

FLUID LANDSCAPES AND THE INSULAR IMAGINARY IN ROY JACOBSEN'S BARRØY-SERIES

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ABSTRACT. *Fluid Landscapes and the Insular Imaginary in Roy Jacobsen's Barrøy-series.* The paper aims to investigate, through the perspective of the recent new materialist turn in the humanities, the island imaginary in Northern Norway. The research will revolve around Roy Jacobsen's *Barrøy-serien*, a series of four books which depict the islands of Northern Norway. The whole world of the islanders seems to be encircled and ultimately enclosed by water. The title of the first volume in the series (*The Unseen*) points directly toward the socio- and geopolitical invisibility of the inhabitants of the little island, who seem to be outside any social system, living their life off the grid. Islands have been often portrayed in literature as such isolated microcosms, objects of colonial gaze and desire, powerless and inert. However, in *Barrøy-serien*, Roy Jacobsen seems to break this pattern, by ascribing agency to nonhuman (and more-than-human) systems like the island or the ocean. The story of the protagonist Ingrid seems to slowly become the story of the Barrøy island itself, which is never just the backdrop of human action and intention, but a force that has the power to shape human destinies. I argue that these narratives allow nonhuman entities like the island and the ocean independence and autonomy, acknowledging their enmeshment in human life.

Keywords: *blue ecocriticism, island studies, nonhuman studies, new materialisms, landscape, ocean studies*

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REZUMAT. *Peisaje fluide și imaginarul insular în seria de romane Barrøy de Roy Jacobsen.* Lucrarea de față își propune să investigheze, prin prisma teoriilor noilor materialisme, un așa numit „imaginar insular” al Norvegiei (de nord). Studiul se concentrează asupra *Barrøy-serien* de Roy Jacobsen, o serie de patru romane care prezintă realitățile unei insule din nordul Norvegiei. Întreaga lume a locuitorilor insulei pare să fie înconjurată și îngrădită de apă. Titlul primului volum din serie (*Cei Nevăzuți*) trimite direct la invizibilitatea socio- și geopolitica a locuitorilor insulei, care par să își trăiască viața în afara oricărui sistem. Insulele au fost adesea portretizate în literatura ca astfel de microcosmosuri izolate, inerte, obiecte ale dorinței și privirii coloniale intrusiv. Cu toate acestea, seria de romane scrisă de Roy Jacobsen pare să destabilizeze această structură, atribuind unor sisteme sau entități nonumane (și mai-mult-decât-umane) precum oceanul sau insula Barrøy abilitatea de a se auto-guverna și de a fi autosuficiente. Povestea protagonistei Ingrid pare să devină pe parcursul celor patru volume chiar povestea insulei în sine, care nu este niciodată doar background-ul activității umane, ci o forță care are puterea să modeleze destine umane. Aceste narațiuni recunosc autonomia și independența unor entități nonumane ca insula sau oceanul, cât și rolul pe care acestea îl au în viața umană.

Cuvinte-cheie: *ecocritică, insula, studii nonumane, noi materialisme, peisaj, studii despre ocean*

Introduction and theoretical background

Islands have oftentimes been depicted as places of secludedness and isolation in literature. From Shakespeare’s “The Tempest” to *Robinson Crusoe*, islands have been described as spaces of otherness and seclusion, inaccessible and exotic, “a geographically, economically, historically autonomous *terra nullus*” (Sreenan 2017, 270). This is especially true in the context of colonialism. Island studies scholars such as Pete Hay or Godfrey Baldacchino view these literary representations of islands as defective and faulty, since they obscure “real islandness” in favour of clichéd tropes and metaphors which dismiss “the physical reality of islands whilst promoting the relevance of metaphorical abstractions” (Hay 2006, 29). Literary representations of islands often enforce dangerous dualistic thinking which can dim the real, material experience of islandness. Nevertheless, how can we maintain a connection between the materiality of islands and their cultural representations, and how can we rise above such dualistic thinking when it comes to them? Recent approaches in the field of environmental humanities and nonhuman studies such as new materialist

theories and material ecocriticism blur the division between biological and political, between natural and cultural. Material ecocriticism “investigates the capacity for material objects to act with effectivity – to have agency or even a «voice» (or several voices) of their own” (Raipola 2020, 279). Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann use the term “storied matter” (2014) to underline the fact that, just like humans, nonhuman actants have the capacity of telling and creating stories, participating in the construction of narrative. Reading (literary) islands through the lens of material ecocriticism means that we do not have to read them as either cultural or natural/material, but as an interplay between these two dimensions, an assemblage of forces and identities, and therefore as a fluid landscape. Literary (or cultural) islands become actants imbued with agency, independent entities which directly engage with materiality.

