

# RESISTING DOMINATION: MERFOLK AND THE BEACH IN AMY SACKVILLE'S *ORKNEY*

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Abstract: In *Orkney* (2013), a novel by British writer Amy Sackville, the relationship of a newly-wed couple is illustrated by the juxtaposition of the wind-swept shore with a sheltered house. Within this opposition, the hegemonic dualisms of nature/culture, femininity/masculinity, magic/reason, and body/mind are precariously upheld by the narrator whose position becomes equivocal as the novel progresses. The ever-present metamorphic essentiality of the Orcadian littoral landscape and folklore challenges his patriarchal narrative and reveals its violence. This paper will focus on the potential for resistance by hybrid spaces and bodies against hegemonic patriarchal narratives, analysing how the woman's interaction with the beach and engagement with merfolk lore open the possibility for an alternative narrative.

Keywords: Blue Humanities, ecofeminism, littoral, Amy Sackville, Orkney

## Introduction

Littoral zones such as shores, cliffs and waterfronts have continuously been significant in literature from the British Isles. Destabilising in both the material and metaphorical sense, the littoral space serves not only as a setting, but as an actant engaging with characters and contributing to the development of the plot. Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach*, and John Banville's *The Sea* are but a few of the many examples where the seaside occupies a prominent role. As the Blue Humanities have been emphasising in the last two decades, moving away from the exclusivity of thinking with solid landmasses provides new alternatives to hegemonic assumptions underpinning earlier ecocritical work. A vastly interdisciplinary field of research, the Blue Humanities "combines water with human ideas" in an attempt which "include[s] both

describing the complex workings of water and imagining ways to change our relationships to it," as Steve Mentz puts it.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters emphasise the transformative potential of the field, highlighting the opportunities for reimaginings through "the sea's material and phenomenological distinctiveness."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Veronica Strang calls for "acknowledging the agency of water," which necessitates a reconsideration of "human and other forms of agency."<sup>3</sup> While "thinking with water" provides productive ways of shifting the focus to human entanglements with the environment,<sup>4</sup> littoral studies engage additionally with the contact zone between land and vast bodies of water and highlight the littoral zone as a space where contradictions and ambiguity unfold.

As Virginia Richter and Ursula Kluwick argue, the beach, specifically, is a space of rich possibilities in literature, offering a "multiplicity of meanings and functions."<sup>5</sup> The beach has been significant for large parts of humanity's history, offering both a contact zone with and a challenge to different ways of being.<sup>6</sup> As a "liminal zone," it challenges clear boundaries, being itself a shifting threshold "between land and the sea, as well as nature and culture."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as a prime example of an ecotone, the zone of two meeting and overlapping ecosystems, the beach is "more than just a marker of separation or even a marker of connection." Essentially, it is "a zone of fecundity, creativity, transformation; of becoming, assembling, multiplying; of diverging, differentiating, relinquishing," in short,

<sup>1</sup> Steve Mentz, *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities* (New York and London: Routledge, 2024) 1-2. See also Steve Mentz, "Toward a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature," *Literature Compass* 6, no. 5 (2009), DOI: 10.1111/j.1741-4113.2009.00655.x.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters, "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume Through Oceanic Thinking," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33, no. 2 (2015): 248, DOI: 10.1068/d14148p.

<sup>3</sup> Veronica Strang, "Fluid Consistencies. Material Relationality in Human Engagements with Water," *Archaeological Dialogues* 21, no. 2 (2014): 168, DOI: 10.1017/S1380203814000130.

<sup>4</sup> Cecilia Chen, Janine McLeod and Astrida Neimanis, *Thinking with Water* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Richter and Ursula Kluwick, eds., *The Beach in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures: Reading Littoral Space* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015) 2.

<sup>6</sup> See John R. Gillis, *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012) 4.; Nick Groom, Jos Smith and Nicholas Allen, *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) 4-5; as well as Richter and Kluwick, *The Beach in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures* 2.

<sup>7</sup> Richter and Kluwick, *The Beach in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures* 2.

