

BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY OF CLUJ-NAPOCA
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**REPRESENTATIONS OF THE OCEAN IN CONTEMPORARY NORWEGIAN
LITERATURE**

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Summary

The present thesis aims to explore the way in which the ocean is represented in contemporary Norwegian literature. There is an entire tradition of oceanic and coastal literature in Norway, a country whose national identity is strongly linked to the maritime culture. Sailing, fishing, rowing, or swimming in the mighty fjords are elements that pervade and infuse the Norwegian literary tradition. However, studies that investigate and explore this maritime dimension in contemporary Norwegian literature seem to be absent. In this context, this thesis aims to research the implications and complexities of such texts by employing the use of the blue humanities, a theoretical, transdisciplinary field that analyses the relationship between literature and water, in this specific case the ocean. Thus, the thesis explores the following texts: Morten Strøksnes's non-fictional text *Shark Drunk* (2015), Maja Lunde's novel *The End of the Ocean* (2017), and Roy Jacobsen's Barrøy-series (2013-2020). The analysis is based on Donna Haraway's theory of situated, embodied knowledge, which stresses the ubiquitous role that the material world plays in the human knowledge production processes. Since the blue humanities centre and celebrate the materiality of the ocean, Haraway's theory of embodied knowledge becomes a valuable approach when exploring the primary texts (and oceanic/maritime literature more generally). The analysis reveals that the ocean is a lively material presence that drives the plot and models the stories and the human characters. I argue that the primary texts are instances of a materially engaged literature, or embodied literature. This embodiment stems from the material engagement that the characters have with their surroundings, and from a material consciousness that they forge with the environment around them. In this sense, the books are built not around landscapes, but *matterscapes*, which organise and animate their plot.

This thesis is structured into six chapters. The first three chapters set up the tone, present the context, and prepare the ground for the last three chapters, which make up the analysis of the primary texts.

The first chapter introduces the research topic, its context, the methodology, and explains the reasons behind my choice of primary texts. It also presents the relationship established between Norwegians and nature, and between Norwegians and the ocean. These relationships are complex and multifaceted: as close as the Norwegians are to their environment, their country is still mainly built on the exploitation of its resources (oil extraction is an example

of such an exploitation process). In this context, this first chapter does also explore Kari Norgaard's theory that, to some extent, Norwegians live in denial when it comes to climate change, because of their privilege and their focus on local culture. There is, claims Norgaard, a certain tendency towards locality, towards regional, community-oriented politics in the Norwegian space. This claim is also what sustains my analysis: how does this tendency towards locality work in Norwegian environmental writing, which usually this kind of texts bears a strong planetary trace?

The second chapter, "The blue humanities: a theoretical overview", introduced the main theoretical and critical approaches that have been used throughout the analysis. The present thesis relies on the meeting point between two fields of study, which are tightly connected and communicate constantly, inter- and intra-acting with each other, namely the blue humanities and new materialist theories. Within this point of convergence between the blue humanities and new materialism, I grounded my research in Donna Haraway's theory of situated knowledge. Haraway's theory of knowledge differentiates itself from other epistemological approaches by its clear focus on the material world. In this sense, Haraway claims that knowledge is neither righteously objective, nor hollowly subjective, but embodied and oriented towards community. Knowledge, claims Haraway, is created in the encounter between our material body and other material bodies, be they human or nonhuman. Haraway adds that when knowledge is situated, it acknowledges the many agencies of the world, even those which are not human. Thus, even though Haraway's theory cannot yet be considered neo-materialist, it nevertheless highly anticipates this approach. The body, in this context, functions as both object of knowledge and tool which initiates knowledge, while agency is distributed in rhizomatic structures, and it does not solely reside in the human mind.

The third chapter, "Representations of the ocean in Norwegian literature throughout time. A diachronic perspective", is another contextual chapter which prepares the ground for the analysis of the primary texts. This chapter explores how environmental concerns behave in oceanic and maritime Norwegian literature throughout time. It analyses texts from Old Norse literature to modernist novels. There is a strong tradition of ocean and sea-oriented literature in the Norwegian cultural space, and many of the texts pertaining to this tradition are environmentally and ecologically charged. This creates a proper context for my analysis: how does this genealogy of texts in which the sea is not just a backdrop, but an active, material presence, reverberate throughout time and reaches the contemporary primary texts?