Theorists of island studies have developed several concepts which comprise this poli-existence and fluidity of islands. Some of these concepts are “tidalectics” (Kamau Brathwaite), “aquapelago” (Philip Hayward), “archipelagraphy” (Elizabeth DeLoughrey). Kamau Brathwaite’s “tidalectics” (tidal dialectics) “resists the synthesizing telos of Hegel’s dialectic by drawing from a cyclical model, invoking the continual movement and rhythm of the ocean” (DeLoughrey 2007, 3). The ocean is never static and inert, but in a constant movement, a constant becoming. The island appropriates this movement; the tide becomes the pulse of the ocean, a pulse that affects not just water, but land as well. The island is to be thought not in terms of stagnation, of fixed territory, but in terms of fluidity and polyvalence. This tidalectics which characterises the insular imagination is “a to-and-fro movement, a hither and thither, between continents and the island, between the island and the world of islands” (Vergès and Marimoutou 2005, 15). When it comes to Philip Hayward’s “aquapelago”, the author defines the term as “an assemblage of the marine and land spaces of a group of islands and their adjacent waters” (Hayward 2012, 3), while Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s “archipelagraphy” can be defined as “a historiography that considers chains of islands in fluctuating relationship to their surrounding seas, islands and continents” (DeLoughrey 2001, 23). Both these two approaches emphasize the significant role that water has in insular thinking. The island is always a “symbiosis between land and sea” (Pearson 2006, 354), an assemblage of these forces. It is important to think of islands as part of a global assemblage. They dissolve the tension between global and local, because they are porous aggregations that bring these two approaches together. Islands are connected with the rest of the world through the global water assemblage but are nonetheless maintaining their locality/regionalty:

Islands, therefore, despite appearances, are never either separate or deserted, but are continuous with and penetrated by the earthly materiality of geological duration, by humanly indiscernible processes of differentiation, emergence, and derivation. They are constituted by the constant interchange between earth and water and in this way embody a differential, unstable ontology (Sreenan 2017, 270).

This paper is an attempt to think of literary islands as real, material entities. My research is a close reading of Roy Jacobsen's Barrøy-series, through the lens of new materialist theories and ecocriticism. I argue that these novels move beyond a straightforward, dualistic thinking of islandness, and portray the island of Barrøy as a fluid landscape, adaptable and unstable, impossible to conquer and control. This approach resonates with Hay's ambition of "rescuing the real" island (Hay 2006, 26), as it implies understanding the island as an independent and autonomous system, and not only as a human-made and human-centred trope. Moreover, I claim that there is an "island imagination" or a "insular imaginary" which plays a significant role "in the negotiation and imaging of the human place in the world" (Marland 2016, 17). This insular imaginary which one can pinpoint in Jacobsen's novels is characterised by aspects such as liminality and fluidity, and a general interlacing of human and nonhuman identities. Jacobsen's islanders are deeply connected with the world around them; the cyclical rhythm of (so-called) "nature" corresponds with the rhythm of the human. There is a strong link between humans and nonhumans, and also between humans and place. As it is to be seen in Roy Jacobsen's Barrøy-series, "islands are not only passive backdrops for the actions of characters, but actively drive the narrative and produce meaning" (Crane and Fletcher 2016, 645). The island of Barrøy is deeply influencing the way in which the islanders see and understand the world, becoming a *locus* "in which the human and the nonhuman are more integrally intertwined" (Marland 2016, 14).

The island as fluid landscape and the island imaginary in Jacobsen's Barrøy-series

Roy Jacobsen's "The Barrøy Chronicles" revolve around the Barrøy family's and especially Ingrid Barrøy's life on an island in Northern Norway. The first volume of the series, *The Unseen*, is a coming-of-age story, a *bildungsroman* which follows Ingrid from early childhood into early adulthood. The members of the Barrøy family (composed of Hans and Maria, along with daughter Ingrid, Hans' father Martin and sister Barbro) live on their own remote island in Northern Norway, in the proximity of the Lofoten Islands (in what could be