“where [s]omething happens.”<sup>8</sup> Following Astrida Neimanis’ “Hydrofeminism,” the beach can be read as a “membrane,” the “quivering tension of the in-between,” troubling binary concepts while preventing the complete dissolution into absolute sameness.<sup>9</sup>

Considering these qualities, the analysis of the beach as a zone between assumed binaries offers a new perspective on naturalised oppositional dichotomies. Pairs such as animal/human, body/mind as well as emotion/reason, all connected to the Western dualism of nature/culture, are complicated on the shore. Importantly, as ecofeminist scholars have been arguing for decades, these dualisms are distinctively gendered. In Val Plumwood’s words, the “concept of the human has a masculine bias.” In contrast, women have historically been identified as a part of the sphere of nature.<sup>10</sup> Hence, the separation of the human from nature denies man’s entanglement with nature, as he is the prototype for the concept of “human,” while attributing an intrinsic interdependence with nature to any woman. Since the culture/nature and male/female oppositions are so mutually intertwined, unravelling either is inevitably connected to the other.<sup>11</sup> Thus, reading the beach as a zone which blurs the boundary between nature/culture, and hence between nature/human, necessarily actualises an alteration of the dichotomy which posits femininity and masculinity at opposite ends. As such, the beach constitutes a crucial element in understanding dualistic dynamics, particularly gender for the following discussion, in littoral literature.

*Orkney* (2013), Amy Sackville’s second novel, declares its windswept and isolated setting in the title.<sup>12</sup> Rather unorthodox, the Orkney islands are the chosen destination for the honeymoon of the protagonists. This unconventional choice reflects the unusualness of the couple’s relationship: the groom is a professor, his bride is his former student, separated by an age gap of thirty-nine years. As the plot unfolds on an unnamed island in the archipelago, water is omnipresent in the ten days they spend together as a freshly married couple – not only geographically

<sup>8</sup> Astrida Neimanis, “Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water,” in *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice*, ed. Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni, and Fanny Söderbäck (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 93.

<sup>9</sup> Neimanis, “Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water” 93.

<sup>10</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 33.

<sup>11</sup> See Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 33, 66; Douglas A. Vakoch and Sam Mickey, eds., *Women and Nature? Beyond Dualism in Gender, Body, and Environment* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018) 20.

<sup>12</sup> Amy Sackville, *Orkney* (London: Granta, 2013). Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

and meteorologically, but also as an element attached to desires and fears. In the husband's imagination, his wife becomes a watery goddess, a shapeshifting creature from the seas, an embodiment of the women his research on nineteenth-century fairytales centres on.<sup>13</sup> This projection is nourished by her own apparent fascination with water, expressed both in her dreams and the endless hours she spends on the shore. The constant close proximity of water stimulates the mythical atmosphere of the novel, which subtly veils what I will argue is the violent disposition of the husband, who dictates the narration as the only narrator. Nevertheless, water, specifically as part of the littoral space, resists the narrator's possessive and dominating conduct and promises a – potentially final – escape from it.

During the honeymoon, the couple find themselves in diametrically opposed locations: while he spends his time in the sheltered house, she prefers the beach. This contrast not only illuminates their differing personalities but also exemplifies the hegemonic dualisms of culture/nature, man/woman, mind/body, as well as reason/magic which inform the narrator's perception.<sup>14</sup> These dualisms form a web that constitutes the conventional hierarchies within a Western patriarchal system;<sup>15</sup> forcefully upholding these is shown to have devastating effects in the novel. However, the ever-present metamorphic potential of the Orcadian littoral landscape and folklore challenges the narrator's patriarchal narrative as the only possible one and reveals its inherent violence. Using the lenses of littoral studies and ecofeminism, the following analysis will highlight how hybrid bodies and spaces, such as the selkie and the beach, resist the hegemonic narrative of dualisms and make visible an alternative narrative of transformability.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> As Monica Germanà states, both his wife and the women in his texts, as “haunting feminine,” “cannot [...] be easily contained” despite his attempts. While Germanà convincingly uses the Gothic to analyse the relationship in *Orkney*, I will here exclude it to focus on other aspects this novel offers. Monica Germanà, “Authorship, ‘Ghost-Filled’ Islands and the Haunting Feminine: Contemporary Scottish Female Gothic,” in *Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Carol M. Davison and Monica Germanà (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017) 229.

<sup>14</sup> The term dualism, rather than dichotomy, will be used following Plumwood's definition which highlights the creation of exclusive opposites “by domination and subordination,” which is not necessarily a condition for a dichotomy. Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 31.

<sup>15</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 7, 45.

