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DIPLOMA THESIS

An Ecocritical Exploration of Julia Armfield's Our Wives Under the Sea and Martin MacInnes' In Ascension

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Declaration

I declare that I have worked on this thesis, *Material Ecocriticism, Trans-Corporeality and Oceanic Imagery in Julia Armfield's Our Wives Under the Sea and Martin MacInnes' In Ascension*, individually using only the sources listed on the Works Cited page. I declare that I have not used this diploma thesis to gain any other degree.

Prague, 9th July 2024

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Signature

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ABSTRACT

This diploma thesis engages in an eco-critical interpretation of two recent and critically acclaimed novels, *In Ascension* (2023) by Martin MacInnes and *Our Wives Under the Sea* (2022) by Julia Armfield. The objective is to contextualise these novels within the domain of ecocriticism and to demonstrate how both authors adeptly capture the perpetual and reciprocal exchange and influence between humanity and the natural world, with the predominant emphasis on the marine environments. The theoretical part of this thesis ventures into a comprehensive examination of ecocriticism, with particular emphasis on the domain of blue ecocriticism, material ecocriticism and the concept of trans-corporeality. Furthermore, it elucidates the concept of the Anthropocene as an overarching term to identify and address the human footprint on the Earth's geology, biodiversity, ecosystems and climate. Subsequently, the practical part offers a literary interpretation supported by the insights evaluated in the theoretical part. It seeks to explore the concepts and themes put forth and through that illustrate how both novels interconnect the personal, family and intimate relationships with the connections and relationship with the natural environment. In the conclusion of this thesis, through a comparative lens, we aim to compare and contrast the novels in their approach to the interconnectedness of humanity and the natural world.

KEY WORDS

Julia Armfield, *Our Wives Under the* Sea, Martin MacInnes, *In Ascension*, Material Ecocriticism, Trans-Corporeality, Anthropocene, Interconnectedness, Ocean, Hybridity, Cycle

ABSTRAKT

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá ekokritickou interpretací dvou nedávno vydaných a kritiky oceňovaných románů, *In Ascension* (2023) od Martina MacInnesa a *Our Wives Under the Sea* (2022) od Julie Armfield. Cílem je zasadit tyto romány do kontextu ekokritiky a ukázat, jak oba autoři dovedně zachycují neustálou vzájemnou výměnu a vliv mezi lidstvem a přírodním světem, s převládajícím akcentem na mořské prostředí. Teoretická část této práce se pouští do komplexního zkoumání ekokritiky, se zvláštním důrazem na oblast modré ekokritiky, materiální ekokritiky a konceptu transkorporality. Dále objasňuje koncept antropocénu jako zastřešujícího termínu pro identifikaci a řešení lidského působení na geologii, biodiverzitu, ekosystémy a klimatu Země. Následující praktická část nabízí literární interpretaci podpořenou poznatky zhodnocenými v teoretické části. Snaží se prozkoumat předložené koncepty a témata a ukázat, jak oba romány propojují osobní, rodinné a intimní vztahy s vazbami a vztahy k přírodnímu prostředí. V závěru této práce nahlížíme komparativní optikou na oba romány a porovnáváme je v jejich přístupu k propojenosti lidstva a přírody.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Julia Armfield, *Our Wives Under the Sea*, Martin MacInnes, *In Ascension*, Materiální ekokritika, Transkorporalita, Antropocén, Vzájemná propojenost, Oceán, Hybridita, Cyklus

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Introduction

The relevance of ecocritical studies within the context of literary criticism appears to be more pertinent than ever within the context of the Anthropocene and the ongoing and unprecedented environmental challenges posed by a "strong human imprint on planetary climate and biogeochemistry" (Malhi 8) as well as the "prevailing technocentric focus on industrial disruption and modernity" (Malhi 12). The discourse encompassing the dire climate change, which is characterised by issues such as carbon dioxide emissions, rising ocean levels or problems related to biodiversity and environmental conservation, is evolving as one of the key concerns discussed among humanity, as evidenced by a plethora of the ominous and alarming headlines, to mention a few: "Scientists deliver "final warning" on climate crisis: act now or it's too late" (*Guardian*) or "World's glaciers melting at record levels due to climate change" (*Nbcnews*). These concerns have been connected with the development of a distinct field within literary criticism focused on the mode of literary portrayal of the natural environment and the negotiation and redefinition of the connections and relationships between humans and nature. Ecocriticism or Ecocritical studies emerge as an indispensable lens through which to examine and evaluate inherent environmental messages presented in literary works.

Consequently, the motivation behind this thesis dwells in the necessity to explore how literature can form and modify humanity's views on the symbiosis between humanity and nature. There is an urgent need to establish new modes of access and approaches to evaluating and interrogating environmental deterioration. Among these, the genre of literary fiction is proving to function as a fertile site to facilitate discussion and, furthermore, is emerging "as a catalyst for environmental awareness, social change, and the cultivation of ecological ethics in collective consciousness" (Chaturvedi 28). A shift in mindset aimed towards the inclusion of nature as a non-negligible entity arises as one of the central themes of contemporary literature, in which the natural environment cannot be comprehended merely as background for humanity's endeavours but as a transformative and agentic force that influences the trajectory of humanity on a daily basis.

This diploma thesis engages in a nuanced and in-depth analysis of two very recent and widely acclaimed novels, Martin MacInnes's novel *In Ascension* (2023) and Julia Armfield's novel *Our Wives Under the Sea* (2022). One of the main objectives of this diploma thesis is to contextualise the literary works within ecocritical discourse, predominantly with an explicit emphasis on the contemporary development and trajectory of the field concerned with paradigms of material ecocriticism and notions such as trans-corporeality or naturecultures. Moreover, the aim is to analyse and interpret the treatment of oceanic imagery and the use of its highly symbolic potential in order to demonstrate how Armfield and MacInnes employ these themes and interpret their purpose and function within the narrative structure of the novels under evaluation. To achieve these aims, the thesis is structured into two main parts – the theoretical and the practical. Within the theoretical part, this thesis aims to conduct a comprehensive literature review that conscientiously informs and serves as an indispensable theoretical foundation for the consecutive literary interpretation and analysis of the novels undertaken in the practical part.

Subsequently, the theoretical part is subdivided into three main chapters, corresponding to the three main themes and concepts investigated in this diploma thesis. The first chapter delves into the definition and demarcation of the scope of ecocritical studies. Emphasis is placed on delineating the development of ecocriticism in the context of literary criticism and outlining the historical trajectory of this field to present the essential theoretical underpinnings that would serve for the ensuing progression of this diploma thesis. This chapter draws on seminal ecocritical publications by renowned academics such as Ursula Heise, Cheryll Glotfelty, Lawrence Buell and Scott Slovic. Furthermore, this chapter introduces the emerging field of blue ecocriticism, which takes into consideration the treatment of the oceanic environments within the field of ecocriticism and endeavours, in Sidney Dobrin's terms, to "unearth" (8) a predominantly terrestrial-based field of ecocriticism. Additionally, it attempts to outline its inherent symbolic richness and diversity while examining the depiction and treatment of place in the marine environments in juxtaposition to the land.

Building on the previous chapter, the second chapter examines the emerging paradigms of material ecocriticism and trans-corporeality, drawing on the publications by leading figures in the field, including Serpil Oppermann, Serenella Iovino and Stacy Alaimo. The central focus is put on the interconnectedness and entanglement of society and the natural environment while highlighting nature's agency and narrativity together with the examination of how material ecocriticism treats and views "matter". Moreover, the concept of trans-corporeality proposed by Stacy Alaimo is evaluated, further exploring the blurring of boundaries between humanity and nature.

The last chapter, incorporated in the theoretical part, deals with the rise of the term Anthropocene and examines its implications, consequences and capitalistic and technocentric underpinnings. The chapter attempts to showcase how the Anthropocene has permeated the general discourse and transcended its scientific origins by contextualising the Anthropocene in its many connotations, such as intellectual zeitgeist, ideological provocation or its relevance for the aesthetics of contemporary fiction.

As indicated above, the practical part engages in the interpretation and analysis of two contemporary novels, *In Ascension* by Martin MacInnes and *Our Wives Under the Sea* by Julia Armfield, which have been widely acclaimed by literary critics and society. *In Ascension* presents Leigh Hasenbosch's odyssey from the depths of the ocean to the unmapped regions of outer space entangled with struggles to navigate her childhood trauma intertwined with the discovery of her identity and role in the "web of life". Whereas *Our Wives Under the Sea* depicts the evolution and convolutions of the intimate relationship between Leah and Miri following an ominous incident in a stranded submarine, culminating in Leah's progressive transformation into a hybrid form, merging water with her human body. The reasons for choosing these two works are their apparent similarities, which will be examined in the practical part of this thesis. While both authors employ slightly divergent perspectives and devices, in the end, striking similarities can be detected in their narratives, themes and messages for society.

Through a close reading of these novels and subsequent comparison in the conclusion of this thesis we seek to uncover the underlying environmental messages, which are primarily concerned with the assessment and re-evaluation of the bond between society and nature. Besides, the conclusion seeks to present the palpable resemblance and links between the thematic explorations and trajectories of these two novels. By utilising the theoretical insights, the thesis aspires to unearth the parallels between personal introspection and familial relationships and the broader context of environmental connections while concentrating on the paradigm of material ecocriticism, trans-corporeal experiences, the confrontation of anthropocentric perspectives and the implications of human-dominated age. Consequently, the practical part is divided into two principal sections, the first of which examines familial and intimate relationships while the latter dissects the environmental manifestations inherent in the novels. In addition, the practical part sets itself to interpret the ocean's inexhaustible symbolic richness and importance for humanity while also analysing the demanding portrayal of temporal and spatial dimensions in the uncharted and vigorous waters of the ocean.

THEORETICAL PART

1 Ecocriticism

In this introductory chapter, we conduct a comprehensive examination of the development of the field of ecocritical studies within the context of literary criticism. The investigation begins with proposing various definitions of ecocriticism and attempting to designate its scope of interest. Subsequently, the focus shifts towards the historical development of ecocriticism, defining its successive but often overlapping waves. The aim of tracing the evolution of the field of ecocriticism is to portray and describe how the subsequent chapter considering 'material ecocriticism' addresses shortcomings and critiques of the previous approaches and waves of ecocriticism, further emphasising how material ecocriticism functions as a valuable lens through which to study and analyse the inherent relationship and interaction between humanity and the natural environment. Overall, this chapter serves as an indispensable foundation, first outlining the general context of the domain of ecocriticism before delving deeper into the distinct frameworks proposed by contemporary academics, namely the frameworks of material ecocriticism and trans-corporeality.

In addition, this chapter examines the recently emerging field of ecocriticism, specifically the paradigm of 'blue ecocriticism', which mainly attends to the frequently abandoned oceanic environment and its intricacies. By employing this theoretical framework, this diploma thesis seeks to navigate and interpret the narratives of the two novels under evaluation: *Our Wives Under the Sea* (2022) by Julia Armfield and *In Ascension* (2023) by Martin MacInnes. Both novels skillfully evaluate the complex interplay between human agency and marine environments.

The framework of blue ecocriticism manages its focus on marine environments and oceanic imagery through which we can examine and interrogate the relationship between the ocean and humankind, between the inanimate and animate, portrayed in these texts. To ultimately develop the portrayal of a complex and active environment like the ocean, this chapter conducts an examination of how the sense of place is depicted in oceanic settings and

juxtaposes it with how the treatment of place operates in the terrestrial branch of ecocriticism. This theoretical discussion also later on serves as a basis and background for later literary analysis of temporality and spatiality in *Our Wives Under the Sea* and *In Ascension.*

The subsequent chapter will examine what Pippa Marland identifies as the "fourth wave of ecocriticism" (855), representing ecocriticism's most recent evolution. It will place particular emphasis on the theory of material ecocriticism and the concept of trans-corporeality coined by Stacy Alaimo.

1.1 Defining Ecocriticism

When attempting to define ecocriticism, it is paramount to mention the multiplicity of definitions provided by various scholars, as ecocriticism is still an evolving and diverse field of literary criticism. Buell et al., in their essay, characterised ecocriticism as an "eclectic, pluriform, and cross-disciplinary initiative" (418). This demonstrates ecocriticism's diversity, incorporating insights and frameworks from various fields, including but not limited to literary studies, philosophy, ecology, anthropology, sociology and beyond.

Moreover, Ursula Heise portrays the diversity of the field of ecocriticism on the spectrum of terms and labels by which the field has been referred to in academic works: "ecocriticism as a convenient short-hand for what some critics prefer to call environmental criticism, literary-environmental studies, literary ecology, literary environmentalism or green cultural studies" ("Hitchhiker's Guide" 506). The essence of ecocriticism is encapsulated in its "openness and theoretical ambiguity" (Opermann 105), highlighting the field's flexibility and inherent responsiveness to continuously evolving scholarly discourse.

In the introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, published in 1996, one of the pioneering publications dedicated entirely to the field of ecocriticism, Sheryll Glotfelty offers a comprehensive definition of ecocriticism:

> Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman. (xix)

Therefore, to conclude this section, it is evident that ecocriticism evolved into a sort of "umbrella term for a range of critical approaches" (Marland 846). Given the scope observed in this chapter, a singular overarching definition would prove to be insubstantial. However, to put it simply, ecocriticism aims to examine the relationship and connections between the natural world and human society through the prism of cultural expression, understood as both literary interpretation and environmental critique. Glotfelty further claims that everything is inextricably linked, and that literature does not exist in a vacuum, but rather, it interacts with the world in perpetual circularity ("Ecocriticism" 230). Similarly, ecocriticism itself is depicted as a productive and evolving approach, continually absorbing novel insights and viewpoints. As affirmed by Buell et al., ecocriticism still "remains in a state of unfolding rather than consolidation" (433).

1.2 Historical Trajectory of Ecocriticism

The use of the term 'wave' in connection to the trajectory of ecocriticism was pioneered by Lawrence Buell in his seminal work "The Future of Environmental Criticism", published in 2005. In connection to adopting this terminology, Scott Slovic observed that it was seemingly inspired by the first and second-wave feminism framework. However, when applied to an ecocritical context, it presents certain convolutions, as the boundaries between waves are fluid and blurred rather than necessarily discrete and easily established (5). Therefore, unfortunately, Marland addresses the shortcomings of this terminology regarding diverging and inconsistent attitudes to what precisely defines each wave (851).

The origins of ecocritical studies can be traced to the year 1987 when the term 'ecocriticism' was introduced by William Rueckert in his seminal essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (Glotfelty, *Ecocriticism Reader* xx). As a result, the field of

ecocriticism has started to burgeon and consequently solidified its position as a fundamental component of environmental humanities. The establishment of the term sparked the ensuing developments in the 1980s that led to the instituting of ASLE[1] in 1992 and, successively, the establishment of the ISLE [2]journal, a medium for the scholarly discourse and discussion on the relationships between the human and non-human worlds (Heise, "Hitchhiker's Guide" 505). The previously somewhat fragmented and dispersed range of scholars engaging in ecocritical exploration became a cohesive interest group with the aim of altering the field of literary criticism (Glotfelty, *Ecocriticism Reader* xviii).

According to Marland, the reason for this delayed development and rather late establishment of environmental ecocriticism may be attributed to the unwillingness and uncertainty of literary studies and literary criticism to engage itself in what is generally perceived as a 'scientific problem'. Furthermore, Marland generalises that another counterargument of why literary studies have refrained from evaluating and examining the non-human world is the fact that the earth has no agency to express itself and subsequently articulate its own narratives (847).

The first wave of ecocriticism principally arose from an emphasis on narratives that "foregrounded the non-human world and that might foster environmental sensibility" (Marland 849). This transition signalled a departure from the prevalent examination and study of literature that was necessarily anthropocentric, refocusing attention on increasing portrayal and understanding of the natural world. Therefore, it can be specified that the first wave of ecocriticism was perceived as a local movement that was unable to effectively address the broader global and social concerns (Nuri 257). This local vicinity is correspondingly evident in ecocriticism's thematic concern, which privileged rural and natural areas over urban spaces (Buell 93). As a result, the treatment of thematic examination in the first wave of ecocriticism was characterised by a distinct fixation on narratives concerned with the pristine and untainted nature, as evidenced by the natural environments functioning merely as a backdrop for human activities. More precisely, it was the "focus on

[1] Acronym for The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment.
[2] Acronym for *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* – "peer-reviewed, international and transdisciplinary journal of the ASLE, published quarterly by Oxford University Press" (Oxford Academic).

literary renditions of the natural world in poetry, fiction, and nonfiction as means of evoking and promoting contact with it" (Buell et al. 419). Additionally, Buell, in his work "Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends" (2011), demarcated two distinct ways within the first wave of ecocriticism:

> The more distinctively humanistic was a range of post-Heideggerian phenomenological theories – often lumped together under the heading of "deep ecology". (…) The second most distinctive path taken by first-wave ecocriticism was to try to make literary theory and criticism more scientifically informed, meaning especially by ecology, environmental biology and geology (89-90).

Consequently, the advent of the new millennium marked the arrival of the second wave of ecocriticism, which was "urging toward a more comparative, trans/global-cultural approach to ecocritical studies" (Slovic 7). It was during this era that ecocriticism witnessed the incorporation of ecofeminism and post-colonial ecocriticism, which converted the field into more socially conscious discourse. Notably, this shift engaged "with the whole sweep of Western literary history from antiquity" (Buell 92). Specifically, ecofeminism challenged the conventional dichotomies by bringing about the destabilisation of rigid binary concepts such as "culture/nature, human/nature or civilised/primitive" (Marland 852). Equally, the introduction of post-colonial studies to the paradigm of ecocriticism, which "have also long understood the close connection between ideological constructions of 'nature' and the oppression and exploitation of colonised people and their habitats" (Marland 853) – the imposition of cultural, social and economic agendas that altered the means of how native inhabitants engaged with their environments.