called an *aquapelago*, in Philip Hayward's words; the water that connects the islands is more important and sometimes more reliable than land itself). The characters of the first volume "exist on the margins of Norwegian life in the early decades of the twentieth century—on the economic, cultural and geographical periphery of the Norway that became a wealthy global nation in the latter half of the century" (Ritson 2020a, 129). The story of the human characters is entangled with recounts of other nonhuman or more-than-human entities or phenomena, like the island itself, the sheep they own, the ocean, a storm. The second volume, *White Shadow*, is set during Norway's World War II occupation by Germany and it revolves around Ingrid's life as a solitary woman in a country (and ultimately a world) in crisis. During her alone days on the island of Barrøy, Ingrid rescues a Russian soldier and helps him get back on his feet, while hiding him from the Nazis. They find peace and safety in each other's arms, until the Russian soldier, Alexander, has to flee to neutral Sweden. Their story is continued in the third volume of the series, *The Eyes of the Rigel*, in which Ingrid sets out on a journey to find the young Russian man, the father of her daughter, Kaja. She finds out that Alexander is back in Russia, together with his wife and child. Although Ingrid does not actually find and meet him, her journey helps her make peace with the past and future that is to come. The fourth volume, *Just a Mother*, brings Ingrid back to Barrøy after her quest around the country. Life seems to have settled down on Barrøy. The reader encounters here characters from the previous three novels in the series, but is also introduced to a few new characters, among whom the skipper of the milk run, Johannes Hartvigsen, and his young son Mathias. One day, Johannes leaves his son on Barrøy, until he finishes work, but Ingrid feels that something is not quite right; her fears become true when the skipper's boat is later found, without any trace of the man. Mathias is adopted by Ingrid, who becomes therefore the mother of two. She and her family buy the Salthammer, a whaling ship which they use to fish. The end of the novel is rather dramatic: while being out on the sea, the Salthammer is destroyed in a storm, and all the boys and the men in the family (except for Mathias) die in the shipwreck. These narratives offer an alternative account to classical stories of human dominion over the nonhuman, destabilising the anthropocentric view we have on islands and the ocean. This paper is an attempt to take a step back and move aside from the fate of human characters and human-centred accounts on the environment. Instead, I try to read the island as a character in itself.

Nevertheless, as Lisbeth Wærp observes in an article from 2022 ("«En øy går aldri under»: Roy Jacobsens Barrøy-romaner i et øylitterært perspektiv") environmental change is not a deliberate theme in the novel: "Miljøendringer

med konsekvenser for jordas geologi (klimaendringer, forurensning, surhetsnivå i havet, utryddelse av biologisk mangfold og så videre) tematiseres ikke, verken i seg selv eller som årsaker til den prekære eksistensen”² (Wærp 2022, 169). The novels cannot therefore be framed within the genre of climate fiction (*cli-fi*) or eco-fiction. However, there are many episodes in which the author alludes to the strong bond between humans and nature, episodes that will be analysed in this article. As Jacobsen himself states in an interview, the Barrøy-series explores the dichotomy “man versus nature. And of [The characters] live by nature, they live versus nature, they live in nature, they also enjoy the comfort of nature” (Jacobsen 2018).

Katie Ritson defines islands as spaces “with indeterminate and often contested borders. Littoral spaces can be read as heterotopias in the Foucauldian sense margins where social norms are suspended or non-existent; in the literary imagination, they can provide a space for alternative ways of life and worldviews that are missing or obscured in inland society” (Ritson 2018, 67). On Barrøy, the worldview that is constantly contested is the anthropocentric perspective that so well characterizes the Western world. The islanders do not live *on* an island, they live *together with* the island, becoming “creatures of the edge, mentally as well as physically” (Gillis 2012, 8). However, on Barrøy, this liminality does not necessarily mean isolation or confinement, but a chance to rethink identity and selfhood. Living on the edge, in places which challenge traditional, long-established modes of thinking, means exploring alternative ways of understanding the world. This liminality can therefore be understood as essentially fluid: the islander is not a creature of the land, neither one of the sea, but a constant conversation between these two dimensions. Another aspect of this liminality is the islander’s identity understood as an interplay, a flow between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. The inhabitants of the islands are both a product of socio-cultural and political factors, and beings whose lives are deeply influenced by and connected to the nonhuman world. They experience war, go to school and to church, have a job; even though they find themselves on the margins of society, they are, however, a part of it. On the other hand, they are also a part of Barrøy’s ‘natural’ ecosystem, depending on nonhuman factors (like the sea, the animals, the land) for food, shelter, water.