<sup>16</sup> As Rebecca Quigg argues, the island itself can be read as a bridge in *Orkney*, “a holistic combination” of land and sea, which extends to the young woman through her connection with the landscape and her heritage. I would argue that a more local focus on the beach rather than the whole island provides an even more productive reading as it is specifically where the woman chooses to be for large parts of the novel, and which

## The Master Narrative

In her study *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Plumwood pinpoints the “identity of the master,” based on exclusive dualisms, “at the heart of western culture.”<sup>17</sup> This identity is constituted by the mastery of reason over nature, human over nature, reason over emotion, mind over body, and other related pairings.<sup>18</sup> This dualistic structure is closely intertwined with gendered and racial bias, as nature, emotion and the body have historically been connected to female and colonised beings, justifying the domination over their bodies and habitat by male, “cultured” humans and institutions; this includes the domination of non-human animals and the more-than-human world.<sup>19</sup> According to Plumwood, the dualistic construction can be understood on the basis of several features which all rely on an utter and radical separation from the other.<sup>20</sup> This denies any dependency on the entity perceived as other, defining them as lacking in comparison with the self.

This hierarchical construction seems to be reversed by the narrator in Amy Sackville’s novel as he adores, idealises and mystifies his wife to the point of idolatry, seemingly subordinating himself to her otherworldly powers. Yet, the dualisms of nature/culture – female/male – body/mind remain strongly upheld in his narrative and culminate in thinly veiled abuse as an enforcement of domination, as I will show later. Hence, the seemingly reversed hierarchy does not undermine the narrative of mastery which Plumwood describes, it merely obscures it. It is not only the novel, but also its reception which demonstrate how deeply this “master narrative” is rooted and how easily it is accepted, for example by renowned reviewers, as a story on “the uncanny power of love,”<sup>21</sup> evoking “not just compassion but a sense of solidarity” with the abusive husband.<sup>22</sup> Eventually, however, this instable narrative is doomed to collapse, as the grievous end of the novel shows.

serves as the locus for the encounter between merfolk and humans in her retellings of the Orcadian folktales. Rebecca Quigg, “Edge Landscapes in Post-Millennial British Fiction” (PhD diss., University of East Anglia, 2016) 200.

<sup>17</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 42.

<sup>18</sup> An extensive list can be found in Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 43.

<sup>19</sup> The term “more-than-human” is borrowed from the field of Human Geography and has found its way into Posthumanist discourse. I find it helpful to make visible the anthropocentrism inherent in our thinking.

<sup>20</sup> Plumwood names the features “Backgrounding (Denial),” “Radical Exclusion (Hyperseparation),” “Incorporation (Relational Definition),” “Instrumentalism (Objectification),” and “Homogenisation or Stereotyping.” Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 60.

<sup>21</sup> “Orkney,” *Kirkus Reviews*, 15 March 2013, 26.

<sup>22</sup> John Burnside, “Doomed to Grief,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, 1 February 2013, 20.

At first glance, *Orkney* tells the story of a honeymoon: the sixty-year-old professor of English Literature, Richard, spends ten days on a remote Orkney island with his young wife and former student. However, it is not only the age difference and the hierarchical gap which calls to mind Vladimir Nabokov's seminal work *Lolita*, but also the fact that Richard is an eloquent narrator, an academic, charming the reader with his knowledge and wit. Like Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, he plays with names for his beloved. His unreliability as a narrator is evident, as conversations with his wife reveal his tendency to twist memories and paint an idealised picture of her. The intertextual references to Nabokov's novel shift the attention to instances of abuse, which are less obvious in an otherwise consensual relationship between two adults.

Richard is the only focaliser; his wife, the other protagonist, remains nameless and is merely represented through his lens. As the narrator, he controls her name in the text, and as her husband, he claims her last name by overwriting it with his own. In fact, her name is not merely erased from the text, but Richard replaces it with those of the fictional women from his research. Her actual name is only represented as a trace on the mist of the window where it disappears quickly again, never to be disclosed to the reader (227). Instead, she is his Lamia, his Melusine, his Vivienne. These women, embodying the fluidity of the water they often inhabit with their shape-shifting powers, are both intriguing and threatening to Richard as their seductiveness is paired with life-threatening danger. This process of renaming not only inscribes their mythical power onto her, she also becomes an object of study which he attempts to command with years of professional experience. The renaming of the woman, by marriage and by ambiguous pet names, along with the erasure of her real name, encapsulates the hierarchy he aims for.