In stark juxtaposition with the first wave, the second wave has demonstrated a heightened interest and preoccupation with urban centres and industrialisation (Buell et al. 419). This shift was affected by the significant consequences of sprawling urbanisation and the expansion of industrialisation into the natural environment. Furthermore, it attended to the concerns of environmental justice and recognised that nature is now more often viewed as

inextricably linked to modernity—both as a concept and in the material manifestations (Heise, "Hitchhiker's Guide" 508).

In their influential 2009 publication "The Shoulder We Stand On: An Introduction to Ethnicity and Ecocriticism", the authors Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic presented the proposition of the ongoing third wave of ecocriticism, which emerged shortly after the year 2000. According to their definition, this wave acknowledges and even transcends ethnic and national confines; thereby, by employing an environmental perspective, it concentrates on all facets of the human experience (6-7).

In 1996, Sheryll Glotfelty disputed that "ecocriticism has been predominantly a white movement" (*Ecocriticism Reader* xxv). In response, Slovic and Adamson pointed out that the third wave of ecocriticism frequently studies ethnicity through the lens of the study of environmental literature (Nuri 261). Furthermore, the third wave is preoccupied with concepts such as eco-cosmopolitanism and translocality while also situating ethnically inflected experiences in broader comparative and environmental contexts (Slovic 7).

Although the third wave of ecocriticism appears to embody the most recent advancement in the field of environmental criticism, Marland identifies the development and the progress of the fourth wave, which she specifies is rather co-existent with the third wave. The fourth wave of ecocriticism primarily centres around the paradigms of material ecocriticism, material feminism and concepts such as trans-corporeality. Examining these recent developments will be a core subject of the discussion in the forthcoming second chapter of this diploma thesis[3].

1.3 Blue Ecocriticism

The preceding section primarily discussed the terrestrial dimension of ecocriticism and its consequent historical trajectory, although this scope systematically ignores the paramount role of the oceans. Traditionally, the body of the ocean is perceived as "a strange place, an

[3] See chapter 2, titled "Material Ecocriticism".

alien place, a wild place" (Dobrin 1), which is frequently excluded from narratives of ecocriticism and the Anthropocene and depicted as somewhat external to human experience. However, Stacy Alaimo aptly poses a question of what happens when you take the Anthropocene out to sea ("Anthropocene at Sea" 153). The globally felt consequences of the Anthropocene and environmental deterioration, including the increasing sea levels or ocean acidification, demonstrate the ocean's inextricable link to human experience. These changes dispel the illusion of the understanding of the ocean as an external 'alien' space or as vast and mysterious 'other', emphasising its undisputable impact on life on land and its interconnectedness and reciprocal interplay with the land-based territory (DeLoughney, "Oceanic Turn" 244).

Within the academic discourse, the ocean is archetypally casted as alien, mysterious, and unknown place. Nevertheless, some scholars put the spotlight on the inherent connection that exists between humans and the ocean. As for example, they draw parallels between seawater and human blood or they point out that every breath we take contains oxygen produced by plankton (Alaimo, "Ocean Origins" 188). Furthermore, as Yolen specifies, "we came from the sea, as the life began in the primaeval oceans" (403). These observations "cast seawater as a shared substance that makes it possible to feel an embodied human kinship with the aqueous Earth" (Helmreich 50). Such viewpoints indicate strong, physical connections between people and the ocean; it is not merely an abstract place external to humanity's existence, but rather, the ocean is experienced on a visceral level due to our reliance on it and interconnectedness with it.

In her seminal work *Blue Ecocriticism and the Oceanic Imperative* (2021), a very recent publication that aims to destabilise the dominant role of land-based ecocriticism, Sidney Dobrin endeavours to emphasise the conspicuously under-appreciated role and importance of the ocean within the field of ecocritical work (7). She proposes the distinct category within the field of ecocriticism, which takes into consideration the body of the ocean, – 'blue ecocriticism'. However, there are proponents of alternative designations to encompass this domain, such as "terrageous ecocriticism, blue cultural studies, critical ocean studies, humanist Oceanic Studies or aquatic environmentalism" (Oppermann, "Storied Seas" 445).

According to Dobrin's definition, the field of blue ecocriticism can be understood as a multidisciplinary field that integrates various theoretical frameworks, perspectives and solutions that include ecocompositional, ecofeminist, social judicial, natural historical, environmental justice, environmental philosophy or indigenous perspectives (9).

As stated by Sheryll Glotfelty, ecocriticism appears to have one foot in literature and one on land (xix) –this bias is precisely what blue ecocriticism seeks to confront. Dobrin describes this effort as a means of "unearthing ecocriticism" (8), accentuating a more in-depth engagement with the ocean. Given that ecocriticism was "forged of the Earth, it emerged in an atmosphere of terrestrial thinking" (Dobrin 3). The primary objective of blue ecocriticism is, therefore, to irritate ecocriticism's engagement with the representation of ocean from primarily land-based methodologies and epistemologies. This is because ecocriticism largely stems from decidedly human conceptual framework demarcating the body of ocean into five oceans and seven seas, and reflecting and dictating how humans interact with their marine environments (Rock et al. 532).

One of the most striking divergences between the land-bound ecocriticism and the recently developed paradigm of blue ecocriticism lies in the sense and understanding of place. Bracke proposes that the sense of place is essential to land-bound ecocriticism since "nature writing largely revolves around the personal experience of place, giving the image a central position in the field's development" (66). Additionally, some academics hold that it is the individual's attachment to a particular place that endorses environmental preservation and conservation (Bracke 67). However, the terrestrial epistemology of place dissolves when applied to the oceanic environment, as, unlike the land, the ocean proves to be uninhabitable, and deep ocean environments cannot be easily accessed without the aid of technology. Instead, humans inhabit the ocean differently and, in parallel, develop a sense of its place differently, predominantly shaped by the peripheral experiences rather than direct inhabitation of its depths. Humans inhabit the periphery of the ocean as coastlines or even vessel-based inhabitations occur on the periphery of the ocean. Therefore, the sense of place is mostly limited to its borders (Dobrin 58).

Nevertheless, the allegorisation of the ocean from abstract space to a local place can be attained by three essential components: "the vessel (canoe, ship, or ark), the shore, and the body, particularly of submarine creatures" (DeLougrey, *Allegories* 142), these figures allow humans to ground the abstract concept of the ocean in concrete and localised contexts. In addition, Elizabeth DeLoughrey in her work "The Ocean Turn: Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene" (2017), makes the following claim:

> This question of temporalizing the sea is vital because unlike terrestrial space – where one might memorialise and narrativize a space into place – the perpetual circulation of ocean currents means that the sea dissolves phenomenological experience, and defracts the accumulation of narrative (244).

Grasping the ocean within the context of human perception of temporality and spatiality is not rendered possible, therefore there arises a necessity to utilise alternative approaches in order to conceptualise the relationship between humans and the ocean. It is required to understand and deal with the ocean as an active force that disrupts the linear accumulation of narratives, time and space associated with a particular location. Consequently, the ocean must be understood and approached as an "amorphous and fluid" (DeLoughrey, *Allegories* 134) entity, rather than, as challenged by Dobrin, applying our terrestrial epistemologies, which enable us to discover fixity in concepts of place (60).

Additional imperative component of blue ecocriticism is the analysis and interpretation of metaphors and portrayals associated with the body of ocean (Dobrin 9). The inherent fertility and diversity of the ocean is regarded as an inexhaustible source of symbols and meanings for humanity. In response, several academics argue that this treatment of the ocean as an inexhaustible source of symbols might possibly encourage people to treat it, analogously, as an inexhaustible storehouse of goods, which consequently manifest in the overexploitation of marine environments (Oppermann, "Storied Seas" 447). Ultimately this stance prompts and affirms the conviction that the ocean's resources are infinite and endlessly renewable.

Furthermore, DeLoughrey indicates that "fluidity and mutability are hallmarks of the oceanic imaginary. These two concepts of transformation are also integral to allegory as a form because it is about the metamorphosis of the subject and, eventually, the reader" (*Allegories* 147). Stated differently, the fluid and constantly transforming nature of the water represents the flow and the transience of life and existence on this planet.

2 Material Ecocriticism

This chapter is preoccupied with the emerging and evolving paradigm of material ecocriticism. By the means of investigating and interrogating the connection between matter, the natural environment and culture, this diploma thesis aims to unveil the nuanced material implications within the novels under examination. Hence, by discarding the dichotomy between nature and culture that infiltrated and defined the earlier waves of ecocriticism, this study aims to demonstrate how Julia Armfield's *Our Wives Under the Sea* (2022) and Martin MacInnes's *In Ascension* (2023) portray these domains as interrelated – in an endless and reciprocal flux. Furthermore, this thesis disputes that the novels under evaluation transcend the conventional treatment of the natural environment as a passive backdrop devoid of agency, but alternatively they portray it as an active, fluctuating and agentive entity, which begs the question of how the ocean, as depicted in these novels, can be construed as a narrative of its own.

Subsequently, this chapter engages in the analysis of the concept of trans-corporeality proposed by Stacy Alaimo. The notion of trans-corporeality opposes the separation between the subject and the object – the human and nature, treating these domains as entangled with the boundaries between them blurred and diminished.

As was illuminated in the previous chapter, Pippa Marland indicated the emergence of the fourth wave of ecocriticism, which she postulates as co-emerging and co-extensive with the third wave. This fourth wave is primarily concerned with the paradigm of material ecocriticism, resulting from the broader "material turn" in humanities which attracted significant academic interest around the year 2010 (Iovino, "Steps" 134). Material ecocriticism constitutes multi-dimensional and multi-faceted field drawing from variety of theories and interpretative methods of "interrelated intellectual movements such as new materialisms, material feminisms, environmentalism, and feminist science studies" (Oppermann, "Material Ecocriticism" 100).

Furthermore, as stated by Oppermann, material ecocriticism is based on the "coexistence of nature, body, materiality, and culture within the "viscous porosity"" (Oppermann, "Material

Ecocriticism" 94). In contrast to the earlier waves of ecocriticism, which strongly dichotomised the natural and cultural domains and by that accepted the human and nature binary, material ecocriticism views these domains as interconnected, where the concept of porosity emphasises the constant flow, interdependence, and connection between them. It is especially in opposition to the first wave of ecocriticism, which foregrounded the non-human world and accentuated depictions of the pristine nature while highlighting the relevance of the sense of place and locality. Consequently, material ecocriticism challenges and subverts this dichotomous opposition between nature and culture and rather, it advocates for the redefinition of this duality into one interconnected notion which can also be defined as the merging of these two entities into what Donna Haraway recognises as "naturecultures" (1). Moreover, as Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino explain in their introduction to *Material Ecocriticism* titled "Stories Come to Matter" there is "no simple juxtaposition or mirroring between nature and culture, but a combined "mesh"" (5).

Additionally, the turn to material ecocriticism also "analyzes the agentic, material world not only in terms of naturecultures in which humans and nonhumans are inextricably entangled but also as a world of storied matter and as sites of narrativity" (Oppermann, "Material Ecocriticism" 100). The notion of matter assumes a central position within this framework. Matter is a "generative becoming" (Iovino, "Stories from the Thick of Things" 453), implying that matter (like rocks, water, air, etc.) is not only a fixed substance devoid of agency but rather one that is constantly transforming, interacting, and establishing new formations. Furthermore, it can be characterised as a "material "mesh" of meanings, properties, and processes, in which human and nonhuman players are interlocked in networks that produce undeniable signifying forces" (Iovino and Oppermann, "Stories" 2). The powerful disposition of this 'mesh' and the interactions between humans and nonhumans are what generate new meanings; they arise from these very processes, which are ultimately entangled.

Furthermore, Iovino and Oppermann argue that the inherent property of the meaning formation can label matter as "storied" (Iovino and Oppermann, "Stories" 7). Consequently, this means that matter "can be read and interpreted as forming narratives, stories" (Iovino

and Oppermann, “Stories” 1). Oppermann is aware that these propositions and claims carry a heavy dose of anthropomorphism (“Ecological Postmodernism” 29). However, in the end, “telling stories and reading the storied world are means of understanding the creative experience that characterizes both humans and nonhuman natures” (Oppermann, “Ecological Postmodernism” 30), and by this he highlights how the natural world can be viewed as a narrative the same way that people produce narratives and stories.

The notion of trans-corporeality – which is extended into the literary sphere and ecocritical studies by material ecocriticism (Oppermann, “Lateral Continuum” 469), will be further addressed and developed in the forthcoming chapter. This concept was insightfully investigated and examined by Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures* (2010).

2.1 Trans-Corporeality

The framework of material ecocriticism and the trends and figures of material feminism share a similar genesis; these intersections are documented in an expanding body of scholarly works by Stacy Alaimo, Karen Barad, Susan Hekman and Nancy Tuana (Iovino and Oppermann, “Stories” 10). Feminist paradigms have been informed by the long tradition of “women” defined in Western thought to constitute a part of nature, which consequently led feminist theorists to strive for the disentanglement of “woman” from “nature” and reclaim the position of “women” within the area of culture (Alaimo, “Trans-Corporeal Feminisms” 239).

Subsequently, material feminism emerged with new philosophies that cast matter as “material-semiotic, inter-corporeal, performative, agential even literate” (Alaimo, “Trans-Corporeal Feminisms” 244). These new notions also reject the principles of “detachment, dualism, hierarchies, or exceptionalism, and do not background nature” (Alaimo, “Trans-Corporeality” 2).

Informed by the broader material turn in feminist thought and the framework of material ecocriticism, Professor Stacy Alaimo proposed the notion of trans-corporeality, which she examines in detail in one of the cardinal works of material ecocriticism, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010). Broadly conceived, *Bodily Natures* deals with the "interconnections, interchanges and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures" (2), which adopted the posthumanist mode of new materialism and material feminism.

Trans-corporeality argues that the "substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from "the environment"" (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 2). Therefore, akin to the principles of material ecocriticism, there arises a resistance and an effort to dismantle the dichotomies that have historically pervaded both the domains of ecocriticism and feminism – dichotomies characterised by "the obsessive pushing away of nature" (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 4). The basis of this dismantling is built on the premise that nature cannot be apprehended as something external or even eternal as it is ever-present, creating transformative and active force fluidly passing through us (Alaimo, "Material Feminism" 49). Therefore, the concept of trans-corporeality, as devised by Stacy Alaimo, must be understood as follows:

> Human corporeality, in which the human is always inter-meshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from "the environment" and also opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors (*Bodily Natures* 2).

Essentially, the notion of trans-corporeality highlights the inseparability and the inextricable link between humans and nature and vice versa, positing the constant and reciprocal interactions that stem from and are shaped by this innate interdependence.

3 The Age of the Anthropocene

This last chapter, incorporated in the theoretical part of this thesis, sets out to investigate the theoretical basis and the conceptual foundations associated with the term Anthropocene. It aims to further clarify and contextualise this epochal shift and its consequences, intertwined with the ongoing environmental degradation, within the broader context of human manipulation of the Earth´s systems. Later on, the focus shifts towards the popular approach towards the concept of the Anthropocene, highlighting the fact that the concept overflowed its initial scientific roots and is in constant debate and exchange of views with many other fields – affecting its ideological provocations, new ontologies arising, and also the concept's aesthetic implementation in the branch of literary fiction.

Subsequently, the practical part of this thesis engages in the literary interpretation of two novels, Julia Armfield's *Our Wives Under the Sea* (2022) and Martin MacInnes's *In Ascension* (2023). Both are located in environments that are largely unexplored and not fully understood by humanity – the ocean and the outer space. Both authors highlight its externality to human existence while they emphasise the constraints and limitations of human intervention and presence in deep-sea and extra-terrestrial environments. The novels also depict the necessity of technology's assistance in these unmapped environments. Submarine and deep-sea exploration demonstrate the technological advances of the Anthropocene, without which humans would still be essentially strangers to the ocean's deep regions. Similarly, the aid of technology in space exploration is paramount to its realisation. Both Armfield and MacInnes attempt to incorporate imageries to evoke the environmental sentiment towards marine environments, which is symbolised by the expanding reach and influence of humans in the ocean. As the sprawling technological advancement persists in expanding and penetrating the uncharted waters of the ocean, legitimate questions and concerns about resource management or biodiversity conversation come to the fore. As Horn and Bergthaler ascertain, the Anthropocene aesthetic must consider that humans are "no longer standing over and above a world of objects but rather are caught in the midst of things – in the midst of climate change, of coexisting life forms, of technologies and technological consequences" (101).

In addition, both novels invite the readers to reconsider and re-evaluate the possibilities and plausibility of interconnectedness and symbiotic connection with the body of the ocean. Simply put, while humans transform the environment, the environment also has the capacity to transform humanity in return. Therefore, by situating these novels within the context of the Anthropocene, we gain a deeper understanding of the necessity for the redefinition of relationships with the natural environments.

3.1 Scientific Origins

In order to venture into the discussion considering the broad concept of the Anthropocene, it is necessary to first provide the denotation of this term in light of its scientific roots. For the purposes of this thesis, the scientific discussion of the Anthropocene is streamlined to provide only the fundamental and necessary information that will enable the following passages to be understood and put into context. As far as the etymology is concerned, Anthropocene is composed of two words - Ancient Greek *anthropos* ("human") and *-cene* stemming from *kainos* ("new" or "recent") (Malhi 2). Thus, this etymological dissection roughly interprets the Anthropocene as the 'new or recent age of humans'.

The term was first established and coined by ecologist Eugene Stoermer in the 1980s. It was later officially proposed as a new geological term by Stoermer in tandem with atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen (Heise, "Science Fiction" 276) in their influential paper "The Anthropocene", published in 2000, which identified the Anthropocene as a prospective geological epoch that follows and is distinct from the preceding Holocene epoch (Crutzen and Stoermer 3). In addition, they emphasised the epoch´s material and substantial divergence from its predecessors (Crutzen and Stoermer 5) and recognised it as a novel conceptualisation and understanding of geological time. Central to this conceptualisation was the recognition of the ""predominant geological force" – one that includes "mankind"" (Crutzen and Stoermer 5).