This fluidity finds its way into the islander’s imagination and sense of self, because “not only do we live on coasts but we think with them. They are a part of our mythical as well as physical geography” (Gillis 2012, 8). The inhabitants

² “Environmental change with consequences for the earth’s geology (climate change, pollution, ocean acidification, biodiversity loss and so on) are not discussed, neither directly nor as reasons for the precarious existence” (Wærp 2022, 169, my translation).

of Barrøy are constantly questioning their place in the world, pondering over their liminality. The island becomes this “immensely rich imaginative locus in which dualisms can be disturbed and human identity explored” (Marland 2016, 12). The islanders understand the world in terms of flowing, fluidity, and movement. As Marte Viken observes, the novels “viser på flere måter hvordan det fysiske miljøet er en prosess og ikke et statisk system”³ (Viken 2019, 37).

When Ingrid ponders upon the *aquapelago* of which her home is a part, she envisions a network of vectors that move and link these places: “She imagined the currents in the sea and the winds and all the islands and skerries between the islands of Rosøy and Barrøy” (Jacobsen 2019, 66). The currents of the sea correspond to the winds in the sky, both representing movement and a general feeling of interconnectedness between elements, planes, and places. A significant part of the island imagination is precisely this fluidity as central metaphor for making sense of the world. Ingrid “challenges opposites such as solid and liquid and interweaves seemingly absolute categories like land, water and air; objects are multiplied, borders are frayed, distances become uncertain” (Riquet 2016, 148). For an islander, water is never just an empty space, a barren surface. Living surrounded by the sea does certainly influence the way in which an islander sees and understands the world, because water invades our human-only narratives and deeply shapes us as individuals. Aquatic spaces shape our language and the way we see and understand everything around us, “just as we are shaped by the ocean, materially and ontologically” (DeLoughrey 2022, 147).

As aforementioned, life on Barrøy encompasses the experiences of both humans and nonhumans, which seem to be interconnected, following the same rules and patterns:

On the very rare occasions the rain or snow falls vertically, a dry circle forms in the grass beneath every nest in the Old Rowan. Then the sheep huddle together there. Especially the lambs dislike the rain, and they relieve themselves as animals do, so there is a black, muddy circle of life beneath every nest, everything is interconnected, just as humans do not divide into two separate parts even though they bend forward. This is how it is on the thousand other islands in the archipelago as well. The ten thousand islands. (Jacobsen 2016, 23).

On the one hand, human life is compared to the life of nonhuman animals, which behave more or less in the same way as the islanders do. On the other hand, life on Barrøy is paralleled with life on other islands of the *aquapelago*.

³ [The novels] “show in several ways how the physical environment is a process and not a static system” (Viken 2019, 37, my translation).

The process of sheep gathering together under the nests of magpies is compared to a human being “bending forward”. Just like the human body does not divide into two separate parts when it does this, the sheep and the magpie nests seem to be in a sort of symbiosis, depending on each other. They cannot be separated. The comparison between this symbiosis and the human body shows us that sheep, magpies, rain and nests all become an assemblage of forces and agencies that function like an organism, which is the island ecosystem itself. All the elements within the ecosystem have their own roles, constantly interacting with other elements (be them living things or inanimate matter). The role of the human in this assemblage is at least questionable; humans are a part of it, but they do not possess any power to alter the outcome. The assemblage is a complex system, a *mesh*, to use Marco Caracciolo’s terminology from *Narrating the Mesh* (2021). It does not have a centre, a privileged, vanguard viewpoint, but rather works as a decentralized system which “is directly opposed to linear and hierarchical ways of understanding humanity’s position vis-à-vis the nonhuman, where linearity is culturally bound up with notions of human mastery and exploitation” (Caracciolo 2021, 31).

In *Just a Mother*, the fourth volume of the series, while out at sea on the Salthammer (the whaling ship the family has bought), Felix and Ingrid witness something extraordinary: they see six finback whales swimming in the ocean, and what they experience is something close to an epiphany, a revelation:

[Ingrid] sees three gigantic finback whales frolicking around the boat, all bigger than the Salthammer, [...] blue planets twisting and turning, as smoothly and soundlessly as birds in the air. [...] Ingrid's gaze caresses these wonderful creatures, six of them now, she feels the boat rise and hover, the chilling sensation and the tears, for she will never see this again, life is too short, she knows this, as she also knows that she won't be able to keep anything for ever, nothing. She sees the disaster before it strikes, she sees the end of all things, life's fragility. (Jacobsen 2022, 136)