This is perfectly illustrated in the first paragraph of the novel, as Richard assures his position as a removed observer of his object of study. He sits at the desk inside the house and watches his wife on the beach:

She's staring out to sea now. My young wife. There she stands on the barren beach, all wrapped up in her long green coat, among the scuttle and clatter of pebbles and crabs. She stares out as the water nears her feet and draws back, and when that soft and insistent suck of the tide gets close enough to slurp at her toes she shuffles herself up to the shore. Soon the beach will be reduced to a strip of narrow sand and she will be forced to retreat to the rocks; and then, I think, she'll come back to me.

In the meantime, I watch from the window, as she stares out to sea. (1)

The window is a powerful image here which represents the limited frame through which not only Richard but also the reader can “read” the young woman. Resembling the opening of a play, with the curtains drawn aside, she is presented to the spectators – reader and narrator – as if on a stage. This staging of the scene almost blatantly represents the male gaze and reinforces his position as the researcher of his wife as an object of study. The glass of the window serves as the lens through which she can be analysed, literally framed within a specific framework.

Most importantly, it serves as a barrier between them, separating the house from the beach. This spatial juxtaposition can productively be read as a visualisation of the divide between culture and nature as gendered spheres. Indeed, the woman is presented as a part of the beach, “among the scuttle and clatter of pebbles and crabs,” moving with the tide as it interacts with her body. Yet, she remains unintelligible, with her back turned to the observer behind the window, who sets up a hypothesis to predict her future actions. It seems to be an uneven, nonreciprocal relationship, as the last line emphasises: “I watch from the window, as she stares out to the sea.” This is, in fact, a misconception, as his wife later reveals that she is acutely aware of being watched and limits her range of movement for his sake. In this first description, the subject/object distinction is set up by the narrator’s voice alone – a narrator who later also attributes magical qualities to his wife, describes her as the embodiment of the sea, and ascribes to her the skill to communicate with animals, while continuously and unsuccessfully attempting to complete his academic work. The dualisms as described by Plumwood seep through the text, already perfectly illustrated on the first page by the characters’ positions on the beach and within the house. Most importantly, they are only perpetuated by the one single, dominant voice. Yet, it is in fact the beach, his wife’s place, which destabilises the structure which Richard attempts to uphold.

### **Metamorphic Resistance: The Beach**

The beach is precisely not the binary opposite of culture, it rather “demarcates the precarious boundary between land and the sea, as well as between nature and culture,” as Kluwick and Richter state.<sup>23</sup> As previously discussed, it is a “liminal zone,” the ever-shifting nature of its materiality resisting clear boundaries between the adjacent bodies of dry land and water. Water, sand, flotsam and jetsam: none of it is stable. John Mack further emphasises the mutability and elusiveness of this landscape, calling the beach “an ambiguous place, an in-between place [...], a neutral

<sup>23</sup> Richter and Kluwick, *The Beach in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures* 2.

space, neither properly terrestrial nor yet thoroughly maritime, awaiting a metamorphic role."<sup>24</sup> Mentz's notion of the beach affirms this "metamorphic role" as he describes it as a model of change.<sup>25</sup> Both of its main constituents, sand and water, are marked by continuity, connectivity, and adaptability: "Sand [...] consists of a near-infinity of particles always touching each other, and its forms constantly change their structures."<sup>26</sup> Significantly, water, as a "deep source of plurality and potential,"<sup>27</sup> can be considered "primarily a process rather than a thing."<sup>28</sup> Hence, the beach resists clear categorisation; it embraces opposites, eroding their boundaries with time and motion. The beach is a shape-shifter, both by being in a constant process of material transformation and by engendering a plurality of meanings in our understanding and imaginations.

Richard recognises this innate hybridity of the beach also in his wife. It is not only her preference for the beach which fuels his imagination – her webbed fingers, her inability to cook and her secretiveness about her past evoke common tropes in folklore which point to a second identity as a shape-shifting mer-creature. While this makes her even more desirable to him, it also threatens his wish for control. In an early description of his wife, Richard's defensive stance towards ambiguity is aptly illustrated:

She is a Protean, a Thetis, a daughter of the sea, a shape-shifting goddess who must be subdued; I hold her fast and she changes, changes in my grasp... But I am no prince and cannot overwhelm her; she will consent to marry but goes on shifting no matter how tight I grip. (22)

Foreshadowing the continuation of their honeymoon, Richard identifies the futility of countering the metamorphic potential and fluidity with force, yet is unable to imagine any other way of engaging with this power than by grasping and gripping tightly.