This epoch is disclosed to be markedly different from its antecedents. Its key features are, in particular, exemplified by the pronounced effects of climate change and its ramifications,

such as “sea level rise, the effect of plastic pollution on marine and terrestrial processes, unprecedented rates of biodiversity loss and the changing chemical composition of soils, oceans and the atmosphere” (Chua and Fair 1).

Following Crutzen and Stoermer´s seminal publication, the term Anthropocene has permeated a broad academic discourse encompassing disciplines such as the natural sciences, sociology, anthropology, politics, etc., which highlights the contemporary complex and multidisciplinary nature of this notion. As a result, a plethora of definitions of the term Anthropocene have been proposed. To allude to a few, Yadvinder Malhi proposes a definition that transcends geological boundaries and emphasises the pervasive implications for society, characterising the Anthropocene as an epoch that “has consequences for how we view and interact with the natural world – and perceive our place in it” (2). Malhi clearly emphasises that the Anthropocene cannot be apprehended as merely a geological designation but also understood as a broader cultural and philosophical paradigm shift that re-evaluates humanity’s role and place within environmental patterns.

Due to the complex and multifaceted nature of the Anthropocene, there is an ongoing and rather vigorous debate regarding the official beginning of this epoch. According to the publication by Crutzen and Stoermer, its beginning can be dated two centuries ago to the year 1784, concurring with James Watt´s construction of the steam engine (13). This claim is endorsed by the paramount role of technological progress during the Industrial Revolution, which enabled profound changes in human productivity, energy use, and industrialisation. However, this issue has witnessed many divergent viewpoints and alternative perspectives, with some academics advocating the date of onset as the period of the Great Acceleration – “the period of extensive technological, demographic, economic and resource use expansion from 1945 onward” (Chua and Fair 3), moreover, because it “marks the first atomic bomb explosion that initiated a period of atmospheric testing” (Finney 8). Nevertheless, for instance, Lewis and Maslin foreground colonial violence as the chief catalyst for the Anthropocene (177). In particular, they illuminate the dire effects of colonialist ideology involving the oppression of indigenous people, the exploitation of natural resources and the imposition of Western ideologies and political systems.

In the midst of the ongoing scholarly discourse surrounding the Anthropocene, its definition, extent, factors or onset, in 2009, the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) was instituted with its "aim to identify a geological reference section, a so-called Global boundary Stratotype Section and Point (GSSP[4], commonly referred to as the 'Golden Spike')" (Max Planck Institute), in order to provide solid and scientifically substantiated evidence for the official onset of a new epoch in Earth's history. Subsequently, in 2016, the AWG announced its majority consensus supporting the stratigraphic reality of the Anthropocene and advocating its designation as an official epoch (Max Planck Institute), which was officially presented at the GSSP Conference held in July 2023. The proposal addressed "the most suitable timing of its beginning; the hierarchical rank the unit should have, and by which means it should be defined" (Waters 3), attempting to synthesise a wide range of empirical findings and academic perspectives.

However, in March 2024, members of the Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy[5] rejected a proposal put forward by the AWG (*CNN*) due to objections and concerns disputing the longer history of human impact on the Earth, including key events such as the advent of agriculture and the Industrial Revolution (*Guardian*). In response to these developments, Waters stated in the interview with CNN that despite the proposal´s rejection and "given the existing evidence, which continues to grow, I would not be surprised if there is a future call for a proposal to be reconsidered" (*CNN*).

3.2 The Concept of the "Anthropo-scene"

As noted in the previous section, the discussion surrounding the Anthropocene extends beyond and overflows the field of science from which it originated. The discussion encompasses a wide-ranging scale of academic fields, such as philosophy, ecology, sociology, anthropology, politics and a plethora of others. Given the ubiquitous utilisation

[4] "GSSPs are reference points on stratigraphic sections of rock which define the lower boundaries of stages on the International Chronostratigraphic Chart" (Stratigraphy.org).
[5] Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy is a "constituent body of the International Commission on Stratigraphy" (Quaternary.stratigraphy.org) which is concerned with "the establishment of a standard, globally-applicable stratigraphical scale" (Quaternary.stratigraphy.org).

of the term Anthropocene, Finney and Edwards observe substantial changes in its semantic and conceptual development, as it is currently popularised and fundamentally distinct from the original chronostratigraphic units that are in charge of the International Council of Science (ICS). It is a juxtaposition between the present and future versus the past (Finney and Edwards 8).

Concerning the multifaceted nature of the Anthropocene, scholars have proposed alternative labels to summarise and denote its multi-dimensional significance. Malhi refers to it as a "mega-concept"; or differently, it has also become "a new umbrella term and call to action to address environmental issues" (17). As Malhi's argument highlights, the Anthropocene has evolved into both a complex and overarching framework under which various phenomena are subsumed while simultaneously serving as a call for immediate actions to address and preferably mitigate environmental degradation and promote sustainability – a call for individuals, communities, government and institutions to take responsibility. It becomes "the core aspect of contemporary thinking about the environment" (Malhi 2), coercing society to reassess its priorities.

With an attempt to summarise and synthesise the vast array of concepts and perspectives across a diverse variety of scientific and social disciplines, Lorimer, in his paper "The Anthropo-Scene: A Guide for the Perplexed" (2017), introduced an encompassing umbrella term to capture the multi-dimensionality of the Anthropocene – Anthropo-scene. The concept of the Anthropo-scene incorporates all the diverse and multi-disciplinary intellectual activities encompassing a range of "academic, artistic and popular discussions" (118) regarding the profound human impact and effects on Earth´s geology and ecosystems. In his article, Lorimer presents five distinct directions through which the term Anthropocene can be approached: "a) scientific inquiry, b) intellectual zeitgeist, c) ideological provocation, d) new ontologies, and e) science fiction" (118). In the following sub-sections, this thesis attends to these distinct facets individually, deliberately omitting the discussion concerning scientific inquiry, which was comprehensively treated in the introductory section.

3.2.1 Intellectual Zeitgeist

Beginning with the treatment of the Anthropocene as an intellectual zeitgeist, the term "provides a plastic and catchy label for a common curiosity and anxiety about the state and future of Earth" (Lorimer 121). When referring to the prevailing spirit or essence of this epoch, the term Anthropocene has become a prominent and influential force in scientific and broader cultural narratives, therefore enjoying remarkable recognition and influence within contemporary discourse.

Furthermore, Lorimer notes how the term has been incorporated and assimilated into broad intellectual discussions, predominantly remarking how the term "Anthropocene" developed into a sort of "buzzword" (Lorimer 121) that permeates popular discourse, as substantiated by its frequent inclusion in article titles, book titles as well as its prolific thematic utilisation in artistic works (Lorimer 122). Nevertheless, Malhi makes a counterargument that entails some concerns regarding the potential reduction of the Anthropocene label to a "mere item of pop culture" (Malhi 12).

Although Lorimer´s argument carries a trace of hope and optimism, Malhi´s claim suggests a more pessimistic approach, stemming from the concerns that the term may be superficially adopted or exploited for its cultural appeal, thereby threatening to potentially dilute or even trivialise its substantive significance and implication within the mainstream popular discourse. Nonetheless, the Anthropocene has evolved into a fertile ground for discussing the future of humanity and its complex and dynamic relationship with the Earth "at scales from local to global and system-oriented" (Malhi 17), recognising the profound influence of the Anthropocene in shaping the trajectory of human history and civilisations in the decades to come.

3.2.2 Ideological Provocation

Exploring the ideological dimensions of the Anthropocene, this section ventures into a discussion of who caused and is responsible for the shift into the Anthropocene epoch. Within this section, Lorimer elucidates the ideological perspectives on the Anthropocene

primarily through the prism of ‘ecomodernism’. As a principle, ecomodernists advocate the reduction of humanity’s environmental footprint through the concentration of human activity within dense urban spaces (Boersma 164). In doing so, they support the prevailing trend of urbanisation; since more people are concentrated in urban centres, there are more opportunities for nature to flourish. They envision a notion of a so-called “good Anthropocene” (Malhi 19) characterised by “vastly improved technology, management or wise use of Earth’s resources” (Crutzen 17) or the promotion of nuclear energy and intensive agriculture (Boersma 164). Notably, proponents of ecomodernism tend to support a formally early onset of the Anthropocene (Lorimer 123).

However, there seems to exist a significant counterargument against this approach, with some academics criticising this “narrative as dangerously hubristic approach” (Malhi 19) and pointing out that proponents of this approach fail to consider the connections between environmental issues and “the dynamics of capitalist modernisation” (Hamilton 38).

> The Anthropocene as caused and experienced by a Western urbanite is very different from that experienced by an African subsistence farmer, for example; however, much Anthropocene writing tends to refer to humanity as a collective “we” that ignores and occludes vast disparities in power, impact, and the corresponding issues surrounding justice and equity (Malhi 21).

Resorting to mere employment of the collective ‘we’ as a homogenising tendency to accept responsibility seems to overlook the vast differences and disparities in power and influence contrasting with the experiences of a Western urbanite, characterised by high levels of consumerism and technical development. Correspondingly, Susan Crate and Mark Nuttall affirm that taking into consideration its deep cultural roots and its genesis primarily from mass consumption, climate change is “ultimately about culture” (12), highlighting, in particular, the unsustainable extraction of resources.

The dispute surrounding the responsibility and blame within the context of the Anthropocene has been an extensive and arduous endeavour, and, as a result, various “-cenes” have

emerged to more accurately capture the agents involved. For instance, the Capitalocene[6] highlights the preponderant influence of the capitalist economic system, while the Plantationocene subjects the historical legacies of colonialism, slavery and plantation economy to scrutiny (Malhi 18). In addition, Kate Raworth introduces the concept of the Manthropocene, in which she highlights the predominantly male composition of the powerful decision-making bodies (*Guardian*) (including the AWG) responsible for deciding on (and justifying) the shift into the Anthropocene. Moreover, the Anglocene emphasises the hegemonic role of the English-speaking world in creating the earliest industrial greenhouse gas emissions and is also currently shaping the debate around the definition of the Anthropocene (Lorimer 124).

Even in the face of collective (but divergent) planetary crisis, the democratic spirit of the Anthropocene relies on such plurality since newly emerging viewpoints and perspectives remain to bourgeon within ongoing discussions and manifest themselves in the building of novel "-cenes ". So, as Lorimer exclaims: "Let the hundred "-cenes" bloom" (Lorimer 133)!

3.2.3 New Ontologies

The penultimate category in Lorimer's categorisation of the Anthropo-scene deals with the emergence of new ontologies. Lorimer argues that these new ontologies are "departing from prevalent ways of conceiving human-environmental relations in order to figure life and non-life on a "human dominated" and nonlinear planet" (125-126). These emerging ontologies are proposed in juxtaposition to prevailing traditional viewpoints, which often dichotomise humans and nature. Furthermore, these perspectives habitually highlight the former as a separate or superior entity. Rather, the main task should be to integrate human agency into ecological frameworks, thus recognising the inevitability of humanity's inextricable entanglement with the natural environment. To put it differently, these new ontologies acknowledge that "humans at the same time cause, are affected by, and alter change"

[6] The concept of the Capitalocene will be examined in further detail in the subsequent chapter.

(Crutzen 3). This assertion highlights the necessity of ontological frameworks that account for the reciprocal and complex relationships between humans and the environment.

In his article, Lorimer primarily presents and examines two emerging ontological frameworks – he focuses, in particular, on the concept of Anthromes and the notion of Technosphere. To begin with the former, it should be noted that the concept of Anthromes was proposed and identified by natural scientists Erle Ellis and Navin Ramankutty (445). Anthromes can be defined as "non-analogue, nonlinear socio-ecological systems that can be arranged along an axis from "wild" to "used" according to their human population density, land use, land cover and the provenance of their biotic communities" (Lorimer 126). Essentially, the concept of anthromes considers the significant interactions of human behaviour, institutions, cultures and economies in their shaping. The Anthropocene concept has accentuated these "complex webs of relations in which humans and nonhumans have always been enmeshed while also generating new, inescapable hybrids and relations in the present" (Chua and Fair 8). Human interventions have catalysed and accelerated the emergence of novel ecosystems, blurring the boundaries and dichotomies between natural and artificial or wild and cultivated. Overall, the formation of various Anthromes can be understood as tangible manifestations of the Anthropocene epoch, identifying them as concrete examples of human-induced landscape modification.

The concept of the Technosphere, as posited by Peter Haff, identifies large-scale technology as another imperative constituent in the context of the Anthropocene. He subsumes the large-scale technology under the term technosphere, which includes a spectrum of infrastructural elements such as "large-scale energy and resource extraction systems, power generation and transmission systems, communication, financial networks, (…) cities, factories" (127), among others. In addition, Haff goes on to promote the view that the Technosphere can be understood as autonomous, claiming its independence from direct human control and imposing its own requirements on human behaviour. Even though human participation in the functioning of the Technosphere is paramount, individuals are cast as subordinate subjects within this system (127). This perspective suggests a view of human behaviour and societal organisations as deeply intertwined with the technological infrastructure, wherein

the latter exerts a significant influence over the former as people depend on it for essential resources and services, as well as for shaping the economic, cultural and environmental systems. Consequently, the contemporary discourse exhibits a strong technocentric orientation and emphasises industrial disruption as the principal theme of social discourse (Malhi 12).

3.2.4 Aesthetic of the Anthropocene Fiction and Science Fiction

As a final point, this chapter will shed light on the representation and exploration of the Anthropocene within its aesthetic representation in the spheres of fiction and science fiction. As Malhi notes, literature has become a "framework for thinking about and discussing human relations to the environment and human responses to a changing world" (17). This inquiry encourages a quest for:

> such types, genres, and genre varieties of cultural texts – in literature, film, theatre, computer games, or visual arts – which most clearly and vividly convey diverse scenarios of human – non-human justice (or injustice) (Gajewska 81).

Ursula Heise infers that this quest can be understood as a direct consequence of the European novel tradition's inability to address climate change ("Science Fiction" 281). Furthermore, Lorimer contends that it appears that the escalating popularity of science fiction and speculative narratives is becoming a central motif of the Anthropo-scene (129). Additionally, two distinct trends are emerging in the sphere of speculative fiction. Firstly, the works of literature that envision a "good Anthropocene" encourage the readers to re-evaluate humankind's place on Earth and reconsider humanity's relationship with non-human entities. On the other hand, literary works that can be classified as "ecohorror" which "mainly expose the negative aftermath of the Anthropocene – culminating in the inevitable disaster" (Gajewska 79) and "emphasise the Anthropocene as a crisis and a rupture of the Earth system" (Malhi 19). Gajewska comments that it is precisely this speculative potential of the fantastic that both reveals the societal anxieties associated with the consequences and

repercussions of the Anthropocene and suggests an imaginative ground for conceiving alternative scenarios for the restoration of order (83).

Subsequently, Lorimer observes the upsurge of a distinct literary genre known as Climate Fiction (Cli-Fi) and explains its emergence in parallel with a broader cultural shift away from consumerist values (129). As a result, Cli-Fi narratives could function as a form of cultural critique or reflection, proposing narratives that challenge and confront consumerist ideologies and behaviours. It is critical to consider the potential implications of these narratives, as they possess a unique ability to shape and influence public perception and attitudes toward urgent environmental issues.

In their work *The Anthropocene: Key Issues for the Humanities* (2020), Horn and Bergthaller assert that the artistic manifestation of the Anthropocene prompts investigation on two levels:

> First, there is the epistemological question as to the modes of access to, and forms of knowledge of, the non-human; second, there is the question as to how this new relationship between the human and the non-human might be aesthetically represented (98).

Consequently, the scope of narratives situated within the context of the Anthropocene need not constrict its focus solely on the negative consequences of human intervention and domination and the consequent and inevitable environmental degradation. In contrast, as delineated by Horn and Bergthaller, they can further analyse and evaluate the relationships and interactions between the human and nonhuman and explore and cherish their intrinsic interconnectedness.

In this context, Horn and Bergthaller outline the fundamental thematic explorations and concerns that are central to the aesthetics of the Anthropocene: "(1) latency, the withdrawal from perceptibility and representability; (2) entanglement, a new awareness of coexistence and immanence; and (3) scale, the clash of incompatible orders of magnitude" (102). In essence, the discourse and artistic production surrounding the Anthropocene can transcend

depictions of ecological degradation and instead can encourage more in-depth exploration of the interactions present between humans and the natural world.

3.3 Capitalocene

According to Jason W. Moore, the concept of the Anthropocene has enjoyed significant attention and recognition in the last decade as one of the most influential constructs in environmental studies. Moreover, Moore delineates two divergent trajectories of the Anthropocene: one is rooted in the geological debate concerning the stratigraphic markers often referred to as 'golden spikes'. The other can be referred to as the 'Popular Anthropocene', and Moore argues that it has eclipsed the Geological Anthropocene ("Anthropocene and the Capitalocene Alternative" 72). Consequently, the discourse surrounding the Popular Anthropocene is joined by a debate involving the notion of Capitalocene, a widely debated alternative to the term Anthropocene proposed by American sociologist Jason W. Moore. Moore argues that "Capitalocene is a means of cutting to the heart of the conversation initiated by Crutzen and Stoermer" ("Anthropocene and the Capitalocene Alternative" 72). The central premise of the Capitalocene, as opposed to Anthropocene narratives that focus primarily on human impact, is to comprehend and illuminate the intricate and detrimental connections between capitalism and environmental deterioration. Accordingly, by framing the crisis as an intrinsic flaw in the capitalist paradigm itself, the Capitalocene framework focuses attention on the particular actors and mechanisms within the capitalist system that contribute to ecological degradation.