The awe-inspiring animals create a feeling of both fondness and fear inside Ingrid, as she begins to cry at their sight. They are compared with “blue planets twisting and turning” (136), a metaphor that calls for an ecocentric rethinking of our world; finback whales are depicted therefore as self-sufficient, autonomous individuals, who carry a whole universe, a whole cosmos within them, a cosmos that seems rather inaccessible and elusive to humans. Moreover, the narrator draws a parallel between the whales and the “birds in the sky”, associating two different (and maybe even opposed) planes: the ocean and the sky. This interlacing of aquatic and aerial is challenging a linear understanding of the world. Ingrid realizes that this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, that human

life is way too fragile and short, and rather insignificant when one sees the grand scheme of things. This epiphany further underlines her enmeshment with the natural world. This powerful connection seems to give her the ability to “see the disaster before it strikes”, because she recognizes the patterns and the cycles of the nonhuman environment that she is so embedded into. In *White Shadow*, the second volume of the series, the islanders can even predict animal deaths or children stumbling, only by observing slight changes in the environment:

To survive on an island you have to search. Ingrid had been searching since she was born, for berries, eggs, down, fish, shells, [...] twigs... an islander's eyes are always searching [...] restless glances across islands and the sea which fasten onto the slightest change, register the most insignificant signs, see spring before it arrives and snow before it daubs ditches and hollows with strokes of white, they see the signs before animals die and before children stumble and they spot the invisible fish in the sea beneath flocks of white wings, sight is the beating heart of the islander. (Jacobsen 2019, 23)

This episode reveals Ingrid's strong bond with the island, with the bodies with whom she comes in contact inside the mesh. She knows things before they happen because she has a strong connection with her human and nonhuman counterparts from the ecosystem. Their destinies are ultimately interwoven, and her life is attuned to the rhythm of the nonhuman environment. Living on an island means always looking for and at something, always searching and paying attention to all the beings, things, and phenomena around you. Ingrid builds strong relationships with all these elements, syncing her life with theirs. She is even described as having the capacity to predict the weather, only by observing specific signs and changes on the island, as in these two episodes: “They'd had a rainy, windy summer, but this last week the weather had been fine, hay-drying, potato-growing, clothes on the rack, calm sea, tomorrow it would rain, Ingrid could feel it in her bones.” (Jacobsen 2022, 34) and “[Ingrid] sees the closest skerries and Oterholmen as usual, she notices the dark two lines in the dew on the grass outside the Karvika boathouse, but pays no heed, just registers that the weather today is going to be calm. (Jacobsen 2022, 53)”. What is striking here is that not only does Ingrid look for signs or changes outside, on the island, sea, and sky, but also within herself. She can feel the changes in weather “in her bones” (34).

Marta Louise Markussen observes in Jacobsen's novels another way in which the characters are linked to their environment: through their work. Discussing the first novel of the series, *The Unseen*, Markussen states that “karakterene [blir] nært knyttet til naturen gjennom det arbeidet de utfører.

Slik blir arbeidet i romanen ikke bare en virkelighetseffekt gjennom detaljerte skildringer, men også en del av karakterenes identitet”⁴ (Markussen 2019, 20). In *Just a Mother*, the narrator himself pinpoints to the way in which the life of the characters is built around their work: “There are two reasons on an island for getting up, first to put an end to the night's thoughts with work, and second because this work needs to be done” (Jacobsen 2022, 116). As we can see from this quote, work is a crucial and fundamental aspect of the islanders’ identity, and much of their life is built around work. Lennart J. Johansen (2001, 31) is also discussing the way in which, in a place such as the islands of Northern Norway, work has the capacity to create bridges between individuals and the environment. Fishing, taking care of animals, cultivating the land and other vital chores that must be done on the island in order to secure the survival of the islanders, are actions that imply that humans directly cooperate with nonhuman others and with the nonhuman environment.

As previously mentioned, the island can be defined as a symbiosis between land and sea. Aside from the life lived on dry land, the inhabitants of Barrøy do also live a life at sea, and their fate is deeply connected to it and to its waters. This happens not just on a metaphorical, conceptual level, but also on a physical, material one. They commute and travel using their boat, go fishing for food, swim, row, and clean themselves in the sea. Addressing the issue of transportation and travel, Elżbieta Żurawska states that all the means of transportation used by the islanders are “ways of travelling that do not separate [the traveller] from the environment, but, on the contrary, mean active participation in it” (Żurawska 2021, 336). Swimming or rowing especially mean that the human body has to move together with the body of water in order to advance, thus creating a collaboration of forces which enable the movement. Żurawska talks about Ingrid’s “immersion in time and space” (Żurawska 2021, 340), which is specifically engendered by the way in which Ingrid experiences the landscape (and generally, nature) through her senses, directly and in an unmediated manner. The author proceeds to state that “the inhabitants of Barrøy are primarily physical beings”, whose understanding of the landscape is “embodied” (342). This implies that the characters’ identity is profoundly connected to the landscape. Vanja Louise Markussen calls this process “den kronotopiske identiteten”⁵ (Markussen 2019, 20), an identity which is always dependent on and created by a time and space organization of factors. The historical context does, of

⁴ “The characters [become] closely connected to nature through the work they do. In this way, the work in the novel does not only become an effect of reality through detailed descriptions, but is also a part of the characters' identity” (Markussen 2019, 20, my translation).