It is his wife who offers an alternative in the form of two Orcadian folktales which contrast with each other in their depiction of a romantic relationship. These stories constitute the longest passages of the woman's direct speech in the novel; she seems the most present and accessible as her voice iterates the stories from her

<sup>24</sup> John Mack, *The Sea: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011) 165.

<sup>25</sup> Steve Mentz, "Brown," in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green*, ed. Jeffrey J. Cohen (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013) 195.

<sup>26</sup> Mentz, "Brown" 195.

<sup>27</sup> Chen, McLeod and Neimanis, *Thinking with Water* 12.

<sup>28</sup> Jamie Linton, *What Is Water?* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010) 4.



Orcadian heritage while Richard's mediation is minimised. The folktales she retells are about shape-shifting female merfolk, finfolk and selkies,<sup>29</sup> and their romantic interaction with a human man. These tales are based on traditional lore from Orkney and geographically connected areas, such as the Faroe Islands, Iceland, the Shetlands, Norway, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, where they exist in different variations.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the ability to transform consistently constitutes the centre of these tales, as it does in the young woman's iterations of the stories. Importantly, in her versions, this ability grants adaptability and independence. Moreover, the reaction of the two men to this transformability stands in juxtaposition, as one embraces the potential to be hybrid and gains the ability to transform himself, while the other prevents the transformability and forces a merfolk woman into dependence. Both tales emphasise the wife's bond with the maritime landscape and her proficiency in an alternative, non-academic transfer of knowledge.

While dichotomic categorisations are omnipresent in these folktales of selkies and finfolk, researchers often underestimate how the setting itself defies them.<sup>31</sup> For example, Peter Le Couteur rightly claims the traditional selkie lore to be a "potent example of Plumwood's cross-linking and hyperseparation played out in a liminal,

<sup>29</sup> In Orcadian folklore, selkies are seal-people who live as seals in the water but can shed their fur to become human. If their sealskin is lost, they can no longer transform back into a seal and are barred from their life in the sea. In contrast, finfolk are physically human, yet can breathe and move underwater. They are generally depicted as wild but not uncultured, living in a hunter-gatherer society. See W. Traill Dennison for examples of common retellings, especially "Orkney Folk-Lore," *The Scottish Antiquary, or, Northern Notes and Queries* 7, no. 28 (1893): 171-77 for the selkie myth, and "Orkney Folklore. Sea Myths," *The Scottish Antiquary, or, Northern Notes and Queries* 7, no. 25 (1892): 18-24 for the finfolk.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Le Couteur, "Slipping Off the Sealskin: Gender, Species, and Fictive Kinship in Selkie Folktales," *Gender Forum* 55 (2015): 65.

<sup>31</sup> Boria Sax, in her book on the animal bride in folktales, states that "the husband represents humanity, while his bride represents the natural world," and reduces the discussion to their marriage as a representation of "the changing relationship between humanity and nature." Further, Kirsten Møllegaard, although emphasising the "transbiological fluidity" of the selkie wife which unsettles the animal/human separation and gender roles, does not include the environment as a supporting factor for this argument. Boria Sax, *The Serpent and the Swan: The Animal Bride in Folklore and Literature* (Blacksburg, VA: McDonald and Woodward Publishing, 1998) 10; and Kirsten Møllegaard, "Global Flows in Coastal Contact Zones: Selkie Lore in Neil Jordan's *Ondine* and Solveig Eggerz's *Seal Woman*," in *Unsettling Assumptions: Tradition, Gender, Drag*, ed. Pauline Greenhill and Diane Tye (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2014) 95.

littoral space between land and sea."<sup>32</sup> Le Couteur points out the predominance of a "hyperseparated, dualist femininity," established by juxtaposing the wild, naked and magical selkie woman with the mundane, civilised man. This juxtaposition relies heavily on the opposition of land and water as well as of the human and the animal;<sup>33</sup> the woman inhabits the water in an animal form, while the man lives in a terrestrial house. However, what is ignored here is that the body of the selkie can transform; hence, the dichotomy of human and animal collapses as the selkie can be both. Further, the space of the encounter, the beach, is both land and water, which introduces a potential category between the opposites. The hyperseparation, then, is shown to be a construct, as the body and space undermine the dualistic opposition.