Moore clarifies this by pointing out that capitalism is predicated upon the duality between Nature and Humanity ("The Capitalocene part 1" 7). "The whole thrust of capitalist civilisation develops the premise that we inhabit something called Society, and act upon something called Nature" (Moore, "The Capitalocene part 1" 7). The emergence of capitalism has created a divide between humans and the natural world that has ultimately culminated in the process of commodification of nature. Nature is thus viewed as a resource to be exploited and extracted for monetary gain and subsequent environmental damage. This dualistic way of thinking relegates Nature to the status of an external entity. Furthermore,

the chasm between Society and Nature can be seen as a division between inside and outside, with Nature seen as something to be studied, controlled and exploited. Within this dualistic framework, many individuals were not treated as a part of Humanity as "the binary Nature/Society is directly implicated in the colossal violence, inequality, and oppression of the modern world" (Moore, "The Capitalocene part 1" 2) Rather, they were treated as disposable objects in the pursuit of capitalist accumulation:

> For the story of Humanity and Nature conceals a dirty secret of modern world history. That secret is how capitalism was built on excluding most humans from Humanity—Indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, nearly all women, and even many white-skinned men (Slavs, Jews, the Irish). From the perspective of imperial administrators, merchants, planters, and conquistadores, these humans were not Human at all. They were regarded as part of Nature, along with trees and soils and rivers—and treated accordingly (Moore, "Anthropocene or Capitalocene?" 79).

According to the Anthropocene view, humanity or the "Anthropos" becomes responsible for environmental degradation. As previously communicated, the human species becomes "a mighty, largely homogeneous, acting unit: the 'human enterprise'" (Moore, "The Capitalocene part 1" 3). Furthermore, the Capitalocene perspective more accurately highlights the imbalanced distribution of environmental responsibilities and advantages. It posits that while capitalist elites accumulate profits, marginalised groups bear the brunt of environmental degradation. Moore continues to argue that blaming the transition to the Anthropocene on this homogenising "we" is superficial and frivolous. In contrast, he asserts that class, capital, imperialism and culture trigger this epochal shift, not humanity as an undifferentiated whole, as is the premise articulated by many scholars ("The Capitalocene part 1" 2). This begs the question of whether we are truly living in the" age of man" or are we living in the "age of capital" (Moore, "The Capitalocene part 1" 3).

In capitalist frameworks, "Nature is cheap". The shift in the region of commodification can be paralleled with a revolution in the technics of appropriating Cheap Natures, particularly the Four Cheaps or the "free gifts" of food, labour, energy and raw materials (Moore, "The

Capitalocene part 1" 27). In order to maintain profitability, capitalism seeks to ensure that these resources are available at low cost, which commonly entails strategies such as outsourcing production to areas with cheaper labour costs or exploiting natural resources without regard for environmental or social repercussions.

As noted above, in the period of Capitalocene, Nature is apprehended as an abstracted object. Ultimately, it was the violent removal of Nature from Society that served as the foundational premise upon which the Capitalocene was constructed (Chua and Fair 12). In contrast to the dichotomy of Nature and Society, Moore proposes his alternative conception of the "web of life", in which nature is seen as a whole – nature as us, within us, and all around us. The nature as flow of flows ("Capitalism in the Web of Life" 3). It does not endorse the dualistic framework that isolates Nature from Society and that regards Nature as an external entity. Moore, on the contrary, advocates a dialectical relationship between these two entities, wherein they are in a continuous interplay interconnected in a singular, dynamic system. "Put simply, humans make environment, and environments make humans – and human organisation" (Moore, "Capitalism in the Web of Life" 3).

PRACTICAL PART

4 Julia Armfield's *Our Wives Under the Sea*

Julia Armfield is a London-born writer and author of the novel *Our Wives Under the Sea* (2022), which will be subjected to a thorough analysis and interpretation in the practical section of this thesis. Prior to her debut novel, Armfield published a collection of short stories entitled *Salt Slow* (2019), which primarily investigates the themes and issues faced by women in contemporary society. Armfield's literary craft has gathered widespread acclaim and praise from both literary critics and society. This is evidenced by the fact that in 2019, she was shortlisted for the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year, and in 2018, she was longlisted for the Deborah Rogers Award and won the White Review short story prize.

Julia Armfield published *Our Wives Under the Sea*, her debut novel, in 2022. It was shortlisted for the Gordon Bowker Volcano Prize and was awarded the Polari Prize in 2023. The novel revolves around two central characters, a married couple – Leah and Miri. As far as the structure of the novel is concerned, the novel is divided into chapters that alternate between the perspectives of Leah, a marine researcher, and the point of view of Miri, Leah's wife and a grant writer. In an interview, Julia Armfield stated that she had always intended to write the novel in this format, with two alternating voices, so that the novel could converse with itself (Armfield, "Interview").

Most of Leah's chapters are set in a submarine stuck at the bottom of the ocean, with disconnected and malfunctioning communication systems. Throughout Leah's chapters, she reflects and tries to navigate the situation and the circumstances in which she unexpectedly found herself, which she shares with her two co-workers, Jelka and Matteo. She mainly communicates her profound feelings of isolation and her yearning to re-establish contact with the land. After six months stranded in the submarine, the communication system unexpectedly starts working, which offers the crew hope of returning to Earth. Nevertheless, Leah is dissatisfied with the absence of research that they were able to conduct, so she is

resolved and determined to navigate the submarine in pursuit of discovery. Their expedition culminates in an encounter with an unknown and alien-like underwater creature that emerges in front of the submarine, which can be later credited as one of the catalysts for Leah's transformation and altered state. Subsequently, Leah and her co-worker resurface, and the sole thought in Leah's mind is how she looks forward to reuniting with her wife, Miri.

These underwater events depicted in *Our Wives Under the Sea* are juxtaposed with the present-day circumstances that follow Leah's resurfacing, narrated from Miri's point of view. Leah appears to be transformed, different and unrecognisable to Miri. Julia Armfield characterises this transformation as "Body Horror – a trope that springs from primal fears (…) and encompasses the concept of bodily violation (Armfield, "Body Horror"). Symptoms of Leah's transformation entail, for example, spending most of her time in the bathtub, drinking water with dissolved salt, or bleeding from her gums. Gradually, Miri begins to perceive their disconnect and the severe alterations within their relationship. As the narrative progresses, Leah's state worsens, and her skin becomes almost translucent – reminiscent of water itself. Towards the end, she completely loses her ability to walk and persists in being confined to a bath filled with saline water, accompanied by the noise from her sound machine.

After meeting with Jelka's sister, Juna, Miri learns that Jelka passed away during the mission. As Leah's symptoms start to ultimately deteriorate, Miri comes to terms with the reality of her partner being someone different and ultimately changed. Finally, at her mother's beachside house, Miri says the definitive goodbye to her wife as she lets Leah unite and amalgamate with the ocean. Leah cannot be defined as a person anymore; instead, she appears to be somewhere in a liminal state – a hybrid state of person and water, and, in the end, Miri is forced to accept that her wife is no longer the person she once knew.

5 Martin MacInnes's *In Ascension*

The second novel analysed and interpreted in the practical section of this thesis is *In Ascension*, published in 2023 and written by Edinburgh-based Scottish writer Martin MacInnes. In Ascension is the author's third novel after *Infinite Ground*, published in 2016 and *Gathering Evidence* in 2020. *In Ascension* (2023) has been widely acclaimed, as evidenced by the fact of being longlisted for the Booker Prize and subsequently optioned for movie adaptation.

As far as the structure of the novel is concerned, the novel unfolds across six separate parts – "Endeavour", "Datura", "Kourou", "Nereus", "Ascension", and "Oceana", respectively. The novel revolves around the protagonist, Leigh Hasenbosch, a marine scientist who grew up in Rotterdam with her younger sister, father and mother, navigating a tumultuous upbringing marked by her father's abuse. After leaving home, she studied marine ecology and microbiology, which led her on an expedition exploring deep-sea vents in the Atlantic Ocean, which eventually led to unbelievable discoveries. Since early childhood, Leigh has harboured a deep appreciation for the water and a profound fascination with the body of the ocean, which she inherited mainly from her father. She senses an intense connection to her natural surroundings and frequently observes and examines humanity's position within the planet's structure. As the author stated in an interview, the thematic exploration of interconnectedness emerges as one of the key concerns in the novel "because it is vital and relatively absent from English language fiction, too much of which draws a world in which humanity is walled off from the rest of creation, as if we were entirely self-involved" (MacInnes, "Interview").

The novel's chapter "Nereus" takes place within the confines of a spaceship where the crew struggles to navigate and accept the feelings of isolation, loneliness, and longing for Earth. Subsequently, as the journey advances, the crew loses contact with the Earth, and the mission seems to reach its fatal climax. In the novel's penultimate chapter, titled "Ascension", the perspective shifts towards Leigh's sister, Helena, who undertakes a journey to find her sister's remains and tries to uncover and expose the truth behind the cosmic mission. Her

quest brings her to Ascension Island, where she uncovers that this island was intended to serve as a post-mission quarantine location for her sister and her fellow crewmates. During the novel's last chapter, the perspective shifts back to focus on Leigh and her crewmates as we witness the spaceship being temporally displaced and its unexpected re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere, but surprisingly, two billion years into the past.

The New York Times described the novel as "a vaulting exploration of the interplay between the micro and the macro, the human and the otherworldly". Leigh ventures from the uncharted depths of the ocean to the unexplored regions of outer space. At the same time, she attempts to decipher and comprehend both the relationship of how humans fit into the planetary structures while also navigating her own belonging into the enormous web of life.

6 Human-Human Relationships in Martin MacInnes' *In Ascension*

The aim of this chapter is to interpret the portrayal of family relationships as depicted in the novel by Martin MacInnes *In Ascension* (2023). The novel's introductory pages are devoted to a comprehensive investigation of Leigh's formative years, which were marked by fear and violence. Leigh Hasenbosch is the main protagonist, who is growing up in a household shared with her mother, father, and younger sister. The novel utilises Leigh's personal background to examine themes such as her identity or belonging later on. Similarly, these thematic explorations are later central to the investigation of the relationship and interconnectedness between humanity and nature, with which MacInnes manages to portray the intricacies of the human condition. Essentially, the narrative structure of *In Ascension* interweaves personal relationships and Leigh's past with the themes of human-nature relationships in order to illuminate the profound interconnectedness present in human existence and creation, suggesting that understanding of the 'self' parallels with an understanding of broader existential questions and planetary belonging.

Regarding interpersonal relationships, the novel explores the development and background of the relationship between Leigh and her father, mother and sister. Throughout the novel, readers also learn that Leigh has a girlfriend, which is the only relationship not explored in depth, and MacInnes only briefly mentions this information. Geert, Leigh's father, worked for the *Waterschappen*[7], a Dutch governmental water board in charge of overseeing the management of surface water in the environment. Despite his dream of working as an architect, Geert, on the contrary, "ended up doing the one thing he expressly didn't want to do, the same work his forebears had done: he went to sea" (MacInnes 8). MacInnes expounds this as one of the factors that contributed to Geert's violent character, as he succumbed to his fate and, furthermore, relinquished his ambitions of pursuing his dream career in architecture. He perceived working at the sea as "a desertion, a disaster" (MacInnes 9); he longed to step out of the history and the family legacy of maritime labour. As his intentions

[7] *Waterschappen* is a water board in Netherlands that is responsible "for the prevention of flooding. In addition, a water manager must ensure a sufficient volume of groundwater and surface water and keep the water quality up to par" (Government.nl).

and desires went unfulfilled, Geert is left with feelings of disenchantment and resentment towards the life he is required to lead. Furthermore, it is enhanced by the fact that he never received the "attention and approval he craved" (MacInnes 11) from his father. MacInnes illustrates the congruence between Geert's fear of his father and Leigh's and Helena's fear towards Geert himself. The cycle of violence and abuse can be seen as driven by Geert's subconscious and the underlying fears and frustrations which stem from his upbringing and dissatisfaction with the life he leads. It can ultimately be read as an example of generational trauma.

From an early age, Leigh was subjected to her father's abuse and "sustained beatings that lasted several minutes" (MacInnes 15). Geert is characterised by his "formidable temper," which instils fear in Leigh and her sister, Helena. Moreover, exacerbating the situation, his moods and beatings were "completely unpredictable" (MacInnes 14), reminding the unpredictable and unstable character of the ocean on which he worked on a day-to-day basis.

MacInnes prompts us, to some degree, to empathise with the character of Geert; he illuminates and tries to make us understand the underlying reasons for his inability to liberate himself from this established pattern. Central to this exploration are Geert's profound feelings of entrapment resulting from the impasse of his predicament: "Once he committed to his life, there was no way he could get out of it. He was angry at us, his daughters because the financial demands of our existence bound him to it" (MacInnes 13). As evidenced by this, the recurring violence towards his daughters can be contextualised within the framework of family and financial obligation, as well as his futile attempts to stop the sea stemming from the nature of his profession. Thus, MacInnes depicts a causal link between the frustration and resentment towards his family obligations and the subsequent violent behaviour towards his daughters. Despite his desire for freedom or change, the weight of financial necessity renders the escape seem impossible; moreover, as Leigh notes: "our [Leigh's and Helena's] freedom was an affront to his confinement" (MacInnes 13). Considering this, Geert's predicament can be seen as a failure to balance personal aspirations and external constraints.

The characteristics of Geert's professional duties in the *Waterschappen* can also be perceived as a contributing factor to Geert's violent nature. More specifically, his occupation entailed the tasks of "understanding, predicting, negotiating and dispersing the water" (MacInnes 12). As a result, his responsibilities at work exerted a noticeable influence on his moods and temper, which stemmed from "the pressure Geert carried on his shoulders every day of his long service" (MacInnes 12). Moreover, he was part of "a world that was perilously balanced, an environment hostile to humans, with catastrophe deferred only through the surgical intervention of specialist teams. Not that he wanted gratitude for it, just some recognition of the existence of the threat" (MacInnes 13).

His whole life was a relentless effort to "keep the sea at bay" (MacInnes 18), which embodies Geert's constant battle with the forces of nature and serves to highlight the challenges that he faced throughout his whole life. Geert's futile attempts to stop the sea, ultimately a struggle against nature, eventually culminated in Geert's inevitable defeat. Nature emerges as an unpredictable force, especially in the context of climate change and the human condition in the Anthropocene, in which "humans can no longer find themselves standing over and abuse a world of objects, but rather they are caught in the midst of things – in the midst of climate change, of coexisting forms of life, of technologies and technological consequences" (Horn and Bergthaller 101). Geert failed to recognise this, and thus, the existential angst that pervades human existence arises from powerlessness against the natural forces, much like Geert's quest to exert control in a world that seems increasingly beyond his grasp. He finds himself "completely overwhelmed, at a loss either to explain or to keep up with the changes. Reality has defeated him. The whole ecosystem was changing, and he couldn't keep up" (MacInnes 18).

Furthermore, MacInnes points out the apparent similarities between Leigh and her father. As observed by Leigh's mother and sister, despite the experienced abuse from her father, Leigh exhibits some acquired traits and attitudes comparable to her father's. They were "equally awed by the shapeless and limitless expanse of the future" (MacInnes 442) – they viewed the future as a vast and uncharted territory that they both wished to understand and eventually control. At the same time, both were "anxious from the sheer scale of what lay

beyond them (MacInnes 442). This alludes not only to personal struggles but also to the vast planetary changes that characterise the Anthropocene, involving climate change and the uncertain consequences of a human-dominated age. Therefore, through this, we can observe the unprecedented degrees of insecurity culminating in feelings of anxiety arising from uncertain future prospects. In general, "both of them were scared, but they would never have admitted this" (MacInnes 442).

As far as the character of Leigh's mother is concerned, during the beatings and violence, her mother, Fenna, appeared largely passive. There is a palpable disconnect between Fenna and Leigh; as Leigh comments: "I couldn't see what she did all day, couldn't imagine what she thought of all her life" (MacInnes 5). They were both uncomfortable with closeness and physical proximity, observing a significant emotional chasm. Fenna was unable to meet her daughter's needs as "the worse the beatings got, the more withdrawn Fenna became" (MacInnes 15). Leigh's longing for her mother's intervention in the face of her father's violence triggered the beginning of her own search for escape and solution – Leigh sought refuge in nature, which emerges as a transformative space to find her identity, hope and, most importantly, the meaning of her life. Interestingly, over time, as Leigh's odyssey progressed, the further Leigh was from her mother, the more she began to miss her, analogous to the fact that the further Leigh drifted away from Earth to the cosmos, the more her body exhibited symptoms and signs of separation and yearning to return.

In contrast to several similarities between Leigh and her father, MacInnes illuminates the striking differences between Leigh and her sister Helena. Their relationship is portrayed as a multifaceted mixture of admiration, animosity and a sense of divergence in perception of their childhood experiences. Leigh expresses that she "wanted to be cold and cool like Helena, who shrugged off the world" (MacInnes 23). Unlike Leigh, Helena appears to distance herself from the violent events of their upbringing. In the novel's penultimate section, which follows Helena's perspective and her quest to clarify the circumstances of Leigh's cosmic exploration, we notice the discrepancy in their perceptions of the past. While Leigh "insisted on letting her childhood define her" (MacInnes 439), Helena's perspective reflects the selectiveness of her memories and the decision to liberate and detach herself

from them. “A couple of times she’d [Helena] sensed that Leigh was alluding to violence. This surprised her. She didn’t remember any of this” (MacInnes 439), showing how Helena “amend[ed] her understanding of the past” (MacInnes 25) in order to pursue her life unrestrained.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, MacInnes attempts to illustrate the connection between the microcosm of internal struggles and traumas and the macrocosm of planetary belonging, the origin of life, and the connection to the environment. This parallelism demonstrates how personal narratives and the inner microcosm correlate with the issues of planetary belonging and shows how individual experiences are depicted as a part of a larger context. As a reaction to her upbringing, Leigh withdraws into herself to seek refuge in the natural world, which becomes her sanctuary amidst family and personal struggles. MacInnes employs metaphors and symbolism to create parallels between the character’s internal states and the natural environment. Throughout the novel, Leigh regularly engages in philosophical contemplations and reflections on humanity’s origin, role and place in the world and the intrinsic interconnectedness between humanity and nature. These reflections function as a nexus between the microcosm of personal introspection and the macrocosm of omnipresent implications that dispute our very nature, existence, and origins. The macrocosm of interrelations between nature and humanity emerges as the milieu for Leigh’s quest to find an explanation for her own internal struggles and past actions.