⁵ “the chronotopic identity” (Markussen 2019, 20, my translation).

course, shape the way in which the characters think and behave, but so does space, the landscape.

At times, Ingrid becomes so deeply influenced by the sea that she experiences her own body as fluid. Water transgresses borders, finds crevices and fissures in the materiality of her porous body: "Ingrid had a feeling of water. It ran into her ears and filled her thoughts – with words. She felt the weight of eider down and her own body heat; her hands no longer ached, they weren't even red, her throat was dry, she said nothing and the foreign words continued to stream upwards from down below through the hatch in the floor" (Jacobsen 2019, 34). Ingrid's body becomes one with water. It becomes a liquid, fluid body, permeated by water. It flows into her ears, and words "stream upwards" (34). The woman understands her own identity in terms of fluidity.

This material, bodily experience of the island began for Ingrid in her young childhood. As a child, Ingrid was afraid of storms, and sailing in stormy weather did often make her quiver. Seeing this, Hans, her father, decides one day to guide her and teach her how to stop being afraid of such weather conditions: "He screams that she has to feel with her body that the island is immovable, even though it trembles and both the heavens and the sea are in tumult, an island can never go under, although it may quake, it is rock solid and eternal, it is fixed to the earth itself" (Jacobsen 2016, 42). Hans urges his daughter to "feel with her body" (42) the materiality of the island, the fact that it is solid and immovable, even though everything around them is movement and fluidity. A connection is created between feeling and thinking, between mind and body, between thought and matter, and the borders between these dualisms seem to fade away in favour of a network where everything is interconnected. Ingrid must feel the Earth beneath her feet and connect with it; she has to grasp the materiality of the island through the materiality of her own body. She uses her whole body as a source of perception, not just her eyes. This experience represents "the confluence of culture (knowledge) and nature (the body)" (Filipova 2022, 151).

Another important aspect of living with water is the necessity of being able to swim. When she first goes to school, in one of her first days there, Ingrid is required to learn how to swim by her teacher, who argues that, for an islander, the ability to swim is essential and compulsory: "«You're going to learn too, today» the teacher says in a strange dialect, because they are islanders and for islanders swimming is as important as being able to sail and row and pray" (Jacobsen 2016, 78). Swimming, being in water, moving along with water, become vital skills for an islander. The ability to swim is compared to praying, as if it would be a sacred activity, a rite of passage, a ritual which creates a bridge

between Ingrid and a higher power, or, in this case, between Ingrid and the rest of the mesh. She experiences the ocean through movement, through her own body, since “our ability to process space is constituted by our movement through it” (DeLoughrey 2020, 6). Since the islanders are creatures of both land and sea, they need to be able to move in water as well as they can move on dry land.

The sea is oftentimes described as an alive organism in itself, or, in Jane Bennet’s words, as “vibrant matter” (2010). It changes consistency, colour, it transforms and renews itself every second, in a constant state of becoming, in the sense that it never reaches a final conclusive stage, just like its waters never reach a final destination inside the assemblage:

In February the sea is sometimes a turquoise mirror. Snow-covered Barrøy resembles a cloud in the sky. It is the frost that makes the sea green, and clearer, and calm and viscous, like jelly. Then it can completely congeal with a translucent film on the surface and change from one state to another. The island has acquired a rim of ice, which also surrounds the closest islets, it has increased in size. (Jacobsen 2016, 47).