In her re-telling of Orcadian folktales, the young woman in Sackville's novel frames the beach as the locus which makes the encounter between merfolk and humans possible, and which necessitates a transformation to move between the elements it combines. In one of the stories she tells, a young crofter discovers three selkie women as he is "gathering kelp on the shore." The women, spotted "naked on the rocks," transform and escape quickly into the water as the crofter's dog barks at them (209). The beach, here, exposes them to the eyes of the human, but also functions as a threshold that allows a fast retreat. However, the crofter learns about the secret of their sealskins which permit the transformation from seal into woman and vice-versa, and steals one of them as he spies the women once more on the beach. He takes the fur to his house, followed by the selkie woman who begs him to let her go, her weeping becoming louder as "they left the roar of the sea behind" (209). Mirroring the spatial separation of Richard and his wife at the beginning of the novel, the house and the beach are set in juxtaposition in the embedded narrative, too. As the selkie woman enters the house, she has to assimilate to the crofter's realm and "becomes a good wife" (209). Yet, while fulfilling her domestic duties as a housewife and mother, the woman relinquishes all emotion as she "neither wept, nor laughed, nor sang, but she was loving, for twenty years." Only when her son ultimately finds the hidden coat and effectively releases her from captivity, "at last she laughed and wept" (209). She returns to the beach from where she can dive back into her life in the sea, which re-establishes her relationship with her sea-borne family, with freedom of movement and lust for life.

In a similar way, the story the young woman tells the previous night already celebrates life under the water. Donald, a crofter, is gathering limpets on "the

<sup>32</sup> Le Couteur, "Slipping Off the Sealskin" 65.

<sup>33</sup> Le Couteur, "Slipping Off the Sealskin" 65.

rocky shore," hanging over an edge of "an outcrop jutting over the water" (187). His close proximity to the water allows a mermaid-like woman to enthrall him and abduct him to her home. This mythical place, called Finfolkaheem, home of the finfolk, is "a city of bones and pearl and silver, with sharks' teeth topping the walls and a whale's jaw for a gate" (189). The short description captures both the luxury and the bond with marine animals. Literally integrated into the structure of the city, the "sharks' teeth" and the "whale's jaw" are not only displayed as trophies to celebrate victory over them, but also as an acknowledgement of their strength and their role as an innate part of society. There, the crofter lives a life of sexual liberation, community spirit and abundance:

Donald existed in a wash of bliss, of wine and feasting, and hunting with the powerful finmen and their packs of seals, riding their seahorses on the crest of a wave [...], and he had quite forgotten his croft, his farm, the gathered harvest and the new crops left unsown, the sheep growing shaggy, the hearth long since cold, and his bucket of limpets left on the shore. (190-91)

The story imagines a nostalgic return to pre-settlement life as the crofter abandons the site of production and cherishes hunting as a way to provide food.<sup>34</sup> Similar to the selkie tale, the (re-)immersion into a life which is entangled with animal species is celebrated as one of "pleasure and love" (190) enabled by either the ability to turn half or fully into an animal as the selkie and the mermaid do, or by living with them, for example with the companion seals and the seahorses in the story of the finfolk. The core juxtaposition of these two tales then consists in the approach to the non-human and more-than-human world: while the selkie's husband prevents his wife from "turning animal" by quite literally disabling her and taking possession of parts of her body, Donald embraces the otherness of the finfolk and finds pure bliss. The shore in these two stories serves as a site of capture, but also as an entry point to the liberation of the alternative underwater world where the boundaries between human and animal become fluid. These hybrid and symbiotic lifeforms are made possible by shape-shifting, a mode of adaptation which can also be exploited, as the selkie tale shows. By choosing these two opposing love stories, it seems Richard's wife is allegorically communicating her conception of a successful relationship, and possibly speaking out a warning.

<sup>34</sup> It is important to note that the gendered division of labour is naturalised below the sea – only the men are hunters and the return to the arms of their women. The tale is therefore not exactly a feminist utopia, but it highlights the joy found in embracing the "other" rather than attempting to dominate them.

