spot/a ghostly cathedral overgrown with grass, the kind of kirk where that camouflaged man/ might deal in devilment and all things dark.'– *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, trans. Simon Armitage (IV. 2189–92), quoted in Bajada, 204.

by moss, bracken and elder".[8] This paper will set aside the above personified interlocutors to focus primarily on the presentation of the natural forces in the composition.

A text like *Ness* is bound to face "the inevitable challenge […] how to go beyond one's humanity and express the otherness of nature, an attempt that no matter how noble it is still fails to some degree because the retelling is still written by a human being".[9] Macfarlane, however, suggests a move beyond the traditional human-centric way of relating to the non-human other through his original treatment of the more-than-human forms. Although he claims to have "long been fascinated by the many languages of Ness: the specialist dialects (military-technological, ornithological, geological, conservationist) that it has generated; the many voices (human, avian, mineral) with which it *seems to speak*" [emphasis mine], and refers to it as a "profoundly polyglot place",[10] these forms do not communicate in traditionally marked direct speech. In contrast to the theatrical interlocutions and monologues of their allegorical counterparts, the way these forms speak is merely alluded to. First, all five forms are briefly covered in the opening section, then each of them is treated individually in ever more accumulating detail. This technique may be understood as a deliberate strategy to circumvent reductive anthropomorphism.

The first and most thorough account is provided for "it". "*It* […] is Drift. Drift nears Ness. Drift is a world-shaper. Drift makes itself up as it goes along. Drift loves lists. Drift is tide, gravity, storm, waves, wind, gyre & coastal aspect. among other things…"[11] All the forms are dynamic, energetic and constantly in a state of movement. "*He* moves through the marshes […] this march matches no known gait. He pours himself forwards; pours, sets, melts & pours again, in a skipping looping flow…"[12] While all of five forms are endowed with non-human characteristics, they are not interchangeable. "Look – here *she* comes. Her skin is lichen & her flesh is moss & her bones are fungi, she breathes in spores & she moves by hyphae …"[13] The most explicitly temporal of the five forms is "they", described as "traversing land, sea and time"[14], but related primarily to other-than-human dimensions of time: "*They* are stone-deaf & sea-eyed & their calm is the deep calm of deep time, the cold calm of cold time […] their motion as ancient as wave & shore & their rhythm is that of growth & erosion […] Their speech is shingle."[15] However, in a subsequent, contradictory sequence, it is noted that *they* "keep time with tree rings, with pollen grains, with the unvarying decay-rates of carbon-14 & uranium-235 /and time to them is not deep, not deep at all, for time is only ever overlapping tumbling version of the now".[16] Such modes of temporality are reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between *Chronos* and *Aeon*. Unlike *Chronos*, which is "the time of measure that situates things and persons, develops a form, and determines a subject ", *Aeon* is "indefinite time of the event, the floating line that knows only speeds and continually divides

8 Macfarlane, "Should this tree have the same rights as you?"

9 Bajada, "Mapping a Post-Literary Geography – Orford Ness," 208.

10 Macfarlane, "Robert Macfarlane's Untrue Island."

11 Robert Macfarlane and Stanley Donwood, *Ness* (London: Penguin, 2021), 17.

12 Macfarlane and Donwood, *Ness*, 33.

13 Macfarlane and Donwood, *Ness*, 1.

14 Macfarlane, "Should this tree have the same rights as you?"

15 Macfarlane and Donwood, *Ness*, 59.

16 Macfarlane and Donwood, *Ness*, 60.

that which transpires into an already-there that is at the same time not-yet-here, a simultaneous too-late and too early, a something that is both going to happen and has just happened."[17] Finally, *as*, the last and most enigmatic of the group, "exists only as likeness, moves as mist & also as metal […] As moves as hyphae do, slipping through the soil…"[18]