7 Human-Nature Relationships in Martin MacInnes' *In Ascension*

In Ascension can be seen skilfully bridging the microcosm of internal and domestic struggles and the macrocosm of human-nature relations. Throughout the novel, this negotiation of relational interplays unfolds through the character of Leigh, who appears to be aware of an expansive extent of interconnections. Parallelism operates on two levels, and thus, through the uncovering of the origins of life and her trans-corporeal experiences, Leigh comes to terms with her own internal struggles and attempts to establish her place in the macrocosm of the interconnectedness between nature and humanity. As discussed in the previous chapter, Leigh's pursuit of hope is found through her kinship with water and nature. From a young age, Leigh was allowed to swim in a nearby river, Nieuwe Mass, on her own – and in its depths, she finds her ultimate shelter from the violent domestic environment. It becomes evident that Leigh withdraws to and appreciates the natural environment, using it as a "secret chamber of her own" (MacInnes 27). More precisely, it is a spot where she can be by herself and rediscover hope and a sense of deeper connection to nature again.

From this perspective, Leigh's reverence for water, particularly the ocean, can be interpreted and understood as a coping mechanism for dealing with the painful realities of her personal life. By immersing herself in the water and later on diving into the pursuit of the origin of life, she ultimately seeks to detach herself from the personal reality. She further defines this as an "escape, a flight from her autobiography" (MacInnes 51). For Leigh, water represents a place of escape and transformation where she finds faith in a better future. Leigh eventually discovers that she is not alone and that her swimming cannot be perceived as a private affair. Instead, she realises that she is surrounded and enveloped by life itself. Leigh yearns for deeper connection and a sense of belonging; ultimately, she desires to establish meaningful relationships. She finds solace in the natural world, which offers her a sense of acceptance and understanding that sharply contrasts with her domestic circumstances.

Initially, Leigh cannot really imagine her future for herself; she suffers from feelings of uncertainty and despair to the point of contemplating suicide. However, she experiences a

revelation as she is enveloped by the vastness of nonhumanity surrounding her. Leigh becomes viscerally aware of her surroundings:

> I realised, suddenly, with appreciation, that absolutely everything around me was alive. There was no gap separating my body from the living world. (…) I looked directly into water-life, a vast patchwork supporting my body, streaming into my nostrils, my ears, the small breaks and crevices in my skin, swirling through my hair and entering the same eyes that observed it (MacInnes 28).

Stacy Alaimo's words fittingly summarise Leigh's observations and her 'natural awakening': "Nature is always as close as one's own skin – perhaps even closer" (Alaimo, *Bodily Natures* 2). This is one of Leigh's earliest epiphanies, which catalyses her lifelong and deeply rooted commitment to science and nature, especially to marine environments. Leigh is an explorer whose relentless quest and determination to expose the origins of life and investigate the nonhuman world that surrounds her stems from the discovery of herself and her place in the vast patchwork of life in which human and nonhuman entities interact. Indeed, uncovering and making sense of life's meaning, origin, and uniqueness is a concomitant phenomenon of discovering herself and her identity. By observing and uncovering the macrocosm of natural interactions, she is able to find her place and role and make sense of her purpose on earth.

In Stacy Alaimo's terms, Leigh serves as the perfect example, the epitome of what we might label as trans-corporeality[8]. Central to this notion is Leigh's constant interrogation of where the human body ends and the nonhuman world begins and whether this boundary can ever be definitively determined. As Harold Fromm puts forward: "The environment, as we now apprehend it, runs right through us in endless waves" (1), with which he highlights the inherent porosity of corporeal existence with no boundary between the human and nonhuman present. This interrogation of life itself is Leigh's credo going forward to clarify

[8] See chapter 3.1, titled "Trans-Corporeality".

and discover its origins in the context of understanding herself and her past. In simple terms, she is analysing herself in the context of examining life as a whole.

Furthermore, Leigh questions her very identity:

> I looked down on them (the clothes) as if they belonged to another person, not mine to take. Gathering the objects up, putting on my clothes, I felt I was only now inhabiting a personality, that until I entered these pre-set shapes, I was diaphanous, and this form did not necessarily match up with who, or what, I was (MacInnes 29).

The "pre-set shapes" she is forced to inhabit represent the constraining role of her personal life, which differs from her authentic self. There is a contradiction between Leigh's aquatic identity and the persona she has to assume outside of the water – wherein she must deal with the trauma and abuse from her father. In the water, she perceives herself as "diaphanous" – fragile and translucent, liberated from the hardships of everyday life. Ultimately, the water serves as a conduit for her self-perception, reinforcing an insightful connection with her inclusion in the web of life. MacInnes uses this as a perfect example of the "co-evolutionary relationship the characters develop with the more-than-human world helps them re-establish their shattered, broken selves, and rediscover their material posthumanist and ecological self" (Kümbet 151).

The insight into Leigh's inquiry of identity extends to a dispute over the fundamental notions of corporeal existence. MacInnes uses this to illustrate the intermingling of human and nonhuman effectively and uses this opportunity to highlight the concept of "the unfolding implications of posthuman identities, bodies and natures" (Oppermann "Posthuman" 34). "I saw glimpses of tiny particulate matter, microcosms of a formerly coherent whole, the spray of a body" (MacInnes 94). Leigh observes the world around her with heightened sensitivity and awareness. The particulate matter represents the most minor components of existence from which everyone is made – the essence of life, the building blocks of our being. Ontologically speaking, this matter that created us and once belonged to this greater whole now inhabits and sustains individual bodies.

Besides, Leigh also refers to this matter as "the body before it was cast" (MacInnes 64), highlighting the shared ancestry at a time when evolution and distinction between humans and nonhumans had yet to occur. Subsequently, Leigh challenges the very nature and essence of the body: "And what is a body, in the loosest terms, but a set of agreements among matter and energy that endures for a period and exhibits a metabolic response?" (MacInnes 310). Alternatively, "you could describe us both as people, and as mobile assemblages of ocean" (MacInnes 64). In this case, she conceptualises the body as a vessel of corporeal substance or the 'storied matter' and energy, a temporary manifestation within life's eternal and cyclical flow that contributes to the destabilisation of the anthropocentric views within the literary discourse, reframing the human as posthuman. This also echoes what Donna Haraway defines as "naturecultures" (Haraway 1) and disrupts traditional hierarchies, placing humans as a separate or rather dominant entity above nature. Our very existence is a network of nature and culture, therefore, "natureculture".

As mentioned before, MacInnes depicts the water as a medium through which Leigh can divest herself of past traumas, which washes away the pain and transforms her into the 'hybrid' form that blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman. Throughout the novel, Leigh's retreat from her personal life into the sphere of scientific inquiry into the genesis of life reflects her quest for self-discovery amidst family turmoil. However, there seems to be a memory in the water that revives the feelings and emotions that Leigh tried to relinquish: "While the water continued to pull me in, I was drawn, equally involuntarily, to my past. I returned to the ocean, as I returned to my childhood in Rotterdam, to Geert's inexplicable beatings" (MacInnes 91). The ocean thus functions as a metaphor for the depths of the protagonist's subconscious. Similarly, just as the water continues to draw her in, so does the repressed past exert an influence on her present experiences and actions. Leigh remarks, "Maybe, rather than investigating the origins of life, I was merely and regrettably pursuing my own individual history" (MacInnes 92).

As discussed in the theoretical section of this diploma thesis, the paradigm of material ecocriticism is predicated on the coexistence of human and nonhuman entities in an intertwined whole that coexist in mutual influence. This notion of human and nonhuman

interconnectedness is detectable from the very first pages of *In Ascension*. The negotiation and redefinition of the relationship between human and nonhuman, or, in other words, cultural and natural, seems to become a central theme of the novel. Leigh, the main protagonist, constantly challenges and questions these ideas while immersing in reflections on the origins of life. This obsession seems to permeate her entire journey depicted in the novel.

Essentially, Leah's second epiphany occurs when she begins to use her microscope to look at the world more closely, illuminating her early-age awareness of the irreversible connections inherent within the natural environment. Leigh recalls this stage as "a great period of visibility, the world bursting into appearance" (MacInnes 31). This period further allows Leigh to perceive nature in a more revealing, active, and lively way. This triggers a shift in perspective by challenging the anthropocentric views, from viewing nature as an external entity that is distant from our lives to embracing nature as an ever-present and agentic entity. Henceforth, from this point on, the interconnectedness present in the world becomes impossible to overlook.

During the *Endeavour* mission, Leigh embarks on a profound investigation into the origin of life; a crew exploring the depths of a hydrothermal ocean vent prompts Leigh to ponder the primordial organisms that are responsible for the emergence of life. These organisms are indispensable to the genesis of "all multi-cellular life – plants, fungi, animals" (MacInnes 51). Further, Leigh adds that "archaea [the primordial organisms] still exist. They're drawn to inhospitable regions – Antarctic ice sheets, the salt plains of Chile – but their most exotic site of all, arguably, is in our stomachs" (MacInnes 51). The juxtaposition of these primordial microorganisms contained within the vessel of the human body challenges established notions of biological identity and invites a re-evaluation of humanity's place in the larger ecological continuum.

Ultimately, the archaea[9] can be read as a "corporeal palimpsest in which stories are inscribed" (Iovino, "Stories From the Thick of Things" 451) because they are charged with narratives and stories delineating the trajectory of the evolutionary journey through time and space. They embody the evolutionary narratives of survival, creativity, and adaptation; therefore, employing the terminology introduced by material ecocriticism, archaea can be interpreted as "storied matter" representing living archives of Earth's history. In this way, telling stories and reading the storied world are means of understanding the creative experience by situating microorganisms as protagonists in the origin of life, the "unimagined receptacles of time and space" (MacInnes 31). Furthermore, it puts the storied matter into perspective and illuminates how humans are immersed in inhuman loops (Oppermann, "Posthuman" 287).

Material ecocriticism is in stark contrast to the previous waves of ecocritical literary studies, which frequently depicted and relegated nature to the status of a backdrop or viewed it as a static medium devoid of agency which often served humans as a picturesque and pristine setting for their leisure pursuits. Leigh and, thereof, material ecocriticism refuse to see the world this way – to view the world in the artificial and reductive dichotomy predicated on the chasm between nature and humanity. Instead, she rejects and dismisses these dichotomies, advocating and calling for the redefinition of such simplistic and crude binaries by "emphasizing their hybridization, their cooperative configurations and their active interplay" (Iovino, "Posthumanism" 4). Nonetheless, Leigh argues that:

> We were blind to this out of necessity because if we saw what was really there, we would never move. It was around us, between us, on the edge of us and inside us. It coated our bodies, and we released waves of it when we breathed and spoke (MacInnes 32).

This statement begs the question of why we, as humans, choose and prefer to be blind to these interconnections. The anthropocentric views that promote the notion of human

[9] Archaea are "single-celled organisms" (Marriott and Allers) which are now "widely accepted to be the ancestors of all eukaryotes" (Marion and Allers). Eukaryotes can be "unicellular organisms, such as algae, or multicellular organisms, such as humans" (Micropia.nl).

exceptionalism drive us to perceive nature as distinct from ourselves; furthermore, the cultural conditioning and societal structures encourage us to pursue living in a world marked by blindness. This 'necessity' that Leigh refers to becomes a substitute for economic expansion or technological progress. This relegates nature to be viewed as a commodity and prevents the recognition of the world as a network of interrelated systems. Is it possible, then, to infer this blindness and 'necessity' as an unconscious choice to distance ourselves from the natural world and avoid the feelings of guilt resulting from exploiting the web of life to which we are intrinsically connected and to which we are a part?

Classifying *In Ascension* (2023) as either climate-change fiction (cli-fi) or a dystopian sci-fi that tackles the inherent environmental degradation in the Anthropocene epoch seems inadequate. Even still, the narrative does contain several allusions to environmental deterioration, such as: "The rising temperatures led to a series of river spills" (MacInnes 18). Moreover, in the penultimate section, "Ascension", "Life is lived increasingly indoors. Sometimes, from her twenty-third-storey apartment, visibility barely reaches 15 feet" (MacInnes 419). However, MacInnes opts for an alternative thematic investigation of the Anthropocene; more specifically, he presents quite realistic scenarios of human interaction with material networks. MacInnes chooses to examine the human condition in the Anthropocene through an alternative thematic exploration focused on negotiating and elucidating the inherent interconnectedness between humanity and nature. Heise argues, as noted in the theoretical part of this thesis that the European novel tradition possesses an inability to effectively address climate change ("Science Fiction" 281), but on the other hand, "what is a climate change if not a consequence of failing to respect or even to notice the elemental medium in which we are immersed?" (Oppermann, "Posthuman" 274). It is through this very immersion in the natural world that MacInnes portrays Leigh as the perfect epitome of this inherent interconnectedness with the natural environment. It challenges and encourages the reader to re-evaluate their conceptualisation of the interconnected web of life and acknowledge that as we are and affect the environment, the environment is and affects us. This posits that comprehension and understanding of one necessitates understanding the other, as "everything is made of the same stuff" (MacInnes 266).

Additionally, MacInnes subtly points out the connections and implications that arise from the rift between Nature and Society, thereby elucidating how the exploitation of one directly affects the other and vice versa. As examined in the theoretical part, Moore explains that this schism is contingent upon an elemental dualism of Humanity and Nature "for such dualisms are part of the problem – they are fundamental to the thinking that has brought the biosphere to its present transition towards a less habitable world" ("Anthropocene" 2). He further contends that the environmental situation in the modern world can be encapsulated by a straightforward 'green' arithmetic: "Humanity or Society plus Nature = Catastrophe" ("Anthropocene" 4). As an example, the narrative's depiction of "a toxic algal bloom" (MacInnes 312) ', that "leaches oxygen and kills of sea life" (MacInnes 312) and can also be lethal to people. This can be analysed as an allegory for the broader ecological crisis. Furthermore, Leigh explains, "They are more common in the coasts off power stations because of chemical run-off" (MacInnes 312). Here, MacInnes cleverly illuminates the notion of trans-corporeality between the human and nonhuman worlds by accentuating the evident chasm between them. Even though the novel is not primarily thematically concerned with environmental degradation and the Anthropocene, MacInnes employs the theme of interconnectedness to illustrate how anthropogenic activities disrupt the ecological equilibrium, bringing the reciprocal interactions between human interventions and environmental consequences to the fore. Moore argues that Capitalism can be accused of creating this rift between Humanity and Nature, emphasising the commodification of nature; MacInnes illustrates this point by claiming that the *Endeavour* mission was "part-funded by groups who wanted to mine and dredge the seafloor" (MacInnes 49) in order to gain monetary profit, thus he illuminates the entrenchment of Capitalist ideologies. During the mission, it became apparent that one of the reasons was the fact that there is a "stuff on the seabed that we want" (MacInnes 45), which further corroborates the underlying financial motivation and objective of the expedition's leaders.

On the other hand, Leigh concedes that our very existence serves as a declaration, evidence of the perpetual exchange of matter, energy and meaning. She conceptualises life as "porous" (MacInnes 94), a viewpoint that resonates with the very philosophy of material ecocriticism. This is in alignment with Oppermann's assertion that porosity emphasises the ongoing flow,

interdependence, and connection between the natural and the cultural ("Material Ecocriticism" 94). Therefore, neither our bodies nor our existence are fixed or impermeable; instead, they are fluid and capable of being crossed or influenced.

During the Endeavour mission, Leigh realises she is close to the source of human existence, to "a cradle, a garden" (MacInnes 71) of life. After the first dive, Leigh and her crewmates experience strange symptoms such as "gasping, sweating, heart pounding" (MacInnes 80). This physiological reaction is juxtaposed with a simultaneous sense of "a compulsion, a desire, a need to return" (MacInnes 90). This juxtaposition portrays the desire to reconnect with nature and reunite with our origins. It can be further illustrated by the presence of the archaea in the deep-sea vent, similar to those in our lower gut. The urge or desire to return could be interpreted as the archaea's innate affinity to the environment in which they originated and the longing to be one unified, cohesive whole again. This force that lures Leigh and her fellow crewmates towards these primordial sites prompts Leigh's observation: "Was our trepidation and excitement partly molten in origin – was that the reason I couldn't stop thinking about going back in" (MacInnes 102). At the same time, the sickness symptoms demonstrate the fragility of our very existence, the vulnerability, and the transformative potential of matter over humanity, further portraying how the nonhuman world can affect humanity. Humans have historically drawn a clear distinction between the human and nonhuman worlds. However, in contrast, we must acknowledge the hybridity in humans – the cultural and natural hybridity.

Leigh's scientific odyssey eventually takes her from the ocean's depths to the far reaches of space and towards the Oort Cloud. In doing so, MacInnes, once more, amplifies the theme of entanglement and shows how humans are interconnected with the Earth. MacInnes draws a parallel between human health and the health of the Earth: "Earth's disappearance was being treated by the body like a new and terrible disease" (MacInnes 353). The metaphorical depth serves as a lens through which we can examine the human body's response to the prospect of ecological collapse, which MacInnes demonstrates by the dislocation of humans from their natural environment. Furthermore, Leigh ponders, "Was it latent in the species – in all organisms even? – a biological measure primed to dissuade us from off-planetary travel

and the destruction of the planet?" (MacInnes 353). Comparatively, Leah's observation of the Earth progressively disappearing from the spaceship can be analogously linked to the broader human experience of witnessing the gradual decay of our planet right in front of our eyes due to environmental degradation. Through this parallel, MacInnes highlights the urge for collective action to mitigate environmental degradation, portraying outer space as uninhabitable, by which he posits that there is no alternative but to attempt to alleviate the climate change caused by the rift between humans and nature.