Richard, however, reacts rather anxiously to speculations of an alternative, maritime life. He has already imagined life under the sea in a nightmarish scene in a previous night:

I [...] saw it all submerged, my desk sinking down, drawers lolling open, streaming seaweed as it fell, I found myself down among the seals, the whales, the squid and narwhals, mermaids laughing at my efforts to catch at my papers as they turned to pulp; until it settled on the bottom, redundant, a wrecked ship, coral-cruled, beaded with tiny bubbles. (172)

Richard's desk and paper signify the core of his work and identity as an academic scholar. His fear of becoming a historical artefact himself, "redundant," while being laughed at for clinging on, is palpable. Further, in the next paragraph he expresses a sense of rivalry with the woman's father who, he imagines, dwells under the sea. He is at odds with the underwater world; his life is incompatible with the wetness that dissolves the core of his identity. Richard's inability to endure this imagery is demonstrated by his immediate search for comfort and distraction by engaging physically with his wife: "I reached for her. She barely woke." (173) A conversation on the following day reveals that the sexual intercourse was not entirely consensual:

'[...] I slept right through. Except when you pestered me.' I pestered you?  
'You woke me up,' she said. 'I was having a nice dream. And you woke me up to have your way with me.' Oh, I'm sorry, I said, only a little sarcastic. You didn't seem all that awake, actually. (175)

Richard cares little for his wife's engagement; in fact, he does not mind if she is not actually conscious in order to consent. Her expression of having been "pester[ed]" and phrasing of "hav[ing] your way with me" is alarming but is ridiculed by Richard's sarcastic response. She emphasises his nightly interference with the peacefulness of her sleep. Like Richard, the woman has dreamt of the submersion in water, yet she has experienced it as calming. Importantly, she adapts to the sea with a physical change – her "skin was all silver," the same tint as the water, which suggests that she had developed scales in her dream (175). This juxtaposition of their watery dreams highlights their stance not only towards nature, but water specifically as a malleable, potentially dangerous but also life-giving element. While Richard clings to his desk and writings, or "culture," his wife becomes part of the water, or "nature." Nevertheless, while this contrast seems to exacerbate the conservative, patriarchal attribution of nature to women,

the novel highlights the violent consequences of Richard's rejection of an entanglement with nature – violence which affects the woman who is placed as a stand-in for nature.

The woman's connection to water increases over the honeymoon. Her nights are invaded by watery dreams, and during the day, she slowly approaches the water more and more closely. This familiarity with water scares Richard, as he perceives her as almost literally slipping away, re-establishing connection with her past on Orkney, and becoming more independent as she learns how to dive. Further, the aquatic women in Richard's research and his wife's folktales gain substance in the mythical, wild, and solitary environment of Orkney. Eventually, it seems like a real possibility for both him and the reader that his wife is indeed of the merfolk. The beach, then, plays a crucial role for the couple as it invites transformability and change, constituting a space of both desire and fear, as it is the entry point to the water where freedom and death can be found. Accordingly, one of the climactic events in the novel is set on the shoreline:

[...] when I lowered the bottle I saw she'd reached the water's edge, and she didn't hesitate, she ran right in, laughing, and then she dived under, and for a moment I couldn't see her at all, and then I saw a white billow a few yards out where she was lying upon the water. [...] I reached her and saw that she was face up and smiling, her nightdress soaked and bulging about her like a jellyfish [...]; she seemed entirely at peace, in her element. (215)

From Richard's perspective, she becomes one with the water, her dress imitating marine life, her body carried by the waves. The breathless narration emphasises how his fear manifests in front of his eyes. She has crossed the threshold she had been toying with in the long hours she had been standing on the beach. Richard can no longer count on her return when the tide rises too high; "the strip of narrow sand" is no longer her boundary (1). While the woman cannot swim, the threat of drowning is minor, as the water is described to be only thigh-high. Hence, Richard is not afraid of an accident, but of losing control: he is haunted by "the thought that [the sea] might take her, and [...] that she might let it." (216) The beach has fulfilled the threat of liminality and has proven to be an entry point to untameable waters where his wife might willingly surrender to the control of another. Richard is in a "freezing, shocked fury" as he carries her out of the water, in contrast to her blissful state (215). The union with the water seems to confirm her identity as a "shape-shifting goddess," to which he can only react by "grasp[ing]" and "grip[ping]" tightly (22).

The defence against the fear of loss, both of the woman but also of the boundaries between human/animal, human/nature and reason/emotion, eventually manifests in the domination of her body. After the couple returns to the house, the narrator makes his most explicit admission of sexual assault in the text: "I took her to bed but I didn't let her sleep. I didn't want to let her leave me, I didn't want to let her go back under. I may have been a little rough with her; when it was over and the blood cleared from my eyes, I saw her face was once more sea-stung with tears." (217) Richard seems to be oblivious to the pain causing her to be "sea-stung with tears" and subdues her again in the morning: "I saw her eyelids flicker and reached for her. I rolled her onto her back and held her under. Her drowning eyes. 'I have a headache,' she said, but relented in the end." (219) Given the unreliability of Richard as a narrator and her commenting on bruises on her body on the next day (229), his cautious confession of "hav[ing] been a little rough" can be taken as an understatement. These two instances clearly depict a lack of consent from the woman's side, even more so as she claims not to remember these events of the night and avoids his presence on the following day.<sup>35</sup> Instead, she lingers at the beach, the space which promises escape according to the folktales.