As characterized by Bajada,[19] the fact that the mentioned forms are only referred to by four pronouns and one adverb further suggests the absence of any graspable singularity or essence. These more-than-human forms are presented in a way strongly reminiscent of the concept of *haecceity* as understood in the nomadic theory of Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*: "a mode of individuation very different from that of a person, subject, thing, or substance […] a season, a winter, a summer, an hour, a date have a perfect individuality lacking nothing […] they consist entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected".[20] Such a mode is echoed in *it*: "Drift is always becoming. Drift has unbounded potential."[21] Haecceities are typically associated with the related concept of "smooth space," characterized as an intensive rather than extensive space, in opposition to the "striated space" of measures and properties: "[s]mooth space is filled by events or haecceities, far more than by formed and perceived things […] in the striated, forms organize a matter, in the smooth, materials signal forces and serve as symptoms for them."[22] When Macfarlane writes about *she*, he notes: "She is not green, but she makes green. Colour is not a possessed property."[23] For Deleuze and Guattari, the sea, along with the desert, is considered a smooth space par excellence. Considering that the shingle spit has many desert-like characteristics and is surrounded with the omnipresent sea surrounding Orford Ness, Macfarlane's interpretation of the more-than-human forms in terms of haecceities seems justified. With the elemental forces constantly present in the form of wind and waves accompanied by bird cries, the spit may be described as a territory "occupied by intensities, wind and noise, forces, and sonorous and tactile qualities".[24]

Finally, not only the character of the individual forms, but the logic of the structure of the text may be described in Deleuzian terms as rhizomatic, wherein *rhizome* is understood as "a subterranean stem such as tubers have. It offers a model, which connects any point to any other point, and traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature […] It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion".[25] Once again, the drift or *it* of Ness appears to be most illustrative of this concept, although the other four forms display similar qualities, with *she* and *as* both described as moving "by hyphae", a mode of motion and growth closely related to rhizomatic connections. Reading, or rather listening – as we are repeatedly encouraged to do

17 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: The Athlone Press, 1996), 262.

18 Macfarlane and Donwood, *Ness*, 1, 71.

19 Bajada, "Mapping a Post-Literary Geography – Orford Ness," 210.

20 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 261.

21 Macfarlane and Donwood, *Ness*, 18.

22 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 479.

23 Macfarlane and Donwood, *Ness*, 45.

24 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus,* 479.

25 Jeremy Hawthorne, *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* (London: Arnold, 1998), 206.

throughout the poem – to the lengthy lists of "components" of disparate nature, all participating in the complexity of Ness, the rhizomatic nature of their interconnectedness becomes apparent. "Listen. Listen now. Listen to Ness. / Ness Speaks. Ness speaks gull, speaks wave, speaks bracken & lapwing, speaks bullet, ruin, gale, deception. / Ness speaks pagoda, transmission, reception…"[26] Ness, "speaks" both the language of the *smooth* and the *striated*, military, space.[27] In the final pages, the five allegorical figures of the scientists "can no longer be seen in the spreading green" and "the Armourer's hair is bracken, his innards are thickening peat, his back is clattered into a row of stones […] and he is Ness. He sings a little to himself, though the voice is in no way and longer his".[28] The ritual "firing song" sung throughout their interrupted meeting metamorphoses into "*the drifting song, the final song*…"[29] In the same position where Stanley Donwood drew the line of the horizon between the land and the sea in his illustrations, a row of words appears on the otherwise empty page: *it, he, she, they, as*. In the same place on the next page, just ten words: "It was all sea once, in a long unbroken line."[30] The very last page "speaks" only through the recurrent image of a hagstone, a pebble with a hole frequently found on the shores of Orford Ness. Macfarlane's explanation of the significance of the hagstone is another reminder of the concept of time associated with *Aeon* which simultaneously evokes different temporal dimensions: "In folklore across Europe, to look through such a stone is to see into the future, the past or the afterlife. In *Ness*, the hagstone is an optic through which one can see nature come alive in its own right, with its own powers."[31]

The Unravelling – Cross-over Fiction for the Anthropocene?