Ultimately, MacInnes depicts the interconnection of two dimensions – the intimate and introspective one and the enveloping planetary belonging and origin. By constantly juxtaposing and interconnecting them, he navigates and attempts to establish the equilibrium and congruence between them, showing how the personal relationships in the novel function as a broader metaphor for the Anthropocene, the natural environment and the intertwining of nature and culture.

7.1 Temporality and Spatiality

Unlike the fixed landscapes of the terrestrial world, the ocean depths defy simple measurement or even comprehension. The ocean is a fluid and vigorous medium that leaves no traces, and thus, "the fluidity of the sea poses a challenge to the ability to render it into embodied and fixed place" (Dobrin 59). When Leigh immerses herself in the ocean, she starts to "become aware – really, viscerally aware – of the depth. It was perhaps an equal distance from the seafloor and the upper sky, the ocean under me as far away as aircrafts above" (MacInnes 81). Dobrin asserts that traditionally, "representations of ocean tend to maintain a consistent position of scale, rendering the ability to imagine ocean only to a singular depth of understanding" (89). By this, MacInnes conjures a sense of awe and wonder at the vast enormity of the oceanic expanse and blurs the boundaries between the sky and the ocean depths by which he emphasises the vastness and infinitude of the oceanic environment.

According to Dobrin, oceanic thinking is intrinsically linked to and shaped by land-based ideologies and principles (3). As described in the theoretical part, we do not inhabit the ocean, and the exploration of oceanic depths necessitates the use of technology, as evidenced by the EVA (extra-vehicular action) suits used by Leigh and her crewmates. Due to this, it becomes impossible for humans to understand and read the ocean as a place when its powerful and fluid nature renders it more similar to a non-place. The breakdown of land-based epistemologies emphasises the juxtaposition between marine and terrestrial environments in the context of a temporal and spatial disjunction: "It was hard to imagine that around us life was continuing as usual, that if you were to travel far enough in any direction, you would find buildings, roads, great washes of noise as people went about their days" (MacInnes 103). In addition, we begin to realise that the place in which we float in the ocean is not the same as when we entered the water (Dobrin 60) – it is undergoing a constant transformation – mixing the new with the old. The water is gone. The place is gone. It has shifted in current and flow. The terrestrial concept of time and space is irrelevant when applied to the ocean, as Leigh remarks: "The whole period seemed out of time. We hadn't seen land in weeks" (MacInnes 103). In this context, the ocean emerges as a constantly changing entity that defies its understanding as a fixed place with linear time.

Additionally, in correlation with the temporality of the ocean, MacInnes stresses the ephemeral nature and temporal insignificance of human existence in comparison to the ocean's vastness, as the ocean "anticipates us, contains us, outlives us" (MacInnes 48). This prompts the examination of humanity's place in the broader context of time and space, where the ocean takes on symbolic meaning for eternity and infinity when juxtaposed with human mortality.

The epistemological rationales concerning temporality, spatiality, accessibility, and habitability make it impossible to imagine the ocean as a fixed place; instead, MacInnes attempts to grasp it through the inherent imagery of circularity.

Stacy Alaimo, in her article "The Anthropocene at Sea" (2017), asserts:

> Although the deep seas do seem a world apart, when scientific and popular rhetoric cast distant depths and abyssal creatures as "alien," they imaginatively remove them from the planet, from the terrain of human concern, and even from reality (154).

Furthermore, Marykate Earnest cast the ocean as an "extra-terrestrial space" (2). In MacInnes' *In Ascension* (2023), Leigh undertakes a journey from the depths of the ocean to the depths of space. Therefore, echoing Alaimo's and Earnest's statements, Leigh's trajectory denotes a passage from one extra-terrestrial, alien and uncharted space to another. Through this odyssey, MacInnes further highlights the hostility of these territories in the context of the Anthropocene by stressing the impossibility of humans "to domesticate and cultivate this non-place" (MacInnes 336) if it comes to a hypothetical scenario of environmental degradation on Earth.

Even as the crew ascends into the depths of space, they still maintain a link to nature. The spaceship's shield is filled with water, which symbolises a tangible link to the oceans left behind on Earth. Similarly, the crew cultivates genetically modified algae on the premises, which can be understood as a testament to the inherent and unquestionable interconnection and interdependence with nature amidst the ostensibly sterile expanse of outer space. The algae functions both as a "stress-reliever, immunity booster, an emotional salve" (MacInnes 214) as well as a source of "familiarity, linearity" (MacInnes 349), offering the crew a semblance of continuity which is impossible to attain in the vast void that is the space. Corresponding with the ocean, the sense of temporality and spatiality is disrupted. There is "no way to measure time, no clear idea of where and when we are" (MacInnes 410); moreover, Leigh characterises their position as one that "exists elsewhere, out of time, beyond two points" (MacInnes 361). As far as the sense of place is concerned, Leigh's sister, Helena, asserts:

> If you can't relate to it, can't conceive of the person being there, then a gap is created, and the mind exploits the reality chasm. (…) If I can't imagine what the world was like, it never existed. (…) There is no basis for reality. The place can't be imagined therefore it can't be substantial (MacInnes 436).

Similar to the oceanic analogy, if one cannot imagine or conceptualise a place, it loses its substance and grounding in reality. Moreover, without the ability to mentally inhabit a place, it becomes devoid of significance and concreteness and exists only as an abstract concept rather than a perceptible reality. MacInnes employs these locations, the ocean and outer space, not only to demonstrate temporal and spatial disjunction but also to contrast the barren space with the richness of Earth, highlighting the preciousness and fragility of Earth's biosphere.

7.2 The Cycle

Throughout the novel, MacInnes investigates the concept and theme of cycles and circularity, which can be interpreted on multiple levels and from different perspectives. He employs the theme in his conceptualisation of the oceanic expanse, suggesting that the ocean is "annihilating the concept of straight and linear time to suggest something more circular and repetitious instead" (MacInnes 32). It is necessary to view the ocean as a continuum, a cycle, as opposed to a linear progression. It is rendered as a sequence of interconnected loops in which past, present and future merge and form a seamless whole. Besides, the cyclical phenomena can also be visible in the portrayal of tides, sea currents or seasons, which act as discernible markers of continuous flow.

In the novel's ending, the coda, MacInnes, decisively abandons and alienates the conventional notions of temporality and spatiality. Instead, he redirects attention to the cyclical aspect of existence. He elucidates, "the end instigates a beginning. (…) Life is circular, atemporal. Every cell an instance of time travel" (MacInnes 489), implying that the idea of the end is not definitive but rather should be understood as a trigger for new beginnings. In order to reinforce the theme of cyclicity, the last section employs several chronological juxtapositions, such as: "This is our arrival, this is the end" (MacInnes 492) or "Everything is coming away, beginning again, the start of this long journey" (MacInnes 496), whereby MacInnes presents life as a continuous loop devoid of linear temporal boundaries.

In Leigh's case, the cyclical trajectory can be interpreted as a progression from discovering personal optimism to discovering planetary optimism. Initially, she found hope in the water, swimming in the Nieuwe Maas. This experience parallels the eventual end of the cycle, where she rediscovers hope again, albeit on a planetary scale. The rediscovery of hope at the end opens the opportunity for a fresh beginning, symbolising the potential beginning of life's cycle again and in its entirety. Leigh returned from the cosmic depths while the spaceship was "temporally displaced" (MacInnes 404) by two billion years. She metaphorically brings life to Earth with the algae on board, demonstrating the resurgence of life on Earth. Her trans-corporeal nature epitomises the beginning of life on Earth again when she initiated the cycle of life anew by bringing the algae into the ocean to form and give rise to life. Additionally, the theme of circularity can also be construed as a symbolic return to life's primordial origin, which is signified by Leigh's reunion with the ocean, where the ocean serves as a metaphorical site of rebirth, suggesting the beginning of life's cycle once more. This is how Leigh envisions hope; she imagines her life "in a close contact (…) with the stuff of the world" (MacInnes 34).

Capitalist society "construct[s] oceanic space as akin to land space and ascribe[s] capitalist notions of ownership and commerce to those spaces" (Dobrin 4). In the end, Leigh's observation, in contrast, elucidates a state of primordial existential detachment from notions of possession, as there was "no belonging. no ownership, no body distinct" (MacInnes 495). The sense of ownership drives a culture of possessiveness and exploitation of natural resources. Against this paradigm, however, stands the glimmer of hope that Leigh eventually is a witness to, hope represented by the dissolution of boundaries and identities opening up the possibility of a shift in perspective characterised by reimagining the innate interconnectedness with nature. The final paragraph gives readers a profound sense of hope, and that a sense of fulfilment and belonging can be found in the newfound understanding of the relationship between nature and humanity, celebrating the infinite potentiality inherent in the ongoing process of transformation and the eternal cycle of beginnings and endings:

> The water is no longer lifeless but life-filled, and I'm glad, at the end, to be part of this, intermediate in this, glad that everything I've seen and done, everything I've felt

will be continuous in this, generative and fertile in this flux, cycles of transformation, not ending but beginning, beginning again, as it always was and will be, new worlds in transformation, new eternities, new life, new – (MacInnes 496).

8 Human-Human Relationships in Julia Armfield's *Our Wives Under the Sea*

In *Our Wives Under the Sea* (2023) by Julia Armfield, human-human relationships are explored through the lens of the ocean and its depths. By navigating the intimate relations between Miri and Leah, Armfield comments on the interconnectedness of humanity and the natural sphere and parallels the intimate relationship with the connections to the natural environment. The ocean acts as a poignant symbol of the unconscious, the unknown and serves as a portrayal of Leah's introspective journey. Accordingly, the novel's structure is divided into five distinct parts, each corresponding to a specific layer of the ocean's depth: Sunlight, Twilight, Midnight, Abyssal and Hadal zones[10]. Through this narrative structure, Armfield examines the mirroring journey into the depths of the protagonists' unconscious and uncovers the veiled difficulties and complications of relationships. Armfield uses this to interconnect the microcosm of inner struggles and relationship problems and the macrocosm of connection and relationship with the natural world. Thus, the novel is replete with symbolism and figurative language, through which Armfield meticulously navigates the depiction of Leah and Miri's marital relationship, their gradual withdrawal, and Leah's escape to and appreciation for the body of the ocean.

Throughout the novel, Armfield utilises the reiteration of the phrase "sunken thoughts" (Armfield 10), which can be seen as an allusion to the thematic exploration of introspection and reflection of the world that is submerged beneath the surface of consciousness. Furthermore, it foreshadows the gradually declining relationship between two women, Leah and Miri. It serves as an exploration of how these thoughts remain suppressed beneath the surface yet still exert an influence on one's perception and behaviour.

The themes discussed in the novel are also hinted at in the epigraph of the novel, where Armfield employs a quotation retrieved from *Moby Dick* (1851) by Herman Melville: "As

[10] The vertical axis of the ocean is divided into five distinct zones "based on various physical and biological conditions" (Worldatlas.com) by the oceanographers. Furthermore, "oceanic zones refer to the deep open ocean which lies beyond the continental shelf" (Worldatlas.com).

this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half-known life" (Armfield "Epigraph"). Firstly, the quote illuminates the employment of contrasting language associated with the distinctive approach to the ocean and the land. While the ocean is portrayed as a shocking, unpredictable, and even horrifying environment, the land is portrayed in stark juxtaposition, depicted as grassy, lush, tranquil, and pleasant. In doing so, this quote illuminates and accentuates the terrestrial bias and perspectives involved in negotiating humanity's place in the natural world – depicting terrestrial dwellings as persistently endangered by the all-encompassing and hostile forces of nature. Likewise, the epigraph's imagery aptly summarises the psychological dimension characterised by the juxtaposition between inner peace and the external struggles and terrors that encircle it like the ocean, which highlights the introspection and unconscious journey which Leah has been exposed to and aims to portray the vastness of external forces beyond our control.

The novel opens with a depiction of the Sunlight Zone, "which covers the distance between the surface and approximately six hundred feet beneath" (Armfield 76). In the context of Leah and Miri's relationship, this layer figuratively examines the early stages of their connection and intimacy, which is endorsed by Miri's recurring reflections that evaluate the beginning stages of their bond. Paralleling the Sunlight Zone, which predominantly covers the ocean's surface layer, these nascent stages of relationship often operate at the surface level, characterised by connections that are not yet deep or intense. This portrayal is further analogous with the Sunlight Zone, where "there is only minimal pressure, coral reefs, colour and pleasure divers" (Armfield 76), similar to the initial attraction, excitement, minimal pressure, and ease of navigation. According to Miri, "Leah and I became this fused, inextricable thing" (Armfield 16), which enhances the seamlessness of their connection during the initial phase of their relationship. These joyful memories are contrasted with the current relational aspects after Leah's return home from the submarine, which got stranded at the bottom of the ocean. The juxtaposition stems mainly from the communication deficit between the protagonists as "most nights we [Leah and Miri] don't talk – silence like a spine through the new shape our relationship has taken" (Armfield 4), which characterises their recently increasing emotional detachment.

However, the underlying and repressed issues must eventually be confronted and faced, as exemplified by the current phase of Miri's and Leah's relationship, where "there was nothing we could do but continue to drop" (Armfield 19). At the same time, Miri navigates the ambivalent emotions, unable to determine whether Leah's presence implies "a relief or invasion" (Armfield 12). The final paragraph of this chapter metaphorically evokes their inevitable parting of ways and predicts the subsequent trajectory of Leah's and Miri's relationship:

> The deep sea is dark, particularly when the lights on your submersible craft have cut out for reasons unknown. I did my best to keep my gaze away from the windows, thought of strange-shaped ocean creatures peering in at the three of us and smiling with all of their teeth (Armfield 33).

Considering the quoted passage and in the context of interpersonal relationships, the lights that illuminate the way metaphorically represent understanding and effective communication and ease of navigation. However, when the lights go out, Miri and Leah find themselves in a predicament characterised by a communication deficit that enhances their gradual growing apart and the widening chasm between them. Indeed, the deep sea appears dark when the possibility of communication and interaction between two people vanishes and simply intensifies the inner conflict of both Miri and Leah as their emotions remain unexpressed and suppressed.

The entrance into the Twilight Zone of the ocean is described as a point where "sunlight may still penetrate" (Armfield 76). The Twilight Zone symbolises a transitional and critical phase between the ostensible clarity and smoothness of the previous Sunlight Zone and the deeper struggles and complications that lurk in the subsequent Midnight Zone. This section begins with a description of the farewell party that preceded Leah's departure on the submarine expedition, emblematic of the transitional state between the clarity and peace of the land and the culminating deterioration of their relationship, symbolised by the descent into the ocean's depths. Miri, moreover, describes that "earlier in the evening we [Miri and Leah] had fought, I forgot about what exactly" (Armfield 38), which augments the feelings of ambiguity while

simultaneously representing the grappling and suppression of the convolutions of their conflict.

Consequently, Leah's underwater voyage can be ultimately interpreted as the catalyst of the rift that precipitates the disconnect and the tension between protagonists, metaphorically portraying the internal conflict and unresolved issues. This is emphasised by the fact that "Leah had gone and returned many times before, and I had no reason to presume this trip would be any different" (Armfield 38), but this time, Miri "i*s not convinced she's really back at all*" (Armfield 56; italics in original). Throughout this section, Miri describes instances that are indicative of the apparent deepening disconnect between herself and Leah, such as Miri's relocation to the spare room from which she "somehow never moved back" (Armfield 41), as well as the portrayal of the pervasive sense of deterioration within their relationship and depiction of the darkness that threatens to engulf them: "Leah has been back nearly two months – thin colourless light in the morning and spiders all over the house" (Armfield 63), describing the state of their surroundings as a reflection of their emotional state.

After the Twilight Zone, the Midnight Zone marks the descent into the ocean's depths, characterised by the complete absence of light and tremendous pressure – "from here on, you're down in the dark" (Armfield 76). In contrast to the initial recollections of the early stages of their relationship, as the novel digs deeper into the metaphorical journey through the oceanic layers, Miri's memories begin to fade, and she becomes increasingly pessimistic and gloomy. Despite this, Miri still finds some measure of solace and comfort in the memories of their past: "It is still comforting, of a fashion, to think about my Leah, though such thoughts come attendant on the usual wave of grief that my Leah is not who I have with me now" (Armfield 99). As previously mentioned, the hallmarks of the Midnight Zone are darkness and the impenetrability of light; this mirrors the complex interaction between reality and the lingering memories of the past, where memories serve as a glimmer of hope and comfort amidst the vast darkness of the Midnight Zone. The growing gap between Miri and Leah is further characterised by silence and the absence of communication even despite their spatial proximity, which further contributes to the constant pressure within their

household; as Miri puts it, “the space around us is a claw half grasped, holding tight without quite crushing” (Armfield 80), comparable to the crushing pressure of the Midnight zone.

The primary challenge seems to be the difficulty of reconnecting with a partner who has retreated into the depths of their inner turmoil: “*Sometimes I think you prefer it down there, (...) you go so deep you forget you’re supposed to come back*” (Armfield 85; italics in original). However, as Leah sees it, “Without lights, the water was blind around us and holding torches to the glass resulted in little but our own faces reflected back – ghost forms in deep water, six eyes peering in from without” (Armfield 76). This emphasises the profound isolation within their relationship, symbolically described through the all-encompassing darkness that reflects the introspective journey and self-confrontation. The reflection of her own face symbolises the drowning in one’s inner suffering, while the darkness of the ocean highlights the absence of external guidance as she attempts to navigate these dark depths. This quote also relates to the fact that Leah initially avoided looking into the dark window[11]. Leah’s initial reluctance to investigate what may be hiding behind the window indicates her fear of the unknown and her inability to face the hypothetically unsettling truth of her and her partner growing apart. In contrast, her behaviour changes over time, observing a transition from external fear to inward introspection, from imagining “monstrous creatures” (Armfield 33) to her “ghostly reflections” (Armfield 76), which illuminates an evolving battle with the inner self. Leah is thus forced to confront her own presence and reality as well as the reality of her isolation.