The sea is a lively nonhuman actant not only because it flows around the world, connecting disjointed places and spaces, but mostly because it flows inside and throughout itself. It is a giant organism whose body is an intricate network of moving forces that flow in an incessant flux. It is continually moving and pouring in, through and between bodies, but it is also continually flowing within itself. The sea “is indisputably voluminous, stubbornly material, and unmistakably undergoing continual re-formation” (Steinberg and Peters 2015, 5). The vectors that create this type of movement and vibrancy inside the ocean are actants like waves, currents, or the tide, actants that create courses and trajectories within the ocean itself, deeming it an intricate system of nerves and forces. If the ocean is a giant organism, then the tide is its pulse, its breathing. There is a certain rhythm of the tide, a throb that manifests itself through rhythmical pulsations, through consistent and systematic rises and falls. It is a movement that never ceases, these are no intermissions between tidal episodes. In *The Unseen*, the tide is compared to the breathing of human beings:

A silence like this is rare. What is special about it is that it occurs on an island. [...]. It is mystical, it borders on the thrilling, it is a faceless stranger in a black cloak wandering across the island with inaudible footsteps. The duration depends on the time of year, silence can last longer in the winter, with ice on the ground, while in summer there is always a slight pause between one wind and the next, between high and low tide or the

miracle that takes place in humans as they change from breathing in to breathing out. (Jacobsen 2016, 73)

The breathing of humans is here compared to the breathing of the sea (the tide), with the blowing of the wind, with the succession of seasons. They all imply movement and fluidity, and even cyclicity: the seasons follow one another, year after year, the tide rises and falls, day after day, living things breathe in and out. There is a certain synchronicity between the rhythm of the island, the rhythm of the sea, and that of the human. They all follow the same pattern. Islanders are deeply connected to the cycles of nature, which they appropriate and adopt. The time of the inhabitants of Barrøy is mostly divided into day and night, high and low tide, summer and winter. Measuring the time in hours, minutes, or using a clock is not a very common occurrence. Ingrid receives a watch at some point while searching for Alexander, but she needs to be reminded by other people to wind it every morning. She is not accustomed to such cultural understandings of time, but rather lives her days according to the natural rhythm of the island.

These synchronized patterns form an assemblage of forces and agencies. The elements of the mesh communicate with each other in a fluid symbiosis. Human agency is set aside in such a network, where the flow of everything precedes human intention. Another relevant episode that touches on this is the following: after one of the most dangerous storms the island of Barrøy has ever seen, the inhabitants of the island notice that the currents, the waves, the rain and storm (therefore, the assemblage) have carried a huge tree close to their home, on the beach, a tree that has never grown around these parts of the world, on the Northern Norwegian coastline: “[...] one autumn morning Hans Barry finds a whole tree that the storm has torn up and deposited on the southern tip of the island. An enormous tree” (Jacobsen 2016, 18). However, human agency plays no role in this. The episode is narrated in the following way:

It is a Russian larch which through the centuries has grown strong and mighty on the banks of the Yenisei in the wilds south of Krasnoyarsk, where the winds that rage across the taiga have left their mark like a comb in greasy hair, until the time when a spring flood with teeth of ice toppled the tree into the river and transported it three or four thousand kilometres north to the Kara Sea and left it in the clutches of its briny currents [...]. (18)

The Russian river Yenisei, a spring flood caused by another storm perhaps, currents that are both ice-cold and warm, and even icebergs contributed to this conclusion of the mighty tree reaching the Norwegian coastline:

[The currents] carried it north to the edge of the ice and then west past Novaya Zemlya and Spitsbergen and all the way up to the coasts of Greenland and Iceland, where warmer currents wrested it from their grip and drove it north-west again, in a mighty arc halfway around the earth, taking in all a decade or two, until a final storm swept it onto an island on the Norwegian coast. (18)

The ocean is the final point of all the processes that have taken place so that the tree could end up on Barrøy, the final destination of all the water particles that have travelled the globe across its Northern hemisphere. At the same time, the ocean is also the place from where these particles will rise again in the form of mist and vapour, travelling back again to the very same place from where they came, or to other, faraway places, they have never experienced before. The ocean is therefore neither end nor beginning, just like any other element of the assemblage. The assemblage does not have a central point or an origin, it is a rhizomatic structure which begins and ends over and over again, or, perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that it never begins and never ends, it just is. Another important aspect of the tree episode recounted above would be the way in which the assemblage works as a system that creates planetary connections and interconnections. The tree's journey started in Russia, on the banks of the river Yenisei. It has travelled along the Northern borders of Russia until it reached the Western part of Scandinavia, that is, Norway. The assemblage is a global system which connects water bodies from all around the world on a geopolitical level, creating a planetary network of nonhuman actants that put everything into motion. This global assemblage that links everything and creates these planetary associations does not care about boundaries and man-made frontiers, as "fluids [...] breach borders and invite the confluence and collaboration of things; they challenge an ordering of the world according to a logic of separation" (Neimanis 2017, 186).