Polly Crosby's fascination with the territory described by Macfarlane as "landscape produced by a collision of the human death drive and natural life",[32] gave rise to the transformation of Orford Ness into the fictional island of Dohhalund in her second novel, *The Unravelling*. Crosby, too, is acutely aware of the conflicting co-existence of the human and the natural, of the "unnerving signs of human destruction […] the peculiar ringing silence that greets you as the wind howls through the broken buildings".[33]

The novel is a dual-timeline historical mystery spanning nearly a century between 1927 and 2018, populated almost exclusively by the eponymous *Women of Pearl Island* from the book's American and Australian editions. Tartelin, the young protagonist and partial narrator, accepts a job as a personal assistant to the centenarian Marianne Stourbridge. Marianne is an amateur

26 Macfarlane and Donwood, *Ness*, 5.

27 Deleuze and Guattari propose that there is no clear-cut opposition between the two models of space: "the two spaces in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space." *A Thousand Plateaus,* 474.

28 Macfarlane and Donwood, *Ness*, 77.

29 Macfarlane and Donwood, *Ness*, 78.

30 Macfarlane and Donwood, *Ness*, 83.

31 Macfarlane, "Should this tree have the same rights as you?"

32 Macfarlane, "Should this tree have the same rights as you?"

33 Polly Crosby, "Secrets of the Sea: On the Hidden Past of Orford Ness and the Residue of Human Destruction," *Literary Hub,* Grove Atlantic and Electric Literature, <https://lithub.com/secrets-of-the-sea-on-the-hidden-past-of-orford-ness-and-the-residue-of-human-destruction/>.

lepidopterist living on a wild uninhabited island off the Suffolk coast owned by her family for generations before a military requisition. It is gradually revealed that Marianne managed to avoid the forced evacuation and witnessed "the blast", an event which, in her account, caused mutations in the island's butterflies and other creatures.

The novel's double timeline is complemented by a dual-narrative perspective: the third-person historical account of Marianne's youth and the Ich-form rendition of Tartelin's contemporary explorations of the island. Significantly, both protagonists are engaged in a kind of investigation: while Miss Stourbridge searches for evidence of the blast she remembers, the young girl gradually reveals mysteries surrounding her employer's early life. The old woman is intimately familiar with the island, despite the fact that her insular birthplace has changed so radically that only the essentials have remained intact. On the other hand, Tartelin, who primarily seeks to escape from grief after the death of her adoptive mother, is initially completely unaware what she might encounter on this island. Crosby thus opens her story with a combination of an insider's and outsider's perception of the setting. Nevertheless, the wheelchair-bound Marianne Stourbridge instructs the young assistant to be a keen observer, to be her own eyes and ears, to submerge herself into the island, and as Tartelin succeeds at this task, the insider perspective becomes dominant. Within months, despite its dark past and disturbing phenomena, the island "gets under her skin" and she even confesses that she "cannot imagine leaving this place."[34] Consequently Tartelin's detailed accounts of her multisensory perceptions of the rich manifestations of various forms of life on the seemingly deserted island become as significant as the plot itself.

As Bubíková and Roebuck observe in the context of island crime fiction, details of Dohhalund's geography and history, animals, insects and vegetation serve to "authenticate the island as a complex environment."[35] The conscious use of the insider perspective results in "a more convincing, less stereotyped, more nuanced, and more multidimensional representation of the island setting."[36]