Both Abyssal and Hadal zones are characterised as points of no return; moreover, as Leah clarifies, “there are big things down here, old things, and certainly more of them than we know about” (Armfield 76). These zones, impenetrable by light, epitomise the descent into a dark abyss that confronts all that is unknown to humanity. The final passages of *Our Wives Under the Sea* are characterised by the consuming darkness of the ocean, which becomes impossible to navigate. This can be identified as analogous to reaching the deepest recesses of the mind, which are “directionless in its blackness, moving no visible way” (Armfield

[11] “The deep sea is dark, particularly when the lights on your submersible craft have cut out for reasons unknown. I did my best to keep my gaze away from the windows, thought of strange-shaped ocean creatures peering in at the three of us and smiling with all of their teeth” (Armfield 33).

140). Additionally, they are exemplified by Miri's weariness and gradual surrender and withdrawal, as she describes, "My heart is a thin thing, these days – a shred of paper blown between the spaces in my ribs" (Armfield 155).

Throughout the chapters articulating Leah's point of view, Armfield accurately illustrates the claustrophobic experience in the submersible. Leah's predicament is portrayed as being stuck in an interminable loop during which "nothing moved except me [Leah] in circles" (Armfield 184), representing the emotional and psychological stasis. As for the novel's final chapters, however, the sudden and unexpected reactivation of the power in the submersible offers the potential to return to the surface and marks a pivotal shift in Leah's internal struggle. More precisely, it is a kind of culmination after being stuck at the bottom of the ocean for a long time. Armfield employs this depiction of the extended period of claustrophobic immobility to build suspense and enhance the sense of hopelessness, alienation and entrapment while also symbolising the fact that Leah is forced to face and return to herself and tackle her darkest fears.

The place where Leah was stuck throughout the whole expedition is described as a "chasm in the ground (…) something shattered or pulled apart" (Armfield 215), which evokes a comparison to the metaphorical abyss that separates Leah and Miri and to the rift within the protagonist's psyche. The bottom of the ocean becomes a speculative topography upon which Armfield analyses aspects of the fractured relationship. Leah is stubbornly determined not to conclude the mission without encountering evidence of life in the ocean's depths to confirm her belief that there is "something knowable about the sea, something within comprehension, and I knew I couldn't allow the opposite to be true" (Armfield 207). While Leah was "longing only for some struggle of life" (Armfield 210), she encounters an enigmatic giant sea monster which "rose up from the chasm below us and kept rising" (Armfield 216), and it filled "my [Leah's] field of vision, seemed to fill the whole ocean by itself" (Armfield 216). The sea creature emerged from the exact metaphorical point of a chasm within Leah's psyche and the rupture within the protagonists', Leah and Miri's, relationship. It represents the inescapable truth of their inevitable drifting apart and the fears that Leah has been reluctant to confront throughout the entire expedition. However, now it

seems inevitable as she is forced to face it and can no longer ignore or escape it. Armfield portrays "the relationship with the sea's more-than-human world in an imaginative experience that opens up an unknown world of discovery and self-discovery" (Zapf 63). This is the pivotal moment, the climax of the story, in which, after a protracted period of darkness, lifelessness and immobility, Leah finally finds something alive and moving. Leah realises the inevitability of the situation when she "wrote her name on the first page of the logbook and pressed it to the window, so that the creature could see" (Armfield 217). This gesture symbolises Leah's acknowledgement and acceptance of the circumstances and the establishment of her identity amidst the all-encompassing darkness, bridging the gap between her subconscious *sunken thoughts* and her conscious corporeal self. It thus implies a readiness and willingness to deal with the concealed facets of her inner world, such as accepting that their once-fulfilling relationship is crumbling and the characters are inevitably growing apart.

The concluding passages of *Our Wives Under the Sea* present us with the last lingering memories, pointing to the positive aspects and phases of Miri and Leah's relationship against the backdrop of Miri's readiness to let Leah go. The phrase "*Let go of them in the water*" (Armfield 223; italics in original) is something Miri once read and recalls as she prepares to let Leah go at her mother's house by the beach. Miri surrenders to the natural currents of their relationship, ready to accept reality and release her memories and emotional baggage by allowing the water to wash away the past and its regrets. In a sense, water evokes nature's cycles – water moves in constant flow, merging the old and new, never remaining the same. This parallels the cycles of life – cycles of endings and beginnings, keeping in mind that every end indicates a new beginning.

The conclusion of *Our Wives Under the Sea* can be read on different levels. It can be interpreted as an inevitable deterioration of their relationship, where Leah becomes a *sunken thought*, transitioning from once being the most significant person in Miri's life to now being a drifted-away memory, symbolising the realisation that the relationship no longer holds the place in one's life as it once did. On the other hand, it can be interpreted as their natural growing apart, where Miri finally admits this to herself and peacefully lets Leah go.

Moreover, Julia Armfield's *Our Wives Under the Sea* presents noticeable parallels between Leah and Miri's mother, which further enables Armfield to examine the coping mechanism for the gradual loss of Miri's loved ones. Throughout the novel, Miri's memories of a blissful past with Leah are interlaced with memories and stories about her mother, who suffered from dementia. The relationship between Miri and her mother was marked by both distance and thoughtfulness, as Miri explains: "I loved her hard and at distance, which made it easier to do, experienced brief but powerful compulsions to hug her and almost never did" (Armfield 43).

In both cases, Miri grapples with the gradual change in behaviour and transformation of her loved ones right in front of her eyes. At the same time, she clings to the distant memories of who they once were, highlighting both the physical and emotional absence of both characters. An equally significant parallel is that in both cases, Miri assumes the role of a caregiver trying to navigate the unstable dynamics and provide support to the other person. Miri's mother's illness is marked by a communication breakdown that mirrors the communication deficit between Miri and Leah. Even though Leah and Miri's mother's paths never crossed, Miri imagines such an encounter: "Sometimes, I imagine my mother and Leah meeting, though this is not a thing which ever actually happened" (Armfield 218). Symbolically, the meeting occurs in the final scene at Miri's mother's house, which can be seen as Miri's way of finding peace and meaning in their respective losses. The figurative act of returning her beloved wife to the ocean outside her mother's house can be seen as a simultaneous release of both Leah and her mother, which allows Miri to let go and reconcile with their absences.

9 Human-Nature Relationships in Julia Armfield's *Our Wives Under the Sea*

As was observed in the previous chapter, Julia Armfield's *Our Wives Under the Sea* is structured into five distinct parts, corresponding to the five vertical zones of the ocean. This chapter deals with analysing and interpreting the depicted link between humans and nature. Subsequently, this chapter analyses Leah's transformation and its meaning. From a relationship perspective, Leah's gradual transformation can be seen as an allegory for two people growing apart, changing into someone completely new and unknown to the other person. This transformation is metaphorically represented by the descent into deeper oceanic regions; the deeper the descent, the more evolved the transformation. In the novel's final chapters, Miri utters: "this alchemist sea, changing something into something else" (Armfield 228), which suitably encapsulates the transformative power of the natural environment. This transformation is evident not only in the changes and alterations that Leah undergoes upon her return from the submarine but also in Miri as she struggles to navigate and overcome the emotional turmoil triggered by Leah's return and her altered state. The alchemy and the ocean's transformative power, therefore, parallel the transformation and changes in Leah and Miri's relationship.

Leah is characterised by a life-long love and appreciation for the bodies of water, especially the ocean, which appears to be of the utmost importance to her understanding of her character. She perceives the ocean as a place where she feels "safe and thinking about the ocean was the method by which I felt safest" (Armfield 127); again, Leah perceives the ocean as a safe space, a haven that provides serenity and moreover "preserve memories, shapes identities and concretize fantasies" (Awad 30). Through Leah's appreciation for the ocean, Armfield subtly addresses the Anthropocene and climate change implications. She highlights the shift in perspective regarding the understanding of the ocean, with which she challenges the anthropocentric perspective of treating nature as simply a resource. Rather, Armfield promotes the relevance and importance of maintaining its health as Leah asserts, "The book spoke so coolly of the deep ocean, not as something to be survived or conquered but simply navigated (Armfield 60). Leah particularly comments on the ecomodernist hubris,

especially “the technology available, the ways in which our ability to observe and understand marine life has advanced since the mid-nineteen-seventies” (Armfield 31). The emphasis is on technological advancement and change through the direct imperative of science and technology in order to mitigate ecological degradation and improve understanding of the ocean’s complex ecosystem and biodiversity. Throughout the novel, Leah mentions several threats posed by the Anthropocene and ensuing climate change, such as the fact that “seabirds eat more plastic relative to their size than any other animal in the ocean” (Armfield 123) or “sometimes I think of oceans rising faster than it is possible to escape them (Armfield 148). Both the plastic pollution in the marine environments and rising sea levels stress the dangers and consequences of the Anthropocene. Armfield’s narrative urges the readers to reconsider the interaction and relationship with the natural world and marine environments:

> *It* [the ocean] *has taught us that life exists everywhere, even in the greatest depths; that most of life is in the oceans; and that oceans govern climate. Perhaps because we’re so terrestrially biased, air-breathing creatures that we are, it has taken us until now to realise that everything we care about is anchored in the ocean* (Armfield 166; italics in original).

One of the roles of oceanic imagery is to highlight and demonstrate the intrinsic entanglement and interconnectedness between humans and the ocean. Given humanity’s inability to navigate or inhabit the ocean without technology, the ocean appears insignificant or negligible. However, Armfield emphasises its importance and indispensable role in maintaining and influencing the quality of life on Earth.

Leah’s affinity to the ocean is rooted in her childhood, as evidenced by her recollections of her father teaching her how to swim at the age of seven. This process was gradual as she “grew used to the water in stages and then fell in love with it” (Armfield 48) ultimately. Her love of the ocean can thus be considered inherited and nurtured by her father, who later on cultivated in her an appreciation for the ocean by buying her books that dealt with the oceanic explorations and voyages she was so fascinated with. In addition, Leah’s references to her childhood dreams and wishes, such as “she would imagine herself with scales growing

beneath the membranes of her skin" (Armfield 52) or "webbing growing past the knuckle and gill-slits in my neck" (Armfield 165), prove her deep kinship with the ocean and the fact that she has always belonged there, as demonstrated by the dreams and wishes which would enable her to immerse in the ocean, her safe space, for the extended period without any limitations. What is more, both quotes function to some extent as a foreshadowing of her eventual transformation and the results. Given this, the sea emerges as "a dual force reminding of their own chaotic and broken lives, and it also operates as a vital and agentic means to coalesce meaning and harmony" (Kümbet 157). Within the narrative, the ocean emerges as a medium to symbolically depict the slowly deteriorating relationship, Leah's internal turmoil and fragmentation, while simultaneously, it acts as a site of harmony, identity formation and balance. Therefore, nature and, more specifically, the ocean can be recognised as a force in determining and shaping the protagonists' trajectories and journeys.

Through the characters of Leah and Miri, we can observe and examine the dichotomy between land and ocean, which can also be paraphrased as a duality of the solid and the liquid. Miri and Leah are deeply shaped by their respective connections to the terrestrial and aquatic realms. Miri is characterised as a "weighted, literal, a tangible creature connected to the earth" (Armfield 100), which is in stark juxtaposition to Leah's oceanic affinity. Miri embodies concreteness and stability, with the solid ground beneath her feet, which provides her with a distinct sense of control. On the other hand, Leah can be read as an epitome of fluidity and transformation by virtue of her deep link to the sea. Subsequently, these juxtapositions point to the development of the relational interaction between the characters, utilising a contrasting view of the land versus ocean or solid versus liquid dichotomy, portraying their inevitable growing apart. For instance, Miri remarks, "Strange, to live in such proximity to an ocean that I almost never see" (Armfield 25). Despite the physical proximity between Leah and Miri, there is a growing and more palpable emotional distance between them. The contrast between the ocean and the land serves as a metaphor for their relational synergy by portraying the sense of estrangement, the clash, and the widening chasm between them. This is due to their contrasting perspectives and the emotional transformation that both characters undergo, especially in light of Leah's gradual transformation after returning from the submarine.

Afterwards, Armfield reinforces the juxtaposition of solidity and fluidity by describing the oceanic phenomenon called the 'sea lung' or 'marine lung'[12], which she describes as a "drifting anomaly of matter, solid and not quite so" (Armfield 100). According to Oppermann, the matter can be perceived "as a site of narrativity (…) a site where the world reveals its creative becoming, its dynamism" ("Ecological Postmodernism" 31). Consequently, Armfield expounds this phenomenon as a fertile site for investigating and examining the relationship between Miri and Leah as well as Leah's eventual transformation, demonstrated by the hybridity of solid and liquid. The liminality between these states reflects the current condition of Miri's and Leah's relationship – "the chilly liminality of water and earth" (Armfield 99) represents a threshold between separation and union, which posits the significance of transformation as a potential shift within their relationship. The liminal space between the water and the air serves as a juncture where the relationship could either mend or break.

Furthermore, this liminal space can be interpreted in the light of Leah's transformation. Upon returning from the submarine, Leah begins to gradually metamorphose into a human-water hybrid form. Moreover, this transformation depicts her internal conflict and her yearning to become someone else, echoing the natural process of the formation of the 'sea lung' described as "the chill of the air, aching to become something else" (Armfield 100). Miri further elucidates, "There's a point between the sea and the air that is both and also quite either" (Armfield 167). In a similar vein, Leah's "aching to become something else" symbolises the need for transformation. Leah's progressive transition from one state to the other situates her at a point between human and water; she is both and also quite neither.

The juxtaposition between Leah and Miri becomes evident through their respective realms. Miri is characterised by the solidity of the ground, while Leah is portrayed by the fluidity of the ocean. In the novel's conclusion, Leah's return to the ocean symbolises her figurative

[12] The term 'sea lung' originates from the observations of the adventurer Pytheas, who, on one of his voyages, encountered a peculiar phenomenon when he felt the different elements combining into one, comparing this blending of earth, water, and air to a 'sea lung'. Subsequently, he described it as something on "which you can neither walk nor sail upon" (Officer and Page 19). Additionally, as stated by Officer and Page, the peculiar phenomenon Pytheas encountered was, indeed, the 'sea lung', a circular piece of ice floating on top of the water (19).

return to her true self. She is characterised as belonging to the ocean, while throughout their relationship, Miri has kept her grounded and confined to the land. This interplay can be grasped through the motif of circularity, both personal and planetary. On a personal level, circularity is manifested by Leah's return back to herself and her identity. In contrast, on the planetary level, it highlights the oceanic origins of life itself, thus implying that humans came from the sea and, in the end, Leah eventually returns to these origins.

9.1 Hybridity

In *Our Wives Under the Sea*, the ocean functions "more than a passive social construction but is, rather, an agentic force that inter-acts with and changes other elements in the mix, including the human" (Alaimo and Hekman 4). This paradigm of material enmeshment is evident from the novel's very first page. Armfield utilises Leah's character to interrogate and reinterpret the interaction between the human and the nonhuman. By drawing parallels between the human-corporeal self and the natural world, Armfield reinforces and affirms the inherent interconnectedness present in human-nature relationships:

> We all carry the ocean in our bodies (…) Blood basically made up of sodium, potassium, calcium – more or less the same as sea water, when you really get down to it. The first things came from the sea, of course, so there's always going to be a little trace of it in everything, a little trace of salt in the bones (Armfield 160).

This redefinition of the relationship between humans and nature serves as a memento of the hybridity inherent in humans, the hybridity that manifests "at the crossroads of body and place" (Alaimo, "Posthuman" 4), interpreted as a profound intersection between the physical self and the environment where the hybrid identity is continuously negotiated and redefined "in perpetual mutation" (Desblache 246). Over the course of the novel, Leah is slowly "becoming less a body" (Armfield 228) which epitomises the transformative encounter between human and oceanic otherness. Leah's condition evolves in tandem with the novel's structure, mirroring the extent of the transformation as the narrative descends into the deeper layers of the oceanic vertical division. According to the Centre's explanation, her condition

is described as merely a "*resurfacing glitch*" (Armfield 95; italics in original). However, Leah's post-expedition state is characterised by the fact that she spends most of her time in the bathtub, as in the water, "she seems less troubled" (Armfield 133), which can be straightforwardly linked to her affinity to the ocean, which she perceives as her safe space and sanctuary. Furthermore, to some extent, it also acts as a coping mechanism and form of escapism from her surrounding circumstances. Leah's connection and yearning for the ocean reveals a deeper understanding of her true self as well as an acceptance of her transformation; as her body and identity increasingly intermesh with the ocean, she finds solace and peace in her new hybrid existence.

Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality or Donna Haraway's concept of naturecultures is personified in the character of Leah, but taken to the extreme. Leah's transformation is foreshadowed in the very first pages of the novel: "Things can thrive in unimaginable conditions. All they need is the right sort of skin" (Armfield 3). "The right sort of skin" refers to the transformation that Leah undergoes, which is necessitated by the circumstances in which she finds herself and which require her to adapt in order to survive. In addition, as Leah's skin gradually turns to water, she adds table salt to her water or consumes exclusively salted things. Given her increasing resemblance to the ocean and merging her identity with the oceanic environment, it appears essential for Leah's survival and adaptation. This further corroborates the thematic exploration of the dissolution of boundaries between her human self and the ocean.

Throughout the novel, Leah's skin gradually changes, oscillating between corporeal and aquatic. Leah "is prone to ring a bath with a scrim of some curiously viscous material, oddly gritty when rolled between finger and thumb and pinkish in the white bathroom light" (Armfield 42); the substance represents the skin that Leah must shed; it is like a "layer removed" (Armfield 99), in order to discover the new one so that she can function in new conditions. As a result, the boundary between the bodily self and the environment becomes gradually discarded. In Leah's case, the rigid dichotomy of nature and culture fuses into a singular entity through the "semi-porous membrane in place of what was once a solid

scaffolding of muscle and skin" (Armfield 204), this renders Leah radically post-human, challenging the notion of human exceptionalism.