The fourth chapter, which launches my analysis, is titled "Stars, speculation, and the sea in Morten Strøksnes's *Shark Drunk*". *Shark Drunk* is hardly a traditional nonfiction

volume: it features essayistic, poetical, even novel-like characters that deepen its borderline character. Even Strøksnes himself agrees that it was, in fact, his intention to write such an ambiguous, fluid text, he claims. The concepts of speculation and scale have been crucial to the analysis of this book. The speculation we have seen in *Shark Drunk* works as an act of translation from nonhuman behaviour to human language. In this sense, this process of speculation relates to material ecocriticism, but also to Stacy Alaimo's trans-corporeality. Strøksnes does also often experiment with scale: in his book, the reader encounters a co-constitutive evolutionary story, which is not a straightforward developmental arc, but a mesh of material agencies. Our oceanic origins are present in our bodies, as material reminders of a history we shared with oceanic beings. The author's gaze moves back and forth, from the macro-level of galaxies to the micro-level of the human eye, and from outer space to the deep seabed. Here, the human is susceptible to a more-than-human temporality that both surpasses and nurtures him. However, as far as Strøksnes's efforts of imagination and speculation go, they are always grounded in the specific material background of Vestfjorden: Strøksnes never leaves Lofoten.

Chapter five bears the title "The Anthropocene ocean in Maja Lunde's *The End of the Ocean*". Lunde's cli-fi (climate-fiction) novel directly takes up the theme of climate change, which has been called by Amitav Ghosh "unthinkable" and "unwritable". Being such an ample and extensive process, which involves all sorts of more-than-human agencies and mechanisms, experiencing climate change through the changes of the ocean can be a good strategy of embodying an otherwise disembodied, intangible, unnarratable process. As already explained in the introduction of this thesis, there is a certain tension between the Norwegian tendency to value the local and climate change's global character. The local thus plays an important role in *The End of the Ocean* and it makes the main character Signe uninterested in the big, planetary narrative, and ultimately selfish and biased. Signe fights to keep the planetary awareness outside of her locally oriented life, but there are, of course, factors that destabilise her plans. One of these factors is plastic, which perfectly illustrates the porosity and the permeability of our human bodies, but also our material susceptibility to the many more-than-human agencies that make up our world. Through ocean water, plastic decomposes and infiltrates into our bloodstreams: although somber, this works as a great instance of trans-corporeality and the hydrocommons. However, the hydrocommons can also foster positive outcomes, not only plastic contamination. Climate change impacts us all, big or small, terrestrial or aquatic, and this sort of shared emergency creates unexpected bonds and exposes common concerns. Haraway's Chthulucene, the philosopher's alternative to the bleak Anthropocene, echoes her

theory of situated knowledge in the sense that it argues for collaboration and community between humans and nonhumans. In this sense, knowledge and identity are relational and environmentally informed: they are not fixed, not vague or immaterial, but embodied processes of interacting with our peers.

The chapter that concludes the analysis of the primary bibliography is called “Liquid landscapes: unseen islands and shores in Roy Jacobsen’s *Barrøy-series*”. Ingrid’s (the main character in the series) island is porous, permeable, and material, just like her own human body. This shared porosity/permeability together with the material experience of the physical labour carried out on the island, which always engages the direct contact between human and environment, are instances of embodied knowledge. Work processes such as fishing, rowing, gutting the fish, or swimming are all activities that imply the direct, unmediated collaboration between islander and his/her surroundings. The life of the islanders is guided by and built around the rhythms of nature, but mostly those of the sea. We have also seen how the island is portrayed as porous space saturated with things and agencies that come from outside: currents that travel the globe, waves that move the boats, or even the tide that breathes in and out of the island’s shores.

In the primary texts we can observe a narrative environment which is structured by material flows, rather than a symbolic setting. In this sense, matter drives the plot; even more so, the *local* drives the plot. The planetary is indeed hinted at, but it does not play a significant role in the context of plot development. The narratives that have been presented in the primary texts are material, and thus local, situated, embodied. These texts are local because they are embodied, and they are embodied because they are so ingrained in the local. I argue that the primary texts are instances of a materially engaged literature, or embodied literature. This embodiment stems from the material engagement that the characters have with their surroundings, and from a material consciousness that these characters forge with the environment around them.

In this sense, my research insists on the specificity of the Norwegian coastal life. Fishing and sailing, crucial elements of such a life lived by the shore, are thematically present in all the primary texts, and so have the (often cathartic) encounters between the human characters and cetaceans, or the actions of diving and swimming. Norway’s economically privileged position, its misuse of its natural resources, and the tendency to favour a life lived in nature, create a specific socio-cultural context that nurtures and pushes forwards this type of materially informed literature. Therefore, the material, embodied nature of these texts is also a product of the Norwegian way of life (but definitely not exclusive to the Norwegian space), I

argue. In this sense, the books are built not around landscapes, but *matterscapes*, which organise and animate their plot.

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