Echoes of the prehistory and pre-human history of the North Sea area permeate the novel. These reverberations go all the way back to the notion of Doggerland, a strip of land once connecting Britain to Netherlands, now submerged into the sea. The fictional Stourbridge family mansion Dogger Bank House is named after the contemporary residue of this connection, a shallow water sandbank called Doggerbank. Dohhalund's micro topography is equally precise, its shape and crucial points mirroring those of Orford Ness, a map of which included in the UK edition. Miss Stourbridge immediately orients Tartelin – and the reader – to the island's layout in her initial instructions: "This house is situated on the most south-easterly point, the highest part of Dohhalund. On a clear day you can just make out the coast of Holland from here. To the north […] on that long spit of shingle, is the military base […] To the west of us of course […] is England."[37]

According to a dichotomy mentioned in Deleuze's early essay *Desert Islands,* Dohhalund, the fictional alter ego of Orford Ness, would fall within the category of a continental island:

34 Polly Crosby, *The Unravelling* (London: HQ, 2022), 322.

35 Šárka Bubíková and Olga Roebuck, "Islands of Crime: The Island as a Setting in Crime Fiction," *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2024): 96.

36 Bubíková and Roebuck, "Islands of Crime," 96.

37 Crosby, *The Unravelling,* 11-12.

"accidental, derived islands […] separated from a continent, born of disarticulation, erosion, fracture".[38] Yet how can an offshore landmass, a mere ferry-ride from the mainland, function as a desert island par excellence? The answer, both in the novel's 2018 timeline and in a contemporary sense, requires surprisingly little: when Crosby's Tartelin arrives, there is no electricity, no Wi-Fi, no fresh running water, only a single dilapidating human settlement with a disabled old lady as a sole permanent resident: "a land covered in pebble and concrete, sewn together by weeds that twisted like rough stitches across its surface".[39] Tartelin's worries concerning her safety arise naturally upon her arrival, and her employer's response stressing the isolation and instability of the place is far from reassuring. "'Is it safe?' I blurt out, thinking of the rough sea and the barren landscape and the isolation of it all. Miss Stourbridge pauses, looking up. 'Safe? […] Yes, on the whole. Make sure to avoid the areas of inland shingle, we don't know what's beneath it. […] There are no hospitals here. No police…'"[40]

From *The Rings of Saturn* to the Unspeakable Sadness of the Sea

Long before Crosby and Macfarlane, Orford Ness bewitched W. G. Sebald (1944 – 2001), a German writer and academic, who found a refuge in England and pursued his career at the University of East Anglia in Norwich. *The Rings of Saturn* (1995, Engl. 1998) contain a notable account of his visit to the "untrue island", and Crosby admits in the acknowledgements of the *Unravelling,* that he hugely influenced her writing.[41] *The Rings of Saturn* has been described as "a hybrid of a book – fiction, travel, biography, myth, and memoir – that obliterates time and defies comparison."[42] A detailed discussion of this complex text is beyond the scope and purpose of this paper, but Crosby's Dohhalund preserves the notorious, hostile *genius loci* recorded by Sebald. His comment on the local beach fishermen, who "couldn't stand the god-forsaken loneliness of that outpost in the middle of nowhere, and in some cases even became emotionally disturbed for some time"[43], clearly resonates in Tartelin's account of her landing on Dohhalund: "this wasn't an ordinary island, not a vacation destination certainly, and not really beautiful at all in the traditional sense of the word, … [the fisherman] rarely brought his boat into these waters [and] he avoided stepping foot on the island as much as he could".[44]

Further intersections of Crosby's fiction with Sebald's novelistic travelogue are subtle but manifold. Apart from the Dohhalund island, which is based on Orford Ness itself as well as Sebald's account of it, the German writer's prose may be traced in other themes and images of Crosby's novel. Sebald's treatise on the herring fishery, on silkworm cultivation, as well as the account of the erosion and destruction of the lost city of Dunwich rendered in *The Rings of Saturn* are distinctly echoed

38 Gill Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)), 9.

39 Crosby, *The Unravelling*, 13.

40 Crosby, *The Unravelling,* 14.

41 Crosby, *The Unravelling,* 325.

42 Roberta Silman, "In the Company of Ghosts," *The New York Times,* July 26, 1998, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/07/26/reviews/980726.26silmant.html>.