The tree episode ends with the remark that Hans Barrøy has never seen such a tree before, because they do not have this exact species in Norway, especially on their (almost) barren, faraway island. If it was not for the water carrying the tree here, Hans Barrøy would have never known such a tree existed in the first place. Water, and here the ocean especially, through its constant flowing, has the power to create networks and pathways that otherwise would have never been created, to link spaces and places that could never have been linked if it was not for this global system.

The "bodies" of saltwater that cover the planet are connected, or, more accurately, are a singular aquatic body divided only by human cartography and discourse for the sake of conveniences like navigational communication,

the ability to identify location, political claims to sovereign rights, and the identification of ecological distinctions. However, such convenience invades our thought, our cultural imaginaries, and our cultural memories, contributing to centuries of understanding the oceans as independent bodies confined with separate, though connected containers or basins. Instead, we must now think not of the world's oceans, but of the world's ocean – singular – [...]. (Dobrin 2021, 1)

This episode is relevant especially because it questions the role humans play in the ecosystem. As Marte Viken states, “Her blir det rettet en oppmerksomhet mot treets ferd gjennom verden. Treet får således en bakgrunn og en historie. En slik fremstilling av natur stemmer overens med et økosentrisk verdisyn. Naturen blir her ilagt en mening med tilværelsen som går utover det som virker nyttig og relevant for mennesket”⁶ (Viken 2019, 50).

Living on an island, encircled by the constant presence of nonhuman actants (such as the ocean or extreme weather conditions) means giving yourself up to circumstances you cannot control. Here, the ocean engenders a “generative interconnectivity of human and nonhuman forces, thereby displacing human agency from its central position within the world” (Why 2017, 20). The islanders know and understand that their fate is dependent on and connected with nonhuman phenomena. When Hans Barrøy ruminates on how the tree was carried to his island, he ascribes agency to elements such as the wind, floods, ocean currents, which are “inherently efficacious and productive in ways that can unsettle human agency” (Caracciolo 2021, 28). He is aware of their power to act as subjects: Hans describes the winds as raging and leaving their mark on the taiga, the floods as having “teeth of ice” which “toppled the tree into the river and transported it” (Jacobsen 2016, 18), the currents as wresting the tree from the grip of the floods and driving it north-west. All these nonhuman elements become actants in the islander's view; Hans understands that the forces which brought the tree to Barrøy are autonomous and compelling, and that his human ambitions cannot interfere with them.

Conclusive remarks

Roy Jacobsen's narrative disrupts long-established assumptions on islands. Throughout the books, the island of Barrøy is depicted as a fluid landscape,

⁶ Here attention is directed to the tree's journey throughout the world. The tree thus gets a background and a history. Such a representation of nature is evocative of an ecocentric worldview. Nature is here given a meaning that goes beyond what seems useful and relevant to man (Viken 2019, 50, my translation).

belonging to both land and sea, humans and nonhumans. The insular imaginary and the identity of the islander is a negotiation between these dualisms, never truly belonging to one or to the other, but always flowing between edges and transgressing borders. Moreover, even though Barrøy is ultimately a literary island, it is depicted as a real, material place: “the island is prominent as a geographic or real space. The description of the harsh weather, the challenging conditions of living, the dangerous cliffs, [...] counteract the paradisiac imaginary often associated with islands” (Schällibaum 2017, 294). The characters engage directly with the materiality of the island of Barrøy. These narratives move beyond a straightforward, dualistic thinking of islandness, and portray the island of Barrøy as a fluid landscape, in which human and nonhuman destinies are interwoven, “a place that is inherently unstable and not under human control” (Ritson and Smalen 2021, 296). The island and the sea are both a material reality and a force, being able to directly influence the life and the identities of the islanders. Last but not least, “Jacobsen’s descriptions of the generations of people who live on Barrøy engage with Norway’s perception of itself as a nation founded on closeness to nature and a simple, rural life in a largely egalitarian society” (Ritson 2020b, 136). Most of the characters in Jacobsen’s Barrøy’s-series have grown up surrounded and enveloped by water, water bodies and waterscapes. Water writes stories and it even writes us, humans. The nonhuman has the power to influence the human, to shape our identity: “We come to identify with, or are touched and moved in different ways, by the waters that we experience” (Chen, MacLeod and Neimanis 2013, 28). Water bodies become engaged actors in the development of our lives, especially if we live in a place like Barrøy, encircled by the constant presence of them. Water narratives flow into our storytelling processes and help us make sense of the world.

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