Armfield discusses the blurring of water and body and, subsequently, the literal fusion of nature and culture, emphasising their trans-corporeal entanglement. Especially intriguing is the fluid border of nature and culture, which suggests their reciprocal becoming. The definition of Leah's condition as a figure of metamorphosis appears to be insubstantial; it is more accurately depicted as an example of hybridity. In her article "Hybridity, Monstrosity and the Posthuman in Philosophy and Literature Today" (2012), Lucile Desblache explains a noticeable shift in the figure of transformation in contemporary fiction. Specifically, hybridity is now more frequently employed than metamorphosis (245). Within the context of material ecocriticism, the concept of hybridity seems to be more feasible in capturing the inherent interconnectedness between the human and nonhuman. Through this unidentifiability, we learn the nature of Leah's gradual transformation as "in hybridity, the border between system and environment is not breached, it is just not clear where it is or whether there is a border" (Desblache 247).

The extent of Leah's transformation remains indeterminate as her "skin seems to flex between states, first skin and then abalone and then water and back again" (Armfield 204). This depiction further corroborates the hybrid state by portraying Leah's condition as unclassifiable, neither purely human nor exclusively aquatic. Consequently, it is not possible to categorise Leah's transformation simply as metamorphosis, which implies "a substitution of one form for another, hybridity a combination of one form with another (…) In a hybrid form, two forms join to create a configuration that is neither the one nor the other" (Desblache 249). Furthermore, these fictions, such as *Our Wives Under the Sea*, are necessary because "they urge us to rethink the human in more-than-human terms" (Oppermann, "Posthuman" 289).

Throughout most of the novel, the state of Leah can be subsumed under the heading of hybridity. However, towards the conclusion, the readers learn that hybridity is only a transitional state which subsequently evolves into complete metamorphosis. In the novel's

pivotal moment, Miri takes Leah to her mother's house, where she bids Leah the final goodbye in a powerful and dramatic scene that portrays Leah's complete amalgamation with the ocean. Miri describes the scene as follows: "First my Leah, then the water, first my Leah's arms, her chest, her ribcage, then the water they are struggling towards" (Armfield 228). This last scene again eloquently points to and illustrates the thematic investigation of liminality after Leah's metamorphosis into the ocean: "What persists after this is only air and water and me between them, not quite either and with one foot straining for the sand" (Armfield 228). Finally, Miri finds herself in the in-between state between the ocean and the air, as "there is a micromillimetre on the surface of the ocean that moves between sea and sky and is simultaneously both and neither. Every known life form exists in relation to this layer (Taub). Leah's metamorphosis and the precariousness of the situation have led Miri to contemplate her own place in the world as she grapples with the loss of her wife and the uncertainty of her future. Nevertheless, she has "one foot straining for the sand," representing the solid ground Miri tries to hold onto amidst the precarious situation.

9.2 Temporality and Spatiality

In the novel *Our Wives Under the Sea*, the treatment of temporality and spatiality of the ocean's depths is realised through the employment of temporal discontinuity and spatial indeterminacy. Recurrently, this approach coincides with and further corroborates the claims proposed by Dobrin, who articulates that achieving fixity in a space such as the ocean is unachievable[13]. Additionally, as Dobrin adds: "If ocean is a place, it is a place we visit, a place from which we must return" (58), which accentuates the ocean's existence and understanding beyond humanity's terrestrial bias and underscores the ephemerality of humanity's encounters with it. Armfield consistently approaches and portrays both the temporal and spatial dimensions with a profound sense of claustrophobia in contrast to the incredible vastness enveloping the submersible. The claustrophobic atmosphere arises from the depiction of the submarine's limited space and the narrative repetitiveness of the events described from Leah's point of view. Conversely, the confined premises of the submarine

[13] See chapter 1.3, titled "Blue Ecocriticism".

are contrasted with the expansiveness of the deep ocean. Furthermore, to identify the exact location without the aid of technology is rendered impossible, further accentuating the inherent spatial indeterminacy:

> In the sea, there's no such thing as a natural horizon, no place for the line of the sky to signify an end. When you sink – which we did, long hours of sinking – you can't see the bottom and you can't see the top and the ocean around you extend on both sides with no obvious limit except the border around your own window. The earth and its certain curvature become far less clear underwater (Armfield 45).

Similarly, traditional temporal thinking is considered unattainable given humanity's terrestrial understanding of the world, as Leah explains: "In the sea, in the dark, there isn't time – not in the way you would ordinarily perceive it" (Armfield 104). This claim further pushes away the ocean from the scope of humanity's interest by depicting the ocean as a fluid entity that "covers its tracks" (Armfield 9), thereby emphasises its inherent fluidity and mutability. Additionally, Armfield enhances the claustrophobic atmosphere by portraying the enveloping ocean as a dark and lifeless expanse, as during the majority of the exploration, the crew did not encounter any living organisms; the only life they seemed to encounter was their own reflection in the window. The omnipresent darkness of the deep ocean defies humanity's terrestrial understanding of time, instead portraying it as atemporal with no chance to discern day from night. This temporal ambiguity leads to Leah's psychological disorientation, as she explains: "I need to talk about the days, and not knowing what a day was, not knowing how to keep track or what it was that separated night from morning" (Armfield 126). A schism between the world above the surface and the ocean's depths provokes an intense sense of isolation and alienation, indicating that the ocean proves to disregard humanity's established and habitual (terrestrial) concepts and frameworks.

The apparent fixity in *Our Wives Under the Sea* is achieved through the body of the submarine, which functions as an antithesis to the boundless ocean surrounding it. As articulated in the theoretical part of this thesis, the ocean can be allegorised from the abstract to a fixed place through the incorporation of a vessel – the submarine within the narrative

functions as an essential component through which Armfield is able to situate part of the narrative in the ocean's depths and, to some extent, establish fixity in the uncharted depths. Within the constraints of the submarine, Leah and the crew attempt to maintain a sense of regularity and temporal semblance, which further affirms humanity's intrinsic reliance on tangible and solid constructs. Moreover, accentuated by the unattainability of temporal and spatial fixity in the ocean, Miri is unable to empathise with or grasp Leah's current state because she cannot relate to her experiences beneath the sea. Accordingly, Leah asks Miri: "What is it you imagine when you think about where I was?" (Armfield 109). A disjunction is created between the terrestrial reality and fixity represented by Miri and the fluid and unknowable depths of the ocean epitomised by Leah.

Armfield illustrates the exclusion of the oceanic portrayal from the scope of human interest by interrogating the land-based bias inherent in humanity's perception. This posits another argument as to why the ocean happens to be relegated to function as an external entity characterised as an extra-terrestrial and inherently alien sphere. Armfield uses straight-forward but thought-provoking arguments such as: "More people have been to the moon that had dived beyond depths of six thousand metres" (Armfield 9) or "We think of the place we live as important, but a far greater percentage of the world is made up of ocean" (Armfield 218). Paradoxically, space has been more extensively surveyed than the depths of the ocean, which constitute a majority of this very planet that we, as humans, inhabit. The depictions that parallel the oceanic environment with cosmic exploration dispute the perception and comprehension of the ocean as an alien territory and emphasise the ocean's unmapped and uncharted waters and, to some extent, its perilous nature. Furthermore, through this imagery, Armfield interrogates and challenges the anthropocentric views in which humanity privileges and spotlights the land-based environments. By presenting this portrayal, she ultimately seeks to challenge these narratives and compel people to evaluate their relationship with the ignored and disregarded parts of the natural world.

The positioning of the ocean as an extra-terrestrial space is further enhanced and extended by the scene in which Miri attempts and yearns to find an online support group that would suit her needs and expectations after her wife apparently disappeared beneath the surface of

the sea: “I found an online group for women who liked to roleplay that their husbands had gone to space” (Armfield 87). In this way, Armfield, once again, draws a parallel between outer space and the depths of the ocean, as both elude the epistemology of a terrestrially influenced sense of place and thinking and, as a result, create the difficulty of envisioning oneself in such a space. The contents of the support group of women roleplaying that their husband had gone to space are analogous with the transformation undergone by Leah following her return from the stranded submarine – the group employs distinctive terminology: “BS (before space), EB (earthbound) and CBW (came back wrong)” (Armfield 88). It appears that this is a support group that Miri can, to some extent, identify with and apply the stories to the circumstances in which she and Leah found themselves. In particular, the state of BS (before space) illustrates the seamless trajectory of their relationship prior to Leah’s departure, while Miri can be characterised as EB (earthbound) – confined to the Earth and keenly awaiting the return of her wife, who unfortunately CBW (came back wrong) which portrays the extensive changes that characterise Leah’s current state stemming from her altered hybrid form.

In this chapter, the thesis has attempted to analyse and interpret the depiction of the ocean’s temporal and spatial dimensions in Julia Armfield’s *Our Wives Under the Sea*. Furthermore, has sought to showcase how this portrayal coincides with the theoretical foundation laid in the theoretical part of this diploma thesis. Notably, the fact that grasping and understanding the ocean within the context of terrestrial epistemology of time and space is not rendered possible and, therefore, alternative approaches have to be utilised in order to illustrate its atemporality, fluidity and spatial indeterminacy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this diploma thesis engaged in an in-depth analysis and interpretation of *In Ascension* (2023) by Martin MacInnes and *Our Wives Under the Sea* (2022) by Julia Armfield. One of the primary aims of this thesis was to contextualise and interpret the novels through the lens of ecocritical discourse, with a predominant emphasis on the paradigm of material ecocriticism and trans-corporeality, in order to highlight the interconnectedness and interplay between humanity and the natural environment. These recent developments in ecocritical studies can be contrasted with the dominant anthropocentric perspectives present in contemporary society. The objective was also to illuminate how the authors bridge the space between personal relationships and the overarching theme of inherent connection to the natural environment and planetary belonging. Furthermore, we concentrated on analysing the treatment of marine environments and their richness in symbolism to show how both MacInnes and Armfield use these spheres to portray the natural environment as an active and agentic zone and to interpret the purpose of these themes within the narrative structure of the novels.

The theoretical part of this thesis established and introduced key terms and concepts for the realisation and understanding of the practical part. Firstly, the theoretical part presented a comprehensive overview of ecocriticism, which has evolved into an indispensable discipline within literary studies. The origins of ecocriticism date back to 1987, and since then, it has rapidly developed and flourished, cementing its role as a pluriform and interdisciplinary field that concentrates on the examination of the relationships and connections between humanity and the natural environment as depicted in the literature. Unfortunately, the central trajectory of ecocriticism overlooks the imperative role of the ocean. As a result, Sidney Dobrin has introduced the paradigm of blue ecocriticism, which centres around the ocean, aspires to destabilise the dominant position of land-based ecocriticism and puts forward alternative approaches to conceptualise a sense of place when applied to the oceanic body.

Secondly, the theoretical part placed greater emphasis on the fourth wave of ecocriticism, which is concerned with the paradigm of material ecocriticism and notions such as trans-

corporeality that originated from the broader "material turn" in humanities around the year 2010. The main divergence between previous waves and material ecocriticism lies in their treatment of the nature-culture dichotomy. While the preceding waves, to some extent, endorsed this dichotomy, material ecocriticism discards it completely, emphasising the porosity of corporeal existence, the interconnectedness and interdependence of these spheres and the narrative power of the nonhuman world. In this context, the concept of trans-corporeality, as proposed by Stacy Alaimo, is of notable importance. Drawing on insights from material ecocriticism, ecofeminism and posthumanism, trans-corporeality argues that there is an inherent inextricable connection between the natural environment and people as they exist in a constant and reciprocal flux of exchange.

Lastly, the theoretical part dealt with the Anthropocene and its consequences and implications. The term "Anthropocene" was introduced by Crutzen and Stoermer over 20 years ago, indicating a new epoch in the history of humankind that is markedly different from its antecedents, manifested in particular by climate change and its ramifications. However, although this notion stems from scientific discourse, it has rapidly overflowed it and has penetrated wide-ranging discussions encompassing an eclectic spectrum of academic fields. Furthermore, the examination of the Anthropocene is complemented by a conversation of the Capitalocene. Advanced by sociologist Jason W. Moore, Capitalocene elucidates the destructive links between capitalism and environmental decline mainly caused by the fabricated duality between Nature and Humanity.

Although we were concerned with two separate works with distinct narratives, *Our Wives Under the Sea* and *In Ascension* share striking similarities and parallels, especially in their treatment and approach to the themes of interconnectedness, which is evident from the practical part of this thesis. Both protagonists, Leah and Leigh, exhibit strong ties to and appreciation for the ocean, which they both perceive as their sanctuary place imbued with peace, comfort, renewal and transformation. Simultaneously, the ocean is also described and portrayed as a place of mystery, the unknown, the unfathomable, as well as a place of horror. In both novels, the characters refer to it as an uncharted and unexplored place. In this light, the ocean reflects the characters' inner turmoil, their introspective journey, and their

subconscious and primarily demonstrates their return to themselves and their origins. Both authors use the interconnection between the microcosm and the macrocosm to demonstrate the links between the microcosm of inner struggles and the macrocosm of planetary belonging and connection to nature. Through carefully constructed analogies and parallels between these two, the authors seek to show how personal relationships function as a broader metaphor for the entanglement between nature and humanity and the use of nature as a transformative and agentic entity in their quest to establish their identity. Both Leah's and Leigh's journeys can be understood as a persistent pursuit of their life stories and battles.

The analysis then drew on insights gained from the study of an emerging fourth wave of ecocriticism, material ecocriticism, which functioned as a lens through which this thesis examined the interconnectedness and active interaction between humans and nature as depicted in these novels. Both novels approach these themes comparably, as both seek to portray the world as an intermesh of the human and the nonhuman. The corporeal existence arises as a fertile site upon which the authors observe the permeable and fluid boundaries between nature and humans, by which they ultimately aim to oppose dominant anthropocentric views by depicting the protagonists as hybrid and posthuman. Pursuing the origins of life and casting the seawater as a shared substance between humans and the ocean allows the authors to explore the innate human kinship with the marine environments and to bring the ocean closer to humans in the context of their terrestrial bias.

Leigh in *In Ascension* is portrayed as the epitome of Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality by de-centring the anthropocentric notions of rigid boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. Leah observes the world around her with sensitivity and enhanced perception, which leads her to epiphanies and discoveries about her place in the coexistence of the human and the nonhuman in the interwoven web of life, with an emphasis on the inseparability of the human from the environment. Similarly, through the character of Leah in *Our Wives Under the Sea*, Julia Armfield draws parallels between the corporeal self and the natural world. The trans-corporeality, or the intersection and exchange of human and nonhuman, is grasped through Leah's transformation into a hybrid state and subsequent amalgamation with the ocean. Leah's state can be defined as a literal fusion of humanity and

nature, which further supports the concept of depiction of Leah as posthuman by discarding and portraying the dichotomy between nature and culture as porous and flexible.

As indicated, the novels evaluate and attempt to redefine the relationship between society and the natural environment by challenging anthropocentric views and human exceptionalism. In exploring the aesthetic of the Anthropocene, both novels opted for alternative routes within the context of the thematic exploration of the Anthropocene. Instead of focusing on the depiction of climate degradation only, they employ the theme of interconnectedness aimed at negotiating and clarifying the relationship with nature. While both novels do provide commentaries and observations considering the consequences of the Anthropocene, technological expansion, ecomodernism and capitalistic underpinnings of exploitation, the far more substantial implication seems to be a thematic exploration of the inherent interconnectedness and coexistence between society and nature.

Another common feature of both novels is the shared use of the motif of circularity, albeit in a slightly divergent form. MacInnes depicts Leigh's circular journey on two levels. Firstly, it can be read as Leigh's circular progression from personal optimism, discovering hope in the Nieuwe Maas, to planetary optimism, where there appears to be a chance for the cycle of life to begin anew as Leigh returns back to Earth two billion years ago with algae on board, initiating the genesis of life. Secondly, the cycle can be interpreted as Leigh's circular return to the primordial ocean in which life, and consequently humans, evolved. Armfield employs the motif of circularity slightly differently. In the conclusion of the novel, Leah amalgamates with the ocean, marking the cycle of return to her native realm, which signifies the metaphorical return back to her true self. On a planetary level, it can be read similarly to *In Ascension*, humans evolving from the ocean and the subsequent return to their primordial origins.

Next, there are palpable resemblances in the treatment of place. *In Ascension* by Martin MacInnes portrays Leigh's journey from the depths of the ocean to distant places in the cosmos, which, based on the terrestrial mentality of humanity, can be understood as a progression from one uncharted and unhabitable space to another. Likewise, most of *Our*

Wives Under the Sea takes place in the undersea territory of a stranded submarine. Armfield employs some parallels between the ocean and the cosmos to illuminate the hostility and uninhabitability of these places. This thesis has therefore examined the dimension of temporality and spatiality as depicted in the novels, informed by the ecocritical emphasis on the sense of place. As analysed in the practical part, applying the land-based treatment of place in the ocean and outer space is unattainable due to the unexplored and inconceivable nature of these spaces, which instils in people the sense of the ocean's unimportance due to its depiction as external and alien. In response, both novels portray the significance of the ocean to the trajectory of humanity, such as highlighting the power and influence of the ocean on life on Earth and the characters' experiences. In both novels, the ocean is depicted as a place that defies fixity due to its fluidity, continuous transformation and movement characterised by atemporality and spatial indeterminacy without the aid of technology, demonstrating that the ocean does not conform to terrestrial concepts and frameworks and needs to be understood outside of the terrestrial orientation.

Both *Our Wives Under the Sea* and *In Ascension* skilfully utilise the themes of interconnectedness between the human and nonhuman worlds. This is portrayed through the interlinking of the microcosm of personal, family, and intimate relationships and the macrocosm of planetary belonging and connection to the natural environment, with nature treated as an agentic and active entity.

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