43 Winfried, Georg Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (London: Vintage, 2020), 234.

44 Crosby, *The Unravelling,* 12-13.

in Crosby's fictional narrative. Further, the act of perambulation serves as a crucial structural and thematic link. Just as Sebald's narrator walks along the coasts of Suffolk and Norfolk, including an excursion to Orford Ness, Tartelin explores Dohhalund on foot and occasionally by bike. She notices details of the island's human history being written over by natural forces, her landlocked origin (she cannot even swim) in confrontation with the insularity of the place, allowing her imagination and memories to drift. As Jeremy Page notes, "in W. G. Sebald's writing, in particular *The Rings of Saturn*, […] a narrative which is rooted, or searching for rootedness, alongside a migratory imagination which permits Sebald's unique visionary roaming of place, time and memory. The author, rooted, the imagination in migration".[45]

Memory and imagination are also central to Crosby's narrative, albeit in a more compact and plot-centred form. Whereas Sebald provides extensive essayistic explications – on early 20th century fishing methods and the natural history of the herring, reminiscent of the chapter on Natural history of the Eel in Graham Swift's *Waterland* – Crosby weaves information on the local fishing industry into her story of the rise and fall of the Stourbridge family enterprise. Marianne concludes her reminiscence of a major 1928 storm, which killed both the crew of the fishing boat *Zilver* and the fish themselves, with the type of laconic statement that recurs throughout the novel, accepting the dominance of the other-than-human forces over transient human affairs: "The sea was silver with dead herring […] Lightning was the most plausible answer. But who knows why anything happens, what its rhyme or reason is? The sea is made up of unspeakable sadness."[46]

Sebald's treatise on silkworm cultivation in the last part of *The Rings of Saturn* – with a breadth spanning the 17th Century reflections on sericulture by Thomas Browne, its ancient China origins, and eventual relevance to the economic plans of Nazi Germany – is adapted by Crosby on a much smaller scale, yet in a no less captivating and informative manner. The theme is connected primarily with the character of Nan, a French "silk girl" who is brought to the island by Marianne's father under the pretext of helping to start a new business, although her ties with the family eventually prove much closer: "Nan had harvested a sample batch of silk a week or so ago. These remaining cocoons would be left to hatch into moths, and then the cycle would begin again. The next brood would be the first attempt at producing Dohhalund silk thread."[47] The failure of the silk project, the herring trade, and the final attempt to save the dwindling family fortune by harvesting pearls from local oysters, illustrates the transience of human efforts in comparison with the outlasting natural forces on which they depend. This pattern asserts the dominance of nature over culture – or, in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's nomadology, the primacy of smooth over the striated space. The progressing erosion on the island steadily bites away at the once striated territory of human settlements, leaving as a testimony only enigmatic structures jutting out of and hidden beneath the sea. Walking the coast at night with her friend Jacob, Tartelin is puzzled by "bricks and chunks of curved flint glinting in the moonlight, circular walls like some sort of round towers [reminiscent of] a lost city pushing up from the water"[48] – structures which prove to be well shafts sticking out at low tide after the land has eroded away. Sebald observed this same phenomenon

45 Jeremy Page, "Is There An East Anglian Literature?," Jeremy Page, <https://jeremypage.co.uk/Site/inside%20the%20shed.../5481C8CE-9791-40A8-B110-3C3B82ECBE2D.html>.