Her disappearance on the next day remains completely open to interpretation: everything seems possible, from escape, abandonment, murder, transformation into a merfolk creature, to her being a complete invention from the beginning. This lack of resolution once again highlights the unresolvable ambiguity which Richard struggles to accept, but which ultimately permeates his own narrative. The last pages of the novel show Richard grappling with the sudden collapse of the relationship he desperately sought control over. The increase in blank space in the text illustrates his loss, not only of his wife, but of his former position behind the window.<sup>36</sup> Eventually, Richard attempts to reverse these positions of the dualistic system, but finds his master narrative blank without a storyteller in the window: "I take her place on the beach and imagine her watching me, from the window, as

<sup>35</sup> This professed inability to remember these events, together with Richard's obvious unreliability as a narrator, might be interpreted as indications that the events of the night and morning are Richard's fantasy and did not really happen. However, the bruises on the woman's body as well as her evasiveness support a more persuasive argument for either the repression of the memory of a traumatic event, or an unwillingness to engage with the perpetrator and to re-live the experience.

<sup>36</sup> In an interview with Sandeep Mahal, Amy Sackville describes the text being co-narrated by the water, taking up increasingly more space on the page. This emphasises nicely how the beach presents the entry point to another possible narrative. Amy Sackville, "Fiction Uncovered," interview by Sandeep Mahal, *Fiction Uncovered*, 1 June 2013, video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vvrX\\_W5Y3Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5vvrX_W5Y3Y).

if we've changed places, but I turn and there is no one there, there is only an empty, blank hole." (248-49) The simple reversal of positions fails to upend the "master story of western culture [...] which has spoken mainly of conquest and control, of capture and use, of destruction and incorporation."<sup>37</sup> Rather, its resolution might require the "recognition of a complex, interacting pattern of both continuity and difference," as Plumwood proposes.<sup>38</sup> This pattern could emerge from the beach, the "model of change,"<sup>39</sup> and the space that accommodates the co-existence of continuity and difference in its ever-shifting persistence.

## Conclusion

The beach is indubitably crucial in *Orkney*, both as a setting creating a distinct atmosphere, and as an interactive environment which contests a dualistic understanding of human and nature that shapes the various webs of hierarchies in a patriarchal society. The division between nature and culture, evocatively construed on the first page of the novel, is challenged by the fluid, hybrid, shape-shifting potential of the beach. The equation of woman with nature, and the beach in this particular case, is both wilfully created by the narrator as well as perceived as a threat which needs to be mitigated and disarmed by domination, often enforced by violence. The sexual assault, obscured by the unreliable narration, can be read as a defence against a perceived loss of control and an act of hyperseparation which serves to maintain a patriarchal power structure. In contrast, metamorphosis, a distinct trait of the beach and by extension the woman, is emphasised as an element for adaptation and change in the folk- and fairytales, told by both Richard and his wife, and subverts patriarchal expectations. The resistance in the mere existence of the beach, the woman, and the folktale unveil the master narrative as just that – one of many possible narratives which can be rewritten and rethought if they are shown to be destructive. The claim to an exclusive narrative leads to Richard's inability to accept a more ambiguous understanding of his wife that does not fit into a dichotomous way of thinking. Eventually, this manifests in an attempt to possess her body by force the moment his wife seems to become an aquatic being, living both on land and in water. Hence, the beach, as an embodiment of the in-between, serves as a meaning-making environment in the novel, underlining the couple's difficulty to escape their embeddedness in hegemonic power structures which not only shape the relationship between genders, but also

<sup>37</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 196.

<sup>38</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* 67.

<sup>39</sup> Mentz, "Brown" 195.

between human and the non-human. Finally, the liminality of the beach represents “continuity and difference” persisting alongside and in contrast to a dualistic perception, as its constituents are in a constant process of flowing, shifting, tumbling; chafing and resisting, moulding and co-creating.

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