46 Crosby, *The Unravelling,* 71-72.

47 Crosby, *The Unravelling,* 124-125.

48 Crosby, *The Unravelling*, 211-212.

in a place further north on the Suffolk coast, near the former medieval port and present village of Dunwich: "all of it has gone under, quite literally, and is now below the sea, beneath alluvial sand and gravel, over an area of two or three square miles […] All that survived, strange to say, were the walled well shafts, which for centuries, freed of that which had once enclosed them, rose aloft like the chimney stacks of some subterranean smithy."[49]

Although Crosby does not specify which parts of her novel are directly influenced by *The Rings of Saturn* and which come from her own experience of a Sussex native and Norfolk resident, inspired by her own visit to Orford Ness and further research, reading the relevant sections of Sebald's prose alongside *The Unravelling* adds a valuable dimension to its appreciation beyond the limits of the given genre. By endowing her fictional island with some of the events and phenomena related to broader East Anglian context, Crosby not only enriches the plot but also enhances the novel's regional affiliation and suggests awareness of a broader-than-human reality.

The Island as a Therapy and Transformation

James Kneale suggests three related characteristics of literary islands: possession, separation, and transformation.[50] Possession is the least relevant in the case of Dohhalund. Despite the Stourbridge family's historical ownership, Marianne's mother explains: "It is not *my* island – we do not own it, we are only keepers of this place, charged with its safety."[51] A poignant reminder of how even this notion of human guardianship becomes illusory in confrontation with the strength of the sea, is one of the final scenes of the novel, where Tartelin watches the Dogger Bank House falling prey to erosion: "Helplessly, I watch as the house creaks and tips toward the sea. Miraculously it stays in one piece as it falls, and then, as it hits the waves, all I can see is a mushroom of dust erupting high into the air, surrounding the cliff and blotting out the moonlight."[52]

The other two characteristics proposed by Kneale, however, are all the more relevant, as "separation is also what makes the fictional island a space of transformation, a laboratory in which new selves, spaces and ideas are made".[53] Both Tartelin and Crosby's Dohhalund have survived a traumatic past and are undergoing a therapeutic process. For Sebald, the encounter with Orford Ness remained a devastating experience: "I imagined myself amidst the remains of our own civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe [. . .] wandering among heaps of scrap metal and defunct machinery."[54] In contrast, Crosby's fictional re-creation of that place communicates a sense of hope, albeit a distinctly non-anthropocentric one. "With my own island, I wanted to create that same feeling of unease that the Ness inspired in me. But I also wanted to

49 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 155.

50 James Kneale, "Islands: Literary geographies of possession, separation, and transformation", in *The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space*, ed. Robert Tally, Jr. (London: Routledge 2021), 204.

51 Crosby, *The Unravelling*, 228.

52 Crosby, *The Unravelling,* 318.

53 Kneale, "Islands," 204.

54 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 237.

highlight the way nature can cover up man's scars with its stark, wild beauty, fighting against whatever obstacles are put in its way."[55]

This hope is realized in the novel's ecosystem. The limited human cast of characters inhabiting the island is contrasted by an ever-broadening spectrum of animal, bird, fish and insect species, observed with minute detail with a sense of awe that underscores human insignificance. Fascinated by an "ordinary" cobweb, Tartelin perceives it as a book "that you can read without words, and within this story are tiny whorls, leading your eye into smaller and more complicated patterns. Ferns and fractals appear as my eyes rake over its beauty, so that it becomes a galaxy of stars, and suddenly I'm aware of how unimportant I am it this vast, bewildering universe."[56]

In accordance with the principles of performative geographies, which grant islands "metaphorical agency by acknowledging that [they] are not passive players in the stories we tell about them, but rather that they participate in the production of meaning",[57] Dohhalund emerges as more of a character than a mere setting. By its participating in the transformation of the protagonist, it is reminiscent of Hardy's Wessex, namely of the role of Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*, albeit with a more optimistic outcome. For Tartelin, coming to the island eventually also feels like homecoming. When she decides to accept a job on the island, she primarily wants to forget her previous life. Her choice to come here, however, seems, predetermined by the stories told by her deceased adoptive mother, who used to speak of herself and her daughter as "the people of the sea".[58] There is, however, another reason for undergoing "the island therapy" - Tartelin shares a bodily strangeness with her adoptive mother. Her own "feathered cheek" like her mother's webbed fingers make them both a bit different, perhaps a bit more-than-human. Tartelin's relationship with the island changes. Having come there to escape her grief, soon she acknowledges: "I'm here because there's something about this place: it has done something to me, changed me intrinsically, and it fills me with hope that one day I will love the person I'm becoming. My grief has followed me here, yes, but there is so much more space for it on this wild, windy island."[59] Despite the initial "queasiness" that echoes the feelings of visitors to Orford Ness, a strange symbiosis and a pre-destined kinship emerge between Tartelin and the island.

Tartelin is an orphan whose adoptive mother has recently died. Continental islands, in Deleuze's understanding, "survive the absorption of what once contained them"[60]. An island, then, may be understood as "a topographical orphan space par excellence"[61]. In this light, Tartelin does not merely find refuge on Dohhalund; she finds her topological counterpart.

55 Crosby, "Secrets of the Sea."

56 Crosby, *The Unravelling*, 101.

57 Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher, "The genre of islands: Popular fiction and performative geographies," *Island Studies Journal* 11, no.2(2016): 640, <https://doi.org/10.24043/isj.371>.

58 Crosby, *The Unravelling*, 65.

59 Crosby, *The Unravelling*, 93.

60 Deleuze, *Desert Islands*, 9.

61 David Floyd, *Street Urchins, Sociopaths and Degenerates: Orphans of Late-Victorian and Edwardian Fiction,* 101, as quoted in Kneale, "Islands," 208.

Marianne's final words to Tartelin are symptomatic of this transformation: "Everything is just … metamorphosis."[62] The next morning, when Marianne is gone, Tartelin observes "a strange light, reflecting off the still surface of the sea, a light that has the power to bend time" and contemplates "how the tides move in cycles, washing the sand clean, removing any trace that anything was ever there".[63] The light that has power to bend time, echoing "Time present and time past" from Eliot's "Burnt Norton" as well as Deleuze's and Guattari's "indefinite time event" *Aeon*, suggests a temporality beyond ordinary human perception. Tartelin's observations culminate in a concluding remark that foregrounds this non-anthropocentric view: "In the distance, where the sea meets the sky, something swims. It is a creature born of this way of life in a way that we humans are not […] communicating to me a joy and expectation of the world that belies anything I've seen before."[64] While the novel's title promises the unravelling of the military mysteries of the island, its deeper message concerns a reconfigured understanding of anthropocentric civilization. Humans are not the masters of the Earth, not even in the small, secluded corners of this island. Rather than an apocalyptic vision with respect to the advancing erosion and potential mutation of species, the novel final words affirm joy and the pleasure of living.

In accordance with Adam Trexler's assertion that "climate change necessarily transforms generic conventions" and that "novels about the Anthropocene cannot be easily placed into discrete generic pigeonholes",[65] Polly Crosby's *The Unravelling* – while often described as a historical mystery – clearly transcends the limits of its genre through subtle yet persistent reflections on the nature of human and other-than-human co-existence. By different means, it achieves an effect comparable to Macfarlane's experimental *Ness*. Written just three years apart, both works congruently affirm the transient "untrue" nature of this ungraspable locale, a quality foreshadowed by Sebald's subversive remark: "Where and in what time I truly was that day at Orford Ness I cannot say, even now as I write these words"[66]. This notion of "untrueness", linked to the island-like shingle spit's unstable geology as well as the questionable human appropriation of its territory, permeates all three works discussed here.

Both MacFarlane's poetic *Ness* and Crosby's fictional Dohhalund are strongly evocative of the sea's natural dominance over the land – a truth applicable to the entire stretch of the East Anglian flat coastline, which is "porous, eroding, soft and malleable [and which] shifts from year to year with the tides, and in many locations the sea is held back by the merest of obstacles – a sand bar, a gravel spit, or dunes bound with marram".[67] This shared vision culminates in their respective endings: Crosby's novel concludes on the shore shortly after Dogger Bank House collapses into the sea, with the sight of an enigmatic joyful creature "swallowed up the waves"[68]. MacFarlane's

62 Crosby, *The Unravelling*, 321.
63 Crosby, *The Unravelling*, 324.
64 Crosby, *The Unravelling*, 324.
65 Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, 14.
66 Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*, 237.
67 Page, "Is There An East Anglian Literature?"
68 Crosby, *The Unravelling*, 324.

composition concludes with the resonant line "it was all sea once, in a long unbroken line".[69] One could hardly find a more fitting illustration of Deleuze's notion that "continental islands serve as a reminder that the sea is on top of the earth"[70] than the untrue island of Orford Ness – both in its physical reality as well as on the page.

Bibliography

Bajada, Jasmine. "The *CounterText* Review: Mapping a Post-Literary Geography – Orford Ness, Non-Human Agency, and More-Than-Human Writing," *CounterText* 6, no. 1 (2020): 204-216, <https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/10.3366/count.2020.0189>.

Bubíková, Šárka, and Olga Roebuck. "Islands of Crime: The Island as a Setting in Crime Fiction." *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2024): 88–97.

Crane, Ralph, and Lisa Fletcher. "The genre of islands: Popular fiction and performative Geographies." *Island Studies Journal* 11, no. 2 (2016): 637–650, < https://doi.org/10.24043/isj.371>.

Crosby, Polly. *The Unravelling*. London: HQ, 2022.

Crosby, Polly. "Secrets of the Sea: On the Hidden Past of Orford Ness and the Residue of Human Destruction." *Literary Hub,* Grove Atlantic and Electric Literature, <https://lithub.com/secrets-of-the-sea-on-the-hidden-past-of-orford-ness-and-the-residue-of-human-destruction/. https://lithub.com/secrets-of-the-sea-on-the-hidden-past-of-orford-ness-and-the-residue-of-human-destruction/>.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.* London: The Athlone Press,1996.

Hawthorne, Jeremy. *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory.* London: Arnold Publishing, 1998.

Kneale, James. "Islands: Literary geographies of possession, separation, and transformation." In *The Routledge Handbook of Literature and Space*, edited by Robert Tally, Jr. London: Routledge, 2021.

Macfarlane, Robert, and Donwood Stanley. *Ness*. London: Penguin, 2021.

Macfarlane, Robert. "Robert Macfarlane's Untrue Island: the voices of Orford Ness." *The Guardian*, July 8, 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/jul/08/untrue-island-orford-ness-macfarlane>.

Macfarlane, Robert. "Should this tree have the same rights as you?" *The Guardian.* November 2, 2019. < https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/nov/02/trees-have-rights-too-robert-macfarlane-on-the-new-laws-of-nature>.

Page, Jeremy. "Is There an East Anglian Literature?" *Jeremy Page*, <https://jeremypage.co.uk/Site/inside%20the%20shed.../5481C8CE-9791-40A8-B110-3C3B82ECBE2D.html.>.

Sebald, Winfried, George. *The Rings of Saturn*. London: Vintage, 2020.

69 Macfarlane, *Ness*, 83.

70 Deleuze, *Desert Islands*, 9.

Silman, Roberta. "In the Company of Ghosts." *The New York Times*, July 26, 1998. <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/07/26/reviews/980726.26silmant.html.>.
Trexler, Adam. *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015.

Magdaléna Potočňáková obtained her Ph.D. in English Literature at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague and later briefly taught there. After a two-year span as a lecturer at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in London, she joined the English Department at the Faculty of Education, University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, where she has been involved in teaching courses of British Literature and Culture, Children's Literature and Literary Translation. Her academic interests range from Scottish and postcolonial studies to ecocriticism and representation of space in literature. She has translated novels by Howard Jacobson and Polly Crosby.